

THE FABULOUS ENGINE NINE: RICHMOND'S BLACK FIRE HOUSE

Written by

SUSAN MICARI

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

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1109 WEST AVENUE
RICHMOND, VA 23220

ENGINE 9

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR: the voice of Harvey Hicks, Jr. hero of the story.

CHARLES BELL firefighter and one of the first black men to call for and get a firehouse for Jackson Ward.

MARIANNE BELL, Charlie's wife, a woman with strong backbone

OLD CHURCH LADY a gossip

SCENE COMMANDER a white fire captain in the postbellum mindset of massive resistance

BILL MOSBY a white engineer disfigured by the CSX train explosion under Church Hill in 1925

RACIST MAN a white man whose Northside house is burning down

WIFE, a woman trapped by the fire

The first black firefighters of Engine 9 in Jackson Ward:

HARVEY HICKS, Jr. lead. Firefighter, leader of the push to get Engine 9's firehouse for Jackson Ward

BERNARD LEWIS becomes the first Engine 9 internal promotion to Battalion chief.

WARREN KERSEY, firefighter

FARRAR LUCAS leaves for other work

WHITE CAPTAIN, the man assigned to run Engine 9

WAITER

MAITRE D'

RENE HICKS, Harvey's wife and the first black woman to work on the main floor of Thalhimer's Department Store. She also helped manage Mrs. Thalhimer's real estate business.

OLIVER HILL the civil rights lawyer and first black councilman of Richmond

YOUNG BOY an admirer of Engine 9

YOUNG BARBARA HICKS, future first black female firefighter in Richmond

MISS LULU a restaurateur of Jackson Ward

BARBARA HICKS, The first black woman firefighter in Richmond
HER MOTHER

MONAHAN, A firefighter who loves Barbara Hicks.

DALMATIAN, Barbara's black and white cat

PREACHER, presides over services in all scenes that take
place in Jackson Ward churches (he can be three different
characters)

CITY COUNCILMEN

WHITE UNION REP

RON, A senior black firefighter and mentor to young probies.

PROBIE, a white, very new firefighter apprenticed to Ron

PROCTOR, oversees the officer exams for fire and rescue in
Richmond

MAYOR HENRY L. MARSH the first black mayor of Richmond

CHIEF RONALD LEWIS the first black chief of department in
Richmond (not promoted from within--an outsider)

OTHER CHARACTERS:

CXS TRAINMEN

VARIOUS FIREFIGHTERS

REPORTERS

CHURCHGOERS

JACKSON WARD'S CHILDREN

VARIOUS EXAMINEES

VARIOUS FIREFIGHTING BRASS, WOMEN AND MEN OF COLOR

PROLOGUE:

NARRATOR: V.O.

The first, the only memories of my father are not really about Big Harvey, my pop. They are about his absence.

SCENE ONE: THE HOME OF MRS. HICKS AND HER SON, HARVEY, AGE 4.
NIGHT, HARVEY'S BEDROOM.

LITTLE HARVEY

(waking suddenly). Daddy? Daddy?
(The little boy is fighting in his sleep, throwing his pillow, punching the air, eyes shut tight.)

MRS.HICKS (V.O)

Baby, go back to sleep. You're all right.

LITTLE HARVEY

(crying, angry, awake). I'm scared, Mama. Where is my daddy?

MRS.HICKS

(comes into the room. Sits on the bed next to Harvey) Shhh, son. Shhh. Daddy is watching over you, always.

LITTLE HARVEY

But I want him to come home now.

MRS.HICKS

Daddy loves you and sees you. But, he can't come home. (She weeps quietly.)

LITTLE HARVEY

(He pats her hand) There, there, Mama. I'm here. (He hugs her hard.)

MRS.HICKS

What a lucky mama I am to have my big boy with me.

LITTLE HARVEY

Where'd daddy go? Why didn't he say 'bye to me?

MRS.HICKS

There was a bad accident, and
Daddy...He's in heaven.
We'll see him again one day.

LITTLE HARVEY

I want to see him now! I could save
him!

MRS.HICKS

Me too, honey. Go ahead and cry.
It's all right. Daddy's safe in our
hearts.(They embrace.)

ACT ONE: EXT. SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER. WESTERN ENTRANCE TO THE
CHURCH HILL TUNNEL, OCTOBER

2, 1925.

SCENE 1: EXT:Day THE TUNNEL UNDER CHURCH HILL

A dark old tunnel entrance, propped up by wooden beams. Black
men and their tools scattered about, they drink water, listen
to the commotion within. A sudden noise. The sound of
clinking, an engine within being stoked with coal.

A couple of Black laborers are wiping their faces, sharing
water.

FIRST MAN

Damn, this job makes my skin crawl.

SECOND MAN

Why?

FIRST MAN

The story from 1889. Scary
collapse, lots of men left inside.
Nobody tried to reopen the tunnel
till now.

SECOND MAN

I heard about that. Whatch'all
know?

FIRST MAN

Nothin'. A feeling is all. That the
dead are awake in there. Down in
the darkness.

SECOND MAN (SCOFFING)
(touching the cross at his
neck)
Stop it, man.

CUT TO:

SCENE 2: THE INTERIOR OF THE TUNNEL, 900 METERS INSIDE THE
WEST ENTRANCE. TORCHES, DARKNESS, HEAT.

The engineer, Bill Mosby, a white man, is stoking the CFX
boiler of a train ten cars long. There are ten African
American laborers clearing track. Several men tap the tunnel
above looking for loose brick, shoring places up with two by
fours. Suddenly a cry floats up from behind them.

A brick comes loose. It falls into an open freight car, and
nothing happens. Men hold torches higher to take a look.

Suddenly a gush of air blows past the men as a crack opens in
the ceiling. Dirt and rock rain down, the men shout and take
cover.

The torches all go out, Mosby pauses, listening. The wind
blows past him, and now dirt and rock rain down as the men
scramble under the train cars for cover. Quiet.

MOSBY
All clear.

Tapping resumes. Silence. Suddenly, debris flies as the steam
engine explodes. Mosby is struck by flame, flying metal and
scalding water.

V.O:

MOSBY (CONT'D)
(screams in anguish)Ahhhhhhh!

Men scramble under the train in the dark to find the exit,
everyone for themselves. Men hurtle over each other, clearing
a path out, whether the man in front of him can keep up or
not.

At the entrance, three men emerge holding each other up and
helping each other to flee. No one else emerges until..

SCENE 3: EXT. TUNNEL, DAY, SMOKE. FIRE. CHAOS.

FIRST SURVIVOR

My god! What is that?

SECOND SURVIVOR
 (grabbing the cross at his neck)
 Can't be a man!

MOSBY

(Emerges from the tunnel lower jaw hanging loose, teeth puncturing what used to be his lips. His skin hanging down in molten strips)

AHHHH!

Bill runs on in shock, with a power that only those who have been injured in battle know. He runs until he can't, stands stock still, bubbling skin, lost eyelids, ruined mouth.

SECOND SURVIVOR
 Help him! We gotta get him to the hospital!

FIRST SURVIVOR
 Bring the wagon! We got to carry him out of here.

Men bring a wagon, tenderly put Bill in it, and take off. Some men go with him, some stay to help other survivors. Only two more men make it out, injured, coughing, and in shock.

SECOND SURVIVOR
 I close my eyes, I'm gonna see Mosby, forever.

THIRD SURVIVOR
 Big Harvey still in there! He got a son..a wife...

FIRST SURVIVOR
 Forget it, man, we're expendable. That's just the way it is. We *been* needing our own firefighters, medics. Ah, Hell!

INSIDE THE TUNNEL: VOICE OVERS

Screams. One man calls out for his son.

BIG HARVEY (V.O.)
 (in the dark) My little boy...Baby, I can't move. I'm done. I love you and your mother.

Sound of debris falling, smoke, screams, choking.

SCENE 4: MONTAGE OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE TUNNEL

COLLAPSE.

Headlines of all the local papers, including the Richmond Rocket, Jackson Ward's paper, reads: "Tragic Tunnel Collapse!" "We Were Warned in '89!" "Evil Under Church Hill!" "The Tunnel Must be Sealed!"

SCENE 5: EVENING A WEEK LATER. A NUMBER OF BLACK CITIZENS OF JACKSON WARD DISCUSSING THE COLLAPSE AT A LOCAL PUB.

CITIZEN ONE

The CSX accident makes me sick. We need a fire department of our own. Professional black firefighters! People who can go into the dark to get our men.

MRS. HICKS

I want my Harvey to be returned to us for burial.

CITIZEN TWO

Oh, ma'am, was your husband killed under the mountain?

MRS. HICKS

(she nods)
It says here that they did dig out the white man who was with Mosby. What about my man?

CITIZEN ONE

(Reading aloud)
The tunnel collapsed further when they dug the white man out, it says. They won't trouble the hill further with digging.

WOMAN

Lord! What about that poor man, Mosby?

CITIZEN ONE

He died.

CITIZEN TWO:

People already saying he ran all the way to Pool's tomb in Hollywood Cemetery. He comes out if you trespass there at night. It's a horror story.

WOMAN

Foolishness.

CITIZEN ONE

Yeah, but see what it means. It's too terrible to think of him surviving the blast in all that pain, even for a minute. So it's easier to make a monster of him.

WOMAN

Yes, but strange doings have been reported at Pool's tomb.

MRS. HICKS

Those that saw Mosby come outta that tunnel, the sight won't let them sleep. My little boy, Harvey, Jr., he didn't see nothin' but he still can't sleep. Calling for his father in the night. (she weeps)

CITIZEN ONE

I'm so sorry Mrs. Hicks. (to the others) Easier to relegate Mosby to evil forces than to insist safety standards for all of us after the tunnel collapse. People will embrace the vampire story and the city will let them. Think we're ignorant, superstitious nig--!

MRS. HICKS

Don't use that ugly word in my presence, Samuel! Ever!

(She smooths her hands
over her ruffled neckline
to regain her composure.)

If nobody cares for us, we DO care for ourselves. Our volunteers protect Jackson Ward with no equipment! My son wants to be one of them, my Harvey Jr.

CITIZEN ONE

A real firehouse for us? The city
will never find the money in my
lifetime! That's just the way it
is!

SCENE JACKSON WARD, RICHMOND, VA IN 1948. EXT: DAY

SCENE 6: INT. DAY

NARRATOR

Here I am some twenty odd years
later.

Harvey Hicks Jr., grown, at his modest apartment. He's a man
of 28, now, a war veteran, and he's been to Paris where black
soldiers were treated like men.

HARVEY HICKS, JR.

(talking to a picture of a his
mother and father)

Mom. Dad. Another day. Look down on me and help me find a
better job. (He sighs, picks up an ax handle and puts on
coveralls.) I could manage this damn construction company.
But I won't get to. Who ever heard of a black man in
Richmond managing white people?

Harvey touches the pictures on his window ledge. Mother,
father, soldiers he served with in WWII.

HARVEY HICKS

I wish you all were here. (He
touches the picture of Paris once,
too.) La Cite du la Monde. You,
too. (He straightens his shoulders,
sighs, and goes out the door.)

SCENE 7: EXT.

Split shot of Jackson Ward in the pre-redlining days before a
highway splits the Ward off from the rest of Richmond. People
finely dressed, strolling in a beautiful enclave on a Sunday.

SCENE 8: INT: SAME DAY, A GARAGE IN JACKSON WARD

We see Harvey Hicks, Charles Bell, and other men coming to the homemade gym inside the garage. The walls are covered with pictures of them and other soldiers posing in front of airplanes, in full dress uniform, in battle gear all from WWII. The men strip down to tee shirts and chinos, start chin ups. It's a competition. Two handsome war veterans are working out. Other men come to join them, our Harvey and Charlie.

Charlie is watching Harvey start his chin ups.

CHARLES BELL

Man! I thought we were done with this stuff when we got out of the army. Here we are again, grunts!

HARVEY HICKS

No we ain't. And we gonna need all our muscles to fight fires in our neighborhood.

CHARLES BELL

(doing incline sit ups)
I love Jackson Ward. Just don't know if I'm brave enough to run INTO a fire for it.

HARVEY HICKS

Firefighters do what they are trained to do. Just like we did in the war. Just like we did in Virginia Union University after we got home!

CHARLES BELL

I didn't think I'd make it through college, man. Fighting Nazis was easier.

