

WRITTEN BY RUDI O'MEARA

MAJOR



BASED ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"THE FASTEST BICYCLE RIDER IN THE WORLD"
BY MARSHALL W. "MAJOR" TAYOR

MAJOR

Written by

Rudi O'Meara

Based on the Autobiography:

"The Fastest Bicycle Rider In the World"

By

Marshall W. "Major" Taylor

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INT. VELODROME - NIGHT

A vast, smoke filled auditorium packed to the steel rafters with FRENCH SPECTATORS dressed in all-black.

SUPER: VÉLODROME BUFFALO, FRANCE | AUGUST, 1908

In grainy, hand-cranked BLACK AND WHITE, we watch as a lone AFRICAN AMERICAN CYCLIST sprints toward us in eerie SLOW MOTION as the assembled throngs HOWL.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)

(English accent)

Track cycling, the first truly international spectator sport, now draws crowds putting those of any other athletic pursuit to shame. And here at The Vélodrome Buffalo, the birthplace of racing, a crowd over ten thousand has gathered to see some of the world's best riders put themselves and their machines to the test.

Closer and closer the Black cyclist rides, with a pack of WHITE CHALLENGERS burying themselves just to keep up.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)

A ghastly contest in which most participants go queer in the head and strain their powers until their faces become hideous with the tortures that wrack them. This is not a sport. It's brutality. Days and weeks of recuperation will be required just to put these racers right once again.

A fluttering finish tape SNAPS taut across the track before us as the cyclists slowly draw closer and closer.

RADIOCOMENTATOR (V.O.)

And it's likely that some of them will never recover from the strain.

His face a contorted mask, the lone Black rider BLASTS toward the tape like it's barely even there.

Like he can't even see it. Won't even acknowledge it.

TITLE CARD:

M A J O R

INT. TRAIN STATION - DAY

Vivid FULL COLOR.

SUPER: PENN STATION, NEW YORK | DECEMBER, 1896

Under the graceful, arched glass and steel roof of this palatial commuter station, a mustachioed middle-aged man in a black wool suit bobs and weaves through the crowd.

Meet: LOUIS DE FRANKLIN "BIRDIE" MUNGER (late 20s), a pugnacious plain dealer with the broad shoulders and trim frame of a former competitor. A winner.

BIRDIE

No, kid. I don't care about all
that junk. I wanna know what you
actually want.

Two harried ASSISTANTS (20s) struggle to keep up with him.

Each man carries a heavy duffel full of gear and a
glimmering steel track bike over one shoulder.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

What can't you live without?

Behind them all strides the same African American man, now younger and wearing an ill-fitting military coat.

A Major's coat. Confederate Army, not Union.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

What fundamentally eludes you?

Meet: MARSHAL W. "MAJOR" TAYLOR (16), a future champion now terrifyingly beyond his depth.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

What would you sacrifice everything
just to get a grip on?

Major slows, thinks. Tries to gather his wits.

The white crowd washes past him in a harried blur.

MAJOR

Well, sir...

Birdie stops dead, wheels back around.

His assistants carry on quickly, saying nothing.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
...I'd have to say...

BIRDIE
Yeah?

MAJOR
Respect.

BIRDIE
Respect?

MAJOR
To be seen as, well, as a man. Not
just a Black man. Not a colored
man. A man. An equal among equals.
(deep breath)
Like anyone else. When I come into
my own, that is.

A broad smile washes across Birdie's face. He nods, runs a hand over his bristly mustache.

BIRDIE
Well, okay then.

MAJOR
Winning, the prize money, the
accolades... I don't ride for that.

BIRDIE
Uh-huh.

MAJOR
I ride to be seen. As a peer.

Birdie steps up, places his hands on Major's shoulders, just below the tattered epaulets.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Well then... know this, kid.
(beat)
You ride for me, and the whole wide
white world will be rooting for
your downfall.

Major draws a breath, looks left, sees a door to a men's restroom marked: WHITES ONLY.

Birdie spies it too, leans even closer.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
They'll expect you to fail. Under-
perform, bend under pressure.

MAJOR

Sir, I--

BIRDIE

But, when you don't bend, when you succeed, like you did against that brute Marmon, they'll hate on you. Question your methods, the veracity of your results. Hold you up to an impossible double-standard.

MAJOR

That's--

BIRDIE

That's why we've gotta make every victory outsized, overwhelming.

Major blinks, takes this in.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Down to the very last ounce, you and your machine will need to be, in a word, *perfect*.

Birdie finally steps back, winks.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Can you do that for me?

MAJOR

(quietly)

Sir, I think--

BIRDIE

Don't think. Know. And it's Birdie.

Pedestrians speed past them. Major nods.

Birdie's assistants are long gone.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Now, I can handle the machine part.

He finally turns to go.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

But you my boy, body, heart, and soul... The *rest* is up to you.

Major jogs off after him.

MAJOR

Wait. What do you want?

Birdie quickens his pace.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
What's... What's in it for you?

BIRDIE
Five percent of every prize purse.
And, of course, cycle sales.

MAJOR
Beyond the money.

Birdie slows again, turns back around.

BIRDIE
I just miss winning. Not that I did
much of it in my day.
(beat)
And I hate seeing talent wasted.

Birdie shoots him another sly wink, shuffles off backward.

Major just watches him disappear into the sea of whiteness.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Show me your drubbing of that
narrow-minded rogue back at the
ten-miler in Indy wasn't a fluke
and you'll have my respect at the
very least. That's for damn sure.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, PADDOCKS - DAY

Birdie trails his assistants through a thick crowd of fellow IMPRESARIOS prepping their NERVOUS RIDERS.

SUPER: MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, NEW YORK | DECEMBER, 1896

Smoke hangs low in the air like an icy fog that Birdie blasts through like an ice breaker at sea.

BIRDIE
Time to tell Hay you're done
shilling second-rate frames with
cheap lugs trick riding out in
front of his store in that
ridiculous costume.

Major stumbles after him, still wide-eyed.

MAJOR
I beg your--

BIRDIE

Never beg, kid. Only borrow. When
you absolutely must.

Through various half-open doors we catch glimpses of young
WHITE CYCLISTS jabbing themselves with long syringes,
guzzling tiny pills, and inhaling from glass vials.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Cocaine for endurance. Strychnine
for the cramps. Amphetamines to
stay awake.

(beat)

When we finally get you over there,
I have a hunch you won't be the
only one on the track who's
hallucinating.

Birdie turns, makes a beeline toward a dingy dressing room.

Through a nearby archway down to the arena, we hear an eerie
STOMPING mingled with CATCALLS and SCREAMING.

It's an unholy din from an over-eager crowd.

MAJOR

Over where, sir?

Birdie slows, holds the door open.

BIRDIE

Europe, kid.

One of his assistants tosses Birdie a wool jersey. He
catches it without even looking.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

See how you fare. You clean up on
the Continent against the *real*
champions and you'll come back to
this backwater with money enough to
chart your own course. Invest
smart. Not down in Tulsa. On Wall
Street. And you'll be set for life,
my friend.

(broad smile)

Set. For. Life.

Birdie shoves Major the rumpled jersey.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Now, change up. Ditch that jacket.
Meet me down on the track.

Major STAMMERS.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
 You want respect? Ride like
 lightning and they'll have no
 choice but see you as their peer.
 (beat)
 Hell, maybe even their superior.

Birdie turns, carries on. Major just watches.

MAJOR
 (under his breath)
 Who's he think he is, Moses?

BIRDIE (O.S.)
 (from off)
 I heard that!

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - NIGHT

Inside the vast, smoke filled, dimly-lit arena, the atmosphere is electric.

Thousands of RABID SPECTATORS fill every seat in the house from the floor to the rafters.

Down on the infield at the center of the oval, COACHES in bowlers and black suits prep their RIDERS as idling steam-driven motorbikes belch fumes.

BIRDIE
 Now, take it nice and easy at
 first. Stay close to the bunch but
 keep clear. And, for God's sake,
 put all of that holier than thou
 kicking ol' prejudice to the
 wayside out of your mind for now.
 (beat)
 It's performance not politicking
 that matters in this deal, right?

Major, in a new white jersey with the word "COMET" embroidered diagonally across the chest just nods.

He's nervous, brimming with second thoughts.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
 Dismount when you need fuel. Don't
 let your mind tell you you don't.
 Your body's the boss, yeah?

MAJOR
 Yep.

BIRDIE

Keep your eye on Hale, the Englishman. Maybe von Hoeg and Pierce too. And don't count on your sprint saving you. By the end, odds are it'll be gone like more than half the field.

A PACER in leathers hops onto one of the motorbikes, slips down his goggles, takes off onto the track.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

If you go down, get up. Frankie and Bill will have you covered with machines if you need 'em. And, if you want out and I'm not here, do whatever they say. They'll time your sleep, keep you fed.

Major draws a long, slow, deep breath. Runs a hand down the top tube of his bike while mouthing a silent prayer.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

And put the five grand out of your head too. You're here to finish, not to prove something. Winning doesn't matter. It's going that distance that counts.

Major grips his bike by the saddle.

MAJOR

Thank you, Birdie.

BIRDIE

For what?

MAJOR

Believing. In me.

Birdie gives him a gentle shove.

BIRDIE

Just remember what you did to poor old Marmon and you'll be just fine. Now go. Show 'em all what you're worth, yeah?

Major pulls his bike closer, swings one leg over, reaches behind himself, pulls something from a pocket in his jersey.

A coin that glints in the dim light.

Another cyclist rolls up next to him just as he lifts the coin to his lips, kisses it, then bends to tuck the coin into his right shoe.

Under his heel. For good luck.

The other cyclist, EDDIE "CANNON" BALD (20s) just stares. His hair is greasy and jet black. Parted down the middle.

MAJOR

The 1890 Morgan Silver Dollar.

Nicknamed the "Comet" because of a striated die gouge right down the coin's face.

Major slips his foot into his cage, pushes off.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

Sometimes even the imperfect things can be beautiful.

As he glides away onto the glistening planks, the massive crowd CHEERS. Bald narrows his eyes, marks his man.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, TRACK - CONTINUOUS

Steadily picking up speed, Major pilots his machine slowly further and further up the steep pitches of the track as a thicket of COMPETITORS jockey for position.

Up ahead, the pace moto bathes them all in faint blue smoke as the SCREAMING CROWD whips by in a blur.

All we hear is the DISTORTED CACOPHONY of the crowded arena.

Flashbulbs explode like HAND SLAPS. Rubber wheels roar like GUTTURAL SCREAMS. Human voices SQUEAL and WHINE, blending together into surfeit of PASSING EPITHETS.

It's a terrifying, haunting SEA OF NOISE until:

BANG!

A RACE OFFICIAL down on the infield fires the start gun.

And they're off.

We stick with Major as he, in the drops, falls in behind a tight cluster of fellow riders, lets his nerves dampen, tries to block out the RACKET.

But it's still there, still prominent, as he sweeps through turn after turn.

His breathing steady, his eyes locked on the wheels before him, Major pounds out a relentless cadence, one pedal revolution after the other.

WHOOSH. WHOOSH. WHOOSH. WHOOSH.

It's almost hypnotically easygoing at first. Until, a slight touch of wheels three riders up: BUZZ. SHOUTING.

Then, a heavy SMACK, as a single rider hits the deck, skids, spinning on his back upward across the track.

Another rider hits his body sidelong, flies over the bars, smashes headfirst into the planks.

Two other riders swerve wide. The elbow of one catches Major in the ribs. Major wobbles, looks down to his pedals.

Both feet are trapped. Locked into their cages.

He veers left, nearly takes out another rider just as the first man to crash hits the top rail, tumbles like a rag doll into the crowd and disappears from view.

The pack settles, tries to regain, focus-up.

Major, his every nerve jangling, picks up the pace, gets clear, hits the next curve low and fast.

Four more riders slip in behind him.

WHIRRERRR.

They take the flats blisteringly, arc up the next turn just in time to see the first rider, unconscious in a bloodied tangle of terrified fans.

Major looks, doesn't want to, sees that the rider's torn jersey matches his own. Same embroidered letters.

And his face is no longer white. It's black.

It's him.

But in a millisecond, he's gone again as Major shakes it off, dials back the pace ever so slightly, lets himself be passed by one rider, then another.

Is he losing his nerve already?

No.

Instead, Major wisely falls in behind them all to draft, get his head back into the game, settle.

As his knees rise and fall with each firm pedal stroke, Major's eyes narrow. His mind begins to slip elsewhere.

Slowly, the sound of his STEADY BREATHING merges with the tune of a SOUSA MARCH played by a distant brass band.

TITLE CARD:

E N D U R A N C E

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY (1892)

Crisp BLACK AND WHITE.

A DEAFENING WAIL of a raucous crowd blots out the march.

And a slightly younger Major (dressed again in his military coat) pilots a smaller, less sophisticated track bike through a mostly white crowd.

SUPER: INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA | FOUR YEARS EARLIER

Another man, TOM HAY (20s) a mischievous schemer with boundless aspirations and a showman's flare for self-promotion, zigzags ahead of him.

A man on a mission.

HAY
Step on it, huh.

To their left: a handful of AMATEUR RIDERS cluster at an impromptu start line on a grassy pitch.

Behind each rider stands a young man in a black suit, steadying each machine by their seat posts.

To their right: a stern RACE MARSHAL (40s) loads a small pistol with a single round.

Up ahead, Hay calls back without turning around:

HAY (CONT'D)
C'mon now. Fast.

Major picks up the pace.

MAJOR
Sir?

Hay slows, reaches a hand back, guides Major beyond a white fence and out onto the turf.

HAY
Ever seen a road race, boy?

MAJOR
No, sir. Can't say that I--

HAY
Good. No time like the present.

MAJOR
I'm sorry?

Major tries to politely wriggle free.

But Hay grips him commandingly by the shoulders.

HAY
Stop apologizing.

He SLAPS Major firmly between the shoulder blades.

HAY (CONT'D)
We'll give you a good fifteen
minute handicap on Walter Marmon,
the scratch man.

Major STAMMERS, petrified.

MAJOR
...I...I...I...

As the band BELLOWs on in the background, Hay smiles,
burnishes the buttons on Major's marshal jacket.

HAY
You can trick ride, son. Sure as
you're born.
(beat)
But can you go the distance?

MAJOR
The distance? I don't even--

HAY
Just pedal up that road a little
ways. Try to beat the best if you
dare. It'll please the crowd.

Major looks to the grandstands. All white faces.

HAY (CONT'D)
You can come on back home if you
get tired.

From just behind Hay, the race marshal SHOUTS:

MARSHAL
Racers ready?

HAY
Go on now. Show ol' Marmon there
what's what for me.
(broad grin)
Arrogant little Wasp.

Major looks from the grandstands toward the stone-still cluster of racers beside him.

At the center of the bunch, a debonaire young man, WALTER MARMON (20s) sits with one leg draped lazily across the top bar of his bicycle.

The picture of entitlement and white privilege.

Hay taps Major's epaulets, steps back, winks.

HAY (CONT'D)
Don't let me down... Major.

CRACK!

A start pistol fires.

Marmon snaps to attention. All of the other riders take off.

Major just stares.

HAY (CONT'D)
Well? GO.

As Marmon sprints away, Major finally kicks.

Gravel and sod go flying.

EXT. CITY STREETS - DAY

Major, chasing, pilots his machine though narrow cobblestone streets lined with SCREAMING SPECTATORS.

Their SHRILL VOICES whip past as quickly as their distorted, mostly white faces bleed by.

Cheering? Jeering? It's hard to tell. Instead, the HOWLING CACOPHONY is haunting and gruesome. Just like at The Garden.

But on Major rides, passing one rider after the other as the crowd blurs into a monochrome sea of nothingness.

WHOOSH. WHOOSH. WHOOSH.

Each crank stroke, each wheel revolution WHIRS in time with the POUNDING of his heart.

The road takes a hard bend to the right.

And Major powers past Marmon, across the cobbles, heads toward a series of loose hay bales marking the way toward a small park lined with tall trees.

Marmon struggles to keep up.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Major, GASPING, stands out of the saddle, crushes his way up a steep rise, bends left, and barrels (alone) onto a small dirt path through the trees.

No spectators now. Just the trees rippling by, casting long shadows across the gravel.

Light, dark. Light, dark. Light, dark.

The strobe effect of the shadows is dizzying. Like being trapped inside a giant spinning Zoetrope.

MAJOR (V.O.)

I'm ashamed to say now how much I
deeply coveted that gold medal Hay
hung up in the shop window to
promote the race.

Instead of slowing down, instead of flagging, Major simply lowers his head, grits his teeth, tucks in his piston-like knees, and cranks.

MAJOR (V.O.)

Almost as ashamed now as I was
exhausted back then.

EXT. CITY OUTSKIRTS - AFTERNOON

Major, hours later, rips his way down another narrow street lined with spectators.

By his face we can tell. He's done. Cooked. Wasted.

MAJOR (V.O.)

All I could hear in my head as I
rode was Hay's voice telling me I
should turn back, quit, give up.

