

FLAT

Written by
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EXT. PARK PLAYGROUND - MORNING

Chirping birds punctuate snippets of Southern hip-hop as cars drive past a run-down playground on a spring morning.

Quick cuts show two small Black hands placing a TENNIS BALL into a sling made of old rags, loading rocks into a hanging milk crate, and testing a rickety piece of wood.

The owner of the hands steps back to reveal NOAH ROBERSON (13), an undersized Black boy, eyes bursting with enthusiasm and curiosity, standing behind his pride and joy: a homemade trebuchet made of scrap wood, zip ties and twine.

NOAH

Behold!

SUPER: Macon, Georgia.

NOAH (CONT'D)

The transformation of gravitational energy to kinetic via the mighty trebuchet! If you wanna see something cool, make some noise!

No response.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I said, make some noise!

Noah's overweight grandmother SANDRA sits opposite him in a beach chair and bathrobe, a mushy-faced MUTT wearing a PLASTIC CONE next to her.

SANDRA

I'm watching a science experiment at 8 AM. Make your own noise.

NOAH

Grammy, I told you a hundred times: it's a demo, not an experiment. And -- release!

Noah pulls the trip wire, dropping the milk carton full of rocks, LAUNCHING the tennis ball a great distance -- and collapsing the trebuchet into a pile of detritus. The mutt takes off after the tennis ball.

SANDRA

Is that a single-use catapult?

NOAH

It's a trebuchet. I need better materials.

The ancient Timex on Noah's wrist BEEPS.

INSERT: 8:37 AM.

NOAH (CONT'D)

We're late! Lando, come on!

SANDRA

I hope you're getting excited about attending worship -- for Psalms 28 tells us to shout to God with joy.

NOAH

Not today, grammy -- it's the science fair!

He throws his stuff in the milk crate and takes off towards his house (immediately opposite the park), Lando in tow.

SANDRA

Then we'll pray together when you get home! Hey -- wait up!!

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - CONTINUOUS

He runs past his bike (with a lopsided wheel) on the front porch and through the front door, yelling down the hall.

NOAH

Mom!! We gotta go!

BEDROOM

Noah carefully affixes a clip-on tie in front of the mirror.

KITCHEN

Noah opens the cabinet too fast, taking the whole door off of its hinges. He leans it against the wall and grabs a capped INSULIN PEN from the shelf.

He twists the handle of the pliers acting as the HOT knob on the faucet and fills up an old kettle.

LIVING ROOM

Lando waits patiently, fiercely wagging his tail -- and devours the bowl of kibble that Noah places in front of him.

Noah places a bowl of oatmeal and two powdered Donettes on the TV tray in front of Sandra, now dressed in her Sunday best, seated in her favorite ratty old armchair.

SANDRA

Grab me a few more, will ya?

NOAH

Mom said only two. Sleeve?

Sandra pulls up her sleeve and Noah injects her with the insulin pen.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Now, the doctor said you're supposed to wait fifteen minutes.

She grabs a Donette and starts munching.

SANDRA

I'm not listening to those morons.
I know my body.

Noah rolls his eyes.

NOAH

(shouting upstairs)
Mooooooooom! Come on!

Noah clips a leash onto Lando and heads towards the door. Lando manages to scarf a Donette off the tray on his way out.

SANDRA

Hey! Your damn dog stole my Donette!

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - MOMENTS LATER

Noah reads a weathered copy of Stephen Hawking's *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, seated on the bumper of a beige sedan while Lando ferociously pursues his tail.

His mother GRACE emerges from the house hauling a hefty tupperware of baked goods -- it's too early for this.

GRACE

We have two hours, Noah.

NOAH

(rapid-fire) The Earth is six point four billion years old and the Universe is thirteen point eight billion years old...

INT. ROBERSON CAR - CONTINUOUS

Grace gets in the car as Noah climbs into the backseat.

NOAH
... so really -- two hours is
nothing.

GRACE
You nervous?

He nods yes, small but intense.

GRACE (CONT'D)
Just read your book. You're gonna
be great.

She turns the key, and the engine TURNS OVER a few times.

GRACE (CONT'D)
C'mon, c'mon...

NOAH
Did you know the half-life of
Uranium-238 isotopes is four
trillion years? Which means they
decay --

The car SPUTTERS and finally starts. They pull out of the
driveway.

SPORTS DJ (V.O.)
GoOoOoOd morning Macon! Hometown
hero and New York Knicks All-Star
James Thomas is rumored to be back
in Georgia, one week after claiming
the Earth is... flat?!

CUCKOO CLOCK SFX -- "he's crazy!"

NOAH
What?! That's the guy?

GRACE
What's the problem?

NOAH
That's not fair!! He's supposed to -

Somebody cuts off Grace and she lays on the HORN and leans
out the window.

GRACE

I hope your honor student drives
better than you!!

SPORTS DJ (V.O.)

From New York to Georgia, we're all
wondering the same thing: just what
the hell is James Thomas thinking?

INT. PODCAST STUDIO - DAY

JAMES THOMAS (tall, handsome, and well-dressed) ponders.

JAMES

People believe a lot of things that
seem insane to me. So if you think
I'm crazy for what I believe based
on what I've gone through -- then
all I can say is -- hey. Do your
own research. Maybe the Earth is
flat.

MATT BARNES (retired NBA player) stares at James.

MATT BARNES

Uh. I was asking about the Eastern
Conference Finals.

The screen freezes.

ANDRE (O.S.)

Is this really necessary?

INT. KENDALLWORTH OFFICE - CONFERENCE ROOM - MORNING

TOM DUNNE (Tom Lennon weenie-type) points a remote at the
paused clip, seated next to team owner CHRISTINE WOODS at a
large mahogany table across from James Thomas and ANDRE (Ari
Gold-lite), his agent.

ANDRE

The podcast incident is irrelevant
to these negotiations.

SUPER: Atlanta, Georgia.

JAMES

I'm assuming you didn't listen to
the whole podcast?

CHRISTINE

Normally I say, let James be James,
but... this is something else.

TOM

This was his performance in Game 1
of the Eastern Conference Finals --
before the podcast.

ONSCREEN

James dribbles past an opponent and hits a gorgeous high-
arcing three-pointer.

TOM (O.S.) (CONT'D)

And this is Game 5 -- two days
after the podcast was released.

James shoots -- but it's awkward and stuttering. Airball.

CUBICLE

Two (expertly-eyeliner'd) eyes peer over a cubicle wall,
watching the negotiations through the conference room
windows.

DANI would be outclassing her (male) coworkers if they were
here -- she wears a Prabal Gurung blouse and slacks. The
elevator DINGS and exec BRUCE KENDALLWORTH emerges.

BRUCE

What are you doing here on a Sunday
morning?

DANI

Hello, Mr. Kendallworth -- I was
just finishing up the Sprite
renewal.

He picks up the folder on her desk and flips through it.

BRUCE

Call me Bruce. Impressive stuff,
Ms. ...?

DANI

Williamson. Dani Williamson, head
of brand partnerships.

She glances towards the conference room, where James is
gesturing animatedly.

DANI (CONT'D)

The James Thomas supermax negotiations seem very exciting.

BRUCE

Hm? Oh yeah, it's going great.

In the window behind them, James spikes a box of tissues.

BRUCE (CONT'D)

This is fantastic work -- swing by my office when you're done.

DANI

Sure thing. Also -- could I observe negotiations with James? I've been thinking about the possibility of moving out of brand partnerships. Between my marketing experience and law degree, I think I could really succeed in representing players --

BRUCE

You're right where you belong, slugger. Negotiations are for agents only. Besides -- isn't James a little young for you? I'm kidding!

Bruce walks away chuckling. Dani's smile disappears.

She looks back towards the conference room.

CONFERENCE ROOM

TOM

Whatever is going on with your shot, James, our consultants think it's linked to this... outburst.

CHRISTINE

And we're happy to provide therapists, psychiatrists, whatever. But he's refused them.

JAMES

Because I am not crazy!!

James stands as Bruce walks into the conference room.

BRUCE

James! Great to see you --

JAMES

Look, I'm not gonna sit here and listen to three white people talk about me like I'm some idiot who isn't here.

ANDRE

James, this is not about --

TOM

I, for one, find you very intelligent --

JAMES

You talk about me like I'm property. Old habits die hard, huh?

James storms out.

BRUCE

Whoa --

CHRISTINE

That is NOT what I said --

TOM

The Knicks would never,
NEVER, view you as --

*

ANDRE

James!!

Andre gets up and follows James out, followed by the others.

CUBICLES

Dani intercepts James as he strides to the elevators.

DANI

Hey James! How have you been?

JAMES

Do I know you?

DANI

I manage all your brand deals. I just wanted to say, I thought that podcast was so interesting --

JAMES

Read the room!

The elevator doors open and James walks in.

DANI
No, absolutely. I just wanted to connect and let you know I'm on the same page so that maybe we could potentially someday --

The doors close.

DANI (CONT'D)
... link up.

She turns to see Bruce, Andre, Tom, and Christine watching.

ANDRE
Please don't talk to my client.

DANI
Of course.

She forces a smile and returns to her desk.

TOM
He has a month til the signing deadline.

CHRISTINE
We're pulling for him.

INT. MACON GYM - SAME

Noah looks at a hand-painted banner reading MACON MIDDLE SCHOOL SCIENCE FAIR with excitement in his eyes -- which dies as a CUSTODIAN unfurls a slick photo banner of James Thomas dunking, completely covering the old one. Noah frowns.

ROBBIE O'HOULIHAN (13, husky) runs up holding a stick.

NOAH
Hey Robbie! Is that your project?

Robbie nods proudly.

ROBBIE
My dad said it's a simple machine.

He inspects Noah's board.

INSERT: Poster Board Title: "PHYSICS IS A PLAYGROUND: LOW-COST ALTERNATIVE PHYSICS EDUCATION".

ROBBIE (CONT'D)
Man. You're like a science wizard.

NOAH

Next year I'll finally have a real lab at Berkeley Prep.

GRACE

Noah, I told you -- they didn't give us enough financial aid. You know that.

NOAH

If I win the National Science Fair, it doesn't matter! We'll be loaded.

GRACE

Just keep your eye on the prize -- you can still go to a great college from Central High, and that's what matters.

Noah rolls his eyes.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Okay, I gotta sell brownies. Stand up straight.

Grace walks away from the boys.

ANTHONY (15, repeating 8th grade) dribbles a basketball through the fair.

NOAH

Oh, great. King Moron inbound.

Anthony pump fakes the ball at Noah, who flinches.

ANTHONY

'Sup, nerds?

NOAH

Why are you here, Anthony? Do you even have a project?

ANTHONY

No -- I'm here for James Thomas. I'm gonna be the biggest thing to come out of Macon since him, so I figured we should meet.

NOAH

Well, you're both imbeciles.

Anthony pushes Noah away from his display.

ANTHONY

Give me your project so I can win
and meet James Thomas.

Noah lunges at him but Anthony holds him at arm's length.

NOAH

All you can do is throw that stupid
ball in that stupid hoop!

ANTHONY

(nerd voice)

I'm Noah, and my project's all
about -- Era-Toast-Hinies.

NOAH

Eratosthenes, you neanderthal!

Anthony pushes Noah, who trips and falls into his display.

ANTHONY

Scientists don't come from Macon,
dummy. Champions do. Nobody cares
about your stupid project.

Anthony laughs at him as he dribbles away. Noah scowls as he
cleans up.

INT. BLACK CAR - MINUTES LATER

JAMES

You threw me under the bus.

ANDRE

You said the Earth is flat!

JAMES

That was not the point!

ANDRE

Well, it is now. We've got one more
stop: Macon Middle School.

JAMES

What? Why?

ANDRE

You're judging your alma mater's
science fair to show just how much
you love science.

JAMES

Oh no I am not.

ANDRE

If you wanna save your career, you
will shut up and smile. Please.

JAMES

Would you tell Muhammad Ali to shut
up?

ANDRE

Muhammad Ali didn't say the Earth
is flat!!

INT. MACON GYM - SAME

Three JUDGES (STUFFY, SLEEPY, and SUPPORTIVE), file into the
gym, clipboards and pens at the ready.

MONTAGE: THE JUDGING.

- A NERVOUS GIRL holds a contraption made of garbage and zip
ties -- which collapses.
- A BOY WITH GLASSES pulls out a possum, scaring the judges.
- A PORTLY BOY creates a soda explosion of Mentos and coke,
drenching the judges.
- Robbie demonstrates his lever moving a small rock.

Finally, the judges arrive at Noah's display.

Stuffy Judge carefully measures his sundial. Sleepy Judge
yawns SO big. Supportive Judge shoots Noah two thumbs up.

Stuffy Judge a-hem's, and all three ready their clipboards.

STUFFY JUDGE

Please summarize your work.

NOAH

I performed physics demos to
promote scientific literacy in an
engaging and affordable manner. For
example: I used ancient methods
developed by Eratosthenes to prove
that the Earth is round.

SUPPORTIVE JUDGE

Impressive!

NOAH

And we've had a 100% increase in
attendance over the last month.

Stuffy Judge reads Noah's board closely.

STUFFY JUDGE

You went from zero attendees to one?

NOAH

That's correct.

SLEEPY JUDGE

And what was your calculation of the Earth's circumference?

NOAH

40,075 kilometers -- or 24,901 miles. Duh.

The judges scribble as they move along.

Grace crosses her arms.

GRACE

Did I raise you to say "duh"?

NOAH

No.

GRACE

They're gonna mark you down for that. But you were amazing.

Grace wraps Noah in a hug.

NOAH

Can Dad come if I make it to Regionals?

GRACE

Maybe his contract will end early -- we'll see.

ON STAGE

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON (politely manic Yvette Nicole Brown-type) nervously clutches the podium.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON

Now that judging is over, I'd like to remind everyone that the only loser here today... is ignorance.

She looks for applause that does not come.

THE BACK OF THE GYM

Large SECURITY GUARDS with earpieces enter through the back. Kids whisper as their attention turns away from the stage.

INT. LIMO - SAME

James' limo pulls up outside of the gym.

INT. MACON GYM - SAME

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON
And now, our five finalists. Dante
Laredo, Alicia Skillman...

A crowd forms at the back of the gym.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON (CONT'D)
...Tamika Bryant, Robbie
O'Houlihan, and Noah Roberson.