HARVEY HICKS

Come on, man. Warm up and let's work with these hoses. We got some old ladders, and we can connect hoses to the fire hydrants. I know we can put out fires faster than a fire department that doesn't always hurry down to the Ward.

CHARLES BELL
Got that right. I'm in. What we
gonna call ourselves?

HARVEY HICKS
Jackson Ward Volunteer Firemen?

CHARLES BELL
No. Jackson Ward Fire Slayers!

HARVEY HICKS
Yeah! I like it!

Miss Lulu, 50's, a local restaurateur with a reputation for good food and an eye for handsome men, enters with a pitcher of homemade lemonade.

MISS LULU
Harvey? Charlie? Why don't you
take a little sip of this to cool
you off? I'm just so proud of you
helping our people.

She bats her eyelashes a few times.

CHARLES BELL
Why Miss Lulu, how did you know
we'd need your lemonade just about
now?

Miss Lulu giggles, and hands him a glass. Her hand lingers on his wrist, as if to steady it.

CHARLES BELL (CONT'D)
Thank you Miss Lu. I got it. Bless
you. You look pretty today.

HARVEY HICKS
Thanks, Miss Lulu. We sure do love
your lemonade.

Miss Lulu blushes. Her eyes linger over the men's bodies.

MISS LULU
Well, I need to be getting back to
the kitchen, ..I suppose. See you
tomorrow.

MEN
Thanks Miz Lu.

As soon as she's out of earshot, they all chuckle.

CHARLIE BELL
We can smile, but she pretty!

The men laugh out loud and resume training, climbing ladders with a stopwatch. Climbing ropes.

SCENE 9: EXT: TWILIGHT. OUTSIDE CHURCH HILL'S ENGINE 23:

NARRATOR: V.O.
Engine 23 is a firehouse next to the last great elm to survive the plague that wiped them away. Many middle class black families moved to Church Hill to escape the redlining and rezoning that has begun in Jackson Ward. It's an integrated neighborhood, if racial clustering around "good" and "bad" sides of the streets can be considered integrated.

Suddenly, a three alarm call rings out. A fine Queen Ann house on East Grace Street is afire. Engine 23 and several other fire houses respond, but it's a bad one.

SCENE 10: EXT. EAST GRACE STREET

Three engine and ladder companies arrive but now two houses are afire on either side of the Queen Ann, and the scene commander groans.

SCENE COMMANDER
(To a probie)
Go radio for help, and get me three more companies up the Hill now!

The probie scurries off. The Commander barks order to his men. Ladders rise along side the fire, hoses trained on the central fire. The men climb, break windows, check for survivors. Fire roars out the windows.

FEMALE VICTIM
(from high inside the house) Help!

Smoke billows out the broken windows, fire climbs to the roof. A man in his pajamas bursts out the door.

MAN WITH A RIFLE
My wife!

Screams from within. A commotion behind the Command center. The firefighting volunteers from Jackson Ward come running up to the scene. They are the future Engine 9. But for now...

CHARLES BELL

(to the Commander) Sir! All us men want to help here.

COMMANDER

Go on away, boy. This a bad fire and no place for you. Y'all in the way.

HARVEY HICKS

No sir, sir! We are the Jackson Ward Fire Slayers. We are veterans and we know fire.

MAN

(To the Commander) Save my wife, my house! Send these niggras off. If they all you got my house is lost.

COMMANDER

(Looks at the man with disgust, pushes him aside.) Out of the way!

MAN WITH A RIFLE

Naw. I'm a kill any Niggra that goes near my house! Let it burn.

COMMANDER

Y'all ready to lose your wife? Gimme the rifle and stand BACK!
(He takes the rifle.)

(To Harvey)

Stand by. Can any of your boys get to the ground there, and there?
(pointing to the side of the house)

HARVEY HICKS

Yessir. My men will hand you down survivors if we find any. (to Charlie) You carry them back there.

Pointing to a staging area with water and blankets

BELL

Yessir.
(To the volunteers)
(MORE)

BELL (CONT'D)

Fan out around the open windows
below the ladders. Be ready for a
hand off of survivors.

SCENE 11: SAME.

The men fan out. No time for suspect looks from the regular firefighters, but they get them anyway. Suddenly the screaming woman is located at a window. Fireman on his ladder reaches precariously for her.

Harvey waits below as other firefighters steady the ladder, climb with their axes, begin to open the roof up to let the fire go up instead of out toward the windows.

WOMAN

(coughing) Help!

A firefighter grabs her hand and lets her swing toward the ladder. He can't hold her and stay on the ladder.

HARVEY HICKS

I'm here, let her go.

The firefighter swings her closer to the ladder and lets her drop. She screams. Hicks catches her and carries her away.

WOMAN

(looking up at Harvey) Thank you.
Thank you. (She clings to him)

Hicks holds her gently and when he gets to the staging area, finds a blanket and some water for her. She's coughing wildly, has burns, needs medical attention. Her husband runs up.

MAN

I'm here, sweetheart. (He ignores
Hicks.)

The woman can't let go of Hicks's hand. The MAN screams.

MAN (CONT'D)

Get away from us, boy!

Hicks disentangles himself from the WOMAN, and walks back to the fire.

COMMANDER

(Seeing Hicks)
You did real good. Go on now, son,
I got a fire to put out.

The MAN distraught, screaming in the background.

MAN

(to the commander)

I'd rather see my place burn to the ground than have nigras fighting the fire.

CHARLES BELL

Yeah, you said that already. Our people live here too!

COMMANDER

Now, mister, we've had nigros of good character manning the water pumps since slavery days. Ain't you glad your wife is safe? Huh? Shut up, then.

SCENE 12: EXTERIOR, FIRE, NIGHT:

The Jackson Ward volunteers, having just been called boys, clean up to go home.

BELL

(talking to other volunteers as they gather)

Nigros of good character...(he shakes his head) Would any of these crackers come to the Ward to save our lives lessen they were paid? We need our own firehouse for Jackson Ward.

HARVEY HICKS

We got our own newspaper, our own clubs, schools, churches. Damn, we need our own fire department. We ought to be able to pull this off.

FARRAR LUCAS

Harvey's on his soap box again...Man, did you see him catch that white woman? Damn!

HARVEY HICKS
 Did you see her thank me?
 (Imitating a white woman
 with the vapors)
 Oh Harvey, Harvey, my
 hero!

BELL
 (laughing) Shut up, man!

HARVEY HICKS
 She was all covered in smoke, look
 like Bride of Frankenstein.
 (He imitates the Bride
 recoiling from the
 monster.)
 Let's go have a beer...

BERNARD LEWIS
 I'm going home to my wife...

CHARLES BELL
 Me, too, man. I left Marianne
 worrying...

WARREN KERSEY
 (To Bell) Why can't you all let
 yourself come on out with us?

CHARLES BELL
 If you had a woman like Marianne at
 home, you wouldn't need to ask.

HARVEY HICKS
 Here's what I want. I want you to
 come see this young singer, Billy
 Eckstein at the Hippodrome. I got
 my tickets and you all better hurry
 up and get yours. He's somebody!
 Smooth singer. Makes the ladies go
 "Ahhh!"

CHARLES BELL
 I'm somebody! I don't want to be
 surrounded by sweaty women. No!

WARREN KERSEY
 The sad story is, you are boring,
 Charlie...

CHARLES BELL
 (laughing) No, I'm not. I'm tired!
 Now Ella Fitzgerald comes back,
 I'll force myself...

The men laugh and walk into the night together.

WARREN KERSEY

How 'bout Sister Rosetta Tharpe.
Homegrown! (sings) "This train is
a clean train, this train." She
comin' to the Hippodrome this
summer.

CHARLES BELL

Nope. Too many screamin' kids.
She's great, but I'm a jazz man.
Now I got to rest for my demanding
job at the dry goods store
tomorrow.

WARREN KERSEY

Hold on man. Better days comin'.

Charlie peels off, whistling. But he's tired.

HARVEY HICKS

Charlie never without a smile.
That's how he keeps going.

WARREN KERSEY

That and two kids at home!

HARVEY HICKS

In the Army he made money playing
cards. Everybody lost to Charlie.

WARREN KERSEY

Still do.

SCENE 13: INT. DAY, EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH OF RICHMOND.

Sunday after the Church Hill fire. Broad and College St.

In attendance are the regal Miss Ethel Thompson Overby, first black principal of a Richmond High School, and she walks by a portrait of Maggie Walker, the first black bank president of a commercial bank. The portrait is adorned with a purple mourning wreath around it, with Walker's years on earth inscribed within it: 1863-1934.

A.S. Richardson, the first black member of the Virginia State Department of Education, and the man who built Armstrong High, the second black high school in Richmond, is talking with Miss Overby.

As people file into the church and take their places in the pews, Richmond's black volunteer firemen, Charles L.

Bell, William E. Brown, Douglas P. Evans, Harvey S. Hicks II, Warren W. Kersey, and their families find their seats. People smile and make room, men touch their hats, murmuring greetings and praise.

OLD CHURCH LADY

Here are our firefighters, our brothers. Praise you, lord! Protect them lord! (she raises her eyes toward Harvey Hicks, handsome in his Sunday best) Harvey Hicks, you are a blessing to us. I remember what you done for my family in that fire. A college man! (she gets up and dances a step in pure joy).

HARVEY HICKS

Now, Ms. Grady, I do appreciate your kindness! And all that good home cooking! I do thank you.

OLD CHURCH LADY

Sit by me, Harvey. We are all so glad to see you.

Many voices murmur assent, conversations abound as the firemen take their seats.

OLD CHURCH LADY (CONT'D)

You know, I knew your daddy.

HARVEY HICKS

Tell me about him.

OLD CHURCH LADY

Don't you remember him, Harvey?

HARVEY HICKS

Not too much...I remember his hands tucking me in at night. I remember his goodnight kiss...how he smelled, like coal and sweat, and shaving creme and...Oh, shucks, Miz Grady, you got me goin' on about him.

OLD CHURCH LADY

I know you miss him still. We all did for a long time. No one more than your mamma.

HARVEY HICKS

Yes.

OLD CHURCH LADY

He was a man, Harvey. Tall and handsome like you. Strong, honest, like you. Funny. He could make us laugh with a story. I know in my soul he watchin' you and smilin'. He wants you to celebrate your life, and be happy, son.

HARVEY HICKS

When I get to be successful at something beside fighting Nazis, I will be.

OLD CHURCH LADY

Your life has already saved many. People you will never know over there. You'll do it here in the Ward, but we'll all be here to thank you in person.

HARVEY HICKS

Thank you, Miz Grady.

V.O. MURMURS OF:

VAROUS PARISHONERS

There the are! Mmm, that handsome Harvey Hicks! These men of ours. Veterans, too!(to the men) Proud to know you!

PASTOR

Let this meeting begin! We want y'all to know that Richmond has hired the first black policewoman in our history. Now we must push for the fire department we need.

CONGREGANTS

Amen!

PASTOR

Let us pray for guidance, for justice, and for strength.

CONGREGANTS

Amen.

PASTOR

And let us take our needs now right to City Hall. Jackson Ward is under threat from politicians that are deaf to our petition for a firehouse of our own. I'd like to recognize Harvey Hicks and Charles Bell to speak on their efforts to move City Hall.

HARVEY HICKS

Charlie and I want to bring a true firehouse to Jackson Ward. We are petitioning City Hall, as you know.

CHARLIE

Let us tell you what we've done and what response we're getting.

PARISHIONER

Zero, right Charlie?

CHARLIE

Not quite...our beautiful Jackson Ward has some economic clout in this city, even if it's viewed fearfully. We have to have our own black company of the best firefighters Richmond has ever seen.

VO: Applause.

OLD CHURCH LADY

(calling out loudly)
Harvey Hicks, I'll always remember the way you saved that white trash woman in the fire!

(she laughs behind her hand)

HARVEY HICKS

(looks at Charlie)
Help.

CHARLES BELL

Now, Ms. Grady, all god's children, you know? Poor thing nearly burned alive.

(he looks at his wife for help. Marianne just smiles up at him.)

OLD CHURCH LADY

No, I don't know! But, I'm glad
you're alive! That makes me happy!

She pulls Charlie down next to her.

Many voices murmur as the church organ swells.

HARVEY HICKS

You know, ma'am, I do believe we
will have a fire department of our
own. An excellent one. Now, we
have a Black policewoman, and who
would have thought that?

OLD CHURCH LADY

Yes, miracles every day, but not
without your hard work. Now the
worst part comes, waiting for the
city to act on our petition.