His coat is now drenched with sweat and his face is riven with blinding agony. Spent.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 With the fatigue I felt so near to overtaking me, I still wanted to go the distance. To win. To be accepted. As a worthy competitor.

But as he pumps away with all his diminished might, a pack of BLACK CLAD RIDERS (in suits, not cycling togs) ride directly at him from the opposite direction.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Even though my knees felt like they'd been torn out of their sockets by my pedals, I was more determined to cover the entire span no matter how long it took.

Confused, Major slows slightly, looks up.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Or how much it cost me physically.

We recognize one of the riders. It's Hay himself.

HAY
 Boy, oh boy oh BOY!

As he speeds toward Major, he clutches the gold medal from his storefront window in one hand.

HAY (CONT'D)
 You're a full mile ahead of the field, boy! But the scratch man, Marmon, he's closing fast!

The gold medal shines brightly in the sunlight as he and his crew wash past Major in blur.

HAY (CONT'D)
 Don't let me down now, son!

With sweat streaming down his face, Major again gets out of the saddle, bears down on his pedals.

Momentarily reinvigorated but running on fumes.

As he weaves his way over the cobbles with heavy, heavy legs, we hear his VOICE once again:

MAJOR (V.O.)

The sight of that medal and the notion that I could make it to the finish, that I *could* win, gave me a fresh start. A hunger the likes of which I'd never experienced.

The crowd is getting thicker and thicker as he rides.

MAJOR (V.O.)

Moments earlier, I felt more dead than alive.

Instead of JEERING, they seem to be CHEERING.

MAJOR (V.O.)

Now I felt as though I'd only just begun the race.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DUSK

With Marmon now swiftly gaining on him, Major sprints with every last ounce of strength past more hay bales and more SCREAMING spectators.

Up ahead, at the same starting line from earlier, stand two clusters of MEN IN BLACK SUITS.

Between them, a silk ribbon flutters in the wind.

Major ducks his head, looks back toward Marmon. The two men are only feet apart.

Just a bicycle's length separates them. Maybe less.

Marmon grits his teeth, taps his deepest reserves to catch his unexpected rival.

Major, sucking down air, looks to the stands.

For the briefest of seconds, all of the spectators (formerly decked out in formal Victorian garb) appear to be dressed in the menacing white robes of the KKK.

Hoods and all.

Major, terrified, locks his eyes onto his front wheel, cranks harder... harder... harder still.

Until: WHOOSH!

He blasts through the ribbon, crosses the finish line mere seconds (six to be exact) ahead of Marmon.

Major skids and swerves before crashing hard into a row of bales and collapsing to the ground in a heap.

Marmon, full of fury, hurtles past him.

MARMON
That's the first, last, and *only*
time you beat me. Buck.

Major, bleeding, rolls over, squints into the sun.

MAJOR
(to himself)
Could crumble the color line all
the way down to the dirt...

Marmon, more perplexed than peeved, bats a hand his way.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
...and still not be able to dine in
their dining room.

EXT. GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

In the bunting-lined grandstands, a slightly younger Birdie slowly lowers a pair of binoculars.

BIRDIE
Impressive.

He caps the binoculars, lets them dangle from his neck as he runs a hand over his thick walrus mustache.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Very impressive indeed.

Next to him, a PRIM DOWAGER (60s) sneers.

DOWAGER
What the devil's that spade trying
to prove? And to whom?

PRE-LAP: BUZZZZZZZZZZ!

BACK TO:

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, TRACK - NIGHT

Sumptuous FULL COLOR.

The sound of another terrifying touch of wheels rouses Major back to the now. To the race at hand.

But, unlike during the ten-miler back in Indiana, he's far behind the pack, stuck in the bunch, bleeding time.

Birdie's CALMING VOICE slips in over the WHIRRING of wheels:

BIRDIE (V.O.)
Show me your drubbing of that
narrow-minded rogue back at the
ten-miler in Indy wasn't a fluke.

Major nods to himself, gets up out of the saddle, taps all the strength he can summon, speeds off.

BIRDIE (V.O.)
That's it, kid. Perfection's the
only way out.

All of the other stragglers watch helplessly on.

The surly crowd CHEERS.

But it sounds less than human. Almost reptilian. Terrifying.

INSERT MONTAGE:

Still to the HAUNTING BLARE, we watch the six-day race play out in rapid succession:

-- Major slows, looks, swerves toward the infield, dismounts, throws his bike toward a waiting COACH --

-- Major dumps a copper ladle full of ice water down onto his head as another ATTENDANT massages his legs --

-- Major wolfs down hard boiled eggs and guzzles milk from a frosty bottle as the coach watches on --

-- Major tosses and turns on a tiny cot inside a cramped dressing room as the attendant times his fitful sleep --

-- Major remounts his machine, waits for a good gap, powers back out onto the track and into the thick again --

-- Major ducks and weaves his way through one cluster of riders after another, looking more and more spent --

-- Major dismounts again, rolls his bike toward the coach, rushes toward the water tank, gulps from the ladle --

-- Eat, Sleep, Drink, Ride, Repeat, Repeat, REPEAT --

END MONTAGE.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, DRESSING ROOM - MORNING

With his back to a tattered wall calendar with four successive days x-ed out in black grease pen, an utterly tapped-out Major HOWLS toward FRANKIE (30s) the coach:

MAJOR
Where is he?! Where's Birdie?!

FRANKIE
I told you. He's OUT.

MAJOR
I can't do it! I can't. I CAN'T!

The attendant, BILL (20s) snaps the grease pen in one hand.

BILL
C'mon now, kid. You gotta. You're already a good what...

FRANKIE
Nine hundred and sixty-seven miles.

Major, his legs cramping and his mind melting, hobbles away, SMASHES his hands into the brick wall.

BILL
You're gonna sell us a billion bicycles! Can't quit on us now.

MAJOR
I'm cooked. Can't sleep. Can't eat. Can't see straight. You've gotta let me off. I can't go back in there. It's... It's not safe. I...

Frankie lifts his hands, slowly crosses the room.

FRANKIE
It's three in the morning, kid. I can't call Birdie now. But I can call the doc.

MAJOR
What the heck good's that gonna do? I need out. I'm done! I'm telling you, it's too... dangerous.

Frankie looks to Bill, then to a leather satchel across the room. Bill nods back, crosses toward the bag.

FRANKIE

I'll call the doc. But I need you back out there. Just for a few more laps until he can get here, to keep you from being DQd. Yeah? Can you do that for me?

MAJOR

Then I can quit? Go home? Stop?

Bill fishes something out of the bag, turns, grabs a nearby half-full glass of water, heads for the door.

FRANKIE

Sure, kid. Sure. Then you can stop.

Frankie gently but forcefully guides Major by his shoulders away from the brick wall and toward the open door.

Major's trembling knuckles are bleeding.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

Just go at your own pace. Stay off the deck. And I'll signal you to come back in when he's here.

MAJOR

Why isn't he here? Why isn't Birdie--

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, PASSAGEWAY - SAME TIME

As Frankie pulls Major out of his dressing room, the FEROCIOUS ROAR returns - even at three o'clock in the A.M.

FRANKIE

What'd he tell you, kid? When he's out, you listen to us. Yeah?

MAJOR

(delirious)

Where did he go? Why would he leave me like this?

Ahead of them, Bill dumps a small paper sachet of white powder into the glass of water. It FIZZES.

He gives the cloudy water a swirl with his greasy pinky finger, hands the glass back to Frank.

Frank lifts one of Major's bloodied hands, slips the FIZZING glass into it.

Milky water sloshes from Major's trembling digits.

FRANKIE

Take this. It'll calm your nerves
until the doctor gets here.

MAJOR

What... What is it?

BILL

Medicine.

Major, bleary-eyed, looks to Bill uncomprehendingly.

FRANKIE

Costs sixty-five Dollars an ounce.
It'll get your hands steady. Keep
your legs loose. Make you feel like
a million bucks.

Major looks into the still swirling vortex of liquid.

BILL

C'mon. Down the hatch.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, TRACK - LATER

Major, having somehow found a second wind, BLASTS across the track like a madman.

His eyes are glassy and crazed. And his face is a study in rabid, unhinged, maniacal determination.

Every sound now is gone. Just DEAFENING SILENCE as he roars down the hardwood like a demon.

Like a whirlwind.

Famed riders from all over the world disappear into his slipstream almost as if they're standing still.

But instead of watching them go, he looks down at his front wheel as it spins and spins and spins.

Like it'll never ever stop. An eternal, unending revolution.

CRRRRACK!

All of the hundreds of electric bulbs in all four of the massive conical light fixtures suspended from the steel girders above the track suddenly shatter.

Glass falls from the ceiling like hail as the entire velodrome is plunged into total darkness.

Other than one light.

Out ahead of Major's machine: a ropey, bright orange, flickering ribbon of flame that extends into the distance.

Like a burning fuse. Like a tightrope set ablaze.

Major powers across it as everything else just fades into oblivion. It's only him now. Him and his machine.

One pedal stroke after the next along a burning razor's edge spanning a vast pit of blackness.

SMASH!

All the lights come back on - just as Major nearly t-bones the top rail.

Stunned senseless, he yanks the bars left, barely misses the rail, skitters across the abruptly empty track, looks down toward the infield.

It's entirely empty now too. Abandoned.

Major tries to slow down, clear his head, get a grip.

But then, from behind him: a BLOOD-CURDLING SCREAM!

He looks back to see a LONE FIGURE in the golden silk robes of a Klu Klux Klan Grand Dragon bounding loudly down the track toward him hefting a glinting silver dagger.

All instinct, Major LEAPS from the saddle, POUNDS the pedals with all his strength, SPRINTS away like lighting.

Black lightning.

BANG!

SUPER: EIGHTEEN HOURS LATER

An unseen race official fires his pistol.

And Major, terrified, skids across the broken finish tape just behind seven other riders.

As the rest of the utterly pulverized field crosses the line and collapses in exhaustion, Major continues ripping on along the track like his life depends on it.

Unstopping and unstoppable.

INT. STEAKHOUSE - DAY

Shaved and showered but still haunted and spent, Major gorges on a massive t-bone inside a posh, club-y steakhouse.

MAJOR
No. You're wrong.

Across the table, not eating and a little mortified by the spectacle of Major's voracity, Birdie crosses his arms.

BIRDIE
What now?

MAJOR
No wonder you ended your cycling career running into a horse.

BIRDIE
Damn thing backed into me!

Major swallows, grabs his milk, flashes Birdie a wry smile.

MAJOR
Winning doesn't matter, Birdie.
Perfection doesn't matter. It's not about the time or the trophies.
Riding matters. That feeling when you finally break through the pain, all the struggle. The effort, the exertion. And everything just goes quiet. All those hundreds of people screaming at me. I can't even hear 'em, can't see 'em. Don't even know they're there. All that's there is my heartbeat and my legs. Pumping, pumping, pumping for the finish.
And no one can touch me. Not a single one of 'em. Every time I get on the bike, that's what I'm looking for. And I don't know if I'll find that feeling again. But I want to. Damn certain I do. Because in that moment, down there on the track, I'm airborne. Soaring.
(beat)
Free.

Major finally takes a greedy gulp from his glass of milk.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
And tonight I thought I'd lost that feeling for good.

BIRDIE
Listen--

MAJOR

This is about me making a difference, Birdie. For the future. And I'm not going to let anyone, not even you, stand in the way.

Birdie nods, unaccustomed to being chastened.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

What was it? In the packet?

BIRDIE

Bicarbonate of soda, on my mother's grave. Nothing more, I swear it. Cost me a nickel.

(broad grin)

Eighth place after Hale. Not bad, kid. I knew you had it in you.

MAJOR

Where were you?

BIRDIE

Asleep. In my hotel room.

MAJOR

I'm never doing that again, ever.

BIRDIE

Agreed. Now, we gotta get you back to Worcester. Prep for next season. Find you a good woman.

Major wags his head side-to-side.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Show the experts that the six-day grind hasn't put an end to your sprinting game.

Major doesn't answer, cuts more steak. Maybe he's out?

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

It's an old trick. A placebo. To get your mind thinking--

MAJOR

I saw a man. On the track. With a knife. Chasing me.

BIRDIE

Well, racing eighteen hours straight without a wink'll do that to you, I suppose.

Major looks down. His face softens slightly.

MAJOR
Eighth place, huh?

BIRDIE
Can't win 'em all.
(beat)
Or can you?

Major forces a smile, takes another greedy bite.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Work our way toward the Worlds for
grins. Then Europe if you do well.

MAJOR
Not until they let me race on
Saturdays instead of Sundays.

BIRDIE
Your piety's gonna cost me a pretty
penny, kid. A pretty penny indeed.

EXT. WORCESTER CITY STREETS - DAY

All alone on his machine as day breaks over the sleepy town of Worcester, Massachusetts, Major speeds across the cobbles like a man on a mission.

A man fully committed now to proving himself not only to Birdie but to the wider white world as well.

Up ahead: a tiny gap between two brick buildings.

And beyond the gap: a narrow street that rakes steeply upward at nearly an 18% grade.

Breathing steadily, Major grinds his way upward. His cadence drops as does his speed. But, just like he did amid the chaos of The Garden, he presses on.

No crowd. No cheering. Just the GUSTING of his breath as the bike wags side-to-side up the seemingly impossible slope.

Grimacing, he looks up, sees the summit.

And, at the crest: a mirage.

A lone young woman in a frilly white dress clutching a pink parasol and wearing a broad-brimmed Victorian hat.

Meet: DAISY VICTORIA MORRIS (20s). A fair-skinned, mixed race socialite with piercing eyes and sharp cheekbones.

She stands at the summit, calmly watching Major as he climbs toward her as if magnetically drawn.

DAISY (PRE-LAP)
They may cheer, but never for you.

EXT. JOHN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH, GROUNDS - MORNING

Now dressed in his Sunday best, Major stands before Daisy as a finely appareled crowd of BLACK PARISHIONERS mingle making POLITE SMALLTALK.

Daisy thrusts her gloved hand out. He takes it, looks like he doesn't know what to do with it.

DAISY
And tell me it's not silly to go
through all that exertion just to
turn back around and ride down the
same hill all over again.

MAJOR
Well, ma'am...

Daisy grips his hand firmly. Confidently.

DAISY
Daisy. Daisy Victoria Morris.

Major shakes her hand stiffly.

MAJOR
Well, Daisy, sometimes exertion is
the only way to prove your worth. I
ride because I love it. The strain.
Achieving the impossible.

DAISY
The *impossible* huh?

She lets go of his hand, eyes him up and down.

DAISY (CONT'D)
You do know that I walked up that
self-same little hill entirely
under my own power.

Major reaches up, tries to loosen his starched collar.

She grins playfully.

DAISY (CONT'D)
In a hoop skirt and a whale bone
corset, no less.

She breezes past him toward the gate to the stairs leading down to the street.

DAISY (CONT'D)

Welcome to Worcester, young man. A fiercely abolitionist city where we don't tend to care quite so much about what the less colorful people in the world think of our worth.

She pushes through the gate, holds it open as if trying to shake Major out of his stupor, cue him to follow her.

DAISY (CONT'D)

Well c'mon, then.

Major, fully transfixed, stumbles her way.

DAISY (CONT'D)

And here I thought you were supposed to be fast.

EXT. PARK, GAZEBO - LATER

Daisy and Major circle each other alone inside of a birdcage-like, ornate, all-white gazebo as cherry blossoms drift through the humid summer air.

Major, tongue-tied and sheepish, twirls his "comet" Silver Dollar down the knuckles of his left hand as he walks.

DAISY

They paid you?

MAJOR

No, my parents.

DAISY

To be his playmate?

MAJOR

His friend. And, yeah. He was my friend. My best friend.

DAISY

A white boy?

MAJOR

Mm-hmm. And then they moved away. Left town for Chicago. Left me in the lurch. Alone.

Major's face shifts. Darkens.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

I've never really fit anywhere. Not with our folks. Not with them. Always sort of stuck in middle.

DAISY

Now, that I understand.

MAJOR

Funny. When I talk to you it doesn't feel like I have to be something else.

DAISY

You don't. Don't have to prove anything to me when you're here.

Major brightens, veers her way.

MAJOR

Well, it's up to Montreal next. If I'm lucky.

DAISY

And they'll just let you in?

MAJOR

Dunno. Gotta make a good showing in a few more races first.

Their shoulders nearly touch.

DAISY

And of course what's his name--

MAJOR

Birdie.

DAISY

Birdie thinks this is a good idea?

He reaches out, almost takes her hand again, hesitates.

MAJOR

I'm ready for it. Ready for anyone. Unlike back in New York.

She slows, leans closer. Their lips are only inches apart.

DAISY

Speaking of, how'd you sleep?

MAJOR
 About as well as I imagine I might.
 When you're around.

Daisy grins, keeps walking.

DAISY
 Seventeen hundred, thirty-two
 miles? On a bicycle?

He looks as though he wished he'd kissed her, badly.

MAJOR
 At least no one was throwing ice at
 me on the track like when I beat
 Sanger back at...

Daisy runs her hand over the ivory balustrade, half wishing
 he'd kissed her too.

DAISY
 And everyone's white?