THE BACK OF THE GYM

The doors open. A WILD CHEER erupts as James shuffles in, barely hiding his distaste for his surroundings. Phone cameras FLASH left and right.

Noah jumps in the air and turns to Robbie.

NOAH
Robbie, we made it!

But Robbie's in the mass of fans around James. Noah scowls.

ON STAGE

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON
Oh! And a big, big thank you to our
special guest judge, basketball
phenom James Thomas.

James takes his seat.

IN THE WINGS

Noah watches with distaste.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON (CONT'D)
Now -- the two highest-scoring
students will compete at Regionals
for the chance to represent Middle
Georgia at the National Science
Fair. Up first; Dante Laredo.

DANTE LAREDO (a.k.a. the Boy with Thick Glasses) approaches the podium, holding a stiff possum by the tail.

STUFFY JUDGE

Mr. Laredo, where did you find this... specimen?

DANTE

The gutter.

CUT TO:

Robbie holds his stick in front of him, beaming.

STUFFY JUDGE

Mr. O'Houlihan, what would you say is the purpose of your project?

He puts his mouth directly on the microphone.

ROBBIE

It moves stuff.

CUT TO:

Noah stands on a stool behind the podium.

STUFFY JUDGE

Mr. Roberson -- what are some incorrect beliefs that your demos seek to correct?

James checks his phone. Noah notices.

NOAH

Believe it or not, some people still think that the Earth is flat. And some kids listen to those dumb people -- just because they run fast or something.

A murmur comes over the crowd.

IN THE WINGS

ANDRE

No no no no no.

ON STAGE

JAMES

I'm sorry, are you talking to me? I went to Duke University.

NOAH
For, like, one year.

JAMES
You're missing the big picture --

NOAH
Do you have a question about my
project or not?

The audience BUZZES.

JAMES
No. And minus ten points for being
disrespectful.

SUPPORTIVE JUDGE
That's not really how this works --

Principal Donaldson rushes to the podium.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON
Another round of applause for all
of our wonderful finalists!

James fills out his scorecard, writing "10" in each box
except for Noah's -- where he writes "1".

He passes the notecard back to Principal Donaldson, who
clears her throat.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON (CONT'D)
Carry the one, hold the three,
juggle the four, and... please give
a big round of applause to our
science fair runner-up: Noah
Roberson, as well as our grand
prize winner: Robbie O'Houlihan!

Noah smiles weakly. Robbie is confused.

Grace claps proudly.

Noah shakes James' hand, posing for a photo.

NOAH
Did you ruin my score? This matters
-- like, a lot.

JAMES
Calm down, Einstein. I can't
discuss judging protocol.

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON
Noah, let's remember that James
Thomas is being very generous --

NOAH
So if you don't believe in physics -
- do you believe in judo?

Noah gets into a fighting stance.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Ai-ya!

PRINCIPAL DONALDSON
Oh no.

James mockingly matches him.

JAMES
What are you going to --

Noah deftly sweeps James' leg, knocking him down to one knee.

IN THE AUDIENCE

GRACE
Noah Roberson!

ONSTAGE

James springs up and grabs for Noah, who squirms away.

JAMES
C'mon! Let's see some more judo
when I'm ready!

NOAH
It was just a demo!

James lunges across the table, knocking over a papier-mâché
volcano which erupts baking soda/vinegar goo.

Andre runs onstage and slips in the goo, taking down Sleepy
and Stuffy with him. James chases Noah into the crowd,
knocking over a MOM -- and barely catching her as she falls
into his arms.

MOM
You're tall!

James (gently) drops her and pursues Noah as cellphones
record the fracas. Noah crawls underneath a table and James
dives after him, grabbing his shoe.

Noah pulls a small pen light from his pocket and shines it into James' eyes.

JAMES

GAAAH!

James lets go and Noah squirms onto the other side and on top of the table.

He leaps over projects as James runs parallel, shoving parents and children alike out of the way.

NOAH

It was just a demo!!

JAMES

Oh, I'll show you a --

James runs smack into a concrete pillar.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. LIMO - LATER

James and Andre are covered in science fair detritus -- James holds an ice pack to his head.

ANDRE

James, the Knicks are fining you a hundred thousand and suspending you from team operations for the next month. Your top five endorsements have dropped you. Nike, State Farm, Gatorade, Icy Hot -- even Outback Steakhouse.

JAMES

It's been fifteen minutes!

ANDRE

You beat up a kid. Word moves fast. Sorry -- it's over.

JAMES

Wait, what?

The car pulls over and Andre gets out.

EXT. LIMO - SAME

ANDRE

I can't represent you -- it's just
not worth it anymore.

JAMES

Just like that?

ANDRE

We're associates, James. Not
friends. Good luck.

Andre walks away.

JAMES

I'm a former MVP, a six-time All-
Star, and an ex-Kardashian!
Tomorrow morning, you'll be
crawling back!!

INT. ROBERSON CAR - MINUTES LATER

Grace lectures Noah via the rearview mirror.

GRACE

You're grounded for a long, long
time! As long as one of your
uranium half-lives!

NOAH

That's like four trillion years!

Grace's cell phone RINGS. She fumbles in her purse.

GRACE

Oh, for the love of --

She finds it, looks at it, and hands it back to Noah.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Tell your father what you did.

Noah answers the phone.

NOAH

Hey, Dad.

INT. OIL FIELD BARRACKS - NIGHT

AL, a built man wearing a dirty jumpsuit, talks on a cell
phone in a long dimly-lit hallway.

AL
Hey, Noah! How'd it go?

INTERCUT BETWEEN OIL FIELD BARRACKS AND ROBERSON CAR

NOAH
I got second.

AL
That's amazing!

GRACE
Tell him everything you did.

NOAH
... and I kinda got into a fight
with James Thomas.

AL
Like, the basketball player?

NOAH
Yeah. Can you come to Regionals?
It's in three weeks.

AL
I'm sorry, buddy -- I'll still be
driving tankers out here.

NOAH
What if I make it to Nationals?

AL
My contract's up by then -- I won't
miss it. How are those demos going?

NOAH
They're okay. How's Canada?

AL
It's alright. Could be better, if I
was hanging out with you.

Noah smiles. Grace takes the phone back.

GRACE
You have some explaining to do, Al.
He didn't learn judo from me!

INT. KENDALLWORTH OFFICE - THE NEXT DAY

Andre sits in front of Bruce, while the office buzzes with activity behind them.

ANDRE

I'm telling you: James Thomas is done. He can't play, he's un-endorseable, and he's insane. The cash cow is dry.

Dani walks into Bruce's office, knocking on her way in.

DANI

Good morning Bruce -- here's that Sprite renewal, all finalized.

BRUCE

Great. Give us a moment. (*Back to Andre*) Well, we have to look to the future. Even if that means saying goodbye to James Thomas.

DANI

Wait -- we're losing James Thomas? Just like that?

ANDRE

I'm sorry, are you an agent here?

DANI

Dani Williamson. Head of brand partnerships. I'm not an agent but I have passed the certification exam -- twice.

Dani sits down next to Andre.

DANI (CONT'D)

If you give me some time with him, I can get him back on track.

ANDRE

Do you have any experience managing or training players?

DANI

I've negotiated thousands of endorsements and managed PR campaigns after dozens of NBA scandals -- from Malice at the Palace to Donaghy's gambling ring.

ANDRE

Do you even -- who's the best player on the Supersonics?

DANI

The Seattle Supersonics don't exist -- they became the Oklahoma City Thunder in 2008.

ANDRE

Very impressive, but I don't see how this will fix his delusions --

DANI

Delusions? James Thomas is perfectly sane. He's just angry. Did you listen to the podcast?

ANDRE

No, I didn't listen to forty minutes of conspiracy jabber -- Bruce, what are we doing here?

DANI

What do you have to lose? Give me til the signing deadline. I understand James. I know what it's like to be ignored -- and I'm ready to listen to him.

Andre rolls his eyes and scoffs.

BRUCE

I don't see the harm. Andre, he's your client. What do you say?

Andre considers.

ANDRE

You know what -- give it your best shot. And in the rare event that this works -- I get half your percentage.

DANI

Deal. But if I close, I want intros to top prospects and equal consideration with every other agent here.

BRUCE

If you close a hundred and eighty-five million dollar deal -- you've earned it.

He holds out his hand. Dani shakes.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' MANSION -- THE NEXT MORNING

On the TV, SKIP BAYLESS and SHANNON SHARPE argue on ESPN's UNDISPUTED.

SKIP BAYLESS

The fact of the matter is -- James Thomas is unstable.

SHANNON

SKIIIIIP! Skip Skip Skip SKIP do not disrespect the Monster of Macon!

James strides across his cavernous kitchen in a silk robe. One of his security guys, RUDY, sits at his counter.

JAMES

It's a good day, Rudy. A great day for my punk agent to eat a fat piece of humble pie. Play voicemails!

AUTOMATED HOME SYSTEM

You have -- one -- new -- message.

BEEP.

RODNEY

Hey James, it's me. Just thought I'd check in again -- I was having trouble with my machine, so maybe I missed your call back. Anyways, I'd love to --

JAMES

Delete message.

AUTOMATED HOME SYSTEM

End of new messages.

JAMES

Are you serious?!

He turns back to Rudy, watching ESPN.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Turn that garbage off.

A DOORBELL echoes in the cavernous house.

Rudy checks an iPad.

RUDY
License plate is from Kendallworth.

JAMES
Ha! Buzz 'em in.

James strides towards the front door.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Tail between his legs --

He opens it to find DANI. His smirk disappears.

DANI
Hello, James.

JAMES
You again?! Can I help you?

She walks past him into his house.

DANI
My name is Dani. I'm your new agent.

JAMES
Uh. No, you're not.

DANI
James, I heard what you said on the podcast. All of it. I understand why you said it, and I empathize with your frustration.

JAMES
Well, I appreciate that, but --

DANI
Where's your gym?

JAMES
No, that's not -- wait --

Dani walks back out the front door.

EXT. MANSION

James runs to catch up with Dani as she glides across the expansive driveway.

JAMES
Wait a second -- you seem familiar.

DANI
I manage your brand partnerships.
We've met four times.

JAMES
Oh. Huh.

INT. GYM LOBBY - SAME

Dani opens the door, strides in, and flicks on the lights.

JAMES
Sorry, white ladies kinda blend
together for me -- who else do you
represent?

Dani walks onto the court.

DANI
You'll be my first client.

JAMES
And you think...

James belly laughs.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Okay, no. No way. I'm sorry, but
I'm not the one to make your dreams
come true.

DANI
(with authority)
I've negotiated fifty-seven million
dollars in revenue for you over the
past six years. I understand your
brand in a way no other agent can,
and I'm going to work outside of
the box to fix your shot AND your
image. I will make you an All-Star
and a household name again -- in a
good way. Trust me.

James starts to speak, stops, considers, and sighs.

JAMES
I'm gonna be like the only guy with
a lady agent.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - DINING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Sandra holds a small digital insulin pump, sitting in her chair. Noah and Lando play tug-of-war with an old rope toy.

SANDRA

That doctor keeps lecturing me.
Lord knows I'm big! I don't need a
reminder!

NOAH

Well, this new pump does everything
for you: it checks your blood sugar
and pumps insulin if it's too high.

SANDRA

Well, I don't trust it and I'm not
using it. They've tried to kill me
before and they'll do it again.

NOAH

Come on, grammy!

Noah picks up the toy and twirls Lando around, jaws locked.

Grace enters the room with flowers in a vase.

GRACE

Your damn fool father keeps sending
me these flowers we can't afford.
Let's see that apology, Noah.

He hands her a lined sheet of paper.

GRACE (CONT'D)

"Dear James Thomas, I'm sorry that
you are a troglodyte."

SANDRA

A trogla-what?

NOAH

Troglodyte. A cave-dweller.

GRACE

This is unacceptable. Sit down and
write a real apology -- or I'm
gonna make you sorry.

He mopes over to the table in a huff as the phone RINGS.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Hello?

INT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM

DANI

Hi, I'm looking for Noah Roberson?

INTERCUT BETWEEN ROBERSON HOME AND GYM

GRACE

This is his mother.

DANI

Hello Mrs. Roberson -- I work for James Thomas. He feels terrible about what happened at the Science Fair and he'd like to apologize.

GRACE

Wow. Um. Noah is also very sorry about how he behaved.

Noah stares daggers -- and Lando takes the opening to yank hard on the rope, jerking Noah across the room.

DANI

James would love to apologize face-to-face -- are you free tonight?

GRACE

That's very kind of you to invite Noah over, but I'm working.

Sandra's in disbelief -- "you're passing this up??"

DANI

Is there anyone else to take him -- Dad, Grandma, the mailman? James is very busy.

GRACE

Well, maybe -- Mom, are you busy?

SANDRA

Heck no!

Lando barks in agreement.

GRACE

Well, there's a bus in twenty minutes --

DANI

We'll send a car. Address?

GRACE

Oh. Um. Thank you. 18701 Cathedral.

DANI

Great. We'll see you soon.

She hangs up.

SANDRA

I gotta do my face! I look like
Beelzebub.

Sandra totters off to her room and Noah storms off to his.

NOAH

I'm not going!

GRACE

Yes, you are!

Lando drops the soggy rope toy on Grace's feet, panting.

GRACE (CONT'D)

And you're taking this damn dog
with you!

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - MINUTES LATER

Sandra, in a sensual-yet-sophisticated leopard-print dress,
leads Noah (in his nice shirt) and Lando (in his plastic
collar) toward the black SUV.

SANDRA

Just be the bigger man and
apologize.

NOAH

He's so much bigger than me!!

INT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM - SAME

James strides after Dani, struggling to keep up.

JAMES

This is ridiculous. Look -- I don't
know if this gonna work out.

DANI

Put this on -- we have a photoshoot
with Noah.

JAMES

Noah who? That kid from the science fair?! Uh-uh -- no way.

INT. LIMO - SAME

Noah sulks, staring out the window, while Lando sits between him and Sandra.

SANDRA

James Thomas is an important man.

NOAH

He's an idiot.

SANDRA

You're always trying to get more kids at your little experiments, right?

Lando jumps up on Noah's window, thwacking him with the cone.

NOAH

For the thousandth time, they're demos, not experiments.