HARVEY HICKS

Richmond is very good at looking
the other way when change needs to
come.

OLD CHURCH LADY

It ain't just looking away. It's
saying no without saying a word.
It's smiling and being a devil.

HARVEY HICKS

I know it can be different. Like
it was in Paris right after the
war. We were loved, welcomed,
equal. That's what I want here at
home.

SCENE 14: MONTAGE OF BLACK PETITIONERS AT THE CAPITAL.

Harvey, Charlie, Bernard, Pastor, others among them. They
stand with their signs and a petition signed by a thousand
residents, demanding separate but equal fire protection.
Spring and Fall, another spring and fall and then, success.
Headlines in the Richmond Rocket. "It's done!"

SCENE 15: EXT. CITY HALL, DAY.

80 men wait to learn whether they will be part of the new
black company. Disappointment for most, but for 10 men,
success! These men congratulate each other.

SCENE 16: ENGINE 9 TRAINING DAYS, EXT. DAY

The ten recruits train on 40 foot ladders, hauling hose up and down. They put out training fires, deliberately set and fairly controlled. Men drill their roles on the one firetruck that Jackson Ward has received. It's old. Men size up and try on their equipment: shoddy jackets, old helmets.

NARRATOR: V.O.

Flame retardant clothing hasn't been invented yet. Gas masks are only a prayer for Engine 9. But the men are fierce and strong.

SCENE 17, JULY 1, 1950, JACKSON WARD, 5TH AND DUVAL ST., EXT: DAY.

NARRATOR: V.O.

It's happening. Engine 9 is born this day, real professional firefighters standing in front of the newly repurposed firehouse, which takes up half of the local police precinct building. See over there? There I am.

Men up on a ladder painting "Engine Nine" over the garage door. On the other side of this three story building is the Jackson Ward Police Department. Black cops and new firefighters in uniform, all posing for the newspaper's camera, their wives and kids around them.

OLIVER HILL, FIRST BLACK CITY
COUNCILMAN AND LAWYER FOR THE NAACP

Today is a great day, I don't mind telling you. We struck a blow for equality, for Jackson Ward, and we got our new black firehouse!

REPORTER

Anyone want to say what this means to Jackson Ward for the Richmond Afro-American and Richmond Planet?

WHITE CAPTAIN

Just say that Richmond is proud to fund the first Jackson Ward fire house, and that we expect our boys to fight bravely and well, and to do whatever tasks the city needs them to do.

BELL

(to his wife, Marianne) I hope that don't mean be the city's janitors.

MARIANNE

There will be fires to fight Charlie, and people you'll save, too.

REPORTER: THE CAPITAL TIMES

How does it feel to have to serve under a white captain?

MARIANNE

(jumps in) WE are grateful that the years Charlie and Harvey spent petitioning the city council have been rewarded.

REPORTER: RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH

Mr. Bell, aren't you scared, throwing away a college education and taking up a dangerous job? I don't see any shiny new equipment here. Can you be a race man and work for the city? Aren't you afraid?

CHARLIE BELL

No, sir, I'm not. All I can say is what MY newspaper's editor, John Mitchell, Jr. said when he started the Richmond Planet 70 years ago, "There are no terrors, Cassius, in your threats, for I am so strong in honesty that they pass by me like the idle wind, which I respect not." ...And, just like Mr. Mitchell did, I keep two loaded Smith and Wessons!

The men crack up. It's Charlie being Charlie.

VARIOUS FIREFIGHTERS (V.O.)

That's Shakespeare in case you didn't know. And if you don't know, now you know!

HARVEY HICKS

Yeah, the test was hard, but we passed it. We trained twice as long, twice as hard, too.

They shoo the reporters off. The white captain addresses the men:

CAPTAIN

Boys, you all are well qualified to be Richmond firefighters. You're smart boys, educated boys, I'm told. I got assigned here, (He can't hide his disappointment) and I plan to make this the model company in all the city.

HARVEY HICKS

Excuse me, sir. We are college educated *men*. There are no boys here.

CAPTAIN

Is that right? (He glares at Harvey.) You will wear full uniforms throughout the day, every day, whenever you are outside the firehouse. There will be no talk about you people. Nobody complaining to me about you! You will especially clean and care for your equipment at the end of each run...

KERSEY

Sir. Respectfully, other companies clean the equipment at the end of a job.

CAPTAIN

...and you will respectfully pick up the laundry from all the other firehouses to which you are assigned laundry duty.
(The firefighters are silent.)

You'll clean, trim, help out the
(MORE)

CAPTAIN (CONT'D)

city park maintenance men, and will collect trash when the chief assigns it to us. Jackson Ward is gonna shrink with the new highway plan. Less for you to do.

SCENE 18: SAME DAY: INT. ENGINE 9 LOCKER ROOM

The men are changing into uniform, shining their shoes. The mood is sullen.

FARRAR LUCAS

I don't know about this job. Are we janitors? Are we? I don't wanna work for the captain.

CHARLES BELL

Well, you ain't! You are working for Jackson Ward. For our people.

FARRAR LUCAS

Man, if I wanted to be bossed around I'd stay, but I don't. I'ma start my own construction company. To hell with this.

CHARLES BELL

Go if you can't take it. I don't know if I can take it, either. But think on this. We've got a firehouse, and Jackson Ward has us. This is for our people.

HARVEY HICKS

We need a union. A brotherhood to work for change. If we stick together, maybe we stop hearin,' "That's just the way it is."

CHARLES BELL

I'ma to take the long view. This is a first step, and what we do will change things in Jackson Ward.

FARRAR LUCAS

Come on, man. Nothing will change. It's the same old shit. We get a second hand engine and have to bow and scrape and be grateful. When will it get better?

CHARLES BELL

I don't know. But I know I have a real job that I can do now, that I had to ask permission to do a couple of years ago. I'ma try, man. I'm going to try to make Engine 9 the best house in town.

There is a knock on the door. The men file out into the engine room. A delegation appears from Jackson Ward.

MARIANNE

Hello, firefighters of Jackson Ward! We brought you a few little things. (She winks at Charlie.)

Women and children, old people and merchants hold out their gifts to the firefighters.

YOUNG BOY

Mr. Harvey, sir. I made you this picture.

(holds out a drawing of an engine and of Harvey in uniform holding a hose)

HARVEY HICKS

Why, it's just beautiful. I'm going to put this up right inside my locker.

The boy beams. A girl of 7 steps forward. All long limbs and long braids. She is strikingly pretty, with an open face and large eyes that she focuses on Charlie.

NARRATOR: V.O

She's Barbara Hicks and we'll meet her again. She'll be the first woman to become a Richmond firefighter. A legend.

YOUNG BARBARA HICKS

I made a heart picture for you, Mr. Bell! I want to be a firefighter like you!

CHARLES BELL

(chuckling) Well, if you want to be a firefighter, you got to try on the hat.

He puts his on her head.

YOUNG BARBARA

Wow! (It covers her whole head) I love it!

CHARLES BELL

What's your name, baby?

YOUNG BARBARA

Barbara Hicks.

CHARLES BELL

Well, you gonna be our firefighter now!

YOUNG BARBARA

Wow!

MISS LULU

I know you men won't turn down my roast chicken and potatoes.

KERSEY

Oh, my, no! (He smells the aroma)
Thank you, Miss Lulu.

LADIES

We brought you something for thirsty work.

(Various of them hold out
pitchers of home made
sweet tea and lemonade)

We can keep it coming, too!

CHARLES BELL

This is so kind, friends.

The men are touched, and everybody stands tall.

HARVEY HICKS

Thank you.

LULU

And you know you are welcome in my restaurant any and every day.
Firefighters from the Ward drink for free!

HARVEY HICKS

Now you talkin'!
(everyone laughs)

MARIANNE

We are so proud of you all. All you did to get this firehouse for us. I feel safer already!

Charles beams at her. Pulls out a deck of cards from his pocket. Takes an ace off the top and shows it to her. She blows him a kiss, touches the Queen of Hearts pin she always wears.

HARVEY HICKS

Now friends, we have to get to work. We'll be calling on all of you who want a safety inspection of your places, with tips on how to protect yourselves from fire.

The community members leave. YOUNG BARBARA HICKS breaks free of her mom and comes back to hug Harvey, looking up at him in awe.

YOUNG BARBARA

Mr. Harvey?

HARVEY HICKS

Yes, baby?

Her mother pulls her away. They go.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)

(to the men, holding back tears)
And that's why we do this job.

SCENE 19: ENGINE 9 EXT. DAY.

Vats of lye soap boiling, men shifting firefighters clothes into them. Stirring pots of clothes. Other men hanging clothes on lines to dry. Folding table where some men fold dry clothes. Bags and more bags. A truck preparing to deliver clothes to all the Richmond firehouses.

Harvey, Charles, and all the men grim, silent, getting it done.

A FIREFIGHTER

Fuck this!

OTHERS

Hell, yeah.

A FIREFIGHTER

I'ma join Farrar doing construction.

He takes off his apron and walks away.

HARVEY HICKS

Let's ask the captain to call up
another man from the waiting list.

SCENE 20: INT. NIGHT. CHARLES BELL'S HOME.

The modest and spotless home of Charles and Marianne Bell. Their children are sleeping in their room, Marianne and Charlie are lying down in their bedroom, facing each other, playing a little round of poker.

MARIANNE

What is it, Charlie? You have been
so short tempered with the kids and
with me. What is troubling you?

CHARLES BELL

Marianne, I can't stand picking up
white boys's laundry. In my dress
uniform, like a butler.

MARIANNE

Tell me more, honey. You promised
to put our family first, but lately
it seems we come in last. You are
never home! (She shuffles the
cards) Deal!

CHARLES BELL

(dealing cards) What can I say? 48
hour shifts, like all the rest.
But they try every day to drive us
out of the job. Shit-heel union
reps, battalion chiefs who aren't
half as qualified as I am, an old
timey Virginia Chief of Department,
they are all against us!

MARIANNE

Baby...has it gotten so bad now?
Is it time to quit? Shall we leave
this town and go north for a better
chance? (holding her cards close to
her chest) I'm raising you 10
cents.

CHARLES BELL

You are, huh? See you and raise
you ten. You'd do that? Leave all
our family, all the hopes we had
for this fire station?

MARIANNE

(Slapping her cards down.) Yes, if it brings peace to our home again. (She looks at him and caresses the care lines at the corners of his eyes) Because I love you more than all this.

CHARLES BELL

I love you, Marianne Bell.

MARIANNE

I know you do! But you gonna lose this hand, boy! I got two queens!

CHARLES BELL

Damn!

MARIANNE

(Dealing) I'm ready to go if it means saving you all this stress. Let's remember where we are. This the slave tradin' center of Virginia.

CHARLES BELL

Honey, this is the land of polite denial. (Picks up his cards, sorts them and smiles.) What they don't want to see, they never do see.

MARIANNE

(Holding her cards close) I know, and so many of our friends have gone north to get out of this mess. They say the highway's gonna blow our town apart. One that Maggie Walker and all of us built out of our love. I'm grateful we still have The Maggie Walker School for our kids!

Marianne screams in delight.

MARIANNE (CONT'D)

You gonna lose again, Charlie!

CHARLES BELL

Naw, I ain't. I'm callin' this hand. You wanna show me your cards?

MARIANNE

Yeah, baby, I do! (she slaps down
three 9s)
When I think of how hard I lobbied
for your job, I just don't know.

CHARLES BELL

You can't beat the master! I got
three jacks, girl. I shouldna
called the hand!

MARIANNE

Dammit. (she drops the cards on
the bed) I'm with you if you want
to start over somewhere else, doing
something else. But...I hear it
ain't much different up north.
Still crackers. Still hate. But
first....before we decide...you
come with me to Evergreen Cemetery.
We gonna pay a call on somebody I
know there and ask for help.

CHARLES BELL

Come on, Marianne! What are you
gonna say in a graveyard that you
can't tell me right now?

MARIANNE

You'll see, Mr. Bell. You come,
that's all. Be my Charlie and do
this for me.

CHARLES BELL

I'm always your Charlie, Miss
Marianne!

MARIANNE

Yes you are. (she kisses him, and
he gets frisky)

CHARLES BELL

What do you want me to do, baby?
Stay and fight?

MARIANNE

Not right now.

They begin to make love.