MAJOR
 Well, yeah. All but me.

DAISY
 Hmm.

He mirrors her movements, opposites attracting.

MAJOR
 You from around here?

DAISY
 Nope. Born in Hudson. New York.
 When my Daddy passed...

She trails off. It's still a fresh wound.

DAISY (CONT'D)
 He was white. Mama was Black. She
 sent me here to stay with my Aunt
 and Uncle. Reverend and his wife.

Daisy slows, turns back toward Major.

DAISY (CONT'D)
 Take it from me. No amount of
 desperate striving can ever change
 the way they see you.

He narrows his eyes, forms a counterargument.

DAISY (CONT'D)
But you can try, I suppose.

Major smiles, thinks he can prove her wrong.

MAJOR
I figure, if I can stay up near the front in any race, I can give a good account of myself when the final sprint comes.

She turns, veers at Major, closes her eyes, lands a gentle, polite little kiss on his cheek. Then another. Harder.

He stumbles backward, breathless.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
At Taunton first. Then Montreal.
(beat)
You should come.

I/E. PULLMAN DINING CAR/OPEN PRAIRIE - DAY

Major and Daisy sit opposite Birdie inside the lavish whites-only dining car of a northbound train.

Daisy is again dressed to the nines. Major looks conspicuously out of place. And he knows it.

Birdie, his face partially obscured by an open broadsheet, seems none too pleased to have Daisy along for the ride.

BIRDIE
You gotta put Becker out of your mind, kid. What happened was, well, unconscionable. A travesty.

Daisy looks around anxiously.

Major tries and fails to calm his nerves.

Birdie doesn't clock it.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Gotta focus instead on McLeod, McDuffee, and McCarthy. And the Butler brothers. Damndest thing I've ever seen. Like they can read each other's minds.

A nervous looking white WAITER (30s) hovers in the distance.

Both Major and Daisy clock it. Birdie is entirely oblivious.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Every last one of 'em will try and
pocket you. Keep you off your line.
Slow you down. That's why you gotta
get out early. Pick your own path.
Stick close to your lead-out.
Especially in the half-mile.

The waiter steps up, COUGHS.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

With any luck, the fans up there'll
keep themselves civil. Not that any
of the riders, American, French,
German, or Canadian for that matter
will cut you any slack.

The waiter draws even closer, CLEARS HIS THROAT.

Birdie finally looks up.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

(to the waiter)

Ah. Yes.

Birdie drops his paper, grabs a menu from the table as Major
and Daisy swap an anxious, furtive glance.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Three lobster cocktails. The spring
chicken for me. Roast tenderloin
for my friend here. And the salmon
for the young lady. A half bottle
of the St. Julien. Two glasses and
a bottle of milk for that one. As
cold as you can--

WAITER

I'm sorry, sir.

BIRDIE

And an Old Saratoga on the rocks
for yours truly.

The waiter leans down toward Birdie.

WAITER

They can't be here.

Birdie SIGHS theatrically.

WAITER (CONT'D)

Belong in the colored car, sir.

BIRDIE

How much longer to the Canadian
border, my friend?

WAITER

Sir, I don't--

BIRDIE

Feel free to delay our order until
we cross. Until then, the Rye on
the rocks if you please.

WAITER

I...I...I...

Birdie tosses the menu, lifts his paper again, smiles slyly
toward both Major and Daisy.

BIRDIE

(toward Major)

Service these days.

Daisy glares at Birdie. He loudly SNAPS the paper taut.

The waiter finally withdraws. And, as he does, every other
eye in the car slides toward Major and Daisy.

Looks of shock and scorn from every white face.

DAISY

(under her breath)

Who do you think you are?

Birdie slowly lowers the paper again, eyes narrow slits.

DAISY (CONT'D)

You wanna get us killed? Murdered?
Maimed? Lynched?

MAJOR

Daisy, please...

DAISY

(still to Birdie)

Who appointed you his ignorant,
gluttonous, self-serving, holier
than thou white messiah?

Birdie looks to Major. Major nods.

MAJOR

She's right. Change will come. But
we'll be the ones to make it in our
own sweet time.

Major stands, reaches out to take Daisy's hand.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
Champions win on their merits.

Helpless to argue the point, Birdie just watches them go.

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, INFIELD - DAY

Down on the dry grass at the center of a vast oval lined with some 18,000 well-dressed CANADIAN FANS, Birdie leads Major through a crowd of TRAINERS and COACHES.

SUPER: MONTREAL, CANADA | AUGUST, 1899

Major is dressed in form-fitting wool short pants and the same jersey he wore back at The Garden.

MAJOR
We were fine in the proper Pullman.

BIRDIE
Please.

Birdie veers toward the track as a cluster of cyclists speed by in a flash.

Seven hulking steam-driven motorcycles ROAR past as well, each one having just dropped their riders.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Don't you ever call that car proper again. You belong wherever you want to belong. Question that, let these bastards beat on you, well, all that business will only serve to get in both our ways.
(beat)
No matter what she says about it.

From the track behind them: a SHRILL SQUEAL.

Both men turn just in time to see one of the massive motorcycles clip the rear wheel of another motorcycle and then SKID downward across the track.

A GASP goes up from the assembled teams as the moto nearly takes out two cyclist and then hurdles end-over-end off the track and into the infield.

Men in black suits flee in every direction as the motorcycle flips and tumbles.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Goddammit.

The limp body of the steam moto's leather-clad driver skids across the gravel and grass before crumpling into a twisted heap at the foot of a cluster of hay bales.

Silence washes over the crowd as the spooked cyclists on the track nervously slow to a dead stop.

Major, stunned, looks to the grandstands where we can barely make out Daisy staring. Eyes full of terror.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
That was our lead-out man for the
half miler.

MAJOR
But...

Birdie starts off toward the mangled remains of the upside-down motorcycle as it belches out smoke.

Both wheels spin unevenly. Violently bent out of true.

BIRDIE
C'mon.

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - DAY

As MEDICS rush the fallen moto driver away on a white stretcher soaked through with blood, Major (shaken) stands over the top bar of his bike.

Next to him: seven other riders wait at the start line.

The nearest two, NAT BUTLER (20s) and his brother FRANK BUTLER (20s) size Major up with a nearly identical coldness.

BRUMM. BRUMM. BRUMM. BRUMM. SCREECH.

Birdie, still in his suit coat but now wearing glass goggles, pulls up before Major on the battered motorcycle.

BIRDIE
(loud)
Now, focus-up.

More motos swerve down from the outside lane and then veer out in front of every other rider.

Their pale blue exhaust washes over the cyclists.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Just stick close to the roller.

He points a bare hand down toward the bent roller bar behind the tweaked rear wheel of the motorcycle.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
No matter what happens, don't back off, don't slow down, until I give you the signal to bolt, yeah?

Major nods, grabs his leather-wrapped drop bars, kicks his left foot into a pedal cage, lifts his rear wheel.

Then he remembers. Pulls the coin. Kisses it. Tucks it in.

MAJOR
You sure about this?

BIRDIE
Nope.

Birdie REVS the engine as a PAUNCHY LINE JUDGE (50s) steps up, loads a broad-barreled start gun.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Remember. The only way to show people like that sonofabitch Becker is to beat 'em fair and square at their own damn game.

Major nods. Birdie looks ahead, exhales slowly.

LINE JUDGE
Racers ready?

Head wags all up and down the line.

LINE JUDGE (CONT'D)
One lap to pace. On your mark. Get set. GO.

Birdie guns the gas, throws the clutch. The moto PEELS out. And Major, head down, eyes ahead, takes off after it.

Only the Butler brothers can match his pace at first.

And, together, all three motos and all three riders speed down the track.

From above and behind them: barely discernible APPLAUSE.

Birdie, his wheels wobbling, looks back.

BIRDIE
That's it. Closer. CLOSER.

Major tucks his elbows in, lowers his head, looks to the bent roller spinning crookedly just inches away from his front wheel.

Birdie accelerates. Major keeps pace as his chest rises and falls in time with the pumping of his knees.

As they bend through the first turn, then back out onto the straits, a fourth rider TOM McCARTHY (20s) rips past the Butler brothers and into second place.

Birdie looks right, locks eye's with McCarthy's lead-out driver, gives his own bike full gas.

For half a second, Major, distracted, falls back, bleeds speed outside of Birdie's slipstream.

McCarthy, eyes down, powers past him with his front tire nearly rubbing against the roller at the back of his moto.

The massive crowd washes by in a blinding blur.

BIRDIE (V.O.)
You gotta put Becker out of your
mind, kid.

Major fixes his eyes on the wheel before him, redoubles his efforts, slips into a trance-like daze.

And the WHIR of his spokes slashing the air blurs into the CLAMOR and DIN of another vast crowd of crazed SPECTATORS.

TITLE CARD:

F O R T I T U D E

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. CHARLES RIVER CYCLE CLUB, PADDOCK - DAY (1897)

Baleful BLACK AND WHITE.

A younger Major, full of fear, follows Birdie quickly through a paddock full of GRIZZLED MECHANICS.

SUPER: TAUNTON, MASSACHUSETTS | TWO YEARS EARLIER

Birdie READS ALOUD from a rumpled broadsheet as they walk:

BIRDIE

Taylor's entry was refused at Louisville, Kentucky and throughout the South on account of his color. Opposition against him has become so marked that he was nearly compelled to give up the circuit entirely.

This is all old, unwelcome news to Major who stoically strides through the crowd avoiding eye-contact.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

The League of American Wheelmen, which professes to control bicycle racing and draw the color line...

Every other rider traces Major's path with a stern gaze.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

...will now only allow white riders to compete in professional races.

Major GROANS audibly, tries to tune Birdie out.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Taylor ranks with the fastest men in this country. But the racing men are envious of his success and prejudiced against his--

Major finally stops dead, wheels around.

MAJOR

I know dang well--

BIRDIE

Oh, heavens.

He STABS at the paper, nearly pierces it.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Good ol' Marmon's gone into business with that brother of his after all. Building automobiles.

He finally lowers the paper.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Good luck with that.

Major turns back around, leaves in a huff.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Remember what we talked about...

Major bats him off with his free hand, steps out onto the flats of the open-air track, scans the crowd for Daisy.

EXT. CHARLES RIVER CYCLE CLUB, TRACK - LATER (1897)

Struggling to clear his mind and regain his focus, Major speeds silently down the track as other riders deliberately keep their distance.

One in particular stands out. This is W.E. BECKER (20s) a barrel-chested bear of a man with a face seemingly carved of granite and fists like weathered boulders.

His eyes are locked on Major's wheel and his legs pump in time with his. A bitter, menacing rival to be sure.

But Major stays within himself. Tries to imagine that he's the only man on the track, not just the only man of color.

As his breath regulates, he powers swiftly and gracefully up and down the banking track to ensure a healthy buffer.

Becker mirrors his movements precisely, almost as if their machines are invisibly tethered.

Up ahead, we see a flurry of action spark up in the infield. Everyone knows what it means, picks up the pace.

BANG!

The start gun fires. And the race begins in earnest.

Major, aiming to save his legs, just watches as Becker and a number of other riders swoop down to the inside line, greedily drafting off of the man before them.

Instead of following, Major keeps a high line.

MAJOR
After you, gents.

Becker looks back through the crook of his arm, slows slightly. The man behind him swings wide right to stay clear, nearly sideswipes Major.

But no worries. Major deftly powers past him, takes a turn only inches from Becker.

The two men swap a quick glance. Major nods.

Let's do this.

Becker edges right, looks like he's going to deliberately take Major out, broadside him.

But Major doesn't flinch, doesn't budge.

Instead, the two riders again seem invisibly tethered, absolutely in lockstep.

Then, the rider ahead of Becker cuts wide, enters the next turn high up on Major's right.

A third rider gives way for Becker, throws his bike directly out in front of Major's.

All three riders surrounding him deliberately slow.

Major is boxed-in. Unable to pass, shedding speed.

Thinking fast, he lifts his head, opens up his chest to catch the air, creates instant drag.

This knocks him almost a length back, and he quickly YANKS his bars right, enters the next flat far right of the nearest rider.

And, as the bunch enters the next turn, Major swerves even higher, all the way up to the rail.

Only Becker and the second rider follow him up, still trying to box him in.

But as all three of them near the top of the track (Becker just to his left and the other rider just in front of him), Major leans an elbow out onto the top of the rail.

It skids along the heavily-lacquered wood, steadies him.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
Go ahead. I dare you.

Becker eyes him nervously. *What the fuck are you...*

MAJOR (CONT'D)
Thought so.

Abruptly, Major stabs his bike forward into the rear wheel of the man ahead of him, normally a suicidal move.

Everything slows down.

The rider ahead of him wobbles, hits the rail, nearly goes over it and down.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 You know, For a time I thought
 maybe the prejudice I faced
 might've stayed down South.

In self-preservation mode, Becker SWERVES left just as they all dip toward the flats and pass the grandstands.

From out of nowhere, an unseen fan tosses a fistful of SILVER PENNY NAILS out onto the track before Major.

Major thinks fast, WEAVES right, barely misses them.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Nope. Instead, it showed up pretty much everywhere I rode.

As the thrown nails JANGLE, glinting, across the track behind him, Major lifts his elbow just in time to catch a brief glimpse of Daisy there in the stands.

Same pink parasol. The only hint of color.

Everything speeds back up.

With a suddenly open window of track before him, Major ducks low to his bars and turns on the gas, leaving Becker in his wake and drawing a ferocious ROAR from the crowd.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 They never stopped trying to ice me out. Take me down. Injure me.

Up ahead: only one rider remains. It's Tom Butler again.

But Major's lost too much time. There's not enough room to bridge the distance, much less sprint for the line.

Still though, Major SHREDS his way across the boards at a dazzling, seemingly impossible pace until:

THWAP.

The finish ribbon snaps taut up ahead.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 When all I ever wanted was a square deal. An even field.

And the only remaining rider out in front of Major THRUSTS his bike through it.

RIIIIIPPP!

Butler breaks the ribbon with Major just inches back.

BACK TO:

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - DAY

Rich FULL COLOR.

Back in Canada, back at the World Championships, Major looks up as Birdie SHOUTS from the motorcycle before him:

BIRDIE
GO now! GO!

Birdie swerves right, nearly takes out the nearest lead-out man, veers up the steeply sloped final turn as Major, free to fly, crosses the start line in a flash.

BANG!

Off goes the start gun.

Every other rider ditches their moto and falls swiftly in behind Major.

There's McCarthy and both Butler brothers - all nearly three lengths behind Major.

No more exhaust. No more ROAR of engines. Just dead silence and the hint of a TICKING stopwatch.

At first, Major's pace seems entirely unbeatable. But then he looks back, sees the pack hot on his heels, seems to momentarily lose his focus. Lose his will.

He shakes his head, bends through the first turn with his legs burning and his mind still stuck on the past.

On Becker. On Taunton.

PRE-LAP: An amateur band playing "DIXIE" and AMERICAN VOICES shouting caustic slurs.

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. CHARLES RIVER CYCLE CLUB, TRACK - DAY (1897)

Haunting BLACK AND WHITE.

Major, back on the track at Taunton, glides behind a victorious Butler, the overtly racist soundtrack to his miraculous slate of early top placements plays on.

But Major tries to let this wash off his back like the wind.

MAJOR
Yeah, well. So much for that.

Up in the stands, Daisy bleeds by again with a mixture of pride, concern, and revulsion coloring her face.

He smiles her way. She grimaces back before:

SMASH!

Becker SLAMS his bike into Major's with all his might, sends him instantly to the deck. Major's bicycle goes flying.

The crowd GASPS. The band falls discordantly silent.

Becker LEAPS off his bike, TOSSES it clear, THUNDERS across the boards toward a stunned Major.

BECKER
You black sonofabitch!

Birdie, sensing trouble, JUMPS up, rumbles down the stairs.

BIRDIE
Ignore him, Marshall.

BECKER
(up toward Birdie)
Fuck you, has-been.

MAJOR
That all you got?

BIRDIE
(still to Major)
Don't give him what he wants.

Major slowly pushes himself to his feet again. Bleeding.

MAJOR
Above it, under it. Funny how I'm
always the one pedaling through it.

Before Major can even react, Becker suddenly has both of his massive hands around his neck.

He FLIPS Major backward.

POUNDS his bare skull into the boards.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

DAISY
(from the stands)
Stop it! STOP!

Major, already bleeding from one ear only GURGLES as Becker, bathed in sweat, steadily chokes him out.

THE SCREEN SLOWLY GOES RED.

Silence. Then:

HABERDASHER (PRE-LAP)
Every time you win, they look
harder at us.

FADE TO:

INT. HABERDASHERY - DAY

Saturated COLOR.

While Major stands on a platform surrounded by tall mirrors, a black HABERDASHER (50s) measures him for a bespoke suit.

Daisy looks on from behind. Pride mingled with concern.

DAISY
They've always been looking. Now's
the time for him to change up what
they're seeing.

Major lets his eyes drift to her reflection. He nods her way proudly. She winks puckishly back.

Love and shared purpose irrevocably intertwined.

Then, over it all:

DAISY (PRE-LAP)
No, no, no! Birdie, DO something!

