

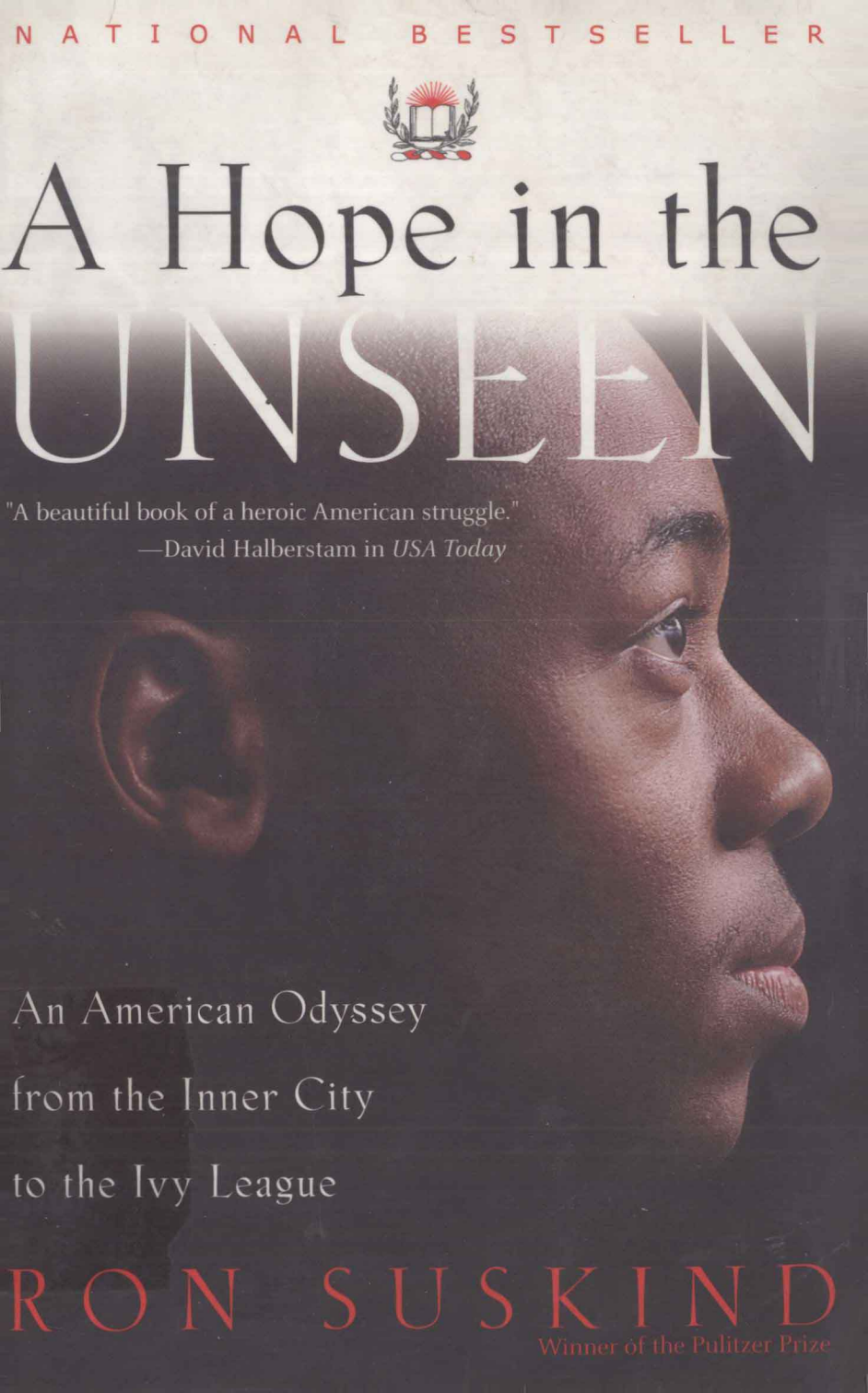
NATIONAL BESTSELLER



A Hope in the UNSEEN

"A beautiful book of a heroic American struggle."

—David Halberstam in *USA Today*



An American Odyssey
from the Inner City
to the Ivy League

RON SUSKIND
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize



RON SUSSKIND

A HOPE
in the
UNSEEN



An American Odyssey from
the ~~City~~ City to the ~~Ivy~~ Ivy League

BROADWAY BOOKS
New York



A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1998 by
Broadway Books.