ACT TWO

SCENE 1: THREE DAYS LATER, EVERGREEN CEMETERY, ONE OF THE TWO RICHMOND BURIAL GROUNDS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS SINCE THE DAYS OF ENSLAVEMENT. EXT: DAY

A tangled place with overgrown trees, patches of well-tended graves, and many forgotten graves, now sunk deep into the earth, without markers or anyone to care for them. Here and there families have gathered, libations pour forth on the graves, crosses polished, stones erected here and there. Brief, loving messages left on the old, cold stones.

Charlie and Marianne hold hands beside a grave.

MARIANNE

It took me so long to find her.

CHARLES BELL

Who is she to you, Marianne?

MARIANNE

Great, great, great grandmother, I believe. I've matched her name and dates to church records and birth and death records.

CHARLES BELL

She's your kin.

MARIANNE

My ancestor. Enslaved on the Shirley Plantation. Her long trip to Virginia ended in toil and loss. Children taken from her--and yet, the name, her name lives on in me.

CHARLES BELL

The grave says Marianne, loving mother of Audrey, Isobel, and Marianne.

MARIANNE

My mother's name was Marianne, too. I don't know who these relatives were. I come here sometimes to ask my ancestors to help us. You aren't the only one who gets sick of this blood-soaked city.

CHARLES BELL

Baby. Our blood, your blood here
in the place.

MARIANNE

And who knows what she sacrificed
to keep her children alive? Now
listen, Charlie. Listen to me. I
am your wife and I will leave our
kin behind to go to some cold city
in the north..but... But who will
remember them right if we go?

CHARLES BELL

I don't want to leave this town in
defeat.

MARIANNE

I'll go if you want to. But we got
to go to something better.

CHARLES BELL

(over each other)I love Jackson
Ward and the lives we have built,
but I love you more.

MARIANNE

You are my success, Charles Bell.

CHARLES BELL

What do we do, then?

MARIANNE

Charlie, you are making things
better here, one piece of white boy
laundry at a time. (Charlie
laughs). One fire at a time. One
baby at a time.

CHARLES BELL

Baby? Marianne?

MARIANNE

Um-hum.

CHARLES BELL

(embracing her)
And you want this child to grow up
here or go north?

MARIANNE

North to what? Is there a better school for our kids than Maggie Walker High? Bless you heart, Charlie, I'm a southern girl. Or don't you know that by now?

CHARLES BELL

Whatever you say, honey, you're my girl. That's settled then. We stay.

SCENE 2: INTERIOR, DAY, THALHIMER'S DEPARTMENT STORE.
SHOCKOE BOTTOM, 1955.

NARRATOR: V.O.

There I am, on the luckiest day of my life...the day I met Rene.

Harvey Hicks is standing outside the window of the Thalhimer's Department Store, staring at the small leather goods counter, where a beautiful black woman is helping a customer chose a wallet. Harvey can't take his eyes off of her. She is the first black woman to ever work in a "white" department store in Richmond.

Harvey works up his courage to walk through the door. He nearly walks back out, but he fixes his eyes on Rene, and comes to the counter, in spite of the glares of white customers. The house detective looks him over, sees he is in uniform, cuts him "slack" and doesn't interfere. He does buzz upstairs to Thalhimer's office.

SECRETARY

Yes?

HOUSE DETECTIVE

Mr. T. in?

SECRETARY

Yes.

HOUSE DETECTIVE

May I speak to him?

SECRETARY

What is it, Sam.

HOUSE DETECTIVE

Niggra in the store, at the leather goods counter. In some kind of uniform...

SECRETARY

And? Rene will serve him. (she hangs up)

SCENE 2: INTERIOR, THALHIMER'S, DAY

RENE

May I help you sir?

HARVEY HICKS

I hope so, miss. I'm Harvey Hicks. A firefighter from Engine 9, in Jackson Ward. I'd like to find a fine wallet.

RENE

I've heard of Engine 9, and read about you, Mr. Hicks, in the Richmond Rocket. Thank you for all you are doing for us.

HARVEY HICKS

It's my job, miss.

RENE

I'm Rene, Mr. Hicks.

HARVEY HICKS

Please call me Harvey. Miss Rene.

RENE

Yes, uh, Harvey. How can I help you?

HARVEY HICKS

Miss Rene, I don't really need a wallet, but I've been looking in at you from outside for nearly an hour. I wonder, Miss. Rene..would you...

RENE

You want to ask me something, Harvey?

HARVEY HICKS

I do. May I take you to dinner at The Eggleston Hotel, Rene?

(MORE)

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
Is there a night you might like to
come with me?

RENE
Oh, my, The Eggleston. I'd love to!

SCENE 2: INT. EXAM ROOM.

Harvey Hicks, in a sea of white applicants, taking the
Lieutenant's test... again

HARVEY HICKS
(to himself) Let's see, I'll get
the highest test grade again and
I'll get passed over again. (He
touches his hand to his heart.)
Rene, this one's for you.

SCENE 3: THE EGGLESTON HOTEL DINING ROOM, INT., NIGHT,

Rene and Harvey arrive, and the maitre d' invites them in. He
takes their coats and Harvey is struck by how beautiful Rene
looks in her dress.

HARVEY HICKS
Rene, you are beautiful.

RENE
Thank you, Harvey.

The waiter arrives with menus. Harvey's eyes widen slightly
when he looks at his. It's expensive.

WAITER
Would you like a cocktail tonight,
miss?

RENE
Would you make me a Bellini?

WAITER
Of course! Sir?

HARVEY HICKS
I wondered if you could help me
find the right wine to have with
dinner.

WAITER
Naturally. What would you like to
eat?

HARVEY HICKS

I'll follow the lady's lead though
I do love a good steak.

WAITER

I have just the thing. A beautiful
red to complement a fine steak
bearnaise. That's what I'd
recommend.

RENE

That sounds too good to miss. I'll
join you, Harvey.

HARVEY HICKS

Then that's settled. Thank you.

WAITER

Of course, Mr. Hicks. We know who
you are and are so proud to have
you both as our guests tonight. (He
exits.)

HARVEY HICKS

Well now, I was going to ask you to
read the menu to me. I fought in
France, but I don't exactly read
French menus every day. Ever,
actually.

RENE

(chuckling) I have some high school
French to call on but I'm so glad
the waiter relieved me of that
duty. Will you tell me about your
service during the war?

HARVEY HICKS

Well, it's a difficult memory to
unpack. I will say that we were
men in Paris, treated like heroes,
and for the first time, I was the
equal of white men.

RENE

Oh my. Was it very hard to come
back here, after?

HARVEY HICKS

Yes, it was, Rene. It's not hard
to come home to family and work and
friends, but to have another war to
fight when we arrived in Richmond.
That was hard.

The waiter arrives, uncorks the wine, and pours. He retreats silently.

RENE

Oh, Harvey, to think of all you have done for us. It's a wonder your heart didn't grow hard.

HARVEY HICKS

That's a difficult thing to hold onto, an open heart. But all of us had our service abroad that united us. We knew that we were fighting for freedom. We hoped the States would remember that.

RENE

Was it very hard serving in France?

HARVEY HICKS

Yes, but not as hard as the Normandy boys had it. Nor the Rangers who landed behind the lines. We were sloggers, one step at a time. One battle at a time, and we knew why we were there.

RENE

Proving your value?

HARVEY HICKS

Beating Hitler. We knew the world as we love it depended on it.

RENE

Harvey, I don't want to upset you with memories.

HARVEY HICKS

You aren't Rene. When I look at you, I'm glad all over again that I survived and had the experience of being welcomed in Paris. I'd like to take you there someday.

RENE

I would love to see Paris.

HARVEY HICKS

I would love to see you in one of those New Look dresses they got over there.

RENE

Harvey Hicks, don't tell me you know about the New Look.

HARVEY HICKS

Shucks, woman. I highly approve of it. Big pretty skirts, I felt like I was in the south again!

RENE

Well now, Harvey, you surprise me! What can I tell you about my life?

HARVEY HICKS

How did you get to be so many firsts, Rene. First black woman to work the front of Thalhimer's. First to work for Mrs. T in her real estate office.

RENE

I got lucky, Harvey. I kept trying, and one day, not long ago, Mr. Thalhimer said that it was time. He asked if I could handle the responsibility of being first, and therefore, superlative.

HARVEY HICKS

And you said, "Sure, no problem."

RENE

In a manner of speaking, I did! And I delivered. Serving at the leather goods counter isn't hard. But being flawless is the real job. You know?

HARVEY HICKS

I sure do!

The food arrives, and it is glorious.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)

Rene, you are so far away over there. Can I come sit by you?

He takes her hand and comes to sit by her at the banquette

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)

Rene, I... (He kisses her.)

RENE
(Eyes closed) Mmmm. Would you do
that again?

HARVEY HICKS
Rene. (He kisses her.)

RENE
Harvey, I thought the red was too
strong, too dry, but with the steak
and the sauce! Mmmm.

HARVEY HICKS
It's my kiss that makes it right.

They toast and kiss, and eat, and admire each other.

SCENE 4: HARVEY'S HOME, INTERIOR, EVENING

Harvey takes his mail out of the mailbox. He sees the
official fire department logo.

He calls Rene on the phone.

HARVEY HICKS
Rene! Test results are in. Here we
go again.

RENE
Don't be so quick to dismiss it.
Can I open it?

HARVEY HICKS
Sure, come on over. (He throws the
letter down.)

Harvey stares at the envelope, but not for long. We here
Rene's bicycle pull up, and hear her run up the steps to
Harvey's place.

RENE
(catching her breath) Harvey!
Harvey! Let me see! (she takes the
first envelope and tears it
open.) You passed with highest
honors!

HARVEY HICKS
And? Another day they don't
promote me.

RENE

Whoa! Don't let that thought in!
What's *this* letter about? (she
opens another letter from the
department) Harvey! Harvey! It
says here that you are promoted to
Lieutenant, effective in two weeks,
to Engine 9!

HARVEY HICKS

What?

RENE

Harvey, it's true. Look!

HARVEY HICKS

(reading the letter) It is true. It
is true! Lieutenant! I'll go for
captain next!

Rene embraces him.

SCENE 5: EXT, DAY, FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH IN NORTHERN
BARTON HEIGHTS. SOME DAYS LATER. PICNIC OUTDOORS ON THE
GROUNDS OF THE CHURCH.

Rene and Harvey on a blanket with a picnic basket between
them, sipping cool drinks and laughing. People coming by to
say hello to Rene and to check out Harvey. Here comes the
pastor...

PASTOR

Sister Rene.

RENE

Pastor, this is Harvey Hicks of
Engine 9.

PASTOR

Mr. Hicks, I know of your wonderful
work getting a fire house for our
community. So proud to meet you.

HARVEY HICKS

Glad to meet you, sir.

PASTOR

Well, sister Rene is woman of
firsts, too. First of our people to
integrate Thalhimer's. First Black
woman in any department store in
Richmond. And one of our best
Sunday School teachers.

HARVEY HICKS
I'm not surprised.

He takes Rene's hand. The pastor moves on, and Harvey holds her around the waist.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
Rene, I got you this little treat.
Try a French chocolate, won't you?
I've been dreaming about kissing
you in a French chocolate shop, but
this will have to do till we get to
Paris.

He feeds her a chocolate and kisses her.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
Why Rene, you are delicious. I want
to ask you... ask you. Will you
marry me?

Harvey holds out a box with a simple ring.

This pearl was my mother's. I had
it made into a ring for you,
because I know my mother would want
you to have it if she were still
here. This pearl shines like you,
Rene. I love you.

Harvey kisses her and puts the ring on her finger. Rene
admires it.

RENE
I will marry you. I love you, too,
Harvey. I think, somehow, I always
have.

People at the picnic applaud.

SCENE 5: EXT, TWILIGHT.

Rene and Harvey holding hands and walking under trees.
Cicada's singing about the fall to come. Lightning bugs
under the trees. Rene and Harvey stop to kiss.

HARVEY HICKS
Looks like the fall is coming.

RENE
 (Kissing Harvey)
 It's already here.

SCENE 6: EXT. FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST, WINTER, A WHISPER OF SNOW, DAY

Harvey and Rene come out of the church, radiant. Well wishers throw rice, Engine 9 is there in full force, saluting Harvey. Rene and Harvey stop, she throws the bouquet, somebody screams as they catch it, the couple get into a waiting car and off they go. The car is festooned for the newly weds.

WELL WISHER
 Did you know that Harvey is taking her to Paris for a honeymoon?