BACK TO:

EXT. CHARLES RIVER CYCLE CLUB, INFIELD - DAY (1897)

Harsh BLACK AND WHITE.

His neck still darkened by Becker's vice-like grip, Major finally GAGS and GASPS back to consciousness.

Daisy cradles him in her arms as Birdie, in the distance, violently SHOVES a race official nearly to the ground.

BIRDIE
Unsportsmanlike? Try fucking
murderous, you pompous ass!

Daisy covers Major's oddly pale face with desperate kisses
and terror-fueled tears.

DAISY
I... I thought I almost lost you.

Major tries to clear his throat, his quaking lips glisten
with jet black blood.

MAJOR
How... How... long was I--

Her chest CONVULSING, Daisy gently rocks him back-and-forth.

DAISY
Fifteen minutes, baby.
(back toward Birdie)
Fifteen miserable MINUTES!

Birdie, still in a shoving match with the officials and a
handful of gathered COPS doesn't hear this.

Down on the ground, shielded from the blazing sunshine by
the brim of Daisy's lacy hat, Major smiles beatifically.

MAJOR
Glad you came. I was pretty much
perfect. Up til then.

Her chest spasms, equal parts terror and relief.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
Sorry I didn't win it for ya.

DAISY
(over her shoulder)
Birdie...

Birdie gives the race official one last shove.

BIRDIE
(to the official)
I don't want him disqualified. I
want that bastard banned for life!

Major, bleary-eyed and bloody, looks to the stands.

But they somehow seem different. No more surly American Fans
hurling epithets. Only silent Canadians all on their feet.

Bated breath. Anxious eyes. Rapt and at full attention.

PRE-LAP: THAWAP. RIP. WHOOSH.

BACK TO:

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - DAY

Brilliant TECHNICOLOR.

Thunderous APPLAUSE.

This time, at the World Championships two years later, Major breaks the ribbon with both McCarthy and Butler each less than a foot behind him.

An ECSTATIC ROAR pours down from the grandstands. He's done it. He's beaten the best of the best at the most dangerous and grueling race on the docket.

Over the CHEERS and WAILING of the crowd:

TRACK ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*At a time of one minute, two-fifths
 of a second, the half-mile title
 goes to... Mister Tom McCarthy!*

Major, still pedaling, looks back, sees an equally surprised McCarthy cranking along just behind him.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*And, in second place due to a lead-
 out violation, the Worcester
 Whirlwind, Mister Marshall "Major"
 Taylor at an adjusted time of--*

DAISY (PRE-LAP)
 It's not worth it!

QUICK CUT TO:

INT. BICYCLE FACTORY, OFFICE - NIGHT (1897)

Sepulchral BLACK AND WHITE.

Back after his beating by Becker, Major sits with his feet in a bucket of ice and a towel wrapped around his neck.

Daisy, paces like a caged panther behind him.

DAISY
*You're gonna... You're gonna get
 him killed out there!*

BIRDIE

There's no way they'll bar him from
the World's now.

DAISY

I. Don't. CARE!

BIRDIE

He wins there, and I know he can,
or at least I think he can.

Birdie looks to Major.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

You can, right?

Major nods slowly. It takes effort. Hurts.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

He wins the *world* title and that's
our golden ticket to the European--

MAJOR

(hoarse)

Sundays, Birdie.

BIRDIE

I know, I know! I'm workin' on it.

Birdie loudly SCREECHES his chair out, stands.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

(to them both)

Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam.
Europe loves a novelty, kid. Let's
make 'em choke on it.

Birdie leans in close to Major, puts his hands on his
shoulders. Gentle and almost fatherly. Full of love.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

The world only changes when
somebody forces it to.

Major looks to Daisy.

She wavers briefly, agrees with Birdie for a change.

MAJOR

(to Daisy)

Riding, racing... This is all I
know, Daisy. All I'm good at.

DAISY

That's the problem. Another hunk of gold isn't gonna change a thing.

MAJOR

You know I don't ride for that.

BIRDIE

Please, Daisy. Trust us on this.

DAISY

Trust you? You act like you're his father. His self-appointed white savior. But you abandoned him out there on the track to die!

BIRDIE

Plus, he only turned pro a year ago. And he's already taken home fifteen thousand Dollars in--

DAISY

This isn't about the money.

Birdie stares at her, momentarily exasperated.

BIRDIE

Well, then...

He turns back around toward his desk, grabs a small silver canister from it, flips it over in his hand.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

...you could give this a shot.

He tosses the canister toward Major. He catches it deftly.

MAJOR

What is it?

BIRDIE

Insurance.

BACK TO:

INT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, LOCKER ROOM - DAY

Warm FULL COLOR.

Still stunned by the galling second-place judgment in the first event of the World Championships, now it's Major who paces inside a claustrophobic locker room.

The cramped space looks more suited to horses than men.

MAJOR
But... I don't... understand.

BIRDIE
It's my fault, kid. I lead you for
too long. Cut off McCarthy's lead-
out. Should've peeled off sooner.

Birdie rips the glass goggles from his neck, tosses them up
onto a grimy wooden table.

Daisy stands in the distance with her arms crossed. She
wants nothing to do with this any longer.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Mistakes happen. Results matter.

Major finally looks to him, draws a breath to speak.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
If you want out, wanna cut your
losses and beg off the mile, fine.
We head back home. Try and figure a
way back onto the circuit in the
States. Find some other way onto
the European schedule.

MAJOR
No.

Major slows, looks to Daisy. Her face says it all:

DAISY
THIS is a mistake. All of it.
Becker. This. Everything.

MAJOR
I ain't quitting.

DAISY
Marshall, please...

Major turns back toward Birdie.

MAJOR
We came here to prove something.
And I don't care if they think you
somehow cut me more slack than I
deserve. I beat all those riders,
McCarthy, the Butler brothers,
every single one. Fair and square.

Daisy steps closer to him, reaches a hand out to spin him
back around toward her.

DAISY

Don't you get it? Don't you see?
The deck is stacked, Major. Stacked
against you and me. Even him.

Major tries to shore up his will, stand firm.

DAISY (CONT'D)

They don't want you to win. They
just want you to prove, once and
for all, that a Black man can't--

BIRDIE

Daisy...

She wheels around to face Birdie.

DAISY

You're just using him like all the
rest. You let him get beaten
senseless by Becker just for the
ink, for the press. For a headline!

BIRDIE

I did no such--

DAISY

For all we know, you fouled his
race today on purpose for the same
damn reason. Blasted bicycle sales!

MAJOR

That's enough.

DAISY

(back to Major)

A either of you want is the goddamn
limelight. Adulation.

Through the door behind her, the track announcer's VOICE:

TRACK ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

And now, ladies and gentlemen, the
marquee event, the competition
you've all been waiting for.

Major's eyes drift from Daisy to Birdie and back again.

TRACK ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

The standing-start one mile World
Championship race.

DAISY

Every win just paints a bigger
target on your back.

BIRDIE

Don't listen to her. You beat the
best riders here, and there's no
stopping us. Ever.

Major turns away from them both.

DAISY

Don't do this, Major. Please.

BIRDIE

Use your rage to take their records
and smash 'em, kid.

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - DUSK

Back out on the track, now without a motorized lead-out, Major balances on his bike with a familiar cluster of riders ready to pounce.

To his left and right: both Butler brothers and two more rail-thin riders, MCLEOD (20s) and D'OUTREION (20s).

Each man's machine is held steady by a YOUNG BOY (teens) in a straw hat and a seersucker suit. Each one is white.

The same line judge from earlier lifts his start pistol.

BANG!

Nat Butler is the first off the line. Major and the rest of the bunch nip quickly in behind him.

Elbows fly. Tempers flare. But the pace is glaringly tentative. As if no one wants to jump too early.

And, as the pack enters the first turn, Major lowers his head again, tries to remain as compact as possible, lets his mind begin to drift.

DAISY (V.O.)

Every win just paints a bigger
target on your back.

Distant CHEERING slowly squelches her words of concern.

TITLE CARD:

F E A R

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. DOWNTOWN INDIANAPOLIS - AFTERNOON (1892)

Grainy BLACK AND WHITE.

A well-dressed man clutching a sheaf of loose papers rushes down a narrow alley to the sound of same CHEERING.

This is racing entrepreneur GEORGE CATTERSON (30s).

SUPER: INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA | SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

CATTERSON

Hurry now, boy. Quick-like.

Major, younger and looking nervous as hell, runs behind him in a white jersey with a solid band of black at the chest.

He carries his much cruder bike by the top bar.

CATTERSON (CONT'D)

Why I let Birdie convince me this
was a good idea I'll never know.

He skids to a stop, peers around a corner, gestures for Major to duck in behind him.

Above: the sky is full of slate-gray storm clouds.

CATTERSON (CONT'D)

Okay. Soon as you hear the start gun, ready yourself. Let the pack pass you. Fifty-one men, minus yourself. Fall in behind them. But hang back, rest up. When they discover you're in the race with 'em, they'll try and make it mighty disagreeable for you.

Major nods, wide-eyed.

CATTERSON (CONT'D)

Seventy-five miles out to Matthews, some of it rough. Farmland. There'll be some club men out in Marion to pace the leaders.

Catterson locks eyes with Major.

CATTERSON (CONT'D)
Dunno if you can depend on them, if
you know what I mean.

He smacks Major with the bundled papers in his hand.

CATTERSON (CONT'D)
Grand prize? The deed to your own
house lot out on the edge of town.
And I'm good for it, boy.

And, with that, he swiftly sprints away.

Major swings one leg over his bike, grips the bars, tries
and fails to clear his mind before:

BANG!

A distant start pistol fires. Then, more CHEERING.

All we see of the pack of riders are a series of fast-moving
shadows sweeping across Major's face as he lets his chest
rise and fall.

He grabs the coin, clutches it tight.

MAJOR
(quietly, to himself)
Please, Lord. Guide and protect me.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - LATE AFTERNOON (1892)

Now in the thick of the pack amidst a heavy, heavy downpour,
Major soldiers on at speed.

Angry and drenched WHITE RIDERS frantically jockey for
position, doing whatever they can to box Major in, force him
to crash, keep him off his line.

WHITE RIDER #1
No way in hell are you gonna make
it to that goddamn finish line
alive, you hear me nigger?

Major, out of the saddle, swerves to miss a deep puddle,
nearly locks bars with another rider.

WHITE RIDER #2
Watch it, ignorant fool.

A third rider lifts a hand from his bars, WALLOPS Major in
the sternum with a closed fist.

WHITE RIDER #3
 Turn back now or I will kill you my
 fuckin' self!

But instead of falling, instead of fading back, Major lays it on harder.

In a deft flurry of motion, he BLASTS through the riders, sprints away from them down the rain-sodden dirt road.

Above: a BLINDING FLASH of lighting. Then, mere seconds later, a the DEAFENING RUMBLE of thunder.

But Major can't see it, can't hear it. Blocks it all out.

EXT. WILLOW GROVE - LATER (1897)

The sky is now a deep blue/black as Major takes a sweeping left hand bend onto a section of road with a seemingly endless grove of weeping willows on the left.

And a vast cemetery of leaning headstones on the right.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Sometimes fear, terror, is the only
 thing to pace you to victory.

As the graves WHIP by, he narrows his focus - perhaps knowing that if the other riders catch him here they'll more than certainly carry out their dire threats.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Problem is, when you win, that
 self-same fear drafts on you.

Another lighting FLASH. Another PEAL of thunder.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Chases you home.

As the swaying willows to his left wash by, Major looks back to the road behind him.

MAJOR (V.O.)
 Tracks you down.

He's in the clear. No sign of anyone.

Then he looks left again.

Only to see that, hung from every tree like gruesome garlands, are hundreds of BLACK YOUNG MEN in cycling costumes identical to his.

Each has been lynched and hung from the neck.

MAJOR (V.O.)
Wins.

Major tries for more speed. But his legs are seizing up, spent. He looks down to his bottom bracket, sees his feet now bare and bleeding.

His ankles are chained. Locked together by a pair of bloody steel manacles. Slave's chains.

FLASH. Another bolt of lightning and it all disappears.

Then, another RESOUNDING BOOM.

MAJOR (V.O.)
But only if you let it.

Spooked and ready to fly, Major leaps from the saddle again and rapidly speeds past the cemetery.

EXT. MARION, OUTSKIRTS - LATER (1892)

The sky clearing and the rain finally stopped, Major, exhausted and running on pure adrenalin, races through the streets of a small rural town.

Up ahead: a cluster of LOCAL RIDERS wait with their machines at the ready. The amateurs on-deck to pace the leaders in.

Fearing more violence, Major slows slightly, tries to pick a line through them.

But the riders, all white, hop onto their bikes and take off ahead of him in two bunches.

He catches them quickly, readies to evade.

But one them flashes him a crazily elated sidelong grin.

LOCAL RIDER
Oh my LORD! You're a good goddamn
hour ahead of 'em! A goddamn HOUR!!

Like a well-oiled machine, the pace crew stitches together around Major to form a tight echelon.

LOCAL RIDER (CONT'D)
C'mon. Tuck in. Only twenty miles left! Catterson's gonna catch hell for this. Birdie too. But you're gonna *flipping* win! You hear me? You're gonna--

FLASH. SIZZLE.

The screen goes all-white.

MAJOR (PRE-LAP)
I don't rightly know how to stop
once I start.

FADE TO:

INT. MODEST HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Glowing FULL COLOR.

Major sits at a narrow wooden desk in a pool of lamplight
filling a page of ivory paper with ink from a fountain pen.

MAJOR (V.O.)
Honestly, I don't know who I am
when I'm not out there trying to
become something.

Atop the page before him the words: **My Dearest Daisy.**

MAJOR (V.O.)
That is, until I see you seeing me
just as I am.

Major pauses, lets the ink dry, folds the sheet of paper,
tucks it into his shirt pocket unfinished.

FLASH TO:

EXT. MARION, TOWN SQUARE - DUSK (1892)

Blown-out BLACK AND WHITE.

Major, still soaked, stands next to Catterson clutching the
deed to his newly-won building plot as a HOODED PHOTOGRAPHER
lifts a second magnesium flare.

CATTERSON
Guess it's time you let Birdie take
you under his wing after all.

FLASH. SIZZLE.

Only Major doesn't blink. Can't.

Behind the photographer, all three menacing riders from
earlier stare threateningly back at him.

Their faces, unlike his, are caked in dried mud and grime.

Followers, not leaders.

PRE-LAP: DING! DING!

BACK TO:

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - DUSK

Lustrous COLOR.

Back at the World Championships, the bell lap in the mile starts with Major still hopelessly pocketed two lengths behind Nat Butler.

Now though, the pace is frantic. Desperately fast.

Wheels touch. Handlebars bang. Flying pedals gash the calves and shins of adjacent riders.

But nobody feels a thing. All that matters is the finish.

From out of nowhere, McCleod kicks hard.

With a massive turn of speed, he passes Butler just as he enters the final bend.

Major looks up, sees daylight, leaps from the saddle, gives it all he's got.

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

Six rows back and nestled in among the CHEERING throngs, Birdie and Daisy watch with bated breath.

DAISY

My father had every chance. Every opportunity. Because he was white. And he squandered every single one.

Birdie lifts his eyes from the track, looks to her with a dawning realization.

DAISY (CONT'D)

I just don't want that for him. Or for you. I want dignity. Survival not spectacle. Real respect.

Birdie nods slowly. Okay, you're--

A CHEER goes up from the crowd. He turns, SHOUTS:

BIRDIE

YES. YES. YES!

Daisy closes her eyes, crosses arms. Can't look. Won't.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
C'mon! It's ALL yours, kid!!

Two rows ahead of them, an older George Marmon (Major's first rival) turns around, arms also crossed.

MARMON
Now that's just a straight waste of chain grease if you ask me.

BIRDIE
No one did, Marmon.

EXT. QUEEN'S PARK TRACK, VELODROME - SAME TIME

Buoyed as if he can almost hear Birdie over the ROAR of the crowd, Major stomps on the pedals.

His bike sways side-to-side as he, out of the saddle, sprints like a madman for the line.

McLeod looks briefly back. But it's too late.

Major WHIPS past him, takes the race by a wheel's length.

And this time, instead of "DIXIE", a brass band leaps into a stirring rendition of "THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER" as Major rockets down the empty track all alone.

Sitting up, arms out, tears streaking down his cheeks, Major searches the stands for his coach and the love of his life.

There's Birdie, rushing down to meet him on the track.

And then there's Daisy with her back to us, leaving the grandstands in disgust. In protest.

BIRDIE (PRE-LAP)
Bullshit.

INT. WINDSOR HOTEL, TEA ROOM - AFTERNOON

Inside a posh salon full of STERN BUSINESSMEN and their OVERDRESSED WIVES, Birdie nurses a cup of coffee amid a mountain of telegrams.

Major sits opposite him looking entirely out of sorts.

Everyone else in the place is white.

BIRDIE

The first Black American named
World Champion in any sport minus
Canadian boxer George Dixon! And
what does the press say?

MAJOR

Doesn't matter, Birdie.