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First trade paperback edition published 1999.

Designed by Jennifer Ann Daddio

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as:

Suskind, Ron.

A hope in the unseen : an American odyssey from the inner city
to the Ivy League / Ron Suskind.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-7679-0125-8 (hardcover)

1. Jennings, Cedric Lavar—Childhood and youth.
 2. Jennings, Cedric Lavar—Knowledge and learning.
 3. Afro-American teenage boys—Education—Washington (D.C.)
 4. Frank W. Ballou Senior High School (Washington, D.C.)—Students—Biography.
 5. Brown University—Students—Biography.
 6. Afro-American college students—Biography.
- I. Title.

LC2803.W3S87 1998

371.8'092—dc21

[B] 97-52700

CIP

ISBN 0-7679-0126-6

02 03 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

TO CORNELIA,
FOR HER FAITH IN POSSIBILITY

I am a part of all that I have met.

Yet all experience is an arch where-thro'

Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades

Forever and forever when I move.

—FROM *ULYSSES*, ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

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SOMETHING to PUSH AGAINST

A hip-hop tune bursts forth from the six-foot-high amplifiers, prompting the shoulder-snug slopes of black teenagers to sway and pivot in their bleacher seats. It takes only a second or two for some eight hundred students to lock onto the backbeat, and the gymnasium starts to thump with a jaunty enthusiasm.

Principal Richard Washington, an aggressive little gamecock of a man, struts across the free throw line to a stand-up microphone at the top of the key as the tune (just a check for the speaker system) cuts off. He dramatically clears his throat and sweeps his gaze across the students who happen to be present today—a chilly February morning in 1994—at Frank W. Ballou Senior High, the most troubled and violent school in the blighted southeast corner of Washington, D.C. Usually, he uses assemblies as a forum to admonish students for their stupidity or disrespect. Today, though, he smiles brightly.

“Ballou students,” he says after a moment, “let’s give a warm welcome to Mayor Marion Barry.”

The mayor steps forward from a too-small cafeteria chair in his dark suit, an intricately embroidered kufi covering his bald spot. He grabs the throat of the mike stand. “Yes,” he says, his voice full of pride, “I like what I see,” a comment that draws a roar of appreciation. The mayor’s criminal past—his much publicized conviction for cocaine possession and subsequent time served—binds him to this audience, where almost everyone can claim a friend, relative, or parent who is currently in “the system.”

The mayor delivers his standard speech about self-esteem, about “being all you believe you can be” and “please, everyone, stay in school.” As he speaks, Barry surveys an all-black world: a fully formed, parallel universe to white America. Providing today’s music are disc jockeys from WPGC, a hip-hop station from just across the D.C. line in Maryland’s black suburbs. A nationally famous black rhythm and blues singer—Tevin Campbell—up next, stands under a glass basketball backboard. Watercolors of George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass glare from display cases. All the administrators are black, as are the ten members of the muscular security force and the two full-time, uniformed cops, one of whom momentarily leaves his hallway beat to duck in and hear the mayor.

Along the top rows of both sets of bleachers, leaning against the white-painted cinder blocks, are male “crews” from nearby housing projects and neighborhoods in expensive Fila or Hilfiger or Nautica garments and \$100-plus shoes, mostly Nikes. Down a few rows from the crews on both sides of the gym is a ridge of wanna-bes, both boys and girls, who feel a rush of excitement sitting so close to their grander neighbors. All during the assembly, they crane their necks to glimpse the crews, to gauge proximity. Next in the hierarchy are the athletes. Local heroes at most high schools but paler characters at Ballou, they are clustered here and there, often identifiable by extreme height or girth. They are relatively few in number, since the school district’s mandatory 2.0 grade point average for athletic participation is too high a bar for many kids here to cross.