WELL WISHER 2
 Wow! I'd like to go to Paris.

WELL WISHER
 I wanna go....anywhere.

They walk away sighing.

SCENE 7: PARIS, EXTERIOR NIGHT. MONT MARTRE

Rene and Harvey walking on the promenade before the Cathedral Sacre Cours. They look out over the city. The wind blows Rene's New Look skirt up for a second. Rene shows a glimpse of a gorgeous lace topped stocking. Harvey is speechless. Almost..

HARVEY HICKS
 Promise me you'll wear those every day, Mrs. Hicks.

RENE
 OK. Gonna have to order them by the boatload.

HARVEY HICKS
 Fine by me, girl. Show me those legs again.

Rene lifts her skirt just enough.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
 Lord. Rene.

RENE

Uh-huh?

HARVEY HICKS

Come with me. (He grabs her hand.)

RENE

Where to? The hotel?

HARVEY HICKS

Yeah.

SCENE 8; IT: THE 9TH ENGINE COMPANY, DINING ROOM, JACKSON WARD.

DAYTIME. 1960

Men standing around in dress uniform, as they have to do. Someone has a flyer for The International Association of Black Firefighters, a new thing, and the men are talking about it.

CHARLES BELL

I don't know. International? I got my hands full with our Club Valiant membership.

WARREN KERSEY

It's hard to get promoted here. Lots of us more qualified than the white boys who do. When are we gonna get a black captain here? How do any of us go higher?

CHARLES BELL

Why can't we use this new association to lobby the city council to open up the competition for leadership to all of us?

KERSEY

It's just blow back all the time. Talking 'bout we should be grateful we have jobs.

CAPTAIN

(entering the dining room)
What's all this?

CHARLES BELL

Literature, captain. about our black firefighters' association.
(MORE)

CHARLES BELL (CONT'D)

We want the test to open up so we can try out for command positions.

CAPTAIN

Hmm. Let me see. You got three men promoted to Lieutenant. Blake, Hicks, and Page. I hear Hicks sat for the captain's exam again.

He picks up a flyer. Scans it. Turns it and squints.

CAPTAIN (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Just not enough light in here to read this, is there?

KERSEY

I can see it ok, sir.

CAPTAIN

Well, I can't.

CHARLES BELL

Kersey, shut up.

KERSEY

What did I say?

CHARLES BELL

(aside) Shut up, man! (to the Captan) Sir, let me read it for everyone.

CAPTAIN

Good idea, Charlie. What does it say?

KERSEY

(dawns on him) (whispers) Captain can't read?!

CAPTAIN

Kersey, go home. Get out of here. (He snatches the paper and retreats to his office)

HARVEY HICKS

(entering the room) What?

CHARLES BELL

Damn Kersey outed the captain.

HARVEY HICKS

Huh?

CHARLES BELL
He can't read.

HARVEY HICKS
We are college men but our captain
can't read?

CHARLES BELL
Yeah.

HARVEY HICKS
What do we aim to do about it?

CHARLES BELL
Nothing. Cracker.

HARVEY HICKS
Nope. We help him. Teach him.

CHARLES BELL
He'll fire you just for knowing.

HARVEY HICKS
He can't. He needs us. And he
needs to read. Im'a offer.

He knocks on the captain's door.

(CONT'D)
Sir, may I come in?

CAPTAIN
(from within) Yeah.

SCENE 9: CONTINUOUS. INT. CAPTAIN'S OFFICE

CAPTAIN
What Do You Want, Hicks?

HARVEY HICKS
Sir, let me, let us teach you to
read.

That hangs in the air.

CAPTAIN
Get out!

HARVEY HICKS
Yes, sir. But I can help. Everyone
needs to read. I can teach you
like I was taught.

CAPTAIN
Get out! When I want your help,
I'll ask for it.

SCENE 10: INT. SOME WEEKS LATER

Captain and Harvey sitting at the Captain's desk. Harvey is helping the Captain trace his letters and pronounce the sounds.

CAPTAIN
I know my A, B, C's, Hicks!

HARVEY HICKS
But now we start putting them
together into syllables. There are
six types to learn, and you can
read long words. Try this one...

CAPTAIN
Let me see...chim..ney, "Ih"
sounds, huh?

HARVEY HICKS
Yup. Today's practice is short "i"
sounds.

CAPTAIN
My wife told me to look up the
word, "Clituhriz." How am I
supposed to look it up when I can't
spell it?

HARVEY HICKS
(Beat.) Captain, how many syllables
do you hear?

CAPTAIN
(clapping out the syllable) Three!

HARVEY HICKS
First syllable?

CAPTAIN
CLIT!

HARVEY HICKS
(hiding his smile) Right.

CAPTAIN
Well now if short "i" says "ih"
like you say, how do I spell
"clit?" K.l.ih.t?

HARVEY HICKS
Almost, Captain. What else says
'k' besides k?

CAPTAIN
Shit.

HARVEY HICKS
No.

CAPTAIN
C, you bastard!

HARVEY HICKS
(trying not to laugh) You got it,
sir.

CAPTAIN
What about "uh?"

HARVEY HICKS
I'll give you than one. It's o-r.
Or.

CAPTAIN
Or says uh? Son of a bitch. Iz,
then. I for ih, and z?

HARVEY HICKS
This time 'i-s' says 'iss.''

CAPTAIN
Ok. Dammit.... Just tell me what it
means.

HARVEY HICKS
(Trying to say it with his hands)
Sir, ah, your wife needs to tell
you that.

The captain glares at him, but sweats out more "k" sounds in
syllables.

SCENE 11: EXT. DAY. WINTER

On February 22nd, 1960, Richmond's own queen of Rock and Roll, Sister Rosetta Tharpe is on the Virginia Union University radio station singing a swinging version of "Wait Till My Change Gonna Come."

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

"Blessed be the name of the Lord.
Job's wife told him, "Why don't you
cuss your god and die?" Job told
'em, "No, no, no, I'm gonna wait
till my change a come."

75 black students listen, sing along, and march from Virginia Union University down to Thalhimer's Department Store. They walk into the four restaurants within, sit down, and ask for service. 34 students sit down at the lunch counter. The restaurant management shuts the restaurants down, and asks the black students to leave. The students hold hands and sing, and refuse to leave. White customers begin to walk out of the restaurant and the store.

WHITE CUSTOMER

What is going on. These damned
agitators. Now look, they
interfering with legal commerce.

BLACK STUDENTS

Separate is not equal. The Supreme
Court ruled in 1954!

BLACK STUDENT ONE

(Holding hands) Don't let
go. We stick together
now.

WHITE CUSTOMER

Damn! This store is for white
customers. Get out!

BLACK STUDENT ONE

No ma'am. We are entitled to be in
all public spaces. All of them!

Things get tense. Shoving. A fire alarm bell goes off. Some people rush toward the exits. Cops come. Dogs.

BLACK STUDENT TWO

(Shouting) We want equal
service. Massive
resistance is gonna end.

Sirens. Cop cars screech to a halt. Cops with clubs and dogs pour out of vehicles.

WHITE CUSTOMER
You are all going to jail!

BLACK STUDENTS VO:

Chanting gives way to screams. Harvey arrives on foot, out of breath, in his dress uniform. He sees Renee through the window.

HARVEY HICKS
Rene! Come on out of there.

RENE
(mouths) I can't!

HARVEY HICKS
Baby, I'll come to get you!

He takes off running but the cops block the way. Harvey runs to a phone booth and calls Engine 9.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
(on the phone) Thalhimer's. They gonna start killing our people and Rene's in there! Please, get the truck here.

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)
(pushing his way inside) I'm a fireman. I'm with Engine 9! Let me in! We got a call.

COP WITH A BATON
No, niggra. Stop telling me what to do.

HARVEY HICKS
I'll help you clear the building. Stop impeding a firefighter. Don't want the newspapers here, do you? You don't want to see my incident report either. Come on.

COP WITH A BATON
Well, go ahead then and see if you can get these agitators to move outta here.

HARVEY HICKS
Start by calling off your dogs. Make it safe for people to leave!

The cop doesn't respond and Harvey runs past him and squeezes through the revolving doors just as Engine 9 rolls up. He runs toward Rene.

RENE
I'm ok, baby.

HARVEY HICKS
Is there a back way out?

RENE
Follow me!

Rene leads the way. Harvey hovers over her protectively. Engine 9 rolls to a stop and the men unload hoses, axes, picks.

CAPTAIN
Where's Harvey? Lord, this is madness.

He grabs his bullhorn and tries to calm the crowd. He finds the police sergeant in charge of the scene.

CAPTAIN (CONT'D)
Come on, Sid. Walk it back. People are gonna get trampled. Let 'em go home. Arrest them tomorrow.

SERGEANT
Niggras! Give me your fire hoses. Let me get this mess over now.

CAPTAIN
Easy, Sid. No. Let's work this out together. (Gets on his bullhorn) Clear the store entrance. Clear the sidewalk. Please, move along now for your safety.

PROTESTOR
We are not moving out of these spaces!

SERGEANT
Then you are my first arrest.

The young protestor puts his hands behind his back and waits calmly. The sergeant handcuffs him and leads hi away to cheers and boos.

SCENE 4: EXT. DAY.BACK OF THALHIMER'S. THE SERVICE ENTRANCE.

Rene and Harvey burst through the door and start fast-walking away from the store.

RENE

Harvey, what are we going to do?

HARVEY HICKS

It's 1960, baby. We are witnessing the peaceful exercise of our rights. It's time. Are you hurt?

RENE

No, honey. I'm ok, just rattled.

HARVEY HICKS

Me too. Come on to Miss Lulu's and have a sweet tea with me. Then I want you to go home.

RENE

Mrs. Thalhimer will want my help dealing with the damage.

HARVEY HICKS

Tomorrow, honey. Call her from home. Tell her you're safe. She'll want to know that.

RENE

When can we just get to live like everyone else, anywhere we want?

HARVEY HICKS

Tide's turning, baby. You'll see.

He holds up a letter from the fire department. It's been opened. He smiles.

RENE

What? You made captain at last?

HARVEY HICKS

It says so. It says to anticipate the retirement of our captain, and that I'll be captain of Engine 9 in '61!

RENE

Oh, darling, what great news!

HARVEY HICKS

First thing I wanna do it raise money in Jackson Ward to get us proper gas masks. We had them in the war, but only a few houses have anything good. If we are going to work inside burning buildings we need to protect ourselves.

RENE

Honey, I'll help. Let me talk to all the Ward leaders. Those that are left. This new highway breaks my heart and cuts through our beautiful black Wall Street.

HARVEY HICKS

Baby. If you can find people who can contribute to that, it will save lives--help me save lives.

SCENE 12: ONE YEAR LATER. 1961. EXT: THALHIMER'S: DAY

NARRATOR: V.O.

I tell you what. It was a long time after Brown v. Board of Education said that separate was not equal. Richmond had what they called Massive Resistance. That meant that Richmond closed the schools rather than integrate them. But little by little...

The Thalhimers sitting down with black leaders from Jackson Ward to talk. Fancy office.

MR. THALMIMER

Tell me what I got to do here.

VARIOUS BLACK LEADERS

You know what. Mr. Thalhimer. If you integrate your stores so black people can shop here, you win.

MR. THALMIMER

How do I win.

He gets a phone call..

MR. THALMIMER (CONT'D)

(Shouts to his secretary) I said "no calls!"

SECRETARY

You will want to take this call,
sir. It's from the White House?

MR. THALMIMER

What? Is this a joke.

SECRETARY

No sir. It's President Kennedy

MR. THALMIMER

Put him through. Gentlemen, please
excuse me a minute...

PRESIDENT KENNEDY PHONE V.0

Mr. Thalhimer, how are you?

MR. THALMIMER

Are you? Is this?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY V.0

Yes, I'm Jack Kennedy.

MR. THALMIMER

Sir! I voted for you. I just want
you to know that, sir.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY V.0

I appreciate that, Mr. Thalhimer,
but I'm calling because I need your
help.

MR. THALMIMER

How, sir?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY V.0

You are doing what I want the whole
south, the whole country to do.
Obey the Supreme Court's ruling and
integrate. It's time. I want to
know how you did it in Richmond.

MR. THALMIMER

(looking at his constituents)Not
alone sir. In fact I'm with a
delegation of black citizens right
now. We are working out the
integration of all my stores in the
south, and by extension, all the
other stores in Richmond.

SCENE 13: THALHIMER'S INTERIOR. DAY.