BIRDIE

They call you The Black Streak.
Dismiss your victory as a fluke.
Say McLeod should've won the race
outright. Claim you barged him.
Locked bars. Fouled his--

Major SLAMS his fist down onto the table, lifts the newspaper, crumples it in his fist.

MAJOR

I thought I'd feel different. That
somehow it'd mean more. But it
doesn't. I feel just as... angry as
I did before.

(beat)

Even at the pinnacle.

Birdie drops his telegrams, takes a scalding sip.

Major looks away, seems far from jubilant.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

Maybe she's right. Maybe all we
achieve won't ever change the way
they see me. Remember me.

BIRDIE

Well, now that every single goddamn
promoter across the entire country
has barred your entry...

CLINK.

Down goes his empty bone china coffee cup.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Claiming it'd be...

THUD. THUD. THUD.

He stabs his down-turned thumb onto the stack of cables.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

...folly for you to compete against
white riders in any section of the
country, even if you're in the lead
for *National Champion* too?

(beat)

Folly? I can think of plenty of
other words that begin with the
letter 'f'.

MAJOR

Fine.

BIRDIE

No, more like--

MAJOR

I'll do it.

Birdie looks up, confused.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

If it'll get me in. If they'll let
me ride, fine.

Birdie just stares.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

The lotion. The bleach. I'll do it.

Birdie lays his hand down on top of the papers before him.

BIRDIE

Are you--

MAJOR

The boy whose parents paid mine to
play with him, to ride with him,
Dan Southard, my best friend...

(deep breath)

...there was a gym in our town. A
Young Men's *Christian Association*
gymn. That's where I met that old
monster prejudice. My bitterest foe
from that day forward.

Birdie narrows his eyes.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

All I could do was watch him and
his friends through the window.
Made my heart ache like--

Major locks Birdie in his gaze.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
I don't ever wanna feel that again.

BIRDIE
You sure about this?

MAJOR
No. But if it'll get me back onto
the track, maybe...

He trails off, sensing this is a mistake.

INT. WINDSOR HOTEL, ROOM - EVENING

As the sun sets through the thick glass windows behind him, Major sits on a wicker cane chair with his shirt off and his hands on his lap.

BIRDIE
When's she back?

MAJOR
I dunno.

BIRDIE
Don't you think--

MAJOR
Just get on with it, Birdie.

Birdie approaches with the same tin of bleaching cream. He's got a thick black rubber glove on one hand.

BIRDIE
It may hurt. Says it'll burn.

Major closes his eyes, grips his thighs.

MAJOR
Do it before I change my mind. Or
Daisy changes it for me.

Birdie, having second thoughts himself, uncaps the tin as Major mouths a silent prayer.

BIRDIE
Say the word and we'll stop.

He sets the lid down on a nearby dresser, dips two gloved fingers into the thick white cream, draws out a heaping dollop, hesitates momentarily.

MAJOR
Goodness it smells like...

Birdie paints a broad swath across Major's forehead.

A breathless second passes.

A door opens behind Birdie. Daisy steps in, horrified.

DAISY
(toward them both)
What have you DONE?!

Major's eyes BOLT open.

And he represses a blood-curling scream.

EXT. KING'S COUNTY TRACK - DAY

In airless silence, Major, his face blistered and his hair burnt a surreal orange, stands over his machine amid murderers row of the sport's preeminent star riders.

SUPER: MANHATTAN BEACH, LONG ISLAND | TWO MONTHS LATER

Everyone's there: MICHAELS, COOPER, EATON, SIMMS, FREEMAN.

Each are in peak fitness and ready to take any other man down, Major especially.

Up in the bleachers, Birdie and Daisy stand shoulder-to-shoulder. He seems hopeful. She seems angry. Repulsed.

Major closes his eyes, crosses himself with one hand, says a silent prayer. *This is your one and only--*

But then he reaches back, finds his pocket empty. No Silver Dollar. No good luck charm.

Clearly still in pain, still burnt, still likely hearing himself scream out in agony, he just lets his shoulders sag.

The START MAN raises his pistol.

But, instead of a gunshot, we hear the throaty BLARE of a luxury ocean liner's STEAM WHISTLE:

HOOOOONNNNNKKKK!

BIRDIE (PRE-LAP)
Told you you had it in you.

EXT. LIDO DECK - NIGHT

Wrapped in heavy wool blankets, Birdie and Major sit alone on wooden deck chairs under a jet black sky dotted with stars as the moonlit sea rushes swiftly by.

MAJOR
If I recall correctly, you asked me
if I had it in me.

Major's face has healed slightly. But his hair still bears the scars of Birdie's ill-fated attempt at masking his true identity. His essence.

His blackness.

Birdie lifts a smoldering cigar, takes a slow pull. The orange glow paints his face warmly.

He offers Major the cigar. Major declines.

BIRDIE
(re: the cigar)
That's right.

A languid moment of silence passes between them.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
And, I agree. It should feel
different, winning. I'd be as angry
as you are.

MAJOR
I just... I don't want to feel this
way. I wanna race on my terms.

Birdie takes another draw, exhales slowly.

BIRDIE
Then do.

MAJOR
I thought maybe if won enough,
maybe they'll stop hating on me.

BIRDIE
Not likely.

Major shoots him a wide-eyed sidelong glance.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
So stop riding for them.
(beat)
Ride for you.

Major can't hear this yet. Won't take it in.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
And I wasn't talking about the
race. Or the title.

Birdie points to the faint hint of a gold band glinting around Major's ring finger.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
And congrats, by the way. Daisy's a good woman. And strong.

Birdie doffs ash from his cigar.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
I got a hunch you might not need me clinging to your coattails much longer, all things considered.

MAJOR
Need you? Birdie...

BIRDIE
What I was gonna say is, well, you might be on the edge of becoming the brightest star in the biggest sport on the entire planet...
(deep inhale)
...but don't do what I did.

Major cocks his head, gazes at him quizzically.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Gotta have a *plan* for your next act. A fall-back. Something to lean on when your spark sputters. You know what I mean?
(beat)
Daisy's right. And she deserves more. Better. For the long haul.

He stabs his cigar out in a nearby standing ashtray.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
I got a guy, a whiz with the market. Let him manage your winnings, keep 'em safe.

MAJOR
Okay...

BIRDIE
Maybe go in with me on the wheels.

MAJOR
For automobiles? You kidding me?
What do I know about rubber?
Patents? Manufacturing?
(MORE)

MAJOR (CONT'D)
(beat)
Plus--

BIRDIE
Just give it a think.

Birdie pushes himself to his feet, sheds his blanket.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Marmon and his combustion engine
grease monkeys just might have
their eyes on bigger prizes than
us, that's all.

Birdie reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out something
small and silver, flicks it toward Major.

The Silver Dollar.

Major catches it, turns it over in his hand.

There you are...

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Luck ain't all that. But still...

As he shuffles away into the night, Major stares at the coin
in his hand, parsing.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Now, get some sleep. Things are
about to get loony.

He opens a steel door, steps in.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, by the way.

Major knows what for.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
The bleach. Worst mistake of my
life. And I've made plenty.

Birdie swings the door closed behind himself.

PRE-LAP: The BRASSY PEAL of church bells.

EXT. FRENCH VILLAGE - DAY

Daisy and Major walk together down a cobblestone street
lined with wheat pasted race posters emblazoned with his
heroic visage.

A smarmy RACE PROMOTER (20s) leads them down the street toward an ancient stone church.

RACE PROMOTER
(heavy French accent)
No one will know.

Major looks to Daisy.

DAISY
(quiet, lethal)
He'll know.

Major nods, chooses Daisy (and faith) without hesitation.

BACK TO:

EXT. KING'S COUNTY TRACK - CONTINUOUS

Still in FULL COLOR and back at The National Championships, it's the final heat now, and Major's mixing it up with the best American cyclists at high, heavy speed.

Shoulders THUD. Knees SMASH. Men SHOUT as each rider barrels their way down the track.

At the back of the pack and taking a fearsome beating, Major looks spent. Utterly knackered.

A man with zero hope of besting the field.

But, instead of giving in, instead of giving up, he just buries himself deep within.

MAJOR (V.O.)
To my mind, there are positively no
mental, physical, or moral
attainments too lofty for a Black
man to accomplish...

Hips down. A light, quick motion of the ankles. Maximum efficiency. Minimal drag. A graceful celerity of movement.

MAJOR (V.O.)
...if granted a fair and equal
opportunity.

And all we hear is his CLANGOROUS HEARTBEAT as he strains to see a path through the pack.

Then, out ahead, far off down the track:

WHOOSH!

A massive wooden cross stabbed into the concrete BURSTS INTO FLAMES. It must be a good sixty feet tall.

The light is ghastly. Apocalyptic.

It blots out everyone ahead of him. Each A-list rider pedaling in time transforms into a ghostly silhouette.

Vaporous. Ephemeral. Intangible.

Beatable.

Lowering his head, Major kicks his cadence up, slips in between Gardiner and Freeman, then Eaton and Simms.

Each ghoulish phantom wafts past him like a translucent storm cloud buffeted by a heavy gale.

Then, there he is. Little JIMMY MICHAELS (20s) headed toward the finish tape.

Beyond and above him, the burning cross rages.

Major PLOWS headlong past Michaels, SNAPS the tape first, and SURGES past the foot of the burning cross.

And, just like that, the cross is dowsed.

Extinguished as if solely by the force of his slipstream.

But, instead of applause --

PRE-LAP: "THE WEDDING MARCH" on pipe organ.

ENT. BAPTIST CHURCH, STEPS - DAY

Kitted out in their wedding day finest, Daisy and Major burst through the doors to their home church and tumble down the stairs together amid a hail of rice and well-wishes.

At the foot of the stairs, the only white man present, Birdie watches with an overwhelming fatherly pride.

As his protégé and his occasional sparring partner step into a regal horse-drawn carriage, Birdie reaches into his jacket, pulls out a hankie, dabs at his eyes.

Where real tears gather.

BIRDIE (PRE-LAP)

Now, that's what I'm talking about.

INT. RITZ PARIS, TEA ROOM - DAY

Seated together at a resplendent table inside the elegant Salon Proust, Birdie SNAPS a newspaper open, READS aloud:

BIRDIE

The quarter-mile, the one-third-mile, the half-mile, the two-thirds-mile, the three-quarters-mile, the two-mile, and his one-mile world record of one minute, forty one seconds could very well stand for decades.

Daisy, proud but a little bored, takes a sip of her tea as Birdie lowers the paper.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

(not reading)

The Black Cyclone.

He reaches a hand out, taps a French sports magazine sitting on the table amid a stack of other periodicals with Major featured prominently on their covers.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

The Ebony Flyer.

(beat)

They love you here because you're not theirs.

Daisy lets her eyes drift to the same cover of "La Vie Au Grand Air", SKIMS the photo credit:

DAISY

Surnomme Le 'Prodige Noir'?

She sets her thin china cup down on its saucer, hard.

CLINK.

DAISY (CONT'D)

So much for colorblind.

Birdie loudly folds the paper closed, tosses it onto the heaping stack.

BIRDIE

Well, Worcester Whirlwind did have a nice ring to it.

Saying nothing, Major lifts a hefty glass of milk, downs it.

MAJOR

My color is my fortune.

(beat)

If I'd been born white, I might not have amounted to a row of shucks in this entire endeavor.

Both Birdie and Daisy stare at him blankly.

DAISY

What on Earth could you possibly mean by that?

MAJOR

I wouldn't be the rider I am if I hadn't had to battle their lot.

This time, Major seems only barely convinced that what he just said is actually true.

Instead, the memory of being a perennial outsider, a full-stop soloist in all things, clouds his countenance.

Erodes his confidence.

DAISY

Know what your problem is?

MAJOR

I imagine so, yes.

Birdie lifts a napkin to his lips, dabs at them.

Doesn't like where this is headed.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

When I'm out there on the track, out there racing, sometimes I see the most devilish things. Terrible things. Things I can't explain. Can't un-see.

Daisy reaches for her teacup, lifts it to her lips again, blows steam as if to dispel the thought.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

Maybe it's just exhaustion. Being beaten on. Spit at. Having ice water thrown in my face. Nails dumped on the track.

Major pushes himself back from the table as Daisy eyes him.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
(off her look)
But go on. Please enlighten me.

Daisy sets down her teacup, locks him in her steely gaze.

DAISY
You're too enamored of their
plaudits and praise. Their little
fool's gold trinkets blind you to
the fact that they'll kick you to
the dirt the instant you stop
minting 'em money.

Major stares at her, stung.

MAJOR
They?

DAISY
Pass you over at the drop of a hat
for next year's crop of doe-eyed
thoroughbreds eager to please.
Leave you scrounging. Trying to
find where they buried your
bankroll.

Birdie draws a breath to argue, backs down.

DAISY (CONT'D)
No amount of easygoing grace or aw
shucks piety will keep you in easy-
breezy comfort forever in this
white man's world.
(eyes on Birdie)
The minute you flag, this one'll
drop you just like all the rest.

Major looks away, feels alien again inside this sumptuous
parlor full of pale Europeans.

MAJOR
Nobody drops me. Ever.

DAISY
You're running yourself to death.
When all you need is family, not
fame. Not--

Major lifts a hand from the table, cuts her off.

MAJOR
This is my choice, Daisy.

He loudly SCREECHES his chair out, stands.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
My fate.

As he turns to walk away, the sound of his FOOTSTEPS is blotted out by what sounds like SHOUTING IN GERMAN.

TITLE CARD:

D E F E A T

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. FRIEDENAU TRACK - DAY

This time, we stay in FULL COLOR.

A massive crowd of GERMAN FANS of all ages ROAR as the reigning European heroes of the sport take to the track amid a frigid, low-lying fog.

SUPER: BERLIN, GERMANY | APRIL 1901

As Major, shivering slightly, mounts his machine we can see his breath - and that of his boyish SPOTTER (early 20s).

SPOTTER
(not sub-titled)
*Bist du bereit in flammen
aufzugehen, Herr Schwarzer Zyklon?*

MAJOR
I'm sorry, I don't speak--

A rider two slots down, German Champion WILLY AREND (20s) turns toward Major, smiles. Thick, curly light brown hair.

AREND
(German accent)
Don't listen to him. And we follow French tactics here, yes?

A quick coin kiss. And his good luck charm safely stowed.

MAJOR
Mm-hmm.

AREND
Welcome to Germany.

Both men's spotters, as well as those of the rest of the famous field lean back but don't let go until:

BANG!

They're off.

At first, the pace is tepid at best. Almost like a leisurely amateur ride through the countryside amongst friends.

Major initially hangs back, tries his best to get his legs warm as moisture gathers on his jersey and that of each of his fellow competitors.

Up ahead, a tight cluster of riders seem to confer in hushed tones. *Are they talking tactics or about the newcomer?*

It's impossible to tell. In fact, it's barely even possible to see them, or the track.

Were it not for the seemingly over-loud VOICES of the enormous crowd and the STEADY RHYTHM of a wholly invisible brass band, one could easily forget this is a public race.

Until, suddenly, Arend lays on the gas and disappears.

At first, no one responds. Everyone hangs back.

MAJOR

Well?

No one says a word, willing to watch and wait.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

Alright then.

With an equally furious kick, Major BLASTS through the pack and into the gray.

A few riders try to hop on his wheel, can't.

And, instead, he vanishes into the mist entirely on his own.

Pedal revolution after pedal revolution, he accelerates catching only faint glimpses of Arend ahead of him.

Through the first turn, his wheels SKID disconcertingly across the concrete. But Major grits it out.

Slowly, steadily, a figure materializes before him.

It's Arend, moving faster than any rider we've seen to-date. And ostensibly expending absolutely no energy whatsoever.

He's barely even breathing by the looks of it.

Major reaches up, wipes mist from his face, grips his drops, doubles down, strains to catch him.

A gale of APPLAUSE from the grandstands seems to melt the fog instantly away as Arend takes a long, fast, steady left hand bend and then barrels down onto the straightaway.

Major, dazzled and distracted by having seemingly emerged from the depths of a cloud, can only watch in amazement as Arend crosses the line two lengths ahead.

Deafening CHEERING rains down from the stands. And the now visible band leaps into a rousing rendition of "WATCH ON THE RHINE" as Major sees Arend glide into the infield.

Arend leaps from his machine. Fans rush from the stands, heft him up onto his shoulders, place a giant garland of white roses around his neck.

Major, still moving, just stares as the fawning and festive throngs BELT OUT the German National Anthem in total unison.

It's like nothing he's ever seen before.

From the infield, Arend catches Major's eye, flashes him the friendly salute of an admiring adversary.

Major nods back. *See you next time, brother.*

EXT. VÉLODROME DE ROCOURT - DAY

An immense crowd of BELGIAN SPECTATORS welcomes their national champion LOUIS GROGNIA (20s) to the field.

SUPER: BRUSSELS, BELGUM | APRIL 1901

As he and another loose pack of luminaries circle the track after their first race, Major cautiously sizes everyone up.

Things are not going to plan.

Up in the stands, Birdie CALLS down:

BIRDIE
Just relax! Loosen up!

