

August Sweeney: The Monster Barber of Harlem

an original screenplay by

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FADE IN:

EXT. BROOKLYN NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

A blizzard--a "white out"--nearly obliterating the four-story brownstone apartments. Cars are smothered in deep snow.

INT. BROWNSTONE APARTMENT - COREY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT

The room is a mess. Clothes on the floor, toys are everywhere.

The walls are covered with pictures of famous African-American baseball and football heroes.

Eight year-old African American COREY JOHNSON, with pajama bottoms and a Yankee jersey, runs into the room, jumps in the bed and pulls the covers over his head.

Corey's grandfather, SKIP JOHNSON 75 years, walks in slowly with a book in his hand. He stops by the dresser and looks...

At a picture of his son dressed in a military uniform. A smile comes to his face but quickly fades when he looks around the disastrous room.

He yanks the covers off Corey and points.

SKIP

Boy, if you don't get your tail up and clean this room. Don't try to play like you sleep 'cause I know you ain't.

He grabs Corey's nose.

SKIP (CONT'D)

And take that stinking jersey off boy, it's musty; you know better than that Corey.

Smiling, Corey sits up. Takes off the jersey and throws it on a pile of clothes on the floor.

SKIP (CONT'D)

(shaking his head)

Boy you just straight pitiful. Your grandmother see this dump, she gonna kill you.

Skip picks up a black wrinkled suit on the edge of the bed. He sniffs it.

SKIP (CONT'D)

Lord, will you look at this, I bet this suit ain't even seen an iron. Or a washing machine. Corey don't you know you got church tomorrow, son, and this the only suit you brought from home--you better get up and wash this.

COREY

Come on granddad, stop trippin'. I can do all of that in the morning.
(reaching out to grab
the book)
I wanna hear the story first.

Skip pulls back -- slaps Corey's hand.

SKIP

Whoa Boy! Ain't your momma teaching you some decency and respect down there in Georgia; you gotta rude streak in you boy...

Corey goes to speak, but Skip raises a finger to silence him.

SKIP (CONT'D)

And don't try to defend her, the apple don't fall too far from the tree, you know?
(chuckling)
Southern hospitality my foot.

Corey reaches over and grabs the picture of the military man from the dresser.

COREY

Let her tell it, I get it from my dad.

Skip snatches the photo from Corey's hand -- puts it back.

SKIP

Naw, that ain't from the Johnson side, tell her to check herself, now. All my boys was raised with manners.

Corey laughs and reaches for the book. He gazes at the title: August Sweeney: Monster Barber of Harlem.

COREY

(frowning)

August Sweeney: The Monster Barber
of Harlem. The title sounds creepy.
Is it a horror story? 'Cause I don't
like horror stories, granddad, they
give me nightmares.

Skip snatches the book back.

SKIP

Didn't anybody ever teach you not to
judge a book by it's cover?

(pause)

Who said anything about it being a
horror story, huh? It's a story
about a life that would be
characterized as bad for a Season,
but not forever.

Pause. Then Corey shrugs and folds his arms trying to act
tough.

COREY

I don't care. I'm over it-- I can
handle anything. I'm a soldier!
Like my dad!

SKIP

(laughing)

Well, I can't argue with that, you're
a Johnson boy, and all Johnson boys
grow up to be Johnson men and all
Johnson men become...

SKIP AND COREY

Johnson soldiers!

SKIP

(laughing)

It's in our DNA.

COREY

(excited)

Is there a soldier in the story?

SKIP

(laughing)

Maybe there is?

He puts his glasses on -- opens the book to read.

SKIP (CONT'D)

Maybe there isn't.

(MORE)

SKIP (CONT'D)

Once upon a time during a very hot summer there seemed to be a darkness that descended upon Harlem...

EXT. HARLEM - NEIGHBORHOOD - EVENING

In the b.g. are rows of old townhouses.

On the sidewalk, three African-American GIRLS play hopscotch while an African American boy, DONTAVIOUS SWEENEY (12), along with five pre-teen African-American BOYS throw a football.