The silent majority at Ballou—spreading along the middle and lower seats of the bleachers—are duck-and-run adolescents: baggy-panted boys and delicately coifed girls in the best outfits they can manage on a shoestring budget. They mug and smile shyly, play cards in class, tend to avoid eye contact, and whisper gossip about all the most interesting stuff going on at school. Hot topics of late include a boy shot recently during lunch period, another hacked with an ax, the girl gang member wounded in a knife fight with a female rival, the weekly fires set in lockers and bathrooms, and that unidentified body dumped a few weeks ago behind the parking lot. Their daily lesson: distinctiveness can be dangerous, so it’s best to develop an aptitude for not being

noticed. This, more than any other, is the catechism taught at Ballou and countless other high schools like it across the country.

As with any dogma, however, there are bound to be heretics. At Ballou, their names are found on a bulletin board outside the principal's office. The list is pinned up like the manifest from a plane crash, the names of survivors. It's the honor roll, a mere 79 students—67 girls, 12 boys—out of 1,389 enrolled here who have managed a B average or better.

With the school's dropout/transfer rate at nearly 50 percent, it's understandable that kids at Ballou act as though they're just passing through. Academics are a low priority, so few stop to read the names of the honor students as they jostle by the bulletin board. Such inattentiveness drives frustrated teachers to keep making the board's heading bolder and more commanding. Giant, blocky blue letters now shout "WALL OF HONOR."

The wall is a paltry play by administrators to boost the top students' self-esteem—a tired mantra here and at urban schools everywhere. The more practical effect is that the kids listed here become possible targets of violence, which is why some students slated for the Wall of Honor speed off to the principal's office to plead that their names not be listed, that they not be singled out. To replace their fear with confidence, Principal Washington has settled on a new tactic: bribery. Give straight-A students cash and maybe they'll get respect, too. Any student with perfect grades in any of the year's four marking periods receives a \$100 check. For a year-long straight-A performance, that's \$400. Real money. The catch? Winners have to personally receive their checks at awards assemblies.

At the start, the assemblies were a success. The gymnasium was full, and honor students seemed happy to attend, flushed out by the cash. But after a few such gatherings, the jeering started. It was thunderous. "Nerd!" "Geek!" "Egghead!" And the harshest, "Whitey!" Crew members, sensing a hearts-and-minds struggle, stomped on the bleachers and howled. No longer simply names on the Wall of Honor, the "whiteys" now had faces. The honor students were hazed for months afterward. With each assembly, fewer show up.

Today's gathering of the mayor, the singer, and the guest DJs car-

ries an added twist: surprise. There was no mention of academic awards, just news about the mayor's visit, the music, and the general topic of "Stay in School."

As the R&B singer takes his bows, Washington steps forward, his trap in place. "I'll be reading names of students who got straight A's in the second marking period. I'd like each one to come forward to collect his \$100 prize and a special shirt from WPGC. We're all," he pauses, glaring across the crowd, "very, *very* proud of them." A murmur rumbles through the bleachers.

Washington takes a list from his breast pocket and begins reading names. He calls four sophomore girls who quietly slip, one by one, onto the gym floor. Then he calls a sophomore boy. Trying his best to vanish, the boy sits stone still in the bleachers, until a teacher spots him, yells, "You can't hide from me!" and drags him front and center. A chorus of "NEEERD!" rains down from every corner of the room.

Time for the juniors. Washington looks at his list, knowing this next name will bring an eruption. "Okay then," he says, mustering his composure. "The next award winner is . . . Cedric Jennings."

Snickers race through the crowd like an electrical current. Necks are craning, everyone trying to get the first glimpse.

"Oh Cedric? Heeere Cedric," a crew member calls out from the top row as his buddies dissolve in hysterics.

Washington starts to sweat. The strategy is backfiring. He scans the crowd. No sign. There's no way the boy could have known about the surprise awards; most teachers didn't even know. And Jennings, of all people. Jennings is the only male honor student who bears the cross with pride, the one who stands up to the blows. The only goddamn one left!

The principal clutches the mike stand, veins bulging from a too-tight collar, and gives it all he's got, "Cedric Jenningssss . . ."

Across a labyrinth of empty corridors, an angular, almond-eyed boy is holed up in a deserted chemistry classroom. Cedric Jennings often retreats here. It's his private sanctuary, the one place at Ballou where he feels completely safe, where he can get some peace.

He looks out the window at a gentle hill of overgrown grass, now patched with snow, and lets his mind wander down two floors and due south to the gymnasium, where he imagines his name being called. Not attending was a calculated bet. He'd heard rumors of possible academic awards. Catcalls from the assemblies of last spring and fall still burn in his memory.