Major tries to ignore this. But he's right. He's too much in his own head. Too jumpy.

The riders ahead of him slowly arrange themselves into position for the next start as a handful of BRACE MEN jog out onto the track.

Major slows to a stop, doesn't even take his feet off his pedals as one of the bracers grabs his bike by the seat post and top tube.

A DUTCH OFFICIAL steps up, lifts his pistol.

DUTCH OFFICIAL
(not subtitled)
Renners klaar?

Grognia, right next to Major, nods, turns to him. Heavy thighs, thin mustache.

GROGNIA
No coaching. From the stands.

Major nods.

BANG!

Another slow rolling, French-style bunch start. Clearly not Major's favorite. But he's adapting.

Around the first turn they go, this time under a robin's egg blue sky full of puffy clouds.

Pastoral and idyllic.

Now though, instead of following protocol (and completely ignoring Birdie wholesale), Major jumps early.

Everyone chases.

It's a dead-out sprint into the flats, through the second turn, and back down onto the straightaway.

Soon, Major and Grognia part from the pack.

They're side-to-side at first, Grognia looks over, smiles. *This is fun, crazy American.*

Major nods, kicks again.

Grognia slips in behind him, drafts, minimizes effort.

Major leans right, leans left. Can't shake him.

This isn't the outcome he wanted, to be his chief rival's lead-out man to the finish.

He bends his neck, looks past his elbow, can't see Grognia.

WHOOSH.

Grognia takes a high line, passes Major in a dizzying blur, throws down the gauntlet.

Major grits his teeth, slams the pedals.

But it's too late.

By the time they reach the pole, Grognia has a length's lead. His pace is unrelenting. Merciless.

And, as he breaks the tape, there's two full lengths between him and Major. Maybe more.

BIRDIE (PRE-LAP)
Aw, don't fret.

INT. VÉLODROME DE ROCOURT, DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Major, looking rocked, paces like a trapped man.

MAJOR
No one's ever done that, not to me,
not ever!

Birdie, seated, just watches him pace.

BIRDIE
Let it go.

MAJOR
If he beats me in the third heat,
I'm done for. Finished.

BIRDIE
That's not your worry, Jacqueline--

MAJOR
I'll be a laughing stock. Just
another flash in the pan. They were
right! I'm just a--

BIRDIE
C'mon now. Settle down. You'll be
fine. Find your line. Forget about
everybody else. Just be you. Ride
your own race. Stop reacting.

Major slows, narrows his eyes, rubs his chin. An idea forms.

Birdie stands.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

And remember, we gotta stop by the bank to wire your winnings back to my man on Wall Street.

Major doesn't hear a word.

EXT. VELODROMO UMBERTO I - DAY

Now on a different, much older track, Major calmly weaves his way in and out of the pack.

His pace is gentle. But his eyes are fierce.

SUPER: TURIN, ITALY | MAY 1901

We must be close to the end of the circuit, because everyone else, even Italian Champion PAOLO MOMO (20s) are winded.

Just like Major did, Momo lifts his elbow slightly, peers back at his upstart rival, baits him to bolt.

But Major, unflappable, doesn't budge.

All of the remaining riders jostle for position. But there's none of the pummeling brutality directed at Major here. It's purely a professional endeavor.

A race among equals.

Until, at the high point of the final turn, Momo slips past Major and surges for the line.

Major tries again to react. But it's too late.

Momo breaks the tape half a bike length in the lead.

EXT. VELODROMO UMBERTO I, INFIELD - MOMENTS LATER

As ecstatic ITALIAN FANS heft Momo onto their shoulders, Major spins down with his head held low.

Another trial. Another defeat.

Major pedals along the edge of the infield, something obviously throwing off his cadence.

The coin. In his shoe. Good luck has turned bad.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Looking spent, Major collapses into an overstuffed chair as Daisy, clutching a sheaf of papers in one hand paces a posh hotel room in a silk dressing gown.

DAISY

What do you mean, gone?

MAJOR

Not gone, invested.

DAISY

In what? Where?

MAJOR

In the market. The stock market. In
New York, not Tulsa.

DAISY

If this was Birdie's idea, I swear
I'll have his head.

Major slowly removes the stiff white collar of his dress
shirt, tosses it to the dresser beside him.

MAJOR

Just, for once, trust me on this.

DAISY

Trust you? From what I can see,
you're getting beaten more than
you're winning. And what you're
winning, prize-wise...

She shakes the papers at him.

DAISY (CONT'D)

...well it just ain't here!

MAJOR

He's a friend of Birdie's. An
expert. It's safe. The money's
safe. We're safe. Now please, I
need to think. Rest.

DAISY

What you need to do is to get a
hold on your affairs.

MAJOR

Woman, don't tell me my business.

A moment of stunned silence from Daisy.

DAISY

Woman?! Wife!

Major stands, hobbles toward her, wrecked.

MAJOR

I can do this. I can mop the track
with Jacquelin. I swear. I don't
care how much it costs, how much I
lose physically or financially. I
will do this, baby. For us.

He tries to wrap his arms around her. She resists at first.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

Everything's gonna be fine. You
gotta believe in me, yeah?

She finally drops the papers, relents, leans into him.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

(unsure)

I can do this. I will beat him.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES - DAY

Inside yet another fogbound velodrome packed, in this case, with some thirty thousand FRENCH FANS, Major glides up to the start line wearing three heavy wool jerseys.

SUPER: PARIS, FRANCE | MAY, 1901

Three riders away, beloved French Champion EDMOND JACQUELIN (20s) rolls up to the line.

Narrow eyes, jet black hair, aquiline nose. He's the greatest French sprinter of the 20th century.

And he knows it.

Both men size each other up through the freezing mist.

This time: no coin kiss. No wishful thinking. No luck.

BRACE MEN race up behind them, prop each man as the CROWD falls eerily silent.

No band. No cheering. Just breathless anticipation before:

BANG!

The start gun fires and Jacquelin beats Major at his own game, takes an instant, wide lead.

MAJOR

So much for a French start.

Shivering again and blanketed in bone-chilling dew, Major bares down, gives it all he's got.

But it's not enough. He's not catching his rival.

With the gap between them widening and widening (even though Major himself has left the rest of the pack far behind) both men speed through each turn at breakneck pace.

SNAP.

Up goes the ribbon.

THWAP.

Through it rides Jacquelin.

A TRIUMPHANT CHEER from the barely visible thousands gathered to see their man best all comers.

And, as Major finally crosses the line a good four lengths ahead of his nearest rival, Jacquelin looks back, thumbs his nose at him.

Another wave of ADORING FANS surge out onto the track and toward the infield. And Jacquelin continues silently mocking Major. Taunting him ruthlessly.

Daring him not to disappoint next time.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES, DRESSING ROOM - DAY

As Major wrings the moisture out of his outer jersey, Birdie stares at him, mouth agape.

BIRDIE

What?! You're firing me? Cutting me loose just like... that?

The same smarmy race promoter from before stands in the far corner of the room with his arms crossed.

His tightly cropped hair glistens, as does his well-tended, wide mustache.

COQUELLE

(heavy French accent)

One champion. One manager. *Fini.*

Meet: ROBERT COQUELLE (20s) Major's new European Manager.

COQUELLE (CONT'D)

And I can guarantee the shift. From Sundays. Next season.

Birdie looks to Major. Major looks sheepishly away.

COQUELLE (CONT'D)

You are welcome to stay for the remainder of the season. And, of course, maintain your role in the States if you prefer. But here, if he wants to win, he needs to work with me exclusively, yes?

BIRDIE

(toward Major)

And you're okay with this?

MAJOR

Racing's my business. Business is yours. Both of you. However you work it out's fine with me.

Major pulls off his second jersey. It's soaked too.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

I don't care about the money. But if I don't beat that arrogant snake, there won't be ANY winnings for any of us to split up whichever way you both...

Major turns, finally looks to Birdie.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

...and I prefer both, believe me.

BIRDIE

Major. This isn't the way.

MAJOR

I gotta take back the reins, Birdie. Get my affairs in order.

BIRDIE

Your affairs?

No answer from Major as he wrings his jersey like a wet rag.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Marshall, I made you.

MAJOR

(forcefully)

I made me.

BIRDIE

I believed in you. Got you here. Lifted you up when no one else--

MAJOR

You bleached my skin. Burnt my
hair. Tried to turn me white.

BIRDIE

You told me--

MAJOR

Stole my money out from under me.
Sent it GOD knows where!

Still in the corner, Coquelle TUT-TUTS dismissively.

BIRDIE

I was trying to *protect* you.

MAJOR

Well, that's my job now. And
Coquelle's. At least while we're
here. Back home--

Birdie, decimated, thunders across the room, throws the door
open loudly, wheels back around.

BIRDIE

Well, cock-elle. Your mama sure did
name you just perfectly.

BANG.

He slams the door. Disappears.

MAJOR

(feigning stoicism)
Alright. What's next?

Coquelle finally uncrosses his arms, snaps to attention.

COQUELLE

Two man sprint. Your final chance.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES - DAY

Back out on the oval again, the mist is gone and the sky is
clear. And it's no longer frigid.

Major, in his trademark white jersey with a dark black band
across the chest, hovers over the bars.

A YOUNG MAN in a white suit braces him as, next to him,
Jacquelin bends to tighten the straps of his cages.

Another SQUALL OF APPLAUSE rains down from the packed
grandstands. This is the main event.

As his spotter strains to keep his bike steady, Jacquelin reaches across himself, toward Major.

JACQUELIN
May the best man win.

Haughty, arrogant, cock-sure smile.

Major, undaunted, grabs his hand, shakes it firmly.

MAJOR
That's the general idea, yeah.

Both men re-grip their bars. Both spotters lean back.

BANG!

And off they roll.

This time though, no instant blast of speed off the blocks from Jacquelin.

Instead, both men enter the first turn at an exceedingly (almost alarmingly) gentle pace.

As if they're just out for a leisurely Sunday spin down the countryside cobblestones together.

JACQUELIN
You don't belong here.

Major, only inches to Jacquelin's right, exhales slowly.

MAJOR
You got that right. I don't belong anywhere, apparently.

HUSHED MUTTERING is all we hear as they pedal past the teeming grandstands side-by-side.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES, GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

Standing together in the crowd, Birdie and Daisy watch in anxious silence.

BIRDIE
This sure as hell better not have been your idea.

DAISY
It's only while we're over here.
When he's back to racing in--

BIRDIE

C'mon now, dammit. Jump him!

DAISY

When we get back home, everything
will settle back down to normal.

Birdie reluctantly tears his eyes from the track.

BIRDIE

If you hadn't noticed, we left
normal behind a long time ago.

DAISY

I need to know where the money is.
Who's handling it? Where's it
invested? And how?

He looks back to the track, to his protégé. His friend who
just unexpectedly fired him.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

(bitterly)

A very long time ago indeed.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES - SAME TIME

Back down on the track, Jacquelin flinches, feigns making a
break for it.

Major, unfazed, barely reacts.

JACQUELIN

You'll never be the best if you
can't even keep up with my shadow.

Major doesn't dignify this with a response.

Instead, he lowers his gaze, lets his eyes fall to
Jacquelin's pumping pedals, does his best to match his
cadence exactly.

MAJOR

We'll see about that.

As their tires ROAR across the track, the sound of another
brass band SHREDDING THE AIR seeps in.

TITLE CARD:

H U N G E R

QUICK CUT TO:

INT. CAPITAL CITY VELODROME - DAY (1896)

From color to BLACK AND WHITE.

Daylight to darkness.

Over the sound of the sound of BAND, a track announcer BARKS over the large conical speakers hanging above a darkened, smoke-filled arena:

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Ladies and gentlemen of
 Indianapolis, may I present to you
 Mister Walter Sanger!*

SUPER: INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA | NINE YEARS EARLIER

HOOTS and CHEERS wash over the WELL-DRESSED SPECTATORS packed into the stands of a vast indoor velodrome with a steeply pitched, ovoid wooden track.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Undoubtedly one of the greatest
 bicycle riders of our era.*

Down on the track, SANGER (20s) powers down behind a pace rider on a smoke-belching motorcycle.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Clocking in at... Folks you're not
 gonna believe this. But I think we
 have a new one mile track record at
 two minutes, eighteen seconds!*

Another massive wave of APPLAUSE ripples the stands as, unexpectedly, we see Tom Hay again hustling a younger Major down the stairs leading to the track.

HAY
 Don't get cocky, boy.

Major is dressed now in shabby, borrowed racing togs. And he's got his prized medal around his neck.

The top tube of his childhood bicycle rests on one shoulder as Hay pushes him roughly through the darkness.

HAY (CONT'D)
 The minute they see you out on the
 track with a white lead-out all
 hell's gonna break loose.

Major, frightened, says nothing.

INT. CAPITAL CITY VELODROME, DRESSING ROOM - DAY (1896)

As Hay keeps watch, Major ducks into a dressing room, hurries toward a closed door, pauses, looks back.

HAY

You wanna show 'em? Show 'em. And, whatever you do, do not tell anyone I was here.

Beyond the door, the CHEERING fades.

MAJOR

Wait. You're not--

Hay spins on his heels to depart.

HAY

See ya back at the shop, kid. If you survive, that is.

With Hay gone, Major looks suddenly rocked. All of his naive confidence quickly eroded away.

This was a terrible...

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Oh, hold on now. I'm just learning that we have a...

Major draws a breath, lowers his crude machine to the ground, reaches out, grips the doorknob, hesitates.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Apparently we have a challenger.

Major closes his eyes, kisses the coin, slips it into his shoe, throws the door open.

MAJOR

Lord, protect and guide me. Steady my hand. And strengthen my will.

Major steps out into the light, mounts his bike, and then pedals slowly down toward the track as Sanger, still GASPING on the infield watches, stunned.

Two young WHITE RIDERS on a steel tandem reluctantly follow Major out, apparently at Hay's prior urging.

INT. CAPITAL CITY VELODROME, TRACK - DAY (1896)

Instantly, a beastly hail of BOOS and EPITHETS rains down from the stands.

The announcer powers on:

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Fresh from his, well, unexpected
 win over local favorite Walter
 Marmon, young buck Marshal W.
 "Major" Taylor will be attempting
 to best Mister Sanger's recently
 established record paced, it seems,
 by two other local riders riding
 tandem for a flying start.*

A hush washes over crowd. Even the brass band falls silent.

And as Major and the two white pace riders on the tandem ahead of him slowly pick up speed, the formerly buzzing grandstands are so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

The only sound that fills the dead air is the STEADY HUM of Major's solid rubber tires as they swiftly pick up speed over the glistening, narrow planks.

After a single quick lap of the one-fifth mile long track, Major looks to the tandem, nods, veers swiftly up the banking track toward the top rail.

As he goes, the tandem follows under the power of two men gritting it out in unison.

Up ahead, the start line looms.

Next to it: a paunchy RACE TIMER (50s) in a straw boater stands with a stopwatch at the ready.

Next to him: a RACE OFFICIAL (30s) aims a start gun skyward.

The tandem crosses the line, then Major's machine.

BANG! It's on.

MAJOR (PRE-LAP)
*When no one's watching, I think I
 sort of... disappear.*

FADE TO:

EXT. CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES - NIGHT

Lustrous COLOR.

No cheers. No crowds.

Just Daisy and Major strolling arm-in-arm down the cobbles together in the silvery moonlight.

DAISY

Good. That means you're finally free.

Major nods his head slowly, tightens his grip on her.

MAJOR

How do you do that?

DAISY

Do what?

Major smiles, doesn't have to say it. Instead, he lifts her hand to his lips, kisses it gently.

PRE-LAP: BAHWHRRRRR.

A brief, terrifying moment of rubber-on-rubber.

BACK TO:

INT. CAPITAL CITY VELODROME, TRACK - DAY (1896)

Steely BLACK AND WHITE.

Still right on the rail, young Major's wheel barely touches his lead-out wheel.

The tandem veers left. Major wobbles, nearly goes down.

MAJOR (V.O.)

I knew at the time that even if, by some miracle, I could break the track time on the mile...

As he regains his balance, all Major can see are the hand-painted letters of sponsor signage FLASHING hypnotically by.

MAJOR (V.O.)

...all I'd get out of it was the satisfaction.

Major follows the tandem down to the inside line.

MAJOR (V.O.)

And the pride of proving I could make good as a sprinter on the toughest track of the country.

Major looks right, up into the stands.

There he is: a formerly fit young man with a thick mustache and his own stopwatch.

Birdie.

MAJOR (V.O.)
That was ample enough pay for me.

Major looks back down, makes an almost imperceptible adjustment, stays in the slipstream, grits it out.

MAJOR (V.O.)
At the time, anyway.

Everything slows down.

Again he looks to the stands. Now though, Birdie is gone.

FLASH TO:

INT. BAPTIST CHURCH - DAY

Faded FULL COLOR.

A weary looking, late career Major slumps in a pew next to Daisy decked out in her Sunday finest as a PREACHER (60s) bellows FIERY FURY from the pulpit:

PREACHER
Obadiah 1:3-5. The pride of your heart has deceived you! You who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high, you who say in your heart "Who will bring me down to the ground?"