SANDRA

When I was a young lady, I threw a fashion show at James T. McGraw High. I worked so hard sewing the dresses and designing invitations and everything. I was so excited -- but the day before the show, only five people bought tickets. So I walked up to Johnny Rogers, quarterback of the football team, batted my eyes and said I'd love to see him tomorrow night at the fashion show. He bought a ticket -- and we sold out by the end of lunch. See what I'm saying?

NOAH

You want me to flirt with James Thomas?!

INT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

James follows Dani as she supervises a PHOTOGRAPHER and their team of ASSISTANTS setting up the shoot.

JAMES

I am who I am -- I'm not gonna
snivel in front of some brat kid.

DANI

Like it or not, your image is your
brand and your brand is your value.
I get that it's been unfairly
damaged, but we need to make nice
before we can clarify what you
actually meant.

JAMES

I do not "need" anyone! Especially
a pre-teen!!

EXT. JAMES THOMAS MANSION

Noah, Sandra, and Lando emerge from the SUV. Noah's jaw drops
-- before he quickly remembers to be sullen.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM LOBBY

Noah walks in, flanked by Sandra and Lando, pulling against
his leash as he attempts to greet everyone in the room.

DANI

Noah! This must be your
grandmother... and your dog.

James approaches Noah, but Sandra intercepts him.

SANDRA

Hey there! I'm Sandra, I'm a single
Christian woman and I'm younger
than I look. Wow-ee. I could climb
on you like a jungle gym.

She shakes his hand enthusiastically. Lando humps Dani's leg.

SANDRA (CONT'D)

Lando! Be polite!

Dani shakes Lando off through a tight smile.

JAMES

Nice to meet you. And nice to meet
you again, Noah.

He extends his hand.

NOAH
Shaking hands spreads more germs
than kissing.

JAMES
I can't do this.

SANDRA
Shake his hand!

NOAH
Why don't we just spit in each
other's mouths while we're at it?!

Sandra lightly swats Noah.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Ow!

SANDRA
Apologize. Now.

NOAH
For what?! Science?!

DANI
James, can you say something?

JAMES
You want me to -- ? Okay. I'm sorry
you never learned your manners.

NOAH
I'm sorry you never learned basic
science.

DANI
Gentlemen!! Let's take some photos
to remember this occasion.

Dani steers them to the drop where a photographer waits.

DANI (CONT'D)
There we go! Just have some fun!

FLASH!

A snapshot of Noah shrinking away from James' touch.

DANI (CONT'D)
Maybe try smiling, Noah? (to
assistant) Get a basketball in
there.

James catches a basketball and passes it to Noah. Noah passes it back, hard.

FLASH!

NOAH
I don't play sports.

JAMES
Sports are good for you.

NOAH
So is graduating from college.

FLASH!

James turns away from the camera and faces Noah.

JAMES
You need an attitude adjustment.

Noah gets into a judo stance.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Oh, we're doing this again?

No, James!
DANI
SANDRA
You stop that, Noah!

*

Sandra swats Noah away and drops Lando's leash -- giving him more opportunity to amorously embrace Dani's leg.

DANI (CONT'D)
Can someone please take the dog
outside?!

JAMES
Okay, I'm done with this.

An assistant finally pries Lando off of her.

DANI
Wait, James -- let's get one last
shot and call it a day. Noah --

She hands him a small toy globe.

JAMES
No. This is over the line.

DANI
It's very effective to address --

James knocks it out of her hand.

JAMES

Listen to me carefully -- I am not
your idiot.

He storms back into the gym.

DANI

Let's take ten. Thanks, guys.

Her phone RINGS. She answers and briskly strides away.

DANI (CONT'D)

Hi Bruce! Yes. It's going great --
could not be better.

Sandra grabs hold of a PA.

SANDRA

What do you know about senior
modeling?

Noah stares at James' trophy case -- First Team All-NBA,
Final Four at Michigan State, All-American at Central High.
And a tiny plaque with a photograph of a young James:

INSERT: MVP Macon Middle Basketball Team -- 2002

GYM

James shoots. CLUNK. He chases down the miss and shoots
again. CLUNK.

He feels someone's presence.

JAMES

I'm not in the mood for a lecture --

He turns to see Noah.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Oh.

He continues to shoot.

NOAH

You went to Macon Middle?

JAMES

Yeah. Class of... '02?

NOAH

I hate it.

JAMES

If you don't hate middle school,
something's wrong with you.

NOAH

You know, I, um. I do physics
demos. In the park. You should come
to one sometime.

JAMES

Uhh. Maybe. You wanna take a shot?

James passes the ball to Noah, who catches it with distaste.

He clumsily hoists up a terrible shot and misses badly.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Not bad! But you're pushing. You
need to flick your wrist.

He demonstrates and tosses the ball back to Noah.

NOAH

To maximize rotational velocity?

JAMES

Uh... yeah. Gives it a soft roll.

Noah pulls a notebook and pencil out of his backpack and
scribbles on it.

INSERT: A force diagram of a boy shooting a basketball.

NOAH

This is a force diagram. It shows
all the forces acting on your shot.

James looks over his shoulder.

JAMES

Uh. What's "Normal force"?

NOAH

It's a contact force that's
perpendicular to an object's point
of contact.

Noah aims carefully at the backboard and shoots -- SWOOSH.

NOAH (CONT'D)

It's what makes the basketball
bounce off the backboard.

JAMES

Yes!

James points at Noah.

NOAH

Why are you pointing at me?

JAMES

You know -- you're the man. Like --

James holds his hand out for a high-five, then remembers.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Oh. Right.

Noah holds out his elbow.

NOAH

Elbows are much more hygienic.

They bump elbows.

NOAH (CONT'D)

If you come to my demos, I could explain all the physics of basketball to you.

JAMES

Yeah, you mentioned that.

James dribbles away from Noah.

NOAH

Right now you're using friction as your shoes push against the floor --

He pulls up to shoot. But it's not jerky and awkward like before -- it's fluid, easy, and natural.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Pushing against normal force to jump --

The shot is perfect -- nothing but net. SWOOSH.

James looks down at his hands and screams.

Dani runs in, mid-phone conversation.

DANI

What happened?!

NOAH
He made a shot, I guess?

He shoots again -- but it's back to terrible.

JAMES
No! It was perfect -- he saw it!

NOAH
I dunno if I'd say perfect.

JAMES
But I -- how did I -- what?!

NOAH
You were thinking about physics,
right? That always calms me down.
Makes sense.

JAMES
No, it doesn't!

NOAH
Take another shot.

James dribbles.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Gravity pulls down on the sphere of
pressurized air --

He spins.

NOAH (CONT'D)
-- while you use Normal Force to
elevate --

He shoots -- beautiful.

SWOOSH.

DANI
I'm gonna have to call you back.

She hangs up.

DANI (CONT'D)
How did you do that?!

NOAH
Physics.

DANI
Physics?

JAMES

Okay, no.

DANI

Noah, how'd you like to come hang out with James after school?

JAMES

What?!

NOAH

When?

DANI

Every day.

JAMES

No!

NOAH

No!

NOAH (CONT'D)

I'm not helping him for free.

JAMES

He's not helping me at all!

DANI

What if we got you, say, a new bike?

Noah considers.

NOAH

I want James to assist in my science demos every week. And he needs to pay for materials. AND. A new Stingray. With the tall handlebars.

DANI

You're a tough negotiator.

INT. MACON SCIENCE CLASSROOM - THE NEXT DAY

The BELL RINGS and students file out past MRS. KISICKI (enthusiastic and incompetent Fortune Feimster type), as she talks at them. Noah waits behind her.

MRS. K

Problem sets for Chapter Six are due tomorrow. And if any more test tubes disappear, we're having a serious conversation! I mean it!

NOAH

Mrs. K, do you think I can win the
National Science Fair?

Mrs. K walks around and collects beakers. Noah follows.

MRS. K

Regionals? Sure, maybe. But the
National Science Fair is a
different beast. I used to judge
for the NSF back before my
chihuahua got an ulcer, and those
kids are pros. Now Franco has this
anxiety disorder -- he'll eat a
buncha dental floss and then I find
him with a little piece sticking
out of his mouth and I gotta haul
it out end over end like an endless
ribbon. What I'm trying to say is:
Look around our lab. Not great,
right?

Mrs. K uses a STRIKER to light a BUNSEN BURNER then lights a
CIGARETTE off of it.

NOAH

Our lab sucks.

MRS. K

Walk with me.

EXT. SCHOOL - MOMENTS LATER

Mrs. K smokes and gesticulates with her cigarette.

MRS. K

This is that girl from Berkeley
Prep who got second last year.

She hands Noah her phone where a VIDEO is queued up.

ONSCREEN

Tiny and intense, DEEPIKA PINGALI (13) is interviewed holding
a robotic hand on the ELLEN SHOW.

ELLEN

So, Deepika Pingali. How often do
you work on this?

DEEPIKA

Four hours a day six days a week in our lab on campus. But there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

ELLEN

Wow! That's longer than I work here!

Canned studio laughter. Ellen and the robotic hand high-five.

MRS. K

That's what you're up against.

Noah furrows his brow.

NOAH

I need a note for the nurse. I have a fever.

INT. NURSE'S OFFICE - MINUTES LATER

Noah sits while MRS. DIXON, the school nurse, holds a thermometer in his ear. A line of kids waits out the door.

NOAH

And she said there's no chance I win, but I think she's wrong. I just have to stand out.

MRS. DIXON

I bet you can do it. Don't be discouraged. And I know you won't be, because you're incorrigible.

NOAH

What does that mean?

MRS. DIXON

It means you don't have a fever.

INT. HALLWAY - MINUTES LATER

Noah holds a spray battle for MR. BOB, a custodian, as he scrubs graffiti off a locker.

NOAH

Maybe I'll never change his mind and the whole thing is a waste of time. My grandma always says you can't grow seeds in rocky soil.

He takes the spray bottle from Noah.

MR. BOB

I'm growing some lavender in rocky soil right now. It's doing great.

NOAH

Huh.

INT. LIBRARY - MINUTES LATER

Noah leans on the counter, face in his hand, while MRS. DINGWALL stamps returns.

NOAH

I mean, he's got the IQ of a sponge. But everybody pays attention to him. So I guess it's my best shot.

MRS. DINGWALL

It's not nice to make fun of people who aren't as smart as you.

NOAH

I know. Sorry.

MRS. DINGWALL

But look what just came in.

She holds out an old, weathered copy of *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan.

NOAH

Yes!! Thank you!!

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - MORNING

A shiny red Stingray leans on a kickstand behind Noah's milk crate podium, where Lando -- finally freed from his cone of shame -- stands guard.

NOAH

Welcome to another demo exploring the wonders of physics.

A few kids gather -- including Anthony.

ANTHONY

You gonna explain why your head is shaped like an egg?

Some LAUGHS. Lando GROWLS.

NOAH

My head is actually an oblate
spheroid, dingus -- just like the
Earth. But first, a welcome to my
new assistant.

James emerges from a car on the side of the park -- and
Anthony's jaw hits the floor.

NOAH (CONT'D)

James Thomas!

The few kids gathered flip out.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Now. Let's talk about Eratosthenes!

INT. JAMES THOMAS' MANSION - GYM - LATER

James has the ball, sandwiched between a whiteboard full of
diagrams and Noah, screaming in his ear.

NOAH

Newton's First Law!

JAMES

Objects... like to move?

James shoots, and misses. Noah spritzes him with a spray
bottle.

NOAH

Objects in motion stay in motion!
Objects at rest stay at rest!

JAMES

Gimme that!

IN THE BLEACHERS

Dani types on a laptop while she munches on celery sticks.
Lando sneaks up behind her and grabs some, taking off.

DANI

Bad dog!

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - THE NEXT WEEK

Dozens of students crowd around Noah, lecturing next to an
old steel drum over a gas burner. He turns to Dani.

NOAH
Excuse me -- would you mind
assisting us?

DANI
Oh no, I don't --

She catches James eye, who shoots her a look. Dani sighs.

DANI (CONT'D)
I'd love to help.

NOAH
Hold this -- and don't forget your
safety goggles.

Dani puts the dorky goggles on with distaste.

Noah hands her a garden hose with spray nozzle.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Behold! The power of air pressure!
Spray our superheated cylinder!

Dani sprays the drum -- it internally collapses with a BANG.
James jumps out of his skin.

JAMES
Warn me, man!

Lando sprints over to attack the stream of water, delighting
the audience.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' MANSION - GYM - LATER

Noah passes James basketballs as he shoots.

NOAH
Newton's second law!

JAMES
Force equals mass times
acceleration!

SWISH.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - THE NEXT WEEK

Over a hundred kids and adults alike watch the demo while a
NEWS TRUCK films.

Noah sits on a tricycle. James sits behind him on a makeshift seat, holding a fire extinguisher.

NOAH

Newton's Third Law states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

James looks down the barrel and accidentally gets a faceful of flame retardant.

He coughs heartily, then sprays the extinguisher behind them, pushing them forward to CHEERS as Lando chases after them.

INT. SUPERMARKET - NIGHT

Grace, scanning groceries as a cashier, watches a news report about Noah and James -- with concern.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' MANSION - GYM - LATER

James dribbles two basketball at once.

NOAH

What is the Magnus Effect?

JAMES

The slight lift on a spinning curved surface due to air pressure -
- like bending a soccer ball!

James shoots one ball, then the other -- SWISH, SWISH.

James elbow bumps Noah.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Boom, baby! I'm back!

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - THE NEXT WEEK

Noah holds two paper cups with their bottoms taped together and a chain of rubber bands.

Hundreds of students observe.

NOAH

Observe the Magnus Effect!

Noah wraps the chain around the cups and releases, sending the cups flying sharply up, then floating gently down.

Off to the side, Lando jumps on Dani. She brings her hand up into a flat palm facing up.

DANI

Sit!

Lando obeys. She gives him a treat.

DANI (CONT'D)

Good boy.

NOAH

Arm your Magnus Flyers!

All students hold up their own taped Magnus Flyers.

NOAH (CONT'D)

And release!

Hundreds of Magnus Flyers shoot across the playground in all directions, students chasing close behind.

Noah beams, looking at the mass of young scientists.

RODNEY, an older black man, pushes through the crowd towards James.

RODNEY

Yo, James! James!

James curses under his breath as Rodney approaches him.

JAMES

What are you doing here?

RODNEY

Well, I tried calling you, then I saw you down here on the news --

JAMES

What, you ran out of my stuff to auction off?