Off in the distance are skeletons of trees and, behind them, a low-slung, low-rent apartment complex. His eyes glaze as he takes in the lifeless scene, clenching his jaw—a little habit that seems to center him—before turning back to the computer screen.

“Scholastic Aptitude Practice Test, English, Part III” floats at eye level, atop a long column of words—“cacophony,” “metaphor,” “alliteration”—and choices of definitions.

He presses through the list—words from another country, words for which you'd get punched if you used them here—and wonders, scrolling with the cursor, if these are words that white people in the suburbs use. A few screens down, a familiar-sounding noun appears: “epistle.” Sort of like “apostle,” he figures, passing by choice “A) a letter” and clicking his mouse on “B) a person sent on a mission.”

He looks quizzically at his selection. Probably wrong, but he likes the sound of that phrase—“a person sent on a mission.” Sort of like me, he thinks, on a mission to get out of here, to be the one who makes it.

Cedric Jennings is not, by nature, a loner, but he finds himself ever more isolated, walking a gauntlet through the halls, sitting unaccompanied in class, and spending hours in this room. He is comforted by its orderliness, by the beach-blanket-sized periodic table above his head against the back wall and the gentle glow of the bluish screen.

He scrolls back to the top of the vocabulary list and reaches for a dictionary on the computer table. The classroom's occupant, chemistry teacher Clarence Taylor, wanders into the room and registers surprise. “Didn't go down there, today, huh?” asks Taylor, a bearlike man in his early forties, short but wide all over. “I'm disappointed in you.”

Cedric doesn't look up. “They give out the awards?” he asks nonchalantly.

“Yep,” says Mr. Taylor.

"Glad I didn't go, then. I just couldn't take that abuse again," he says evenly, this time glancing over at the teacher. "I'll just pick up the check later. They have to give it to me, you know?"

Mr. Taylor offers a mock frown, now standing over the boy, eyes wide, brows arched. "That's not much of an attitude."

Cedric flips off the power switch with a long, dexterous finger. "I know," he murmurs. "I worked hard. Why should I be ashamed? Ashamed to claim credit for something I earned? I hate myself for not going."

He sits and stares at the darkened screen. He can hear Mr. Taylor ease away behind him and unload an armful of books on the slate-topped lab table near the blackboard. He knows the teacher is just fussing, walking through a few meaningless maneuvers while he tries to conjure a worthwhile response to what Cedric just said.

Mr. Taylor's moves are familiar by now. The teacher has personally invested in Cedric's future since the student appeared in his tenth grade chemistry class—back then, Cedric was a sullen ninth grader who had just been thrown out of biology for talking back to the teacher and needed somewhere to go. Taylor let him sit in, gave him a few assignments that the older kids were doing, and was soon marveling at flawless A papers. Taylor took Cedric for an after-school dinner at Western Sizzlin', and they were suddenly a team.

In the last two years, Taylor has offered his charge a steady stream of extra-credit projects and trips, like a visit last month with scientists at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He challenges Cedric with elaborate intellectual riddles, withholding praise and daring the pupil to vanquish his theatrical doubting with a real display of intellectual muscle. It's call and response, combative but productive. Mr. Taylor even sets up competitions among the top students, like a recent after-school contest to see who could most swiftly write every element in the periodic table from memory. As usual, Cedric rose to crush the competition, reeling off all 109 elements in three minutes, thirty-nine seconds.

Cedric is still staring at the dead screen when he finally hears Mr. Taylor's squeaky wing tips coming back around the lab table.

"You see, Cedric, you're in a race, a long race," the teacher says as

Cedric swivels toward him, his arms crossed. "You can't worry about what people say from the sidelines. They're already out of it. You, however, are still on the track. You have to just keep on running so . . ."

"All right, I know," says Cedric, smirking impatiently. With Mr. Taylor, it's either a marathon metaphor or a citation from Scripture, and Cedric has heard the race routine many times before. "I'm doing my best, Mr. Taylor. I do more than ten people sometimes."

Mr. Taylor clams up. So much for *that race metaphor*, Cedric thinks to himself, delighted to employ an SAT word. He jumps up from the chair and paces around the classroom, picking up things and putting them down, looking caged.