Daisy turns, eyes Major up and down sternly. Major looks away, knows the verse well.

Too well.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, "From there I will bring you down," says the LORD.

PRE-LAP: VENOMOUS CHEERING.

HARD CUT TO:

INT. CAPITAL CITY VELODROME, TRACK - DAY (1896)

Stark BLACK AND WHITE.

Back out on the track in Indiana, young Major focuses-up, swerves slightly right, accelerates unexpectedly, pulls up next to the anxious white boys on the steel tandem.

PREACHER (V.O.)

*If thieves came to you, if robbers
in the night, oh what a disaster
awaits you! Would they not steal
only as much as they wanted?*

As if trying to block out the preacher's holy invective, Major swiftly overtakes both white riders. Terrified of losing their line, they don't even look up as he passes.

PREACHER (V.O.)

*Everyone who is arrogant in heart
is an abomination to the Lord. Be
assured, he will not go unpunished!*

With his wheel a flickering blur and his legs rising and falling like pistons, Major sprints for the line.

Can almost taste it.

PREACHER (V.O.)

*Pride goes before destruction, and
a haughty spirit before a fall.*

BANG! The finish gun fires.

Major, looking haunted and spent, FLASHES past the stunned race timer, his gaze still affixed to his stopwatch.

He can't believe his eyes.

PREACHER (V.O.)

*For it is better to be of a lowly
spirit with the poor than to divide
the spoil with the proud.*

Major, having barely even broken a sweat, makes quick eye contact with Sanger, still standing track-side.

Over the loud speakers:

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Well, folks, hold onto your seats.

Unlike Marmon, Sanger nods calmly. Almost admiringly. Time-tested champion to first-time record holder.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
But we have another new track
record at two minutes, eleven
seconds!

Major, deeply conflicted, lifts a hand from his bars,
tentatively tips an imaginary cap Sanger's way.

And, just as he does, a barrel-chested BLOWHARD (50s) in a
tight-fitting linen suit, thrusts a thick stack of dollar
bills toward Sanger.

His ill-gotten prize money.

Major looks guiltily away, continues pedaling, knows full-
well he won't see a dime.

No matter how much he might have wanted it.

BACK TO:

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES - DAY

Prismatic FULL COLOR.

Back out in the brilliant sunshine of the most famous
velodrome in the world, Jacquelin is still egging Major on.

Still taunting him, trying trick him into bolting.

But Major still won't take the bait.

Instead, the pace is slowing.

Slowing.

Slowing.

Entering the flats, still elbow-to-elbow, both riders
eventually come to a full stop.

The crowd goes berserk. HOOTING. HOLLERING. WHISTLING.

Stone-still, Jacquelin balances with his front wheel turned
slightly toward Major's bike.

Major does the same.

Jacquelin stares at him. Major smiles.

And then he slowly cranks a half revolution backward, eases
his bike directly in behind Jacquelin's.

The grandstands are in a frenzy.

Major looks up, sees Birdie there in the crowd as always.

Birdie, still stung, still jilted, but ever Major's not-so-minor defender, just nods. *That's right. Nice and easy...*

Perhaps sensing he's being mocked, Jacquelin LAUGHS out loud as he shimmies his machine back-and-forth to stay upright.

And then he finally bolts.

But Major, barely bothered, starts right off after him.

Finally at a decent pace (but not sprinting all-out), they circle the track.

Jacquelin bobs and weaves, trying to lure Major to make a break for it.

But, instead, Major stays in his slipstream. Precisely where he wants to be.

Jacquelin looks to the stands, then back to Major. And then, at precisely the same spot where he previously took off for the resounding win, he kicks again.

But this time, Major's ready.

And he's up on Jacquelin in half a heartbeat.

Going all-out, their machines swaying violently with every heavy pedal stroke, it looks as though we're in for a tie.

That is, until Major again digs deeper.

More than doubling Jacquelin's cadence, he hits the flats in the blink of an eye.

And takes the race by at least four lengths.

Victory hits Major like a slap in the face. Like he can't quite process it. Can't quite believe it.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES, GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

Overcome with emotion, Birdie looks to Daisy, wipes a tear from his eye, turns to go.

BIRDIE
He'll regret this, firing me.

Daisy, unaccustomed to being on Birdie's side, simply nods as Birdie descends through the dumbstruck crowd.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
And so will you.

EXT. PARC DES PRINCES - SAME TIME

Still amid a stunned silence, Major pedals through the straightaway with Jacqueline right behind him, slamming his fists against his bars.

Instead of savoring his triumphal win, Major appears crestfallen. Like he's finally arrived at the lofty summit only to realize that it's all in vain.

His quest for equality through achievement, maybe it's an elusive mirage? A self-deception.

An unachievable goal.

MAJOR
(to himself)
I'm the fastest alive. And I'm
still a ghost.

He looks up to the silent stands, closes his eyes, searches his soul for a different outcome.

PRE-LAP: Adoring APPLAUSE and the SCREECHING of sea birds.

EXT. SYDNEY HARBOR - DAY

A weary looking Major (now 23) stands on the deck of another luxury liner waving half-hardheartedly to a large crowd of AUSSIE FANS gathered along a concrete promenade.

SUPER: SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA | THREE YEARS LATER

Daisy stands next to him, also waving.

As she waves, we notice: she's very pregnant.

EXT. HARBOR STEPS - DAY

Standing at the edge of a bunting-lined stage, Sydney Lord Mayor ALDERMAN HUGHES (40s) addresses the crowd:

HUGHES
It is my highest honor to welcome
to Australia the man who, as the
Champion Cyclist of the World, has
met and defeated the foremost men
in Europe and America.

Behind him, Daisy smiles to the doting throngs.

HUGHES (CONT'D)
And who now comes to our fine
country to gain, if possible, some
fresh victories.

Another CHEER goes up.

But, rather than looking like the confident conquering hero,
Major seems spent. Drained. Tapped out.

HUGHES (CONT'D)
And while I wish Major Taylor every
success, we sincerely hope that the
Australians would hold their own
against him.

More APPLAUSE. A strained grin from Major.

HUGHES (CONT'D)
Although I realize that they have a
very difficult task before them.

This time, Birdie is nowhere in sight.

EXT. DOWNTOWN SYDNEY - NIGHT

Dressed to the nines and showing, Daisy walks down a
bustling sidewalk with her arm woven around Major's as
electric light fills the air with promise.

Passing STRANGERS tip their caps, make way, smile
admiringly. They're not fans. Just good people.

The air is warm. And the sky above is a blue/black velvet.

DAISY
Sydney.

MAJOR
Mm-hmm.

DAISY
No, I mean...

She lifts her free hand to her bulging belly.

Major nods. She smiles.

MAJOR
Oh, I like it.

DAISY
Rita Sydney Taylor.

She seems 100% at ease for the first time in a very long time. He still seems on-edge. Off kilter. Not himself.

After a second of silence:

MAJOR
How it is again that a family of
two...

DAISY
Of three.

MAJOR
...can't seem to manage on thirty-
five thousand Dollars a year?

DAISY
Ask Birdie's so-called ace down on
Wall Street. Won't so much as
dignify my requests with a reply.

MAJOR
Heck, President Roosevelt barely
makes more than that, I think.

DAISY
I need you to get things straight,
Major. Now more than ever.

Major nods slowly, looks away.

MAJOR
I'm trying, Daisy. Lord knows I am.
I just don't know if I have it in
me anymore. Racing...

That's not what she wanted to hear. At all.

EXT. MOORE PARK VELODROME, CONCOURSE - NIGHT

Still not having shaken his ill temper, Major walks his machine out onto the flats of a massive, strangely shaped track in the dead of night.

The stands are packed with RABID AUSSIE FANS. But we can only hear them. We can't see them.

Only the track is lit from above by electric light. And, unlike your average velo track, it's fully circular.

The steep, banking concrete turns are pitched at more than twenty-five degrees. And they somehow seem more perilous, more foreboding than any we've seen so far.

In the infield: a full cricket pitch packed with COACHES, TRAINING STAFF, and COMPETITORS warming down.

A fast-moving pack of WHITE RIDERS blasts loudly by:

WHOOSH. WHOOSH. WHOOSH. WHOOSH.

Major slows, squints.

From out of the darkness behind him steps a tall man in a tan suit and a wide-brimmed felt Stetson.

This is his new trainer, SID MELVILLE (30s).

SID
Night races. Give me the willies.

He places a hand on Major's shoulder, squeezes.

SID (CONT'D)
Birdie too. Listen...

Sid leans in close to Major's ear.

SID (CONT'D)
There's a rumor going around
MacFarland's aiming to throw you.

Major doesn't react to this in the slightest.

SID (CONT'D)
Told Lawson he knows he can't beat
you. And he's already got money
down. On himself, damn fool.

MAJOR
(quoting)
*Dishonest wealth shall dwindle. But
what is earned through honest--*

SID
Uh-huh.

Sid taps his shoulder, turns to go.

SID (CONT'D)
Just watch out out there, huh?

Major simply nods, reaches back for the coin, hesitates, decides against it. And then pedals out onto the track.

EXT. MOORE PARK VELODROME - NIGHT

As Major slowly builds up a head of steam, a lanky American rider comes quickly into view.

This is said FLOYD MACFARLAND (20s). Long legs, skinny torso, and manicured mustache. A much less elegant rider.

Major eases up next to him, looks him up and down.

MAJOR

Tell me again why you and Lawson
followed me down here?

MacFarland speeds up, doesn't even bother responding.

MAJOR (CONT'D)

I mean, if I wanted to beat you at
home, I woulda done it by now I
imagine. But you know...
(forced smile)
...busy schedule.

MACFARLAND

Do you mind?

MAJOR

What?

MACFARLAND

Not runnin' your mouth.

MAJOR

Least I know where to put my money.

MACFARLAND

That so?

Major seems to be expending no effort whatsoever keeping pace with him.

MACFARLAND (CONT'D)

I hear you're losing it hand-over-fist. What the hell do you know about Vulcanized rubber anyway?

MAJOR

I know it tends to speed me to victory, Lord willing.

And, with that, he promptly leaves his rival in the lurch.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
(over his shoulder)
Love of money is the root of all--

Over unseen loudspeakers: an ANNOUNCER'S BOOMING VOICE:

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Riders to the start. Riders to the
start of the final heat of The
Sydney Thousand.*

PRE-LAP: CHOP. CHOP. CHOP.

The sound of a tempered steel knife slicing through carrots.

FLASH TO:

INT. SMALL KITCHEN - NIGHT

Simple. Quiet. Alive.

Daisy and Major stand back-to-back in a modest but well-appointed kitchen cooking together.

He's by the sink, the one slicing carrots. She's by the stove, kneading dough in a silver bowl.

They're both wearing matching frilly aprons.

DAISY
What happens when you stop racing?

Major slides the carrots from the butcher block to a colander in the basin, grins.

MAJOR
Then I'll finally be home.

Daisy's fingers slow. She turns.

DAISY
Whenever you're here, I'm home.

Major nods to himself, grabs another carrot from the bunch.

MAJOR
Although, I think maybe I'll have
Birdie's boys at the factory whip
me up a better apron.
(broad smile)
Someday.

PRE-LAP: The heavy ROAR or a completely invisible crowd.

BACK TO:

EXT. MOORE PARK VELODROME - NIGHT

Poised now for a standing start, a handful of riders including Major and MacFarland hunch over their machines.

Two riders up from MacFarland is another (Swedish) American rider named IVER LAWSON (20s).

His bars dip low like Major's. And his hair is thick with pomade and parted in a strange zigzag.

He and MacFarland swap a quick furtive glance.

Major clocks it, looks dead ahead down the eerily illuminated track as clouds of cicadas flutter and flash around each and every lamp.

Their airborne VIBRATIONS sound like a chorus of a thousand distant rattlesnakes.

The CHURNING DIN only serves to amplify the oddity and eerie otherness of the place.

An OFFICIAL lifts his pistol.

OFFICIAL
(Australian accent)
Racers ready?

Long line of nods.

OFFICIAL (CONT'D)
Set.

Everyone grips their bars.

BANG!

Major, aiming for safety, is the first off the blocks and into the lead.

MacFarland and Lawson struggle briefly to keep up. But then, with Lawson pacing, they're just a couple lengths back as Major speeds into the first steeply-pitched turn.

Instead of taking the low line, Major swings wide, lets Lawson and MacFarland close the gap and pass him.

To nothing but the GRINDING cicadas and the over-loud sound of Major's metronome-like breathing, the three men steadily build a bigger and bigger lead.

Through corner after corner, they jockey for position with Major doing his level best to keep clear and not get boxed.

DING! DING! DING!

The final lap.

Major darts ahead. MacFarland struggles to catch him. Lawson holds the inside line, nudges past Major.

Thinking fast, Major swings further right, to the center of the track to give Lawson a wide berth.

Everything slows down. Even the WAIL of the cicadas.

Major looks to the darkened stands, thinks he sees Birdie's ghostly silhouette here, there, and everywhere.

But each translucent iteration, each seeming spirt, turns away. Vanishes as if exorcized by the SOUND.

Amid the terrifying TORRENT OF DISTORTION, Lawson looks back to MacFarland, knows it's time, swerves directly into Major.

Major tries to react. But it's too late.

Everything speeds back up.

Major's wheels slip out from under him with the impact.

And he falls to the concrete with heavy THUD.

His bike goes flying. His limbs twist and bend as his body tumbles end-over-end directly into MacFarland's line.

MacFarland tries to hop him. But he's not strong enough.

His front wheel hits Major in the face.

Blood and teeth go flying as Major SKIDS across the deck, shredding his togs down to the his bare, bloody skin.

EXT. MOORE PARK VELODROME, GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

Daisy, frantic, tumbles down the darkened grandstand stairs, fights her way through the crowd to save him.

DAISY
Marshall!! NO!!

As the rest of the pack bobs and weaves around Major's body, the sound of the SHRIEKING cicadas is slowly overcome with a grizzly, distorted HUMAN WAIL.

The gut-wrenching SCREAM of a man in paroxysms of pain.

FLASH TO:

INT. ORIENTAL HOTEL, BATHROOM - NIGHT

A younger Major stands before a crazed, gilt-edged Victorian mirror with his face blanketed in thickly applied layers of the gelatinous bleaching cream.

HOWLING inconsolably.

The skin of his forehead, cheeks, chin, nose, and neck have already begun to blister. And the roots of his hair have burnt to a surreal, vibrant orange.

But nobody comes. He's entirely alone now. Forsaken.

Staring at his ghoulish reflection in the mirror, slathered with heavily corrosive whitening lotion, he just SCREAMS and SCREAMS and SCREAMS.

It's the sound of centuries of mutilation and oppression.

SMASH!

In a violent spasm, Major SHATTERS the mirror with two open palms. Glass goes flying.

And, with it, shards of his own tortured reflection.

BACK TO:

EXT. MOORE PARK VELODROME - NIGHT

Over the SCREAMING, a pregnant and desperate Daisy struggles to pull a dazed and bleeding Major from the track.

But he can't even see her. Won't even acknowledge her.

It's as if he's just gone. Consumed by the pain.

Overwhelmed by failure.

As she drags him across the track, we can barely make out the tiny glints of light from a silver coin still spinning, spinning, spinning on the track.

The Silver Dollar. The Comet. Abandoned.

Left behind.

CUT TO BLACK.

SUPER: FOUR YEARS LATER

Over black, the SCREAMING gives way to the sound of a young girl HUMMING "RING AROUND THE ROSIE".

FADE TO:

INT. TAYLOR RESIDENCE, BEDROOM - DAY

The young girl, RITA SYDNEY TAYLOR (4) rides a tiny three-wheeled bicycle around a modest but lovingly decorated bedroom inside Major's stately home.

SUPER: WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS | FOUR YEARS LATER

A weakened and heavier Major lies in a tangle of sheets surrounded by heaping piles of his racing clippings.

News from a different era. Another decade. Another life.

From off, a FAMILIAR VOICE:

BIRDIE (O.S.)
A book? About your exploits? Worst
idea I've ever heard.

Birdie, now graying slightly at the temples, steps past young Sydney, smiles broadly.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Got a title?

Major looks up, COUGHS faintly.

MAJOR
(weakly)
"The Fastest... Bicycle Rider...
in the World."

BIRDIE
Fastest bedridden bicycle rider.
How far you got?

Major tries to sit up, grabs a sheet of paper, flips it around toward Birdie, clearly in pain.

On the blank sheet there's a single hand-written word:

FORWARD

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
Well, guess that does pretty much
sum up your entire career.

Major lowers the sheet looking defeated.

MAJOR
I thought I'd *mean* something.

BIRDIE
C'mon now. That's it? Past tense?

MAJOR
Birdie, I never should've fired
you. Never should've--

Birdie cuts him off with a hand to the shoulder.

BIRDIE
Nope. None of that.
(beat)
How you holdin' up?

MAJOR
How's it look?

BIRDIE
Sorry about what happened down--

MAJOR
It was my fault. Australia.

BIRDIE
Dirty play, if you ask me. Worst
way to go out.