RODNEY

No no no --

JAMES

Well, that's your problem. Please get out of my life.

RODNEY

James, it's not like that --

James turns and walks away. Dani, having watched this from afar, approaches him.

DANI
You okay?

JAMES
Fine.

Dani looks back towards Rodney, who sadly slinks away.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LATER

Grace snatches a bag of candy from Grammy's lap.

SANDRA
Hey! Neither thieves nor swindlers
will inherit the kingdom of God!
That's 1 Corinthians.

GRACE
Too much sugar, Mom. Noah, home at
5:30 to help Grammy, okay? I'm
working a double.

Lando grabs the bag from Grace, initiating a game of chase.

GRACE (CONT'D)
Lando Chowrissian! No!

NOAH
Grammy's fine -- the new pump does
everything for you.

SANDRA
I don't need anybody. I'm
Superwoman.

NOAH
More like Super Old Woman.

Sandra lazily swats at Noah.

Grace catches Lando, who drops the bag of candy and takes off with Grace's scarf instead.

Grace sighs and zips her coat up higher.

GRACE
5:30, Noah!

As Grace exits, Sandra surreptitiously leans over to grab the bag of candy and pop a chocolate in her mouth.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' MANSION - GYM - LATER

Near the end of a workout -- James is sweaty.

DANI

Alright. I think we're ready to pull the training wheels off. Let's see you shoot without Noah.

NOAH

Just think about your force diagrams.

James rolls his eyes.

He grabs a ball off the rack and shoots -- it's awkward and stuttering.

JAMES

Alright, let me get into it.

James takes a jumper -- CLUNK.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I just need my rhythm.

He shoots three times in rapid succession -- CLUNK, CLUNK, AIRBALL.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Damn it!

DANI

Why don't we take a step back --

JAMES

"We we we" I'M the one playing! While some kid screams at me!

DANI

Noah's been instrumental to your recovery. We should be grateful --

James drop kicks the basketball to the other end of the gym.

DANI (CONT'D)

With that, let's call it a day.

She exits as Noah quietly gathers his things.

JAMES

Hey -- sorry, Noah. For losing my cool.

NOAH

That's okay. My dad says if you don't lose your cool sometimes, you don't have any to begin with.

James smiles.

JAMES

Sounds like a good dad.

NOAH

Yeah. Except he works far away. And Regionals are this weekend, so he can't come.

JAMES

It's tough not having your dad around, huh? I get that.

NOAH

Did your dad work far away too?

James exhales, turns back to the hoop and lazily dribbles.

JAMES

Not exactly. He didn't really want to be a dad. Walked out when I was seven. Didn't hear from him for years. And then he showed up out of the blue after the hype started.

James shoots. Noah chases after it.

NOAH

So -- do you talk to him now?

James chases after his miss.

JAMES

Few years ago he tried to auction off the birthday cards I sent him as a kid -- cards he never responded to.

James shoots around some more.

NOAH

I'm sorry.

JAMES

That's okay -- it was a long time ago.

Dani opens the gym door.

DANI
Noah, your ride's here.

She ducks back out. Noah looks up at the clock.

INSERT: 4:50 PM.

NOAH
Wait, can we take some more shots?
My dad always says you can't make
failure a habit.

James smiles.

JAMES
Smart man. Let's go.

NOAH
Alright! Focus on the major players
here: Fingers -- ball -- friction!

He shoots -- SWISH.

EXT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM - LATER

Dani paces on the phone in front of an idling Black SUV as
Noah and James exit the gym.

DANI
He'll look over the contract ASAP.
No, thank you so much. We're
thrilled to be working with you.

She hangs up.

DANI (CONT'D)
Noah -- what are you still doing
here? Your ride's been waiting.

NOAH
We just had to take a couple more
shots.

Noah climbs in the car.

NOAH (CONT'D)
James, I want you to draw force
diagrams of each stage of your shot
-- the gather, jump, release, and
descent. Okay?

JAMES
Got it.

The car pulls away.

DANI

That was Dirty Mike himself of Dirty Mike's Dirty Burger -- set up a deal just like you asked. They licensed the "Jams Thomas" for 37 locations across the South for 1.1 Million -- all for a Quarter Pounder with fontina and piscillo pepper jam.

JAMES

Hell yeah! Great work, Dani.

DANI

But help me understand -- last year you shot down a national ad campaign with Tradewinds Insurance for ten million. They're still interested --

JAMES

No way.

DANI

Why? That's an ongoing gig as the face of a Fortune 500 company -- why turn that down for a small Southern burger chain?

JAMES

Tradewinds is owned by a conglomerate with investments in private prisons. Dirty Mike's is a Black-owned business. Easy choice.

Dani is stunned.

DANI

You know, James -- if we publicized a decision like this, it's incredible PR.

JAMES

I didn't turn down that endorsement for PR.

DANI

Look, I understand why you went on that podcast and said what you did. But most people don't. And if they could see how thoughtful you are --

JAMES

I'm not gonna be fake for anybody.

DANI

It's not being fake -- it's being smart. You must understand why people are upset -- what if some kid now thinks the Earth is Flat because James Thomas said so?

James sighs.

JAMES

Do you have kids?

DANI

God, no. Not for me. But consider this, James -- I know you don't want to give in to the media frenzy, but admitting you were wrong --

James makes a face, and she corrects.

DANI (CONT'D)

-- admitting you misspoke could go a long way.

JAMES

If your kid hears one clip of a celebrity saying the Earth is flat, and they believe it -- you raised your kid wrong, not me.

DANI

Fair enough. Alright, get some sleep. More training tomorrow.

She walks to her car and opens her car door.

JAMES

Wait -- one more question.

DANI

It's a long drive back to Atlanta.

JAMES

I know, I know, but -- what are you gonna do if your husband wants kids someday?

He indicates to the ring on her finger.

DANI

Thankfully, my wife and I are on the same page.

JAMES

Your...? Oh, I didn't realize -- that's cool. That's very cool.

DANI

It is. See you tomorrow, James.

She climbs in and shuts the door.

INT. BLACK SUV - LATER

Noah flips through his notebook, writing down figures while he jams out to a CATCHY SONG on the radio.

INSERT: 6:12 PM.

NOAH

Could you turn it up?

The driver does, and Noah sings along (poorly).

His delight dies as they turn onto his street and he sees red and white lights flashing.

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - NIGHT

Noah gets out of the car and watches paramedics carry his grandmother out on a stretcher, oxygen mask over her mouth.

GRACE (O.S.)

Where have you been?

He turns to find Grace towering over him. He gulps.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Grace stands over Sandra's bed, holding an estimate from the hospital.

SANDRA

I thought the pump would handle everything.

GRACE

It's not magic. You still need to eat better and tell me when you're feeling bad so we can go to the doctor instead of the ER!

Her phone rings.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Hi, Al -- yeah, we're here. We're all good... mostly.

A pause.

GRACE (CONT'D)

I don't know -- she's on the transplant list now, but that can take years. And with dialysis --

Another pause.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Well, who's gonna do that?! I'm not cutting into Noah's college fund --

She storms out into the hallway. Noah watches her sadly.

SANDRA

Noah, be a sweetie and get me a sugarfree pudding cup.

NOAH

You already had three.

SANDRA

God, I hate this place. Nothing's changed. They tried to kill me back then -- now they wanna finish the job.

Noah reaches out and gently takes her hand.

Grace sticks her head in the door.

GRACE

Noah, let's talk.

HALLWAY

Noah and Grace sit in plastic chairs.

GRACE (CONT'D)

If Grammy didn't get to the phone,
she might have gone into a coma. Do
you understand that?

Noah stares down.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You abandoned your grandmother.

NOAH

Mom! It was one time! The pump was
supposed to do everything.

GRACE

Noah, I'm sorry, but you can't go
over there anymore.

NOAH

But I need James for my project!

GRACE

Grammy needs someone to watch her.
And besides, I don't like how those
people are treating you -- like a
mascot or something.

NOAH

James is my friend. If I don't win
the science fair, I'll have to go
to Central, and they don't even
have AP Physics which I have to
take to get into a tier-one
research university!

GRACE

Baby, I wish we could afford
Berkeley and I wish you'd win the
science fair -- but we have to be
realistic.

He stands.

NOAH

I will win! And then Dad will come
home and we can take care of Grammy
and you won't be sad all the time!!

GRACE

Oh, honey.

She wraps him up in a hug.

GRACE (CONT'D)
Dad's gonna be home soon.

NOAH
When?

GRACE
I don't know -- but soon.

NOAH
James believes in me. Why don't you?

GRACE
Of course I believe in you. James can't look out for you the way a mom does.

She pulls back and looks Noah in the eye.

GRACE (CONT'D)
You're going to do so great this weekend. I just don't want you to get your hopes up too high.

He nods.

FRONT HALL - THE NEXT DAY

Noah stands next to his project in his competition outfit.

Grace talks on her cell in the living room.

GRACE
Mom, I don't care if they "seem shady", they are medical professionals.

The landline rings.

GRACE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Can you get that?

NOAH
Mom, we gotta go!

GRACE (O.C.)
One second.

NOAH
I'm gonna be late.

GRACE

I said one second! Answer the phone!

Noah picks up the phone.

NOAH

Hello?

EXT. OIL FIELD -- MORNING

Al speaks into a pay phone under a steel shelter in a vast expanse, pouring RAIN.

AL

Hey, Noah! Just wanted to call and wish you good luck today.

INTERCUT BETWEEN OIL FIELD AND ROBERSON LIVING ROOM

NOAH

Thanks.

AL

You feel good?

NOAH

I'm fine.

AL

Well, I wish I could be there. I was thinking about the time we --

Grace walks up to Noah, pulling her coat on.

GRACE

Noah I'm sorry, Grammy is yelling at the nurses about what's in her IV and I have to go down to the dialysis center -- here's bus fare.

She dumps some change in his hand.

NOAH

Mom!!

GRACE

I'll get there as soon as I can -- I'm sorry.

NOAH

You promise?

GRACE
I'll do my best, Noah.

She exits out the front door in a huff.

DAD (O.S.)
Noah? You still there?

NOAH
Dad, I gotta go. Please come home soon. I love you -- Bye.

AL
I -- I love you too.

Noah hangs up and runs out the door.

INT. BUS - MINUTES LATER

Noah carefully hauls his board and materials down the aisle.

An ELDERLY MAN SNEEZES on Noah as he passes. He finds a seat next to a YOUNG MOTHER holding a CRYING BABY.

EXT. BERKELEY PREP - PARKING LOT - MINUTES LATER

Noah exits the bus with his materials at the edge of the parking lot.

The other kids in the lot smile and laugh as they unload projects from SUV's with their parents.

Noah walks through them towards the gym, past a sign reading:

WELCOME MIDDLE GEORGIA REGIONAL SCIENCE FAIR!

INT. BERKELEY PREP - GYM - MINUTES LATER

Robbie stands in line to sign-in and register, wearing a t-shirt and shorts.

Noah approaches him, walking past kids in business attire.

ROBBIE
Hey! Your mom called my mom -- she can't make it, so we're gonna give you a ride home. Maybe we can get ice cream!

Noah's face falls -- she's really not coming?

ROBBIE (CONT'D)
You don't want ice cream?

DEEPIKA (O.S.)
Coming through!

Robbie pulls Noah out of the path of a huge metallic box, wheeled by DR. RUTHERFORD, followed by a tiny girl -- DEEPIKA PINGALI.

NOAH
Whoa. Do you know who that is?

Robbie shakes his head.

NOAH (CONT'D)
She got second at Nationals -- and she was on Ellen. She's the real deal. One sec.

Noah hands Robbie his box of stuff and approaches Deepika.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Hey! Deepika?

Deepika turns to see him.

DEEPIKA
Um. Hi?

She turns back to her set-up.

NOAH
My name's Noah. I saw your robot hand on Ellen -- it's awesome!

DEEPIKA
It's a Biomimetic Anthropomorphic Prosthetic. Not a "robot hand".

DR. RUTHERFORD wheels more circuitry past them.

NOAH
Oh. Is that your dad?

DEEPIKA
Ew. That's my advisor, Dr. Rutherford.

Dr. Rutherford waves cheerily.

DR. RUTHERFORD
Hey, sport!

DEEPIKA
He's an adjunct. Useless.

Deepika peers past Noah at his board.

DEEPIKA (CONT'D)
I'm guessing it's your first year?

NOAH
Yeah! I'm excited.

DEEPIKA
Don't be. Rookies don't win. Let's
see what you have here...

She unfolds Noah's poster board to inspect its contents.

DEEPIKA (CONT'D)
Wait. You're the Flat Earth kid!

NOAH
No, no, no -- that's my friend,
James Thomas.

DEEPIKA
Your "friend" is an idiot.

NOAH
No, he's not. You're kinda judgey.

DEEPIKA
I'm a winner. Which is intimidating
if you're mediocre. Are you entered
in physics?

She inspects his experiment.

NOAH
Yeah. What about --

DEEPIKA
This isn't physics.

NOAH
What?

DEEPIKA
This is Behavioral and Social
Sciences. Has the IRC seen this?

NOAH
The IRC?

DEEPIKA
Institutional Review Committee.
Wow. You really don't know anything
about this. It's a shame they let
you compete at this level. It's
just not fair to you.

Deepika turns back to Dr. Rutherford, struggling to carry
some heavy boxes.

DEEPIKA (CONT'D)
If you worked faster, you'd be
tenured by now.

They walk away. Noah clenches his fist -- then scribbles on
his paperwork.

Deepika flags down a man wearing an IRC armband. She points
at Noah.

INT. JAMES THOMAS' GYM

James jumps rope. Dani comes to the door.

DANI
Hey -- Noah's mom just called from
the dialysis center. Apparently his
grandma's having some medical
issues -- she doesn't want Noah
coming over anymore. Says they're
too busy. I can work on her, but
might be a few days before we have
him back.

JAMES
What about Regionals?

DANI
I'm sorry?

JAMES
Noah has regionals today. And if
his mom and his grandma aren't
there -- he's gonna be alone.

DANI
Yeah, it's a rough break -- I feel
for him. I really do.

JAMES
Well, maybe we should go -- you
know, just for the optics.

Dani faux gasps.

DANI

Oh my god -- you really care about him.

JAMES

Oh, c'mon -- no, I don't!

James hustles out the gym past her.