"So, did you mail the application yet?" Taylor asks, trying to keep the conversation alive.

"Yeeees, I maaaiiled it," Cedric says, rolling his eyes.

This is not just any application. It's a bid for acceptance into a special summer program for top minority high school students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It's highly competitive, drawing from a nationwide pool and taking kids for an intensive six-week program between their junior and senior years. It offers academic enrichment but also sizes up whether the students could cut it at MIT. About 60 percent are eventually offered a blessed spot in the university's freshman class for the following year.

Cedric does not dare speak about it to anyone except Mr. Taylor, who helped him with the application. He feels too vulnerable. His yearning is white hot. It's his first real competition against invisible opponents—minority kids from far better schools—in what Cedric rightly knows is a dry run for the college applications that must be mailed in the coming school year. It could even mean a slot, eventually, at MIT.

It will be nearly two months before he hears whether he's accepted, but the program is quickly consuming Cedric's thoughts. His notebooks in math, physics, and English have MIT doodles—the three magic letters are Gothic here, three-dimensional there, then crossing over one page and written fifty times on the next. Being accepted there would be the reward for years of sacrifice.

"You think I'll get in?" he asks, awkward and momentarily exposed, but catches himself. "I mean, you know, whaaaaatever. What does it matter?"

"Will you get in?" begins Mr. Taylor, launching another discursive riff. "Well, let me note . . ." The class bell rings, interrupting him, and Cedric prepares to go, having lost his taste for an answer.

The hallways fill as a wave of students from the gymnasium washes through the school. Leaving the chemistry classroom, Cedric keeps his eyes fixed forward on a shifting spot of linoleum about a yard ahead of his front foot. He hears someone from behind, a boy's voice, yell, "Where was you Cedric—hiding in the bathroom?" followed by a burst of nearby giggles, but he won't look up. Just don't get into it, he says over and over in his head, trying to drown out the noise.

Today, though, it's no use. He wheels around to see a contingent behind him, two hard-looking boys he barely knows and an accompaniment of girls.

"Why don't you just shut up," he barks, facing them while backpedaling. "Just leave me alone." Fortunately, his math class is the next doorway and he slips into the almost empty classroom, relieved to have avoided an altercation.

"Ready for the test today, Cedric?" asks Joanne Nelson from her desk across the room. She's a round, soft-spoken, dark-skinned black woman who also had Cedric in tenth grade.

"Uh-huh," he nods, regaining some composure. "Yeah, I mean, I think I'm in real good shape."

The test is in Unified Math, his favorite subject. Each day, Cedric looks forward to this class, composed of eighteen kids from Ballou's special math and science program.

With the program, Ballou is attempting a sort of academic triage that is in vogue at tough urban schools across the country. The idea: save as many kids as you can by separating out top students early and putting the lion's share of resources into boosting as many of them as possible to college. Forget about the rest. The few kids who can manage to learn, to the right; the overwhelming majority who are going nowhere, flow left.

Cedric, like some other math/science students, applied to the program and arrived a year early to Ballou, which allows a handful of ninth graders to enroll with the eight-hundred-student tenth grade class. While at Ballou, the math/science students mix with the general student body for subjects like English and history but stay separated for math and science classes, which are called “advanced” but are more at a middle level of classes taught at most of the area’s suburban high schools.

Slipping into a favorite desk, Cedric watches as the rest of the class arrives, mostly girls, many of them part of a tiny middle-class enclave from nearby Bolling Air Force base. He is friendly with a few of the girls, but today the room is tense and hushed, so he just nods a quick hello or two. Soon, everyone is lost in the sheaves of test papers.

It takes only a few moments for a calm to come over him. Knowing the material cold is Cedric’s best antidote to the uncertainty that sometimes wells up inside him, the doubts about whether any amount of work will be enough to propel him to a new life. He takes out his ruler and confidently draws two vertical lines, noting points for asymptotes, limits, and intercepts. He moves easily through the algebraic functions on the next few questions, hunched close to his paper, writing quickly and neatly, the pencil’s eraser end wiggling near his ear. For half an hour, he is steady and deliberate, like someone savoring a fine meal.