Black people enter Thalhimer's to shop. Black and white people shop side by side. No conflict.

We see all colors of people at every counter at Thalhimer's. And not just Thalhimer's but Miller and Rhoads, and stores all over Virginia.

Mr. Thalhimer is talking to the press from his office.

THALHIMER

I was afraid to integrate the stores. You know, our customer base, how it was. But it was time. I'm Jewish. I didn't ask to be born Jewish. I don't think anyone asks to be born black or white either.

REPORTER

How's business?

THALHIMER

This year all my stores serve black customers right along with the white. Some white customers couldn't accept it. Business slowed down. But people get over their distaste for change, eventually. President John F. Kennedy called me for advice. What a day that was. He asked how we did it, and could I help him with his efforts to integrate the country, Can you believe it! (He beams.) Look around! We're growing again.

(Cameras flash while Mr. Thalhimer smiles.)

SCENE 13: EXTERIOR.

Harvey standing next to a table with the several gas masks that have been donated or bought with fundraising. There aren't enough for every firefighter.

HARVEY HICKS

We gotta train with these. But they ain't good enough. We gotta have the new boots and coats, too. Thermal and fire resistant.

(MORE)

HARVEY HICKS (CONT'D)

Otherwise we can't enter a fire
with any kind of safety for our
men.

CHARLES BELL

Man, these old firefighters don't
seem to make it much past 70.
Lungs scarred, hearts affected.

HARVEY HICKS

That's them that smoke, too. Glad
I don't.

CHARLES BELL

Me, too, man. How we gonna use
these four masks?

HARVEY HICKS

We'll take turns training in 'em.
Save 'em for the fires where we can
get inside.

CHARLES BELL

We gotta lobby for the best damned
equipment.

HARVEY HICKS

Get the Brotherhood on it, ok?

CHARLES BELL

Yessir.

SCENE 14: ENGINE 9: JUNE 14, 1963 DAY: INT. ENGINE 9: FIRE
ALARM, TWO BELLS.

NARRATOR VO

And here's my finest hour. Maybe.
Maybe it was the very worst day any
captain could have.

The men spring to suit up for the job.

Men sliding down the pole, manning the trucks, opening the
garage, revving the engine.

FIREFIGHTER

What's the job?

KERSEY

Sink hole! Rescue job on Church
Hill.

FIREFIGHTER
Why they sending us up there?

KERSEY
Don't know. This is over that
tunnel where all those men got
killed back in '25.

BERNARD LEWIS
I don't like that place. Feels like
people ain't at rest even now.

V.O: Sounds of the 1925 explosion, screams of burning and
scalded men.

BERNARD LEWIS (CONT'D)
I close my eyes, I can see them
sometimes. Hear them too. The
expendable men.

The truck takes off, full company aboard. Captain Hicks gets
in his car to go to command the scene.

SCENE 15: EXT: DAY, ENGINE 9 ROARING TO THE SCENE. A HUGE
SINKHOLE OPEN WITH A HOUSE ON THE EDGE OF IT. RIGHT BY
JEFFERSON PARK.

CHARLES BELL
Christ! The house. Who's in there?

CAPTAIN HICKS
Sink hole opened up under a house.
Guy went in. We're going in. Church
Hill's full of sinking tunnels.

The men sort out ladders, ropes, ready to do a trench rescue.
But a sinkhole? Nobody knows quite what to do. Four men grab
their old model gas masks, look up at Harvey.

Harvey Hicks crosses himself, descends first, firefighter
Evans follows him, using a rope with two other firefighters
tying the rope to a tree. We see them disappear.

CHARLES BELL
You all right, Captain Hicks?
Where's Evans?

HARVEY HICKS
Naw! The walls are loose!

We hear a sickening thunder of dirt. Harvey is silent.

Two more firefighters descend the rope with shovels. WE see them digging madly for Harvey.

KERSEY

Where'd he go under?

BERNARD LEWIS

There!

(They dig and call out to Harvey but there is no movement.)

Suddenly the bottom drops further. The edge of the car sticks up, a hand sticks out lifeless. It's Harvey's.

CHARLES BELL

Let's go get him!

(He shimmies down the rope. The ground is soft, and gasses arise. Charlie is overcome.)

CHARLES BELL (CONT'D)

Get help! Gas!

LIEUTENANT BLAKE

Holy good Christ!

(He radios for help.)

Nobody else go in. We need oxygen masks on. It ain't safe to go down.

KERSEY AND BERNARD LEWIS

We got to go. Got to try sir.

They leap down with masks on to find the other three. It's too late. Captain Harvey Hicks is dead. Firefighter Evans is dead. Firefighter Charlie Bell is unresponsive. They pull him out of the dirt and race him away. Nobody else emerges. Bernard Lewis holds his hands over his eyes, weeping.

SCENE 15: FLASHBACK: 1925, CHURCH HILL, NIGHT.

A train whistles in the dark. An explosion. Screams.

VOICES IN THE DARKNESS (V.O.) Get me out! Ahhhhh!

The lost black men of the tunnel collapse call out. They blend with the sound of music, voices singing in heartbreak. Big Harvey calls out once more for his son, Harvey.

SCENE 16: INT. HOSPITAL. DAY

Charlie Bell is on a respirator. Coughing. Damaged lungs. Heavily drugged. Now, will he live? If he does, his career is over. Marianne is there with the children. The children are kissing Charlie, Marianne is praying. The baby gives Charlie her toy. Marianne is wearing her signature Queen of Hearts pin. She undoes a pack of cards, shuffles and cuts like a croupier. She finds the four aces and arranges them by Harvey's bed, along with a cross, some good food from Miss Lulu's, and many, many cards.

MARIANNE

Honey, you gotta make it home to
us.

Charlie can't speak but his eyes say "love" and his tears say more.

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3

SCENE 1: INT. FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, MEMORIAL SERVICE. BARTON HEIGHTS.

Rene and Marianne and their families are seated in front of a coffin. It's Harvey's. It's Evans's.

PASTOR

Harvey gave the last full measure
of devotion. John 15:13 says,
"Greater love hath no man than
this: that he lay down his life for
his friend."

People weep. The white ex-Captain stands in the back,
weeping, too.

PASTOR (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

We have distinguished visitors
here. Our first city councilman
from Jackson Ward. Mr. Oliver Hill,
our NAACP champion. Let's hear him
speak.

CITY COUNCILMAN

I'm so sorry, brothers and
sisters! I know this is not the time
for a speech. It's time for
weeping! But, I will fight to
integrate the Richmond Fire
Department, and I won't take 'No'.
No more losses like this that
devastates the soul of our
community. No more substandard
equipment, no more passing over our
firefighters for advancement.

The mourners clap and murmur approval. The old white captain
of Engine 9 starts to slip out the back, thinks the better of
it, and stands firm. A parishioner offers him a seat. He
looks shaky.

WELL-DRESSED PARISHIONER

(calling out)

Captain, won't you sit with us?
This is your loss, too.

CAPTAIN

It is. Thank you. I...I say yes to integrating Richmond's fire and rescue. It has to be....and I just want to tell you, I couldn't have led Engine Nine through a sink hole rescue. Nobody could. But Harvey tried. Charlie and Evans tried. Did you know, did you know that Harvey taught me my letters? He taught me to read.

He gets up to leave. People applaud him. People weep.

There is murmuring of assent and agreement. No, he couldn't lead.

PASTOR

Brother, you don't have to go away.

The old captain sits back down.

RENE

Harvey, Harvey! Did it have to take this to see your dream come true?
(She collapses. Congregants attend to her.)

People grieving. Children crying. A song rises up. "It is Well with my Soul."

NARRATOR: V.O.

Rene can't know it yet, but I'm lookin after her still, and my babies. Marianne, too.

The people weep as we focus on a close up of the grieving Rene and her children. Marianne is there with hers, but Charlie is not present.

SCENE 2: EXT. CHURCH, AFTER THE FUNERAL

CITIZEN ONE

Man, it's horrible how Harvey died. Suffocating.

CITIZEN TWO

Yeah. Just like in '25, these men were expendable.

CITIZEN ONE

Same damned thing right now. Our men get sent to a dangerous job. No training for a sink hole accident.

CITIZEN TWO

Um-hmm. No peace for the dead.

CITIZEN ONE

Look out, now! Miss Rene and Marianne Bell are passing.

CITIZEN TWO

Miss Marianne. Miss Rene. Children.
(The men tip their hats as the women pass by. Some weep openly.)

Marianne and Rene, arm in arm walk slowly toward Rene's home in Jackson Ward.

SCENE 3: INT: RENE AND HARVEY'S HOME.

Kids and Rene around the dinner table. Marianne and her children are there.

Nobody is eating. Above the table is a portrait of Harvey, and a program from the funeral. The family is silent, praying. A baby sits in Rene's lap. Marianne clutches a picture of Charlie.

Neighbors knock on the door, arrive with more food, sit down to pray with the family.

NEIGHBORS

We want to remember him with you...

RENE

Thank you. (She is ashen. To Rene)How's Charlie doing?

MARIANNE

His lungs are hurt. He's alive though. The doctors aren't sure how well he'll heal, but I know Charlie. If it can be done, he'll do it.

NEIGHBORS

Drink a little sweet tea, sisters.
(to each other) I just don't know how they come back from this.

(MORE)

NEIGHBORS (CONT'D)

Their poor children. And Rene with
a new baby.

CUT TO:

SCENE 4: WEEKS LATER: RENE AT HOME, WITH A PICTURE OF HARVEY
DRAPED IN BLACK.

RENE

My love. Harvey. I can't. I
can't.

A phone rings. It's Mrs. Thalhimer.

RENE (CONT'D)

(taking the call) Yes? Mrs.
Thalhimer. Yes, ma'am. I received
the flowers. We got the school
uniforms for the children. And the
money. You are gracious and
generous. I would like to come
back to work. I can be ready. A
new job? Your commercial property
manager? Yes, Mrs. Thalhimer. I
want to work for your real estate
concern full time. Yes, ma'am.
What would the salary be, Mrs.
Thalhimer. (Rene sits down) I can
support my children on that! Thank
you, and if you don't mind, I'd
like to start on Monday. Mrs.
Thalhimer, you hired the right
person. I'll be the best
commercial property manager and
best lease negotiator you have ever
had. (she hangs up the phone.)

RENE (CONT'D)

Harvey, we are going to be all
right.

She starts thumbing through the church directory to find
someone to care for the baby.

SCENE 5: EXT: CITY HALL. DAY. 1963

A delegation of firefighters from Engine 9 enter the
building.

CUT TO:

INT. CITY COUNCIL

On one side of the room, the city council sits. There is a black member, elected from Carver, and representing Carver and Jackson Ward, two historically black communities in Richmond city.

In the chamber sit representatives from local and national black firefighter's associations. On the other, sit local union reps and firefighters from various houses in Richmond. Press is there from all over the south...

1ST BLACK CITY COUNCILMAN

First I want to welcome all the brother firefighters and their associations, all the press from across the country. Welcome! Friends, this is the day we must integrate our city's fire department. How many qualified men,--how many good men have you spurned, Richmond, who put their lives on the line for us each day, without hope of advancement?

OTHER COUNCILMAN

I urge patience. Rome wasn't built in a day.

1ST CITY COUNCILMAN

Rubbish! We've been putting out fires since the days of enslavement in this city and we want our people represented in the ranks of leadership. We want our firefighters spread throughout the city so that there is never another tragedy like the sink hole disaster that killed the soul of our firehouse!

WHITE FORMER ENGINE 9 CAPTAIN

(standing up from among
the black firefighters)

I want to speak to y'all 'bout my experience with Engine 9. When I was captain, I didn't think right, but I know better now... Engine 9 was better than any other house in the city.

(MORE)

WHITE FORMER ENGINE 9 CAPTAIN

That's why the Chief of Department used to call me and say, "I don't care where they are, send me Engine 9!" Integrate. It's time, and it's right.]

The council is silent.

CITY COUNCILMAN

Let's put it to a first vote. Gentlemen, have you any written testimony for our review? Is there another department in Virginia that has already integrated its force?

HEAD OF THE INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF BLACK FIREFIGHTERS

No, sir. Richmond should lead the way. Our people deserve it and we demand it.

CITY COUNCILMAN

Let's take a voice vote. Have you a list of candidates for captain and battalion chief and their test scores? (He takes the paper and looks the results over) Arthur Page is Lieutenant at Engine 9 and passed the test. What about promoting him to Captain?