DANI

You care about him soooooo much!

INT. BERKELEY PREP - GYM - LATER

Across the way, Deepika demonstrates her VR project on a huge LCD screen to an enthralled crowd.

Noah frets.

ONSTAGE

An official-looking BUTTONED-UP JUDGE walks to a podium onstage.

BUTTONED-UP JUDGE

Our judges have selected our runner-up and Grand Prize winners to represent Middle Georgia in Washington, D.C. Our runner-up is...

Noah holds his breath.

BUTTONED-UP JUDGE (CONT'D)

From Macon Middle: Noah Roberson!

Noah can't believe it! He walks up to the stage, trying to hide his smile and play it cool.

ROBBIE

That's my friend!!

Noah gets up onstage and makes eye contact with James, his 6'7" frame sticking out in the crowd.

JAMES

Hell yeah, Noah!

Noah bursts into a wide grin at the sight of James pointing to him to say "you're the man". He sheepishly points back.

The IRC Man approaches the buttoned-up judge and whispers to him. The Buttoned-up judge nods, and the IRC man leads Noah offstage.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Wait, what's going on?

DANI
I have no idea.

James speed-walks towards the backstage area, garnering considerable attention from the crowd.

DANI (CONT'D)
Where are you going? James!

ONSTAGE

BUTTONED-UP JUDGE
Sorry, folks, it seems we had a judging error -- our runner-up, from Berkeley Prep, is Shawn Wright!

The crowd cheers -- much louder than they did for Noah.

IN THE WINGS

The IRC Man displays Noah's paperwork.

IRC MAN
Your paperwork says Behavioral and Social Sciences, but you registered previously in Physics.

NOAH
Uh. Yeah.

IRC MAN
That's an automatic disqualification. I'm sorry, son.

James comes through the curtain.

JAMES
Noah! Congrats! Wait -- what's going on?

NOAH
I'm disqualified.

JAMES
What? Why?

IRC MAN
He's competing in a different
category than he registered in. Are
you his advisor?

The IRC man holds out the form. James looks at it, and then
at Noah.

JAMES
I guess so.

IRC MAN
You should have caught this.

JAMES
Okay, then that's my fault -- if
his project's the best, who cares
how he registered?

Dani finally catches up.

IRC MAN
Rules are rules.

JAMES
Why are you singling him out?

IRC MAN
We received a complaint from
another competitor --

JAMES
(*deep sarcasm*) I can't believe they
complained about the only Black kid
in the competition.

IRC MAN
Sir, you need to calm down and
leave the backstage area --

JAMES
What?!

Dani steps in between them.

DANI
James, take a step back.

Noah notices teachers and students alike staring at him
backstage -- he doesn't belong here and they all know it.

IRC MAN
You're belligerent. Please accept
your disqualification and leave.

Noah runs out of the backstage curtain.

JAMES

Noah!

Noah runs through the crowd, tears blurring his vision as he searches for a way out. He comes across, Robbie, who grabs him by the shoulders to steady him.

ROBBIE

Noah! Are you okay?

He pushes Robbie off and runs through students and parents towards the exit.

ROBBIE (CONT'D)

Noah!

BUTTONED-UP JUDGE (O.S.)

Our regional champion is... from
Berkeley Prep, Deepika Pingali!

EXT. BERKELEY PREP CAMPUS

The double doors part as Noah stumbles out into the afternoon light.

INT. BERKELEY PREP GYM - SAME

James runs through the crowd after Noah with Dani following, well-aware of the camera phones pointed towards them.

EXT. BERKELEY PREP CAMPUS - CONTINUOUS

James approaches Noah, crying outside the doors.

JAMES

Hey, buddy. You okay?

DANI

James, wait a second --

Noah sprints away into the heart of campus -- towards the large stone pillars of the Library.

JAMES

Noah!

DANI

James, we should go.

JAMES
And just leave him?!

There are cameras pointing at them from every direction.

DANI
We are not helping!!

A School Resource Officer emerges through the doors.

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER
Excuse me ma'am -- is there a
problem?

DANI
No, sir. We were just leaving.

She walks swiftly towards the parking lot. James follows --
but not before scoffing at the School Resource Officer.

INT. BERKELEY PREP LIBRARY - AFTERNOON

Noah sprints past the LIBRARIAN's desk.

LIBRARIAN
No running!

He doesn't listen and runs deeper into the stacks of the huge
space, turning left and right indiscriminately.

Deep inside, he slows, catching his breath and wiping his
nose on his sleeve.

INT. LIBRARY - SAME

Noah walks down the stacks and stops at a book:

INSERT: *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* by Stephen
Hawking.

He pulls it off the shelf, sits down out of sight, and opens
it. His breathing slows -- he relaxes.

EXT. BERKELEY PREP PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

James walks fast to catch up with Dani, the phones far behind
them.

JAMES
Hey. Hey!

She keeps walking.

JAMES (CONT'D)
What is wrong with you?

She turns on her heel.

DANI
I've been your glorified babysitter for too long now, and like everyone else, I'm beginning to think you're not worth it.

JAMES
You've been leeching off me for three weeks! You didn't give me a kidney!

DANI
James, I know all white ladies look the same to you, but I have been creating opportunities for you for years -- and now I'm here, listening to you, when nobody else will.

JAMES
Why? Because you care about me? Or because you might get four percent of one hundred and eighty-five million?

DANI
James, I -- I care about my career but this is not just a job --

JAMES
Last I checked babysitter was a job. Do you even care about Noah or is he just another piece of PR that you can abandon when it gets tough?

DANI
Of course I care about him -- we can help Noah AND your career, if we work together. But you are not an island, James, and this whole me me me thing -- you're so concerned about being used for your money, but who are you worried about? You don't seem to have many friends in Macon. Where is your entourage? Where is your family? Who do you have left?

This cuts deep.

DANI (CONT'D)
Look, we're both emotional right now. I'm sorry --

JAMES
No, that's, uh. That's fine. I'm gonna go look for Noah.

James walks past her back towards the school.

DANI
I'll look for him -- you just head home.

JAMES
I'm not leaving without him.

DANI
Then wait ten minutes for the hubbub to die down. Just ten minutes.

James exhales hard, and stops.

JAMES
Fine.

INT. BERKELEY PREP GYM - MOMENTS LATER

In the aftermath of the ceremony, Deepika supervises Dr. Rutherford breaking down her project for transport.

MRS. PINGALI, a tall woman wearing her white doctor's coat, approaches Deepika.

MRS. PINGALI
Hey Deepika! So sorry I'm late -- my patient had complications.

DEEPIKA
Mom! Look! I won!

MRS. PINGALI
Of course you did.

Her beeper goes off and she curses under her breath.

MRS. PINGALI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, Deepika -- I have to head back. Dr. Rutherford can give you a ride home.

DR. RUTHERFORD
Sure can!

MRS. PINGALI
Your dad should be out of surgery
soon -- he'll text you!

She hurries off.

DEEPIKA
Okay. Bye.

DR. RUTHERFORD
Your mom is really proud of you,
Deepika.

DEEPIKA
I know that, idiot!

EXT. BERKELEY PREP - PARKING LOT - LATER

Robbie stands next to an idling minivan driven by his MOTHER.

ROBBIE
(*hollering*) Noah?

Nothing.

Grace races into the parking lot, almost taking the corner on two wheels. She comes to a screeching halt and jumps out of the car.

GRACE
(*to Robbie's mom*)
Thank you for waiting, I really
appreciate it! You don't have to
hang around. I'm sure he'll turn up
soon.

Robbie climbs in, and their car drives off. Grace turns back to the school -- supremely worried.

GRACE (CONT'D)
Noah?!

James emerges from the school grounds, Dani right behind him.

DANI
Hi, Grace.

GRACE
What are you...?

DANI

We came to support Noah. And after he was disqualified, he had a little episode, and he ran away.

JAMES

We've looked everywhere on campus. He must be in the neighborhood.

GRACE

Well, thank you for looking.

Grace goes to her car and opens the door. James steps towards the car.

JAMES

We'll come with you. Until you find him.

DANI

James --

Grace stops moving.

GRACE

Why?

JAMES

Because he needs us.

Grace gives him the once-over -- and unlocks her doors. They climb in and pull out of the parking lot.

INT. BERKELEY PREP LIBRARY - SAME

Noah leans against the shelf, asleep. *Brief Answers...* sits in his lap.

SECURITY GUARD (O.S.)

Hey. Hey kid.

Noah wakes up, confused, to find the SECURITY GUARD looming over him

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

Public hours are over. You a student?

NOAH

No.

SECURITY GUARD

Then you gotta leave. Sorry.

Noah nods and puts the book back on the shelf.

EXT. BERKELEY PREP PARKING LOT - EVENING

Noah walks out of the parking lot off-campus -- the opposite way Grace turned.

EXT. WEALTHY NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Noah drags his feet down the wide, tree-lined street -- the only pedestrian out.

In his peripherals, he senses a car.

It's a POLICE CRUISER.

He quickens his pace. The cruiser speeds up.

At the end of the block, he turns. The cruiser follows.

The cruiser pulls over and an Officer emerges.

Noah walks faster.

OFFICER

Excuse me. Son.

Noah stops.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

Where are you coming from?

NOAH

I was just, uh -- Berkeley Prep.

OFFICER MICHAELS

You a student there?

NOAH

No. I was at the science fair.

The Officer studies Noah.

OFFICER

Uh-huh. Can you empty your pockets for me?

NOAH

Uh. Why?

OFFICER

Burglaries in the neighborhood.

Noah takes a step back.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
Woah. Don't make any sudden
movements.

NOAH
No, I --

Noah puts his hands up and the officer lunges at him,
grabbing his wrist and twisting it behind his back.

Noah SCREAMS.

The officer pushes him up against the patrol car.

OFFICER
Do not resist.

He speaks into his shoulder Walkie-Talkie.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
10-87 at Wilshire and Lancaster.

He pulls Noah's arm harder.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
Stop resisting!

INT. ROBERSON CAR - SAME

Grace drives slowly through the wealthy neighborhood while
Dani calls out the window.

DANI
Noah?

They turn the corner and see Noah, pressed up against the
cruiser. Grace stops the car and runs towards him -- Dani and
James emerging a half-second after.

GRACE
Noah! Noah!! That's my son --

OFFICER
I need all of you to stay back.

GRACE
He is a child!

OFFICER

I'm not going to tell you again --
stay back!!

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Noah sits at the dining room table.

Grace slides a bowl of mac and cheese in front of him.

Noah tentatively picks up a spoon and pushes the food around
without taking a bite.

GRACE

How many times have we talked about
this?

Noah can't meet her gaze.

GRACE (CONT'D)

I could have gotten a phone call
tonight saying that you were dead.
That wouldn't be unusual. When a
police officer stops you, you say
yes sir, no sir, keep your hands
out of your pockets and do not
move. Do you understand that?

Noah nods. Grace exhales.

GRACE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry I couldn't make it today.
And I'm sorry they disqualified
you.

NOAH

It's not fair.

GRACE

Life's not fair. Never has been,
never will be. But we have to keep
on trying. Right?

Noah shrugs.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Noah, I gotta tell you something.
Grandma's dialysis is expensive.
Really expensive. And I know this
isn't what you want, and it's not
what I want, but...

(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

Dad is going to renew his contract.
He won't be home for a while.

NOAH

What?! For how long?

GRACE

Six months.

NOAH

Six months?! You said he'd be home
in two weeks!! Why did he lie to
us?

GRACE

He did not lie -- he's out there
working for us, Noah. For you.

NOAH

Well, maybe somebody should ask me
what I want! Because I wanna do
science and I want Dad home!!

GRACE

I do too. But it's not that --

Noah stands and storms off to his room.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Noah. Noah Roberson, you get back
here!

He slams his door behind him. Grace gets choked up -- this
isn't like him.

INT. JAMES THOMAS GYM

James catches passes from a TRAINER and shoots -- CLUNK.

TRAINER

Think about your footwork, James.

Pass -- shoot -- BRICK.

TRAINER (CONT'D)

Just get out of your head.

Pass -- shoot -- BRICK.

James looks at Dani, watching from the bleachers. He shrugs.

DANI

Let's take ten.

She approaches James.

DANI (CONT'D)
Deadline's next week. How are you
feeling?

James shrugs.

DANI (CONT'D)
You can shoot without him, James.
It's all in your head. You know
that, right?

JAMES
Yeah. (*a little less sure*) Yeah.

DANI
Let's take some more shots.

She walks, pulls out her phone, and dials. James returns to shooting.

DANI (CONT'D)
Hi, Mrs. Roberson? Sorry -- Grace?

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - AFTERNOON

Grace cracks the front door to find Dani and James on her front porch. She begrudgingly opens it.

GRACE
Come on in.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - DINING ROOM

Grace, Sandra, Dani, and James sit at the dining table.

Noah peeks around the corner in the hallway, making eye contact with James.

He subtly points to Noah -- you're the man.

Noah smiles and points back.

DANI
We took full responsibility for the
mistake as Noah's advisors. And
they've decided to reinstate him in
the National Science Fair in New
York.

GRACE

That's in a week.

JAMES

My contract negotiations with the Knicks are a few blocks away. The team's chartering a private plane and a suite for us -- Noah could have his own room.

DANI

And we'd supervise, of course.

Sandra scoffs.

GRACE

That's not happening.

DANI

I know it might be hard to trust us, but we care deeply about Noah.

GRACE

If I'm being blunt -- I trust you about as far as I can throw you.

DANI

We just want Noah to get the same chance that every other kid does -- this is important to him.

GRACE

Don't tell me what's important to my son. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Noah is going to college, which means we have to save every penny we can and make some tough decisions. We can't afford this.

DANI

Grace, we'll pay for everything.

GRACE

And then what happens after that? When he comes home, and you've gotten what you need from him? If you give him the most amazing week of his life and then abandon him -- you're going to shatter him.

JAMES

Ma'am -- I grew up in Macon. My dad wasn't around. I know how much a positive male role model means --

SANDRA

You think that's you?! Some celebrity who thinks the Earth is Flat?!

JAMES

I did NOT say that the Earth --

SANDRA

You wanna be a role model? Show up for your community -- when my grandson hasn't guilted you into it.

GRACE

Mom, don't get worked up --

SANDRA

Your cousin Therese lives at the end of the block, right? How's she doing?