MAJOR
Is there a good way?

Birdie nods as Sydney still circles, still HUMMING.

BIRDIE
You know there is.

MAJOR
No, Birdie. I'm done. Finished.

BIRDIE
So, that's how your book ends? With
a whimper, not a bang?

Major's face shifts. Angry and defeated. Crushed. Lost.

MAJOR
(through tears)
I was wrong about *everything*.
Everything! Every damn bit of it
was vanity.
(MORE)

MAJOR (CONT'D)

A waste of my time, my life! Trying
to prove to anyone that I was--

BIRDIE

Far as I'm concerned not even
Jacquelin was your equal.

Major stifles another cough, wipes away tears.

MAJOR

My pride deceived me, Birdie. And
the Lord, he took me down.

BIRDIE

Nonsense.

MAJOR

I wanted to be the fastest rider
that ever lived. Not just the
fastest Black rider.

BIRDIE

I know.

MAJOR

Wanted to win so badly.

BIRDIE

Well, only one way to be the
official fastest...

MAJOR

No, you don't understand!

Birdie looks back to the open doorway to see Daisy silently
watching on.

BIRDIE

Listen to me now. This isn't about
you winning. Never has been. It's
about us winning. All of us.

Birdie and Daisy lock eyes.

A silent detente passes between them.

Birdie looks back to Major there on the bed.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

How much you weighin' now?

Major does an exhausted slow double-take, realizes what both
Birdie and Daisy might have in mind. Another tear falls.

MAJOR

No, Birdie. I can't--

BIRDIE

You can and you know it. Wanna
crack the quarter mile? You're
gonna have to drop all that weight.
Get back to true form.

(beat)

Set the damn book down until you
have a proper walk-off, yeah?

Major looks to the sea of clippings, his research, gathered
all across the bed. Some now spattered with salty tears.

DAISY

(to Major, gently)
I can work at it. While you're
gone. Sydney too.

Major's face softens, his watery eyes brighten.

DAISY (CONT'D)

Build up our legacy, together.

Major bites his quivering lip, looks back to Birdie.

MAJOR

Tell me this isn't just some damn
ploy to sell more bicycles.

BIRDIE

Bah. Two wheels are pretty much
done for, my friend. It's four plus
combustion that's gonna rule the
day. If Marmon has his way.

Birdie lowers a hand to the bed, turns to go.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Don't let me down, Major.

From beneath his palm emerges a matching 1890 Morgan Silver
Dollar. Same markings. Same comet.

Hopefully the same talisman of good luck.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Tickets are on the dining room
table. I'll meet you over there.
Get you back before the wee one
even notices you're gone.

PRE-LAP: HEAVY BREATHING and BIRDSONG.

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAINS - DAY

Major, sweating profusely and uncharacteristically winded, grinds his way up a steep, narrow, mountain road.

The grade is precipitous but the air is crisp and clean.

Birds crisscross the blue sky as Major wills his haggard, out-of-shape body further and further uphill.

MAJOR
(straining)
C'mon now. C'MON!

Picking up steam, he rounds a hairpin turn, emerges from the trees to face an epically grand vista.

Verdant foliage and rolling hills as far as the eye can see.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
That's right. That's...

Major kicks his right foot free, glides to a stop at the end of the road. The end of the line.

Spent, he bends forward with his head to his top bar.

WHEEZING.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
...it.

The feeling he's lived for. The one he thought he'd lost.

Not performance. Not perfection. Transcendence.

Even amid the pain.

INSERT MONTAGE:

Still to the tune of his AGONIZED GASPING, we watch weeks and months of training grind quickly by:

-- Major, looking at the verge of collapse, pushes his bloated body back up the George Street Hill --

-- Major, sweating profusely, jumps rope in a pool of light inside the eerily empty Worcester YMCA --

-- Major, pushing himself to his limit, takes a high corner all alone inside the Shrewsbury Street Velodrome --

-- Major, having shed weight but still desperate for air, summits the same mountain once again --

Unlike last time, the trees now are leafy and green as he dismounts and bends at the waist, sucking down air.

END MONTAGE.

Slowly, a low, steady GALE OF STATIC weaves in over Major's LABORED BREATHING as it settles.

TITLE CARD:

S T R U G G L E

HARD CUT TO:

INT. VÉLODROME BUFFALO TRACK - NIGHT (1908)

Gritty BLACK AND WHITE.

Under the riveted steel roof of a vast indoor velodrome, thousands of FRENCH SPECTATORS eagerly await Major's return to the sport.

SUPER: PARIS, FRANCE | THREE MONTHS LATER

But, instead of cheering, all we hear is the same STATIC and the EERIE HUM of a shortwave radio coming to life.

Then, over the HUM:

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

(English accent)

In what will likely be his last laps here at the Vélodrome Buffalo, American and now World Champion, Major Taylor, will have to lay down a blistering pace against some of the greatest names in the sport if he has any chance of nearing a record-setting time.

Down on the track, a trimmer Major gathers his wits as Birdie steadies his front wheel.

Behind Birdie, a massive, newer motorcycle with a strange, bullet-shaped tank belches out smoke.

But we don't hear its motor. Or the crowd still.

Just Birdie's VOICE over the HUM as he leans in closer:

BIRDIE

These are the moments where
history's made, my friend.

Major reaches behind himself, pulls the Silver Dollar Birdie
brought him from his jersey pocket, lifts it, kisses it.

MAJOR

History's just another lap they'll
probably make me ride twice.

Major bends, slips the coin into his shoe.

Birdie smiles. Brothers bonded for life.

BIRDIE

What do you want, kid?

Major locks eyes with him, remembers.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

What would you sacrifice everything
just to get a grip on?

More STATIC.

And silence from Major. He knows he doesn't have to answer.
Birdie already knows, will always know.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Just stay close to the rollers.
Ignore everything else. When it's
time to jump, jump.

MAJOR

Uh-huh. And watch out for horses.

Birdie rolls his eyes, lets go, steps back.

BIRDIE

Remember why you started all this
in the first place. Riding. Not for
all this. Not for them. For you.
For the purest pleasures.

(beat)

Freedom.

Major looks down, inhales slowly.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

And it backed into me.

MAJOR
 Sorry. Watch out for horses'
 assess. Got it.

To his left, a PORTLY RACE OFFICIAL (60s) raises the start gun, grips the trigger.

PRE-LAP: WHOOSH! WHOOSH!

HARD CUT TO:

EXT. INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY - DAY (1911)

Early two-strip KINEMACOLOR.

A white silk flag whips back and forth across the frame to reveal the grandstands of the old Capitol City Velodrome.

But the whole place, the site of Major's first victory, has been razed and replaced by much more massive structure.

And every seat is full, cheek-to-jowl.

SUPER: INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA | THREE YEARS LATER

The raceway has tripled in width and is packed with dirt. The turns still arc gracefully. But are more gradual.

More forgiving.

On the track, a loose bunch of primitive racing machines - basically pill-shaped open-top single person buggies with steel wheels and Vulcanized tires - speed by.

They're moving fast, at straightaway speeds approaching seventy-five miles per hour.

But, from nearly every vantage point it's nowhere near as viscerally, wildfire fast as a tight bunch of cyclists pressing their luck for the tape.

A HEFTY REFEREE (50s) in a light blue suit, leans out of an elevated, track-side cage, lifts a checkered flag.

And, from the bunch, a single canary yellow car, number 32, takes the lead, streaks dead-out for the finish.

As it crosses the blurred white chalk line in a cloud of dirt and exhaust, the referee waves the flag.

And the crowd goes berserk as a TRACK ANNOUNCER'S VOICE bellows from speakers slung from roof of the stands:

TRACK ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*And there you have it folks! Ray
 Harroun takes the Marmon Wasp,
 number thirty-two, to the finish of
 the inaugural Indianapolis 500!*

A blistering blend of CHEERING and APPLAUSE.

EXT. INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY, GRANDSTANDS - SAME TIME

Seated in the grandstands, an even thicker, older looking Major (33) turns toward a graying but still spry Birdie in an elegant pinstriped suit.

He's sporting the same pair of binoculars he wore when he first spotted Major back in his teens.

MAJOR
Marmon Wasp?

Birdie lowers the binoculars, looks to Major, SIGHS.

Much as he was back when Birdie found him, Major seems bedraggled. His suit is wrinkled and worn, fraying in spots.

Well-used and poorly tended.

BIRDIE
More like Flightless Dung Beetle.

Birdie thrusts the binoculars toward Major.

He doesn't want them.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)
*But, thankfully, he does pay his
 bills in a timely fashion.*

MAJOR
*Then why am I out fifteen grand
 again all of a sudden?*

Birdie stands, smiles.

BIRDIE
*Should've partnered with me, not
 the riffraff in Detroit.*

Major just looks around, a man outside his element.

MAJOR
What happened to us, Birdie?

BIRDIE

The future, my friend. Love it or leave it. C'mon.

Major finally pushes himself to his feet. It takes effort.

EXT. INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY, INFIELD - LATER

As Birdie and Major walk through the grassy infield dotted with automobiles, VARIOUS BUSINESS TYPES greet Birdie with handshakes and back slaps.

And they eye Major blankly. His global fame, such as it was, has faded fast. Been erased.

Replaced by new men, new machines.

BIRDIE

Guess no man can outrun the world.

Major reaches inside his jacket, pulls a silver tin of tiny white pills, shakes a couple into his mouth, swallows them.

MAJOR

Well, I sure did make 'em chase me though. Didn't I?

BIRDIE

That you did, my friend.

Off in the distance, we finally spy Major's very first race rival: Walter Marmon (now early 40s) holding court next to his driver, RAY HARROUN (early 30s).

Dashing and dark, Harroun's face is covered in dirt and flecks of rubber. His glass goggles hang around his neck.

The rakish star of the hour. And, of course, white.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

(still to Major)

That you did.

Birdie turns, makes a beeline toward Harroun, reaches out, shakes his gloved hand vigorously.

BIRDIE (CONT'D)

Helluva showing, Ray. Well done.

RAY

Thanks, Munger. The new tires held like a bloody charm.

Marmon, deep in conversation with a pair of gray-haired TYCOON TYPES suddenly spies Major, politely excuses himself.

MARMON
I'll be goddamned.

Major still can't quite believe his eyes. It's really him.

MAJOR
Easy there. Don't be so hard on yourself, Marmon.

The two men, bitter enemies as boys, reach out, firmly shake each other's hands.

MARMON
Told ya I'd have ya beat someday.

An affectionate, not arrogant, self-effacing smile washes across Marmon's prematurely lined face. He leans closer.

MARMON (CONT'D)
Saw you back at Paris. Buffalo.
Your last big one. Never seen anything quite like that before or since. Today included.

He looks Major deep in the eyes.

MARMON (CONT'D)
Owe you one.

Major seems entirely taken aback.

MAJOR
For what?

MARMON
Showin' me how it's done.

Marmon drops his hand, turns to go.

MARMON (CONT'D)
Keep yourself in good stead and enjoy your next chapter, Major.
(beat)
You've earned it.

And, with that, Marmon threads his way back toward the man of the hour. His driver, Harroun.

PRE-LAP: ROOOOAAAAARRRRRR!

BACK TO:

INT. VÉLODROME BUFFALO - DAY (1908)

Razor-sharp BLACK AND WHITE.

The belt-driven motorcycle with the long, sleek tank RIPS down the slanted wooden track with Major, back in his late-stage prime once again, tucked in close.

His front wheel is only fractions of an inch away from the roller as he powers across the parquet at full-speed.

The gathered crowd is, again, silent. And almost entirely invisible. Just ghostly, distorted figures washing by.

MAJOR

C'mon history. Gimme what you got.

The MOTO DRIVER (20s) looks back.

Major nods.

The driver veers wide.

And Major, digging deep, picks up the pace. It's quite possibly the fastest we've ever seen him move.

All efficiency. No wasted effort. The peak of proficiency.

Then, over it all, A CHILD'S VOICE:

YOUNG MAJOR (PRE-LAP)

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to invite you, one and all, young and old, to experience the freedom...

QUICK CUT TO:

EXT. HAY & WILLITS' - DAY (1891)

Desaturated SEPIA.

A fresh-faced YOUNG MAJOR (13) pilots a gleaming steel bicycle through a bustling pack of PEDESTRIANS moving in tight clusters down a crowded city sidewalk.

YOUNG MAJOR

...the thrill, the unparalleled pleasure of peregrination...

He pedals backward with his hands behind his back.

SUPER: INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA | SEVENTEEN YEARS EARLIER

YOUNG MAJOR
...under your own power...

With a balletic grace, Young Major weaves through the crowd, comes to a full stop, grabs the bars, spins his front wheel.

YOUNG MAJOR (CONT'D)
...on the all-new Hay and Willits'
Outing Bicycle.

Lifting one leg over the handlebars, then the other, he pedals like a ship's figurehead in looping arcs out in front of a palatial, high-tone cycle shop.

Some passersby gawk in awe. Others rush by entirely unaware.

YOUNG MAJOR (CONT'D)
Light, strong, and exquisitely
finished...

He's wearing form-fitting short pants and the same heavy woolen military officer's coat, open at the chest.

YOUNG MAJOR (CONT'D)
...with a special regard for the
features which even the most
discerning of riders...

Behind him, a man in a rumpled wool suit and tweed flat cap, quickly flips a window sign from OPEN to CLOSED, pulls the towering doors shut.

YOUNG MAJOR (CONT'D)
...particularly prefer.

Young Major whips his right leg back over the bars, leans all his weight onto his left pedal, and presses the bike back and forth with one hand on the front tire.

YOUNG MAJOR (CONT'D)
As Susan B. Anthony recently said,
"bicycles have done more to
emancipate people than anything
else in this fine ol' world."

The man behind him, Tom Hay once again, his old boss, quickly crosses the sidewalk.

HAY
C'mon, boy. I got a brilliant idea.

PRE-LAP: DING. DING. Then, STATIC.

CUT TO BLACK.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*He's done it, ladies and gentlemen!
 He's actually done it!*

TITLE CARD:

VICTORY

QUICK CUT TO:

INT. VÉLODROME BUFFALO - DAY (1908)

As Major, now in shimmering FULL-COLOR, blazes down the track in glorious SLOW MOTION, his face subtly shifts.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*Major Taylor, in his last attempt,
 has smashed both the track record
 and the world record, destroying
 the motor-paced mile in just one
 minute, thirty-three, and two-
 fifths of a second!*

All fear, all drive, metabolized by the purest sensation of complete and total mastery.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*As he powers down after that epic
 spin through the oval, I can't help
 but think that we shall not look on
 his like again.*

No more striving. No more desperate maneuvering though thickets of vicious competitors. No more greed.

Just a confident, steady ease. The same natural elegance he showed as boy.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*In my opinion, he is and shall
 remain the greatest racing cyclist
 the world has ever seen.*

Slowly, the rest of the pack veers from the track toward the infield. Exhausted and defeated. Vanquished.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*Hustled and hated as he was, his
 records may stand for decades.*

As the sun paints the track a vivid crimson, Major continues his relentless high-speed passage across the boards.

Airborne. Soaring. But oblivious. In his element. Unequaled.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
Generations even.

WHOOSH.

Major blasts right past us and disappears into the distance, into the uncertain future, like a sacred mirage.

A man destined for greatness. Against all odds.

RADIO COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
*And his absence will be a great
loss to the sport.*
(garbled)
A great loss indeed.

More heavy SHORTWAVE STATIC slithers in over commentator's voice, obscuring it. Erasing it.

PRE-LAP: CRUNCH. CRUNCH. CRUNCH.

The sound of leather-soled shoes over gravel.

SLOW FADE TO:

EXT. JARDIN DU LUXEMBOURG - DUSK

As the sun sets over The Latin Quarter, Major and Daisy amble alongside a large, circular fountain.

Entirely unrecognized by the crowd of well-dressed PARISIANS out and about for their evening stroll.

DAISY
Feels nice, doesn't it?

Major nods slowly, all weight lifted.

DAISY (CONT'D)
Belonging.

MAJOR
Together.

He leans to kiss her, just like he wished he'd done way back in the gazebo back in Worcester. Back home, years ago.

She pauses, kisses him back. Tenderly.

DAISY
You sure about this? Retiring.

MAJOR
Only been *more* sure once before.

He lifts a hand to her face, caresses it gently.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
About you.

PRE-LAP: CLACK. CLACK. CLACK. DING.

The sound of typewriter keys pounding white paper.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

An older, graying Major sits alone at a long oak dining table lit by the warm glow of a brass chandelier.

On the table before him: a battered Royal typewriter and a massive, tidy stack of pages covered in black ink.

MAJOR (V.O.)
Turns out, they did finally see me
after all.

ZIP. ZIP. ZIP.

He quickly wheels out the last page from the rubber platen, lifts it to the light.

At the bottom of the page full of rapidly recalled exploits a single typewritten word in all caps:

FINIS.

MAJOR (V.O.)
Shame they blinked.

SMASH TO BLACK.

ROLL END CREDITS --

To "A CHANGE IS GONNA COME" by Sam Cooke.

THE END