An aid hands him a file.

CITY COUNCILMAN (CONT'D)

How many in favor of promoting a Arthur Page from Engine Nine to Captain to replace Harvey Hicks?...

The council raises hands. Five to four, the motion passes.

Cheers ring out. The black firefighters embrace. The old union rep from Richmond City grimaces.

CITY COUNCILMAN (CONT'D)

The motion passes. Congratulations to Engine 9.

Arthur Page beams and shakes hands all around.

CAMERA PANS TO THE WHITE SIDE OF THE ROOM.

Tepid applause. A few men murmur dissent.

UNION REP

Now watch. (to the men next to him)
It's gonna be equal pay and
benefits next.

CITY COUNCILMAN

I move also that pay and benefits
equity be extended to Engine 9. We
should not rely on charity to
provide for the families of *any*
lost firefighters.

UNION REP

See? These people want everything.

OLIVER HILL, CITY COUNCILMAN

We are prepared to move that all
fire houses in Richmond be
integrated as of today.

CHORUS OF VOICES.

So moved!

Camera flashes. Local newspaper people are there but so are
reporters from Philadelphia, Wilmington, Atlanta, Washington.
This is big news.

WHITE UNION REP

Fuck us.

WHITE FIREFIGHTER

Get over it. I'd fight with any of
these men. Send me Engine 9,
anytime!

UNION REP

These boys you mean. Nigger lover.

WHITE FIREFIGHTER

What did you say?! Step outside?(He
stands, smiling down at the union
rep. Several black firefighters
stand beside him.)

UNION REP

I ain't said nothing.

The black firefighters applaud the council. Pretty soon a
number of white firefighters and reps join in. But not all.

UNION REP (CONT'D)

(CONT'D)

There goes Richmond.

END OF ACT 3

ACT 4

SCENE 1: MONTAGE OF FIREFIGHTER TAKING TESTS. LATE 1960'S.

Scene of basic firefighters exams, lieutenant exams, battalion chief exams. Black firefighters getting their results. Some exulting with their exam tickets in their hands.

SCENE 2: MONTAGE OF BLACK FIREFIGHTERS INTEGRATING DEPARTMENTS ALL OVER THE CITY OF RICHMOND. 1967 TO 1969.

Aggressions abound. First day on the job for half a dozen firefighters in their new houses. Somebody has spread garbage on the black firefighters' lockers.

WHITE FIREFIGHTER

Hey, boy! Why don't you clean up that mess.

The black firefighter ignores him. His association coach counsels him to ignore the bait, do the job.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER'S COACH

Don't answer, don't even look at him. When he speaks respectfully to you, then he exists. Right now, he ain't there.

Montage of men refusing to answer the "Hey, boy!" taunts. No reaction to the garbage strewn lockers. These men can't be bullied. It's a new day.

SCENE 3: EARLY 70'S. RICHMOND FD.

Montage of Black and white Men sharing bunk rooms. Hispanic, Asian, Black and White men dining together. Men teaming up to train, across color lines. The department is integrated and functioning better than ever.

SCENE 4 INT. DINING TABLE IN A FIREHOUSE.

Black firefighter sitting across from a white firefighter. Each of them tucking into a steak, a newspaper open beside them.

WHITE FIREFIGHTER
Pass the salt, Cooper.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER
Here ya go.

WHITE FIREFIGHTER
Pass the ketchup, will ya?

BLACK FIREFIGHTER
On good steak?

WHITE FIREFIGHTER
That's the way I like it!

BLACK FIREFIGHTER
Philistine! (He passes the
ketchup.)

WHITE FIREFIGHTER
Thanks. Don't call me Philly
Steen. You know my name.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER
(laughing) OK.

SCENE 5: A HOTEL FIRE IN RICHMOND'S INFAMOUS SHOCKOE BOTTOM.
EXT: NIGHT.

1973.

Ladder men working in dangerous conditions, pulling people
out of windows. Men below training hoses on the fire.
Firefighters sharing the work of carrying people to safety.
Axes opening the roof ten stories up to let the fire up
instead of out.

RON, A SENIOR BLACK FIREFIGHTER
(To a white probie) Now you stay
with me, stay alive, you
understand? It gets to 1300 degrees
in thirteen seconds at the ceiling
line of a fire like this. Stay low,
stay behind me.

PROBIE
Yessir. (He follows his leader into
the fire.)

BLACK FIREFIGHTER
You doing good, boy. I'm opening
the roof. Keep you hose on the
opening I make.

PROBIE

Yessir.

The firefighter cuts into the roof. Fire rises up hot and instant. The probie steps back instinctively.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

No! Stay right with me. You step back on instinct, you fall off the roof and you die. Understand?

PROBIE

(sick with fear) Yessir.

The open roof draws up the fire and the two men step back carefully.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

Down the ladder you go. I'm right behind you.

The probie pulls back his hose and disappears over the ladder. His mentor follows. The probie is frozen in fear, gripping the ladder and unable to make his legs move.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER (CONT'D)

It's ok to be scared. But you gotta keep movin', now.

PROBIE

Yessir.
(He is shaking.)

They arrive on the ground.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

You did good, probie. Let's get to the respite tent. You need water and so do I. You get a change of mask there, too.

They go off.

SCENE 6: INT: POE'S PUB, A BIKER BAR, LATE MORNING

Firefighters off duty, drinking together. Talking over the fire.

FIREFIGHTER ONE

Did you see Ron schooling that probie?

FIREFIGHTER TWO

No, man. Too busy keeping my head down and working that hole Ron made in the roof!

FIREFIGHTER THREE

Man, I thought we'd lose so many people in this one. What was it? Two fatalities?

FIREFIGHTER TWO

Trapped guests. When will they modernize escape routes in these old hotels. Richmond's seen too many of these killers.

FIREFIGHTER ONE

Yeah, it was a hot one. Sweet Lord I get sick when I think about how it used to be--three alarms in the middle of the night, sure to lose a dozen or more.

The black firefighter and the white probie walk in.

FIREFIGHTER TWO

Hey! Sit down men. First round on us. How'd the kid do, Ron.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

I think he'll do. (smiling) What are you drinking, kid?

PROBIE.

Beer.

FIREFIGHTER TWO

That was some job on the roof, Ron.

The men raise their glasses.

MEN

To us, brothers!

Ron raises his glass to the company and urges the Probie to do the same. Cheers all around as the kid downs his beer.

SCENE 6: INT. EXAMINATION ROOM.1976.

NARRATOR: V.O.

Now you really got to meet this woman. Remember that little girl who was all eyes for me and Charlie at Engine 9?

Barbara Hicks walks into the firefighter's exam. She's a young woman of about 18. The black, white, hispanic, Asian American men sitting at their tables all around the room look up in surprise.

Murmurs arise:

EXAMINEES

A woman! What? Damn.

PROCTOR

Y'all shut up now. If she can pass the test and the physical, she gets on the list of potential firefighter hires, just like y'all.

EXAMINEE

But boss, she's a girl. A black girl.

BARBARA

Who you calling a girl?
(She is big, strong, and determined.) I'm a Black WOMAN.

EXAMINEE

There goes Richmond.

FLASHBACK TO BARBARA AT 7-YEARS-OLD.

Barbara on the playground near her home. A big boy bully comes at her .

BULLY

(Trying to pull her long braids)
Hey Barbara! You can't touch me.
(He pulls them again, hard.)

YOUNG BARBARA

Ow! You better stop!

BULLY

Huh? Make me!

Barbara takes a swing and a miss.

BULLY (CONT'D)

Oh, good. Now I'ma teach you something.

Before he can get off a punch, Barbara dives into his big belly and knocks him down. Knocks the wind out of him, too.

YOUNG BARBARA

There! I told you to stop.

Bully can't speak just yet and Barbara walks away.

V.O Barbara's mother in the background

MOTHER V.O.

Barbara! Are you all right?

YOUNG BARBARA

Yes, Mom.

MOTHER

Did you hurt him?

YOUNG BARBARA

No, Mom. I stopped him.

MOTHER

(appearing) Good. Now come home. No need to hang around. What did he do?

YOUNG BARBARA

Pulled my hair.

MOTHER

What else?

YOUNG BARBARA

I told him to stop and he did it again.

MOTHER

What else?

YOUNG BARBARA

He said he'd teach me a lesson, so I took a swing at him. Missed. He was about to punch me so I...

MOTHER

O.K. I want you to defend yourself, always. But start a fight? Never. I'm mad at you. Now let's check if he's ok.

YOUNG BARBARA
Hey, Rufus. You ok? Need a hand
up?

Rufus brushes them both off.

YOUNG BARBARA (CONT'D)
Nobody touches me lest I say it's
ok.

BULLY
OK.

MOTHER
I'll call his mother. He's an
awfully big boy, this, what's his
name?

YOUNG BARBARA
Rufus.

MOTHER
Yes, I know his mother. Well,
that's it, honey. Never start a
fight, never make fun of a kid like
him. understand?

YOUNG BARBARA
OK, Mama.

MOTHER
And Barbara...Nobody lays a hand on
you. If you can't beat 'em, come
get me.

The bully Rufus gets up. He *is* a big kid. He catches his
breath and goes away.

BACK TO THE PRESENT. INT: EXAM ROOM

Grumbling until the proctor silences them.

VARIOUS FIREFIGHTERS
Damn. A Black girl.

MONAHAN
(A young and handsome Irishman)

She ain't botherin' you, feckless. Let her be.

SCENE 7: EXT. DAY: BARBARA'S HOME: A LARGE OAK TREE IN THE YARD WITH A KNOTTED ROPE HANGING FROM A HIGH BRANCH. DUMBBELLS AND A PLATFORM. BARBARA IN A BUTTERFLY TEESHIRT.

Barbara is doing an overhand climb on the rope, no legs, all arms. She gets to the top of the rope, slaps the tree and shinnies down. Then she drops to do squats with a set of heavy hand weights. Suddenly, the mail truck snakes along the road and stops at her mailbox.

Her mother is standing by the window watching her. On the table there are flowers and a picture of Barbara Hicks as a 7 year old girl, looking up at Harvey Hicks, wearing Charlie Bell's firefighter's helmet.

Barbara runs to the mailbox, retrieves her mail, sees her test result envelope and tears it open.

BARBARA

I qualify! I got a really good score. Where's my cat? Where's Dalmatian?

She runs inside.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Mama! I got a great score on the exam. They have to let me in!

MOM

(handing her a big black and white cat) Who names a cat Dalmatian? Baby, I wish you'd settle for EMT. Rescue work is more like it for a girl.

BARBARA

No ma'am. I'm going to fight fires, and I'm going to be a captain one day. And an EMT.

MOM

(chuckles and shakes her head)

Where did I go wrong? Can't I convince you to get married and have a bunch of children for me to take care of?

BARBARA

Nope! I want to do something really big, Mom. You know I never did like playing with dolls.

(MORE)

BARBARA (CONT'D)

(she sticks out her tongue at her mother, playfully)

MOM

You ain't too big for me to put over my knee!

BARBARA

Yes, I am, Mom. Be happy for me, please? I want to do this. I'm going to change things around this town.

MOM

Child, I think of your father's high hopes for you. Of his hope that you'd get an education, and do something refined and special!

BARBARA

Mom, I love you. Firefighters are smart people, especially in leadership. Do you know that all the physics I studied in high school helped me pass the exam? You got to know thermodynamics to fight a fire. You got to be a leader, too! Besides, the men I know aren't worth sacrificing a dream for.

MOM

Well, thank God for Maggie Walker High School, then. I want my baby to stay alive. But you got that right on the mens. And where you supposed to change clothes? What you gonna do with your hair? They gonna let you keep it natural?

BARBARA

Braids, Mama. Rows. I'll keep my hair and it won't get in the way of a fire fight.

MOM

Braids? Lord have mercy! Are you goin' *country*?

BARBARA

Mom, do you trust me? My hair's pretty. I'm pretty.

(MORE)

BARBARA (CONT'D)

I'm strong, and I don't give a you-know-what about some guy trying to turn me off my path. I'm gonna be the first black woman in leadership. You see if I don't! Now give me your blessing!

MOM

(embracing her) Always, always!

INT. DAY. A YEAR LATER. KITCHEN TABLE WHERE BARBARA IS CHECKING THE MAIL OF THE DAY.