JAMES

I -- I haven't been --

SANDRA

I'll tell you how she's doing -- she got fired and she can't afford baby formula.

GRACE

(gently)

Watch your heart rate.

Sandra settles back into her chair and grumpily checks her glucose monitor.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Look, James -- you're concerned about how many millions you will earn this year. I am budgeting my mom's insulin for the next three months. We don't have anything else to talk about.

Grace walks to the door and opens it.

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - SAME

Dani and James walk out to the car -- James pauses before he climbs in and sees Noah in his bedroom window, waving to him. He waves back.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - NOAH'S BEDROOM - SAME

Grace cracks Noah's door to find him waving at James in his window -- it hurts her heart.

GRACE

Hey.

Noah sits on his bed, arms crossed, refusing eye contact.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Are you mad at me?

NOAH

(angrily)

No.

She walks in and sits on the edge of his bed.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Am I gonna see James again?

GRACE

Maybe we can see a game next season.

NOAH

Okay. I'm gonna miss him.

Grace scooches closer to Noah and puts her arm around him.

GRACE

I'm sure he's gonna miss you too.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

James looks at Macon passing by, a few blocks from Noah's house. Next to him, Dani taps on her phone.

JAMES

Hey Mark -- you can let me out here.

DANI

What? Everything okay, James?

JAMES

Yeah. I just need to talk to... someone.

The driver pulls over.

EXT. RODNEY THOMAS' HOUSE - NIGHT

James Thomas emerges from the car and takes a look around.

He ambles up to the front door of one of the houses, raises his hand to knock -- then freezes. He puts his hand down -- then back up --

The door opens in front of him, revealing RODNEY THOMAS holding a baseball bat.

RODNEY

James?!

JAMES

Hey, Dad.

RODNEY

Oh my god, you scared me. What are you doing here?

JAMES

Sorry -- I just wanted to say hi. See how you were doing.

RODNEY

Oh. Well, I appreciate that. I'm doing alright. Come on in!

JAMES

No, I just, um. I wanted to say... I'm not sure what I wanna say.

RODNEY

Wait a second --

He retreats inside and reappears with an old basketball.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

You wanna shoot around?

James cracks a smile.

EXT. MACON - MINUTES LATER

James and Rodney play one-on-one in silhouette, the hoop bathed in the sodium-yellow glow of a streetlight.

James lazily dribbles around the arc.

Rodney pokes the ball away and steals it.

RODNEY

You scared of being shown up by
your old man? I can take it -- play
for real.

He tosses the ball back to James, who gets into triple threat
position. He shows off some handles, spins around his dad,
and slams it home.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

Not bad.

JAMES

Not bad?

Rodney smiles.

RODNEY

Hey, James. I know I owe you an
apology for the auction, and for a
lot of other stuff. But there are
things you don't know about me --
about why I left.

JAMES

What are you talking about?

Rodney looks around solemnly.

RODNEY

James, I left to protect you. I was
in... the Black mafia.

JAMES

The Black mafia?

RODNEY

You ever heard of El Chapo?

JAMES

You worked for El Chapo?!

RODNEY

No, but it was that big. Real
secret stuff I can't even talk
about now.

James starts laughing.

JAMES

"the Black mafia"? Are you serious?

RODNEY

I've been out for years, so you're not in any danger. But -- I only left to keep you safe.

JAMES

Dad, you moved two miles away! You didn't assume a new identity in Brazil! I saw you buying pork chops at the Save A Lot!!

RODNEY

Your mom did too, and boy, did she let me hear it.

He laughs.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

You know, I always wish I had said something to her before she passed. An apology, at least, for up and leaving. But I didn't. And I regret that.

James tries to find the words to respond -- and shakes his head instead.

He takes a shot. It's off.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

What the hell was that?

JAMES

I've been having... issues.

RODNEY

You gotta watch your followthrough. Like this, right here -- all day.

Rodney shoots -- CRUNCH through the metal net.

JAMES

It's not the followthrough. It's in my head.

RODNEY

You're in a funk! You know, when I played college ball, I was in a funk too.

JAMES

How'd you get out of it?

RODNEY

There's only one thing to do when
you're in a funk, and that thing
is... nothing.

Rodney shoots -- SWISH.

JAMES

What do you mean?

RODNEY

It's just a funk. It comes along
one day for no reason and then one
day, for no reason, it'll be gone.
No point in stressing.

JAMES

Huh.

James shoots -- BRICK.

RODNEY

And if that doesn't work, just put
your head down and take it to rack.

James laughs.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

Listen, James -- I'm not really
good at the heavy stuff. But I'm
sorry for not being around when you
were little. You needed me. I
shoulda been there, and I can't get
that time back. I understand you
might hate me -- but I'm not
looking for another penny from you.
I just wanna know you.

James considers that.

JAMES

Fair enough. But there's something
I want you to do for me.

RODNEY

Of course -- anything.

JAMES

You remember my cousin Therese?
Veronica's kid?

James pulls out a wallet and hands Rodney five hundred dollar
bills.

JAMES (CONT'D)
She's going through it. Can you
give this to her? From an anonymous
friend.

RODNEY
Wow -- yeah, of course. And you
don't have to worry about me and
this money -- I'm going straight
over there.

JAMES
I'm not worried.

James holds his elbow for a bump -- Rodney is a bit confused.

JAMES (CONT'D)
It's more hygienic.

Rodney bumps. James shoots again.

RODNEY
Watch me --

Rodney shoots -- SWOOSH.

RODNEY (CONT'D)
What did I say?

JAMES
All day?

RODNEY
All day, that's right! Gimme my
change.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - EVENING

Noah reads on the floor of the living room while GOSPEL in
the vein of Richard Smallwood plays on the radio.

Sandra walks in, using a cane, holding a crumpled MAGNUS
FLYER from Noah's demo.

SANDRA
What's this I found on top of the
trash? Ooh I love this song, turn
it up.

She hums under her breath.

NOAH

That's just an old flyer from the demos I used to do.

SANDRA

No more demos? Since when?

NOAH

Since mom said I couldn't hang out with James Thomas anymore cause I gotta watch you. Plus, he was the only reason anybody came.

SANDRA

You have to watch me?! I thought I was watching you. Who's really in charge around here?

Noah goes back to his book, responding absentmindedly.

NOAH

We both are, grammy.

SANDRA

And who cares about James Thomas? You loved these demos. You can't stop just cause of him.

NOAH

I dunno, Grammy. People from Macon don't care about science. And they don't really become scientists. Maybe I'll be a real scientist when I go off to college -- I just gotta wait til then.

A fire alights in Sandra's eyes.

SANDRA

"Real scientist" -- what the hell are you talking about?!

NOAH

Grammy! You said hell!

SANDRA

Now you listen to me: the Lord says the Kingdom of Heaven is here and now. It's all over scripture -- Luke 17, Matthew 12, Romans 8:32. Not tomorrow, not next week, and not next year.

(MORE)

SANDRA (CONT'D)

You gotta go out and create a better world, live your truth, and uplift his glory right now, in this moment. You're not waiting to be a "real scientist" one minute longer - cause you're already a real scientist, no matter what those stuck-up jerks at Berkeley Prep think. You hear me?

Noah knows not to interrupt when she's on a roll.

NOAH

Yes ma'am.

SANDRA

You did more than any of those kids with half the resources. They're mean cause they're scared of you -- and they should be. Cause you're gonna change the world, and they'll still be catching up. Now I want you to march out on that playground right now and do your little experiments.

NOAH

Nobody's gonna be there -- and they're demos, not experiments. I've told you a million times!!

SANDRA

Don't exaggerate -- it's not scientifically accurate. Maybe I wanna learn about some physics. I'm old, but I'm still curious. C'mon now! Get to it!

She shoos him out the front door.

NOAH

But grammy -- Mom said -- I have to watch Lando!

SANDRA (CONT'D)

C'mon now -- no if's, and's, or -- we'll bring him too --

*

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - EVENING

Grace pulls into the driveway. She gets out of the car and looks over into the park -- under the glow of a lonely streetlight, Noah demonstrates the Bernoulli principle, as a small plastic cylinder spins and emits water from two small holes drilled on either end.

NOAH
(distant)
Thus, the reaction between the Alka
Seltzer and water creates movement!

Sandra applauds more heartily than ever next to Lando.

SANDRA
Brilliant!

Grace barely cracks a smile as her eyes get misty. And then --
regret sweeps across her face.

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - LATER THAT NIGHT

Grace is on the phone -- Sandra and Noah are in bed.

INTERCUT BETWEEN ROBERSON HOME AND DANI'S APARTMENT

Dani reads in bed, lying next to her wife KATE.

DANI
Hello?

GRACE
I was wrong. Noah needs to go to
that science fair. I need to
protect him -- but I can't shrink
his world to keep him safe.
I want to let Noah go with you. But
I need you to promise you'll take
care of him -- not just this week,
but afterwards, too. Even when he's
not useful to you. James has to
pick up the phone when Noah calls --
at least every once in a while.

DANI
I promise you -- I'll look after
Noah like he's the number one draft
pick. And I can't promise anything
about James -- but he cares about
Noah. A lot.

GRACE
Good. If anything happens to Noah
while you're watching him...

DANI
You don't have to finish that
thought -- I'm already scared. He
will be totally safe.

GRACE
Good. Thank you, Dani.

DANI
Thank you.

EXT. ROBERSON HOME - A WEEK LATER

Sandra, Grace, and Lando see Noah off through the window of James' SUV.

GRACE
I want updates, okay? Twice a day.
No, three times a day.

DANI
I'll send pictures.

SANDRA
Noah, you be good.

GRACE
And take this.

Grace hands Noah an old Nokia phone.

NOAH
Mom, this is ancient!

GRACE
It's prepaid. Any sort of
emergency, you call me -- I'm there
in a heartbeat. By plane, train, or
automobile, I'm there.

NOAH
Mooooooooom. I'm gonna be fine.

GRACE
Okay. Bye honey. I love you.

The SUV pulls away.

Sandra hoists Lando in the air (as best she can).

SANDRA
We're rooting for you!

Noah waves out the window.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - SAME

Noah and James wave at the kids as they drive past. Robbie leads the pack that chases after them, GIGGLING and SHOUTING.

EXT. TARMAC - MINUTES LATER

James and Noah hop out of the SUV, parked in front of a private jet. Noah runs up the jet steps, huge backpack bouncing around.

JAMES
Hey! Slow down, man!

INT. PRIVATE PLANE - SAME

Noah sprints in past the flight attendant, gazing in wonder at the opulence.

James and Dani catch up behind him. Noah picks up a small bag of popcorn.

NOAH
Are we allowed to eat the snacks?

DANI
Of course!

Noah tears open the bag and throws back a handful with glee.

EXT. TARMAC - MINUTES LATER

The staircase is retracted and the flight attendant closes the plane door.

Noah presses his face up against the glass as the plane gathers up speed and takes off into the sky.

INT. PLANE - SAME

NOAH
See! You can see the clouds
rushing over the top of the wing
faster than the bottom of the wing,
which creates lower air pressure
above the wing, and therefore,
lift!

JAMES

You really never stop thinking about science, huh?

NOAH

Nope. James -- do you really believe that the Earth is flat?

JAMES

Do you really believe that I believe the Earth is flat?!

NOAH

What?!

JAMES

Did you even listen to the whole podcast?

NOAH

Podcasts are for boring people on their way to their jobs.

James pulls out his phone and plays the clip.

INSERT: James talking on the phone.

JAMES (PHONE)

Most people think we all have the same shot in this country, regardless of race. And that's insane to me. People believe a lot of things that seem insane to me. So if you think I'm crazy for what I believe based on what I've gone through -- then all I can say is -- hey. Do your own research. Maybe the Earth is flat.

MATT BARNES (PHONE)

Uh. I was asking about the Eastern Conference Finals.

JAMES (PHONE)

And I'm telling you -- a country that admits to the evils of the Tuskegee experiments without one single indictment or prosecution is a country that cannot be trusted with the most basic truth -- even the shape of the Earth.

NOAH

What are the... Tuskegee experiments?

James stops the video.

JAMES

My grandfather lived in Tuskegee, Alabama. He was an All-American football player until he got sick. Some scientists from the government told him that they'd make him better. But they didn't. They made him the experiment and studied him as he died, withholding the medicine that they knew would save him. Because science determined that his life didn't have value.

NOAH

But -- but that's not science. That's terrible. And that was a long time ago.

JAMES

Would that cop have stopped you if you were white?

NOAH

What does that have to do with science?

JAMES

It's all connected.

NOAH

This is all anecdotal data -- you have to be factual --

JAMES

You want facts?! On average, Black families in the US have a tenth of the wealth of white families. A Black man is three times as likely to be killed by police as a white man. Black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. You can look those facts up.

NOAH

But --

JAMES

What if that cop who stopped you was just a little more scared? What if your mom didn't show up? What if you were carrying a toy gun, or playing loud music, or wearing a hoodie? We're told that all men are born equal here, with the right to life, liberty, and happiness. That seems like a lie to me. So if they're lying about that -- what else are they lying about? Maybe they don't care if we live or die. Maybe they want to wipe us all out. Maybe the Earth is flat.

James exhales hard. He composes himself.

NOAH

When my grandma was pregnant, she went to the hospital because she was really sick. They didn't know about her diabetes yet, and she tried to tell them something was wrong, but nobody listened. My grandma passed out, and when she woke up, my mom had been born way too early. She almost died. And nobody ever asked my grammy what to do.

Noah sniffs.

NOAH (CONT'D)

My grammy still hates doctors.

JAMES

I'm sorry, Noah.

NOAH

And you're right, it's not fair. We don't all have the same shot. But even though science hurt my grandma -- she knows that things can be better. Science can be better than that. And it will be when I'm in charge.

James gets choked up too.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Because the Kingdom of Heaven is here and now, and we don't have time to wait.

JAMES
Wait, what?

NOAH
Here. Read this.

Noah holds out his copy of *Brief Answers...* James takes it.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Just don't lose my place.

James opens to the bookmark and reads it.

INSERT: Bob Marley bookmark: "Truth is, everyone's gonna hurt you..."

JAMES
Where did you get this boomark? And why does the Rastaman look like Dr. Doolittle?

NOAH
My grammy got it from Bible study. Read the whole thing, okay? It'll help you see what I see in science. But be careful -- it's my only copy.

James takes it and wipes his eyes.

JAMES
Man -- what is it about altitude and emotions?