A dark mysterious cloud blocks the sun. One of the girls playing hopscotch stops and looks while the others continue playing.

Dontavious stops playing and looks up into the sky.

SKIP (V.O.)

But it was a darkness that few could see...one of these few was a young boy by the name of Dontavious Sweeney...

All the teen boys gather behind Dontavious while the little girl comes beside him to look at the sky.

TEEN BOY#1

Yo, Dontay--what ya'll two looking at?

EXT. FRONT OF CHURCH - SAME

PASTOR THOMAS RUSSELL (late 40s) descends from the steps to look at the dark cloud.

Bystanders on the street and sidewalk stop, look at Pastor Russell, then look at the sky and back at Pastor Russell. Their facial expressions spell; What in the world is he looking at?

SKIP (V.O.)

But the cloud was only a sign of the evil that was about infringe upon the community, and it was during this time that the strangest things began to happen...

Pastor Thomas watches as part of the cloud comes down and rest over the Sweeney Styles & Cuts Barbershop. The door flings open, and a smiling African-American man, AUGUST SWEENEY, late 50s, walks out with a broom.

SKIP (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Part of the happening was the uncle of Dontavious, a man by the name of August Sweeney. His skin was brown and his eyes were full of frown; he shaved the faces of gentlemen from all around town who thereafter were never found...

August looks across the street and sees...

Two young AFRICAN-AMERICAN drug dealers openly passing cocaine to each other in a small zip lock bag.

SKIP (V.O.) (CONT'D)

His voice was soft, his manner mild. He seldom laughed but he often smiled.

At this sight of this wrong, Sweeney's face slowly fades from a smile to a frown.

SKIP (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He'd seen how civilized men behave. He never forgot and he never ever forgave.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

A young crying AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN staples a missing person poster of one of the young drug dealers #1. She looks across the street to ...

See OTHER weeping AFRICAN-AMERICAN women pass out missing poster fliers of young drug dealer # 2 to people walking by. Some show concern, some look at the posters and spit on it, others throw them on the ground, and a few toss them into the trash can.

August Sweeney, standing against his shop sipping coffee, gives an eerie smile against the madness on the streets.

He turns his head across the street to see...

EXT. ACROSS THE STREET - SAME

The stern face of an African-American man, ICHABOD WASHINGTON (60s), strolling down the side walk. His attire clearly out of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance period. He wears a green high fashion three piece Zoot suit, pimp cane and white high fashion shoes.

Behind him trail five African- American CHILDREN, ages 9-16. All dressed in attire from the roaring twenties era. The boys wear short pants with knee length socks and the girls are dressed in a one piece smock dress.

Each face displays a look of fear and discomfort.

In the back of the line stand the oldest youths, WENDY and MALCOLM. In secret, they cautiously grab each others hand -- shoot each other a quick starry eyed glance of "hopeless love".

Ichabod stops in front of the orphanage, turns around at...

Wendy and Malcolm-- they pull away from each other, barely escaping Ichabod's harsh gaze.

At the door of an old warehouse, the sign reads: Mercy Harlem Orphanage.

 ICHABOD
 (knocking the sign
 off/growls)
 Didn't any of you knuckle heads even
 bother to fix the sign before we
 left!?

He turns around and shakes the sign in their faces.

 ICHABOD (CONT'D)
 Unacceptable!

Too scared to answer, the children shake with fear as PEOPLE walk by gazing at their attire.

 WOMAN VOICE (O.S.)
 That man know he ought to be ashamed--
 it's 2009 and he got them babies
 dressed like it's 1929.

 WOMAN VOICE #2 (O.S.)
 Naw, somebody need to call the psych
 ward, honey, they gotta know one of
 they patients missing.

Angry, Ichabod overhears the comment.

 ICHABOD
 (turning around to
 the women)
 And somebody needs to mind their own
 business.

The front door opens, Ichabod pushes the orphans inside, and slams the door behind him.

INT. DONTAVIOUS'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

On the dresser is a picture of Dontavious standing in the middle of his parents, both dressed in their Army uniforms.

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