BARBARA

Huh. Fire Department. Probably another test date. (she opens the letter) What?! I'm in, I'm gonna be a firefighter! For real! (she shouts) MOM! MOM!

MOTHER V.O.

Don't shout, Barbara. What is it.

BARBARA

Mama, come see! I got a job. I'm a firefighter. The first woman on the job. Engine 23, Church Hill!

MOTHER

Glory be, Barbara. (She comes to see the letter.) My baby did it! Now I'm gonna be up at night every night you on the job, worryin'...

SCENE 8: INT. ENGINE 23, REC ROOM, 1978

We see Barbara in uniform at Engine 23, Church Hill. She is on the phone with her union rep.

BARBARA

I need a bathroom and a changing room. I'm tired of changing in my car.

UNION REP (V.O.)

Yeah, I know, Babs. I'm gonna take it up with city council, with the chief of department, too. We gotta change with the times.

BARBARA

Call me Barbara. Hell, yes, it's 1978. I've waited a damn year to get on the force *after* I aced the test. Come on, man, you got to fight for me.

UNION REP (V.O.)

It isn't just you, Babs--Barbara. You opened the door and others have followed.

BARBARA

Good! Then give us someplace to pee! Hell, I'll start lobbying the council myself. No, wait. I'll start a benevolent association for women firefighters.

UNION REP (V.O.)

Do it, Barbara. Meanwhile, I'll ask your captain if you can change in his bathroom. That oughta get you your own shower, at least.

Barbara smiles, but she's frustrated and hangs up the phone.

BARBARA

Right. (She sighs.)

Men passing by Barbara at the payphone.

A FIREFIGHTER

Hey Babs. Talking to your boyfriend?

BARBARA

It's Barbara. Shut up.

ANOTHER FIREFIGHTER

Ooo, she's fiesty! Use my locker, Barbara!

He makes an attempt to touch her shoulder. She grabs his wrist, hard.

BARBARA

No. (she doesn't bother to look up)

SCENE 9: INT. NIGHT. ENGINE 23, CHURCH HILL 1978.

Alarm goes off, and Barbara and her brethren slide down the pole to the trucks.

BARBARA
Where's Dalmatian?

MONAHAN, the big Irish firefighter, hands the cat to Barbara.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
All right then. (She kisses the
cat for luck and loads Dalmatian
into the truck.)

They all finish suiting up to take off to a fire.

SCENE 10: EXT. NIGHT, EXT. GILPIN

Barbara and her crew pull up to a house fire. Small wooden house, one from the 1850's burning away in the summer night. Barbara jumps off the engine and works the ladder. Up she goes, nimbly and quickly.

BARBARA
Cover me at the window!

The men below train water on the window near her ladder. She breaks the glass and fire shoots out, meeting the water with a great gush of fire and steam. Barbara crouches below the window.

A FIREFIGHTER
You OK?

BARBARA
Yeah, get Monahan up here to back
me up if I find people to hand off.

A FIREFIGHTER
Will do. (he shouts) Monahan! Get
up there.

Monahan shimmies up the ladder. Below the men watch a moment.

ANOTHER FIREFIGHTER
(Admiringly) She's fuckin' strong. Anybody come out alive?

A FIREFIGHTER
Yeah. No fatalities that we know.

Now it's just another routine firefight as the crew puts down the fire, isolates it, waters down the houses and trees around it.

BARBARA
(coming down the ladder,
takes off her oxygen mask
and goggles)
Any injuries?

A FIREFIGHTER
One. The lady who called in the
fire has smoke inhalation, second
degree burns on her arms.

BARBARA
Thank god we got her out.

They mop up, and head back to Engine 23. As the firetruck
pulls into the house, Barbara looks up at the elm tree that
is one of two left in Richmond. A grand tree, that survived
the plague that killed elm trees all over America in the 19th
century.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Hi, my elm tree. You beauty, you.

FIREFIGHTER
Barbara's talking to the tree
again.

OTHER FIREFIGHTER
(chuckling) She's a tree hugger and
no mistake. But whatever else she
is, she's a good firefighter.

UGLY FIREFIGHTER
She's still a Black b---.

FIRST FIREFIGHTER
Take that back, you asshole.

UGLY FIREFIGHTER
(smirking) Sure.

Monahan walks up to Ugly, looks him up and down, slowly
flexing his arms, he lifts Ugly off the ground. When Monahan
releases him, the ugly firefighter leaves the room.

MONAHAN
(calling after him) Good idea! (to
the others) I don't want him
backing me up on the ladder. Nor
Barbara, neither.

FIRST FIREFIGHTER
See the captain.

MONAHAN

No need. That slug'll leave the house, you watch.

SCENE 11: INT: LATER, IN POE'S PUB, A GREAT BIKER BAR UNDER CHURCH HILL:

Firefighters from Engine 23 are drinking on the front porch, when Barbara comes in on her motorcycle. She stops her engine and pulls off her helmet. Monahan and the other firefighters shout out to her to join them on the porch. They've got a beer ready for her.

MONAHAN (SINGING)

In Scarlet Town, where I was bound,
There was a fair maid dwelling,
Whom I had chosen to be my own, Her
name was Barbara Allen.
All in the merry month of May,
When green leaves they was
springing,
This young man on his death-bed
lay,
For the love of Barbara Allen.

BARBARA

Y'all crazy. (She shakes her head,
but she is pleased.)

MONAHAN

Have a beer.

BARBARA

Just one. I gotta study for the
lieutenant's exam.

A FIREFIGHTER

WE should hate you for showing us
up, but we can't. You are a fuckin'
firefighter, Barbara.

BARBARA

I love you, too.

ANOTHER FIREFIGHTER

Let's get back to the 23rd. I'm
making lasagna.

MONAHAN

I am gonna marry you, Barbara.

He tries to kiss her cheek, tenderly.

BARBARA

I gotta go. Monahan, interracial marriage is ten years legal, which is no time in Richmond. You ready to deal with that kind of blowback in this messed up town?

MONAHAN

Do you think I care? Barbara, I'm not playing around. I tease ye, but I love ye, too.

BARBARA

Wow! (she touches the place that Monahan kissed) Uhh, I gotta go study. I'm off. Where's my helmet. Um, well. This was fun.

Barbara grabs her gear and jumps on her motorcycle. She can't help but take a long look behind at the handsome Monahan. She roars off.

MONAHAN

I think that went well.

The men all laugh.

CAPTAIN LEWIS

I'd a never guessed, but she's good for the house. Damn smart firefighter.

MONAHAN

I know she loves me down deep.

FIREFIGHTER

(The men cheer). It's legal now! You can (he makes a crude gesture)..you know! Ooh, Monahan, you are so handsome. I want to marry you myself.

MONAHAN

What am I still doing here? I gotta go see about Engine 23.

FIREFIGHTER

You mean Barbara?

MONAHAN

Ye eejits. Ye tossers.(Monahan is enjoying himself.)

He jumps in his truck and goes off after Barbara.

SCENE 12: INT: ENGINE 23

Newspapers lying all around the kitchen table where the men and Barbara are finishing dinner.

FIREFIGHTER

Look here! They knocked down Engine 9 on Duval in Jackson Ward!

BARBARA

What? That was my neighborhood firehouse forever. Harvey Hicks was my hero right up till he died. I'm a firefighter because of him!

FIREFIGHTER

Well, they tore it down. Says here that it isn't needed anymore, what with a lot of houses gone now for the highway. "A consolidation," it says.

BARBARA

God, that's sad.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

I remember the 9th. There was that terrible accident in '63 and they got spread all over the city, after. I just would of figured that City Council woulda kept Engine 9 for history's sake.

BARBARA

The Ward is shrunk. All those businesses gone, all those homes. It's the end of a whole world for our people.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

We can rebuild it. The Ward ain't dead. Just torn...You got to come in first on your lieutenant's exam. Then they can't keep you out. Besides, it's our turn now! White people leaving town...it's our town now!

BARBARA

Ok, Al. (The prospect makes her sigh.)

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

Keep on bein' first.

BARBARA

You too, Al.

SCENE 13: CITY HALL INDUCTION CEREMONY, 1980

The stage is filled with fire and rescue brass, the Mayor and City Council members. The Mayor introduces Ronald C. Lewis to Richmond, an African American fire chief from Philadelphia.

MAYOR HENRY L. MARSH

(He's the first black man
to become Mayor of
Richmond, a lawyer and
civil rights activist)

It's with pride that I introduce
you to our new chief of department
for all fire and rescue in
Richmond. Ronald C. Lewis comes to
us after years of experience
leading a consolidated fire and
rescue department in Philadelphia,
and we are so proud to welcome our
first black chief.

Wild applause, cheers, cameras flashing. Lewis and the mayor smiling and shaking hands. Lewis approaches the podium and mic.

RONALD LEWIS

Thank you. I'm here today because
Richmond had the foresight to
become the most diverse fire and
rescue in all Virginia. Our men and
women are some of the best in the
country, and in our new Richmond,
the fire department reflects the
people that live here.

More applause. People stand and cheer.

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

(To his buddies, in tears) Did you
ever think we'd see the day?

FIREFIGHTER

When do we get a black chief who's
from Richmond?

BLACK FIREFIGHTER

Aww, shut up!

RONALD LEWIS

The first thing I want to do today
is to ask you to be alert to the
changes we intend to make to
Richmond Fire and Rescue. First,
let me announce promotions to the
rank of lieutenant: Barbara Hicks,
of the 23rd. Come and receive your
commission.

Barbara comes forward, receives her stripes and star
insignia. She smiles and waves. The firefighters of the 23rd
cheer. Monahan loudest of all.

FLASH FORWARD 2003: BARBARA, retired from the force, shakes
the hand of Tina Watkins, who is the first black woman
firefighter in Richmond to make Captain.

TINA WATKINS

I made it because you broke through
in '76 Barbara.

CUT BACK TO:

RONALD LEWIS

And next, let me announce.....V.O:

NARRATOR V.O.

And from that day to this, Richmond
Fire and Rescue has been a model of
efficiency, safety, and valor. The
new chief instituted fire safety
training for every fifth grader in
Richmond public schools. He made
the promotions that had been stuck
in the pipeline happen, and today,
Richmond, VA has more women and men
of color in leadership positions
than any fire department in any
American city its size. How do you
like us now, people?

SCENE 14: THE PRESENT. THE GARAGE WHERE HARVEY AND CHARLIE USED TO WORK OUT AS VOLUNTEERS. DAY.

NARRATOR V.O.

Now friends, pay attention to that big man in the corner. That's Big Harvey over there. See him? I'm about to meet my daddy for the first time.

A great table is set and in walk all the people in this story, to sit down as the great local heroes and characters from history that they are, but they also sit down as the actors who play them in this film. The camera crew is there, the men who died under Church Hill are there, looking angelic and healthy. The living and dead members of Engine 9 are there in person, and so are Marianne, Rene, and everyone, in the peak of health. Big Harvey walks down, scanning the room for his son.

BIG HARVEY

Where's my son? Where's my boy?

All the people of Jackson Ward who are part of this story appear, and last of all Charlie Bell and Harvey Hicks walk in arm-in-arm to thunderous applause.

BIG HARVEY (CONT'D)

There he is! Harvey, son!

Big Harvey rushes toward his son, and they embrace. They sit down and all of the people begin to eat Miss Lulu's barbecue. It's all pure joy and laughter.

Charlie gets up, holding a piece of chicken and a pack of cards and moves to the other side of the room..6 or 7 people follow him to play poker.

Hand shaking, crying, laughing, embracing. Barbara Hicks walks in and takes her seat near Monahan. Her mother at her side. All the strong women of the story, including Rene and Marianne, enter and the men offer them seats, kiss their hands. Maggie Walker arrives last in full regalia. Everyone is happy.

And the lost ghostly railroad workers of the CFX disaster are satisfied at last.

HARVEY HICKS

Without these valiant firefighters,
and their loved ones, we might
never have been able to prove that
all of us belong in firehouses, in
leadership, in service to this
city, this country, this beautiful
world. Take a bow, everyone.

The characters all take a bow. Wave. Smile.

HARVEY HICKS

Without these women of courage and
skill, we might never have known
that a woman can fight fires, be a
battalion chief, be a good cop,
make our city stronger. Ladies,
please take a bow.

The actors turn to the camera, stand and bow, then turn back
to their meal and celebrate.

ROLL CREDITS:

Motto of the International Brotherhood of Firefighters rolls:

"WE ATTAIN THE UNATTAINABLE."

END OF ACT 4