NOAH
Low air pressure in the cabin means that we have less oxygen in our bloods, leading to low-grade hypoxia and emotional states.

JAMES
You got an explanation for everything, don't you?

Noah shrugs.

INT. BLACK CAR -- NEW YORK -- HOURS LATER

In the backseat, Noah gazes up at skyscrapers with wonder.

INT. HOTEL SUITE - EVENING

MONTAGE: Noah's Home Alone moment.

- Dani, James, and Noah walk into the hotel suite -- Noah rushes to the window to press his face against the glass.

- Noah climbs up onto his bed and jumps up and down, giggling and changing channels on the TV.

- He runs to the closet and slides open the door to find a fancy bathrobe.

- He plays with the hair dryer, blowing himself in the face and giggling.

- James walks in to Noah's room to find him jumping on the bed in the bathrobe.

JAMES

Get down from there!

Noah throws a towel at him.

- James chasing a shrieking Noah around the suite, throwing towels and pillows at him.

- James saying goodnight and closing Noah's door. Noah runs over to his window and looks out again at New York -- his face glowing.

INT. LOCKER ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

James sits on a bench in the locker room. Dani stands over him as Noah mouths his presentation.

DANI

How do you feel?

JAMES

I'm a lion, ready to hunt.

NOAH

Only lionesses hunt.

DANI

You can do this, James. We'll be cheering you on.

Dani exits, and Noah starts to follow her.

NOAH

Hey James -- maybe you've already figured this out, but I'm not magically fixing your shot. I'm just distracting you.

JAMES

What?

NOAH

You gotta trust things sometimes. Physics. The laws of the universe. Yourself. If that doesn't work, just focus on creating maximum rotational velocity.

Noahs flicks his wrist to demonstrate.

JAMES

Maximum rotational velocity. Sounds like a plan.

INT. COURT - MOMENTS LATER

Noah sits in the empty bleachers next to Dani and Christine.

Tom, acting as ref, blows his WHISTLE.

On the floor, James brings the ball up-court, guarded closely by his OPPONENT -- he looks stiff and nervous.

James crosses the ball over quickly, getting an open shot around his opponent. He stops on a dime, elevates, and SHOOTS --

It flies through the air in slow-motion, beautiful and majestic -- then SMASHES off the backboard without hitting the rim. BRICK.

James winces.

Noah smacks his forehead.

Tom WHISTLES as the ball flies out of bounds.

Dani turns to Christine.

DANI

He's... warming up.

Christine nods reproachfully.

James looks up at Noah. Noah flicks his wrist -- maximum rotational velocity -- and points at James: "You're the man!!"

James lets himself smile, just the tiniest bit -- and finally lets himself relax.

He's ready to play.

Tom WHISTLES as the ball is thrown inbounds. James catches a pass at the top of the key, fakes a pass and drives.

He shows off some fancy handles, spins, loses his defender, and fades away --

He shoots, visualizing each physical force dynamically emanating from himself and the ball in beams of energy.

He flicks his wrist -- and watches the rotational velocity he's created as the ball spins backwards.

Perfect form.

Perfectly balanced.

SWISH.

Dani pumps her fist.

NOAH

Yes!

JAMES

(under his breath)

Maximum rotational velocity.

James points up at Noah in the stands -- YOU're the man.

INT. ARENA HALLWAY - LATER

James paces outside a door while Noah reviews notecards.

The door opens and Dani emerges.

JAMES

So?

Dani is tight-lipped.

DANI

Well, I was only able to get...

JAMES

Yeah?

DANI

Two hundred and seven million over
five years. Guaranteed.

JAMES

I... what?!

DANI

Two. Hundred. And. Seven. Million.

NOAH

Dollars?!

James throws his hands up in the air and screams. He runs
down the corridor --

JAMES

HE IS BACK! JAMES THOMAS IS BACK,
BETTER THAN EVER.

EXT. ARENA BALCONY

-- out onto a balcony overlooking a plaza.

JAMES

They said I was done, but I'm back,
all on my own! James Thomas is
BACK!

He waits over the plaza as pedestrians turn to him and
cameras come out --

But the spotlight feels different now. James takes a step
back.

Behind him, Noah loudly clears his throat.

James steps back.

JAMES (CONT'D)

We did this. Together. And I
couldn't have done it without
either of you. Dani, in case there
was any doubt -- I'd like for this
to be a long-term partnership.

DANI

I'd like that as well.

James holds out an elbow, which she bumps. He turns to Noah.

JAMES

Now -- don't we have a science fair
to win?

INT. SCIENCE FAIR FLOOR - MINUTES LATER

Noah arranges his display -- various apparati from various
demos populate the table around his board.

James fends off a horde of FLIRTY MOMS (think Maya Rudolph)
and a few FLIRTY DADS (think John Early).

FLIRTY MOM

And then she's like no! This is the
chemistry lab!

She emits an intense CHORTLE as James grimaces.

FLIRTY DAD

What does this tattoo mean?

Flirty Dad traces something on James' arm, too suggestively
for a youth science fair or really anywhere.

JAMES

Uh, Dani? Can we get moving?

DANI

We're still getting set-up -- take
some selfies!

JAMES

Thanks.

Deepika approaches Noah, flanked by Dr. Rutherford.

DEEPIKA

Wow. I can't believe you actually
showed up.

NOAH

Are you gonna try to tell on me
again? Or can you actually compete?

DEEPIKA

The judges here aren't so
pedestrian -- they'll see through
you in two seconds.

DR. RUTHERFORD

Deepika, are your parents going to
help us set up?

DEEPIKA

They only come to the awards ceremony, dingbat!! (*Back to Noah*)
Don't talk to me anymore. I can't be associated with your pseudoscience.

Deepika walks away.

NOAH

And I can't be associated with huge jerks! So THERE!!

DANI

Hmmm... do you like her??

NOAH

I wish she was wiped off the face of the Earth!

Behind him, James takes a selfie with Flirty Dad.

FLIRTY DAD

Okay, now let's do a silly one!

FLIRTY DAD'S HUSBAND walks up to Flirty Dad, indignant.

FLIRTY DAD'S HUSBAND

Steven, you are embarrassing yourself.

FLIRTY DAD

You don't like sports -- you don't get it.

FLIRTY DAD'S HUSBAND

Do you want to participate in our daughter's nationally-recognized science project or do you want to feel up some more studs?

FLIRTY DAD

Oh my GOD.

FLIRTY DAD'S HUSBAND

Is that so much to ask? That you be present for...

They continue bickering as they walk away.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - LATER

James, Dani, and Noah march into the hotel room, laughing as James chases Noah, taking swigs from the bottle of champagne in his hand.

JAMES

I wanna celebrate for the next week! No -- the next month!!

DANI

Well, Noah has to wait til tomorrow night to celebrate, so maybe go easy on the Champagne.

Dani exits to her room.

NOAH

I should review my notecards again.

Noah runs to his room to grab his notecards. James walks over and looks at Noah's board, on a table in the middle of the suite.

JAMES

Hey Noah -- this poster board is looking pretty good!

NOAH

Thanks!

JAMES

"Kids at my school believe some pretty crazy things about science. So I..."

James is taken aback.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Yo, Noah? Who told you you could write this?

Noah emerges from his room, concerned.

NOAH

What?

JAMES

"I leveraged a relationship with a well-known science denier into increased attendance." Why would you call me that?

NOAH

I have to get people's attention!

JAMES

"My demonstrations corrected hundreds of students' erroneous beliefs, including James Thomas." I didn't give you permission to use my name like that!

NOAH

Since when do I have to ask?

James scans Noah's board.

JAMES

This makes me sound dumb! Take it out!

NOAH

I can't take it out now!

JAMES

Yes, you can!

NOAH

You already signed your contract! Why do you even care?

JAMES

I'm not gonna look like an idiot so you can look great!

Dani walks in from her room.

DANI

Everything alright in here?

JAMES

Dani, we gotta fix his project --

NOAH

Don't touch my stuff!

DANI

What's wrong?

JAMES

He made it about me. Look --

James rips a photo of himself off the board.

NOAH

Stop!!

DANI
James, calm down.

JAMES
You convinced me that the only way
I can play basketball is with a
kid, and now he wants to make me
the laughingstock of ESPN.

NOAH
You don't need my help for that!

James storms out.

DANI
James. James!

The door SLAMS.

Dani examines Noah's board.

DANI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, Noah -- I'll talk to
him.

NOAH
I can't change my project now!

DANI
You don't have to change all of it
-- just don't mention him, okay?

Noah shrugs.

DANI (CONT'D)
We'll talk about it. I'll be right
back -- stay here, okay?

Dani exits after James, and then sticks her head back in.

DANI (CONT'D)
And this is exactly why you should
never, ever drink!

The door closes.

Noah looks out the window at Manhattan, all alone.

He goes to the door, turns the knob, and exits.

EXT. 7TH AVENUE - MINUTES LATER

Noah walks down a crowded 7th Avenue past Madison Square Garden -- an electronic billboard still displaying a promo photo of James.

EXT. HUDSON RIVER -- SAME

Noah walks along the river, looking out at Jersey. Down the promenade, an NYPD OFFICER eyes him.

Noah looks up at the man and makes eye contact. The officer's expression remains blank. Noah puts his head down and walks past him. When he's a few feet away, the officer calls out:

NYPD OFFICER
Hey. You. With the green jacket.

Noah keeps walking.

NYPD OFFICER (CONT'D)
Hey!

Still ignoring, Noah speedwalks away. The officer follows behind him.

NYPD OFFICER (CONT'D)
I'm talking to you.

Noah picks up the pace even more. The officer breaks into a jog, catches up, and grabs his shoulder --

Noah wheels around in fear.

NYPD OFFICER (CONT'D)
Oh -- sorry. Didn't mean to scare you.

He holds out a HOTEL KEY CARD.

NYPD OFFICER (CONT'D)
You dropped this.

Noah takes it.

NYPD OFFICER (CONT'D)
Everything okay? You lost?

NOAH
No, I'm okay. Thanks.

The man walks away. Noah's breath is shaky.

He sits on a bench overlooking the Hudson and pulls out the ancient Nokia from his pocket.

He stares at it. Should he just go home?

Noah dials, and puts the phone to his ear.

AL (O.S.)
Hello?

NOAH
Hey Dad.

EXT. OILFIELD - EVENING

Al stands next to his truck in a vast, desolate oilfield, cell phone to his ear.

AL
Lucky timing! Barely get reception here.

Noah doesn't say anything.

AL (CONT'D)
Really glad to hear from you. It's been a while. I miss you.

INTERCUT BETWEEN OILFIELD AND MANHATTAN

NOAH
I miss you too.

AL
Is everything okay?

Noah SNIFFLES.

NOAH
I'm gonna quit the science fair.

AL
What? Why? Isn't it tomorrow?

NOAH
I only got to Nationals because of James Thomas. Now he hates me.

AL
What happened?

NOAH

He said I can't mention him in my presentation at all. And that's like the whole point.

AL

Did you ask his permission to talk about him?

Noah hangs his head in shame.

NOAH

I'm not supposed to be here.

AL

Of course you are. What do you mean?

NOAH

I don't think science is for people from Macon.

Al's face drops.

AL

Noah, that's just not true.

NOAH

All the other kids in the science fair hate me and I don't think James is really even my friend and I just want to go home.

AL

Oh, buddy. Think about all your friends back home. They know that a kid from Macon went to the National Science Fair. It's gonna change what's possible. You belong there, Noah. You earned it. You understand me?

Noah nods.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - LATER

Noah opens up the closet and gazes at the terry-cloth bathrobe.

MONTAGE: Prep.

- While wearing the bathrobe, he writes fervently in his notebook.

- He paces up and down the hotel hallway, practicing his speech (replete with planned gestures) in his bathrobe.
- In the hotel's Business Center, he taps on the shoulder of a BUSINESSMAN, then points to a sign that says "15 minutes max when others are waiting."
- Noah practices a speech in front of Dani, yawning hugely but giving him a thumbs up.
- Receiving printouts off the printer, and handing the printout after his to the same BUSINESSMAN behind him.
- Noah cuts out a new RESULTS section.
- Noah finishes his speech in front of Dani, who is asleep. He shakes her and she sits upright, applauding.
- He glues a picture of the Earth over the spot where James' picture was.
- He steps back to inspect the board. He nods, the picture of steeled determination -- "This is it."

INT. CONFERENCE CENTER - THE NEXT MORNING

One young scientist checks his teeth in a pocket mirror.

Another emphatically delivers a speech to a wall.

Another frantically tries to fix the wiring in a contraption.

Noah stares at the project across the way, a child-sized android walking in front of an awestruck crowd, while Dani paces behind him.

DANI

(On the phone)

Hi James, just trying you... again.
It would mean a lot to Noah if you
were here. That's all.

She hangs up.

SNOOTY JUDGE (O.S.)

Noah Roberson of Macon Middle
School, yes?

Noah turns to find a SNOOTY JUDGE (quiet stern energy of Bob Balaban) checking his watch.

NOAH

Yes! That's me.

Snooty Judge inspects Noah's board.

SNOOTY JUDGE

So, in essence, your project was...

NOAH

I designed new physics curricula to educate underserved students in my neighborhood.

SNOOTY JUDGE

... And?

NOAH

My curriculum was very successful. We saw scientific literacy rates climb after my demonstrations.

SNOOTY JUDGE.

Great. Thanks for sharing with us.

He unclicks his pen and turns to walk away.

NOAH

My work also showed me how science has failed the Black community.

He stops and turns back to Noah with a hint of indignance.

SNOOTY JUDGE

Excuse me? What exactly do you mean?

NOAH

I used to think my Grandma was so weird, because she doesn't trust science at all. And I thought science was basically always right. But she was treated badly by doctors -- and that's what she thinks of when she thinks of science. If I want to understand her, I need to listen. Just like you need to listen to me.

The Snooty Judge looks up from his clipboard.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Science hasn't treated me equally, even though I deserve to be here. And I want to change that.

(MORE)

NOAH (CONT'D)

I want science to be by and for everyone, and that's why my demonstrations matter: because everyone deserves to hear the truth from someone they trust.

The judge is taken aback. He scribbles intently.

SNOOTY JUDGE

Thank you very much, Mr. Roberson.