When he arrives at the last question—which asks students to write about the topic they have found most interesting thus far in the semester—he starts tapping his pencil on the desk. So much to choose from.

Finally, he begins to write: “The part that most interested me was finding the identity of the trigonometric functions. I had a little bit of trouble with them at first, but they became easy!” He reels off ten lines of tangent, sine, and cosine functions, an intricate equation springing effortlessly from his memory, and arrives at a proof. Cedric sits back to admire his work. It’s so neat and final, so orderly. So much confusion, all around, such a long way to travel to get out of this hole, but here, at least, he can arrive at modest answers—small steps—that give him the sensation of motion.

He’s done and puts down his pencil. Still ten minutes to the period

bell. Suddenly, he smiles for the first time in days and again grabs the dull No. 2. Across the bottom, he scribbles "I LOVE THIS STUFF!"

Each afternoon, there is a choice of bus stops. The stop right in front of the school is usually quiet and empty late in the afternoon, while another one, a few hundred yards away on bustling Martin Luther King Avenue, is always hopping.

At 5:02 P.M. on this day, a week after the awards assembly, Cedric Jennings emerges from Ballou's side entrance, having already finished his homework and another SAT practice test in Clarence Taylor's room. He slings his bookbag over his shoulder, freeing his hands to pull closed his three-year-old black parka with the broken zipper. Day by day, he's hearing fewer barbs in the hallways about the awards assembly, and his spirits lift a bit as he sees a fading late afternoon sun shining across the teachers' parking lot. He pauses to look at it a moment—there hasn't been much sun lately—and decides today to opt for Martin Luther King.

In a moment, he's strolling on the boulevard—Southeast's main street of commerce, legal and otherwise—and taking in the sights. There's a furious bustle at this time of day. Darkness, after all, comes earlier here than in those parts of Washington where the streetlights work, where national chains have stores with big neon marquees, and where everything stays open late. In those places, the churn of commerce isn't halted, as it is here, by a thoroughly rational fear that seems to freeze the streets at nightfall.

Cedric huddles against the cloudy plastic window of the bus stop hut and watches the drug dealers near the intersection at 8th Street. He wonders what draws him out to the avenue bus stop, where—God knows—he could get killed. People do, all the time; he muses today, as he often does when he stands at this stop, about whether coming out here means he's going a little crazy.

Two crack dealers are chatting about twenty feet away. Both guys are in their early twenties, with hair mottled from being outside all day—one in a fine-looking long-sleeve Redskins football jersey and the

other in a soft leather jacket. Cedric cranes his head around the hut's aluminum edge to pick up the conversation. He's sure they're armed, and he spots telltale bulges on each with his trained eye.

"So, you see, this bitch, she sucked my dick just to get her a little rock," says the Redskins jersey.

"Hey, next time you send her to me," says the soft leather, throwing his head back in a toothless laugh. "I'll give her what she needs real bad."

Cedric listens, not breathing, and then pulls back behind the plastic wall just as the one in leather turns toward him.

Hidden behind the bus shelter, he replays the dialogue in his head, where he will continue to chew on it for days afterward. He smells the rich greasy aroma of Popeye's Fried Chicken wafting from across the street, hears a saxophonist just up the boulevard, playing for quarters. A few guys he recognizes from Ballou, including some crew members, wander into view and he watches them flirt—or "kick some game"—with two cute girls who are rolling their eyes but definitely not walking away.

Spending so much time alone, he finds it hard to resist observing the fiery action all around. No diving in, not for him, not ever, but what's the harm in watching a little, picking up bits of this or that? He spots the bus a few blocks down. Clenching his molars to flex muscle at the bend of his still smooth, boyish jaw, he steps out into the wind.

Apartment 307 on the third floor of the blond brick High View Apartments at 1635 V Street, Southeast, is empty, dark, and warm at 6:04 P.M., when Cedric unlocks the door. There hasn't always been heat, with overdue bills and whatnot, and he always appreciates the warmth, especially after the long walk from the Anacostia bus and subway station in the icy dusk wind.

He slips out of his coat and backpack and goes from room to room turning on lights, something he's done since he was a small kid, coming home alone to apartments and tiptoeing, with a lump in his throat, to check if intruders were lurking inside closets and under beds.

It's not a very big place—two bedrooms, a small bathroom, a kitch-