INT. SUITE - A FEW MINUTES LATER

James Thomas drops an Alka Seltzer in a glass of water, looking a bit worse for the wear after a night of partying. He flops on the couch and flips on the TV, where Shannon Sharpe and Skip Bayless react to his contract on ESPN.

SKIP BAYLESS

James Thomas is turning the page -- he's putting all this hoopla behind him and focusing on basketball.

SHANNON SHARPE

It's the right move, Skip. I don't wanna hear Flat Earth ANYTHING ever again!

BZZ. James' phone vibrates. He picks it up.

INSERT: Caller ID: DAD.

James looks at the phone, considers, and picks it up.

JAMES

Hey Dad.

EXT. RODNEY THOMAS' HOUSE - SAME

Rodney sits on his front porch, drinking a beer in an undershirt after a long day.

RODNEY

James! My man! Congratulations, superstar! I just turned on ESPN and saw the news.

INTERCUT BETWEEN RODNEY'S HOUSE/SUITE

JAMES

Thanks. It's exciting.

RODNEY

I'd say it is. That's a whole lot of money! You're outta your funk, huh? See!! I told you. Funks always end, and now you're back on top.

JAMES

Yeah.

RODNEY

Say, I have this idea -- you know how we used to go catch crawfish?

JAMES

Uh. Barely.

RODNEY

Man, you used to love it -- but I've been thinking. You know if we had a boat, we could go out fishing for WAY more than crawfish.

JAMES

"We"?

RODNEY

I'd be happy to maintain it -- I got a buddy who has a little marina on the gulf, could get a discount docking fee, you know?

James feels his suspicions confirmed -- everyone is always in it for something. Nobody cares unconditionally.

JAMES

You couldn't wait til the ink was dry to get something out of me?

RODNEY

Oh, no. It's not like that, James.

JAMES

Everybody wants something. It never stops. And I am so tired of --

James sees Noah's copy of *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* -- his grandma's bookmark sticking out.

He picks it up and opens to it.

INSERT: "Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you. You just gotta find the one worth suffering for." -- Bob Marley.

It's so stupid, but... huh.

RODNEY

James, I'm sorry. It was just an idea -- you know, could be fun.

James is lost in thought, staring at Bob surrounded by deer and birds.

RODNEY (CONT'D)

James? You there?

JAMES

Uh, sorry, I -- I mean, that's alright. But I dunno if I want to buy a boat just yet. Why don't we charter one first?

RODNEY

You sure? I know it gets expensive with the captain and everything --

JAMES

That's alright. If I'm spending time with you... it's worth it.

RODNEY

Well hot dog. We'll catch us some wahoos. Maybe even King Mackerel if we're lucky.

JAMES

That sounds really great, Dad. I'm gonna call you back later. I gotta go.

RODNEY

Alright, sounds good. I'm looking forward to our trip.

JAMES

Me too.

James hangs up, stands, and hustles out of the suite, all while re-dialing.

INT. HOTEL HALLWAY - SAME

JAMES

Dani? Where are you?

INTERCUT CONVENTION CENTER/HOTEL HALLWAY

DANI

We're in the convention center --
they're about to announce the
finalists.

JAMES

Great. I'm on my way. I need to
talk to Noah.

DANI

Like, nicely? Or... in rage? James?
James!

She realizes he's hung up and curses under her breath.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - LATER

ONSTAGE

The Snooty Judge stands at a sleek glass podium.

SNOOTY JUDGE

We have had a phenomenal showing at
this year's National Science Fair.
I will now announce our individual
category winners.

Noah -- and all the other young scientists -- turn and face
the stage and accompanying giant video screens.

SNOOTY JUDGE (CONT'D)

In Robotics: Deepika Pingali.

The crowd APPLAUDS.

IN THE CROWD

James surreptitiously ducks in through a side door.

About a hundred feet up, Noah waits anxiously. Dani puts her
hand on his shoulder and smiles -- "you got this."

ONSTAGE

SNOOTY JUDGE (CONT'D)

In Physics: Dmitri Marnitov.

The crowd APPLAUDS.

SNOOTY JUDGE (CONT'D)

And in Behavioral and Social
Sciences: Noah Roberson.

IN THE CROWD

Noah goes crazy!

NOAH
I did it! I did it!!!

DANI
You did it! Yes!!

They jump up and down together -- and he sprints towards the stage. Dani follows at a reasonable pace.

James watches intently from the back of the crowd.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - ONSTAGE - MINUTES LATER

An avatar made of crude polygons whirls to slice a pixel monster in half.

Deepika removes her VR goggles to address the judges.

DEEPIKA
And so you see -- as the player
learns more about the game, it
learns evil amounts -- I mean,
equal amounts about the player.

SNOOTY JUDGE
No further questions. Thank you,
Ms. Pingali.

Deepika walks offstage to thunderous applause.

IN THE WINGS

Deepika wipes the sweat off her forehead, breathing hard.

She looks into the front row of the audience -- and sees her mother on her phone.

DR. RUTHERFORD (O.S.)
Congratulations, kiddo!

She stomps past Dr. Rutherford.

DEEPIKA
"evil amounts" oh my God I am so
stupid.

Noah watches, about to go on next.

DR. RUTHERFORD
Deepika, you did great! You were
like Elon Musk -- but more human!

DEEPIKA
I screwed it up and I'm going to
get second, again, because I ruin
everything!

She puts her head in her hands and tries not to cry.

NOAH
Hey Deepika, that was amazing.

She looks up at him and quickly wipes her eyes.

NOAH (CONT'D)
I can't believe I have to go after
you. It's not fair.

DEEPIKA
Well, yeah. I mean. Um. Thanks.

NOAH
Can I try your game sometime?

DEEPIKA
Yeah. Sure. Maybe... we could play
together?

NOAH
Yeah! That sounds awesome!

A STAGE MANAGER ushers Noah towards the stage.

DEEPIKA
Good luck!

Noah holds out an elbow. She bumps it.

ONSTAGE

SNOOTY JUDGE
And our last finalist: Noah
Roberson!

A round of applause as Noah nervously takes the podium.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Grace, Sandra, Lando, neighbors, and friends gather around
the TV.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - SAME

Robbie and the kids of Macon watch a live stream on an iPhone. Anthony pushes through the crowd to see.

ANTHONY

Move!

INT. OIL FIELD MESS HALL - SAME

Al's co-workers surround his chair directly in front of the small flatscreen.

INT. MRS. KISICKI'S PLACE - SAME

Mrs. Dixon, Mr. Bob, Mrs. Dingwall, Mrs. Kisicki, and her chihuahua, Franco, crowd around an ancient TV and share popcorn.

MRS. K

Go Noah!

Everyone cheers and Franco YAPS.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - ONSTAGE - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Noah's in the middle of his presentation -- behind him, photos of his demos fill up the display screen.

NOAH

My demos don't happen at a special school or a camp with fancy facilities -- they happen in my neighborhood, in the park where my friends hang out. If you want people to really love science -- you need to meet them halfway. Thank you.

Applause from around the Arena.

In the audience, James applauds politely -- unreadable.

SNOOTY JUDGE

Thank you, Mr. Roberson. I understand your project received a considerable amount of publicity due to one James Thomas?

NOAH

Yes, sir -- but he's not the main subject of my experiment.

SNOOTY JUDGE

This James Thomas publicly stated that the Earth is flat, yes?

NOAH

Uh. No, he didn't.

SNOOTY JUDGE

Can you clarify that?

NOAH

James never said the Earth is flat. Everyone assumed he was dumb based on one tiny clip, but James is really smart.

A small ripple of laughter through the crowd. James' ears burn.

NOAH (CONT'D)

James taught me that when you hear the same lies presented as truth over and over, you question the things you're sure about.

SNOOTY JUDGE

Our concern is your demonstrations, not your philosophy, Mr. Roberson. Is it really effective to communicate your message through an individual of... questionable scientific integrity?

NOAH

Well, I -- I... Um.

Noah's breathing picks up.

James moves through the crowd towards the stage.

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Grace clasps her hands in front of her face in prayer as she watches.

GRACE

C'mon, baby, C'mon.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - ONSTAGE - SAME

James' six foot seven frame parts the crowd like the Red Sea.

NOAH

I -- I don't know.

Backstage, Dani presses her hands together under her chin in distress.

INT. OIL FIELD MESS HALL - SAME

Al focuses intently on the TV.

AL

C'mon, Noah. You got this. C'mon!!

The judge scribbles on the pad in front of him while Noah tries to find his words.

NOAH

I guess -- if you really think
about it -- it's sort of like --

The crowd GASPS as James deftly hauls himself up onto stage, holding Noah's copy of *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*.

JAMES

I have a bad record of interrupting
science fairs, but I have something
important to say.

The audience BUZZES. Dani grips her face in terror.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - ONSTAGE - SAME

Noah looks at James, extremely concerned.

JAMES

I ignited a lot of controversy when
I said that the Earth might be
flat. Most people missed what I was
trying to say -- that we don't all
have equal access to the truth in
this country. And until we work to
fix that, how can the Black
community trust the people --
including scientists -- who have
lied to us?

Snooty Judge shakes his head in disappointment and confers with the other judges. A murmur of distaste ripples through auditorium.

JAMES (CONT'D)

But I was missing the bigger picture -- and Noah helped me see that. Isaac Newton said that for every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction. I said some provocative things to get people thinking, but I provoked an unintended reaction -- one that affected my impressionable fans, young and old. So today, I am proud to say, without a doubt, that the Earth is...

He checks a passage from his BOOK.

JAMES (CONT'D)

... an oblate spheroid.

Noah's face lights up.

JAMES (CONT'D)

No matter the outcome of this science fair -- Noah, you've taught me a lot more than just physics. Going forward, the James Thomas Foundation will be covering all of your educational expenses -- forever.

A ROAR OF APPROVAL sweeps through the auditorium.

Dani is stunned.

She shakes herself out of it and cheers and takes some photos.

DANI

Wooooo!

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Grace dances around Sandra (who dances from her chair) as their friends CHEER.

SANDRA

That's my baby! That's my baby!!

EXT. OIL FIELD MESS HALL - SAME

Al jumps and throws his hat into the air, struggling to hold back tears. His coworkers CHEER and clap him on the back.

INT. MRS. KISICKI'S PLACE - SAME

Mrs. K and company jump around, throwing the popcorn in the air while Franco runs laps around the room.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - SAME

The cluster of kids goes wild for Noah.

ROBBIE
That's my best friend!

INT. ROBERSON HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME

Grace's excitement turns to tears to gratitude as she realizes -- without a doubt, no matter what -- Noah is going to college.

Sandra sees it, and from her chair, grabs her daughter's hand to share a small moment. Grace squeezes it tightly and she wipes away her tears with a smile.

INT. CONVENTION CENTER - ONSTAGE - SAME

Noah runs across the stage and hugs James, who laughs and hugs him back.

FADE OUT.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - DAY

A REPORTER speaks in front of a camera.

REPORTER
Though Noah Roberson did not win the National Science Fair, he got something even better: a friendship with James Thomas. Their new venture, the Baller Scholars, starts today in Macon, in the midst of the best season of James' career.

Dani approaches Sandra and Grace, holding a tray of muffins and accompanied by her wife Kate.

DANI
I brought muffins. Sugar and gluten-free.

Grace skips the muffins and goes straight for a hug.

GRACE
Thank you. For everything.

SANDRA
Watch the muffins!

Sandra grabs one and starts munching.

James alley-oops the ball off the backboard to himself and dunks, delighting the crowd of children watching. Al approaches as James gives out high-fives on the sideline.

AL
Excuse me, James? I'm Noah's father.

JAMES
Oh, hey! It's great to meet you -- heard a lot about you.

AL
You too. I don't want to make a big scene or anything, but -- I need to show my gratitude for what you've done. Not just for Noah, but for my family, our community. This changes a whole town's momentum -- all cause of you.

JAMES
Hey man -- you woulda done the same thing. I was just in the right place at the right time.

James holds out a hand to shake. Al pulls him in for a strong half-hug.

AL
Thank you.

NOAH (O.S.)
Huddle up, team!

James, Dani, Grace, Al, Sandra, Robbie, Deepika, and Lando gather.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Here's the plan: I lead the angular momentum demo and Robbie and Deepika assist me. Mom and Sandra are in charge of hospitality, Dani and Lando are on crowd control, and Dad and James run passing drills until we're ready to switch. Fists in, Macon on three.

All put their closed fists into the circle.

NOAH (CONT'D)

One -- two -- three --

ALL

Macon!

They break apart. Noah addresses the crowd.

NOAH

Behold! A bike wheel and a stool. Two ordinary objects, turned into so much more using the power of angular momentum.

On the basketball courts, James demonstrates throwing a bounce pass to Al.

Dani and Kate play with an overjoyed Lando.

Noah lectures alongside Deepika. They stand in front of Robbie, who sits on a stool holding the bike wheel.

NOAH (CONT'D)

If you wanna see something cool, make some noise!

The crowd whoops and hollers.

ROLL CREDITS.

As the credits roll:

INT. WILLIAMSON AGENCY OFFICE - MORNING

Dani sits underneath a sign that says THE WILLIAMSON AGENCY, beaming. BILL NYE sits across from her.

DANI

Bill, as our second client at Williamson, we're so excited to have you onboard.

INT. STADIUM -- ALL STAR GAME

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
Give it up for your All-Star Game
MVP: James Thomas!

James lifts the trophy above his head to massive cheers.

EXT. JAMES THOMAS MANSION - SAME

A muffled BOOM shakes the house. Dani & James run out onto the front porch -- and burst into laughter.

Noah, Robbie, and Deepika stand behind a blown-up model rocket, exhaust marks radiating out all over the driveway, cartoonishly grimy faces with hair on end. Deepika and Noah point to Robbie, who attempts a smile.

EXT. MACON PLAYGROUND - EVENING

A block party fills the park, as the people of Macon dance, grill, and celebrate, including Dani and Kate. Grace and Al dance together in their front yard across the street, intimate and romantic.

We pan to find Sandra dancing with Lando in her arms a few feet off -- just as romantic.

Noah watches his parents dance together with joy. Then he nudges James and lifts a straw to shoot a spitball at Sandra, who slaps her neck and whirls around. James points at Noah.

SANDRA
Romans, 6:23: For the wages of sin
is death!!

She lumbers after a giggling Noah, swatting and missing as James makes sure she doesn't fall, weaving among relatives, friends and neighbors: Noah's community. His family.

THE END.