

THE EMPTINESS INSIDE

by

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BLACK SCREEN

SUPER: "Washington, D.C., 1939."

FADE IN:

INT. CLARK GRIFFITH OFFICE - DAY

CLARK GRIFFITH, a well-heeled businessman, looks across his desk to his SECRETARY who waits for instructions.

CLARK GRIFFITH
All right. Send them in here.

SECRETARY
Yes sir.

The Secretary checks an item off on her note pad, then turns and exits the office.

Clark Griffith stands and comes around his desk and prepares to greet his guests.

The Secretary shows two black men, BUCK LEONARD and JOSH GIBSON, in. They are short for athletes, but quite stocky. Josh Gibson is the thicker of the two.

CLARK GRIFFITH
Gentlemen, gentlemen! Welcome to my office. Come in! Please!

Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson's eyes widen in surprise as Clark Griffith shakes each of their hands in turn.

CLARK GRIFFITH (CONT'D)
Mr. Buck Leonard! Mr. Josh Gibson!
(stands back in admiration)
The "Thunder Twins!" The best baseball players on the Homestead Grays! It is indeed a privilege and an honor to meet you both!

BUCK LEONARD
(humbly nods in shock)
Thank you, sir. Thank you.

JOSH GIBSON
(even more intimidated)
Thank you.

CLARK GRIFFITH
Please. Have a seat.

As they move to their seats, the curious and uncertain Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson glance at each other. Buck cocks his head to Josh as if to say, "Let's see what this is about."

Behind his desk, Clark Griffith extends his hand to offer chairs to his guests. He sits when they do. Then --

CLARK GRIFFITH (CONT'D)

Do you gentlemen know who I am?

JOSH GIBSON

Yes sir.

BUCK LEONARD

You're Mr. Clark Griffith.

JOSH GIBSON

Owner of the Washington Senators.

BUCK LEONARD

And namesake of Griffith Stadium, one of the largest ballparks ever built.

CLARK GRIFFITH

That's correct. And I am well acquainted with you two. I have been paying attention when you boys are playing here in Washington. Your screaming line drives off the outfield walls, Buck; and I dare say, Josh, you have hit more home runs into the left field bleachers than the entire American League combined. I must say you boys, in particular, play a fine brand of ball.

Josh exchanges a glance with Buck, their curiosity becomes piqued and their excitement grows.

BUCK LEONARD

Thank you, sir.

JOSH GIBSON

Yes. Thank you.

CLARK GRIFFITH

The reason I have called you here today is I have a question I want to ask you.

BUCK LEONARD

Ask away.

Clark Griffith pauses for effect.

CLARK GRIFFITH
 How would you boys like to play in
 the major leagues? For the Washington
 Senators?

Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson are thunderstruck. They look to each other again, both at a loss for words. Buck recovers first. He is the more guarded of the two.

BUCK LEONARD
 Yes, sir! We'd like it!

JOSH GIBSON
 (broad smile)
 We'd like it fine!

CLARK GRIFFITH
 Well then, let me ask you this....
 Do you think you boys could hit *these*
 pitchers?

Josh gives a quick glance to Buck, then back at Clark Griffith.

JOSH GIBSON
 Well, some of them we could hit and
 some of them we couldn't.

BUCK LEONARD
 We're just like anybody else in that
 regard.

Clark Griffith tilts his head back with his finger to his lips. He mulls over his thought, then returns to his normal position.

CLARK GRIFFITH
 Well, as soon as somebody decides to
 sign a Negro ball player, I will
 come calling.

Clark Griffith gives a big, broad smile.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. LOCKER ROOM - DAY

A somber and subdued Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson sit in silence in the locker room, until finally --

JOSH GIBSON
 Why he have to say all that, Buck?

BUCK LEONARD

He wants to get in good with us, I guess. In case somebody decides to be first.

JOSH GIBSON

Somebody else. But not him, huh?

BUCK LEONARD

(shakes head)

Nooo, Josh. Not him.

Josh lapses into a subdued silence.

JOSH GIBSON

It's troubling to my mind.

(contemplates next question)

Buck? Do you think they'll ever let us in the majors?

Buck sighs a tired, heavy sigh; then --

BUCK LEONARD

Maybe one day. After we're too old to play.

JOSH GIBSON

Or maybe after we're dead and gone.

(looks at Buck)

Buck... I don't know if I want to play in the majors.

Buck draws a breath understanding where the conversation is headed.

BUCK LEONARD

You sure enough did a few minutes ago, Josh.

JOSH GIBSON

That was then. It's different now. I think I'd like to stay in the Negro Leagues and show them I can do just fine on my own.

BUCK LEONARD

Mmm-hmm. And reject his rejection of you?

Josh smiles liking that idea.

JOSH GIBSON

If he don't want me now, why should I want him later?

BUCK LEONARD

So you're going to let your pride keep you from playing against the best players? From seeing how you stack up against them?

Josh falls silent facing an inconvenient truth.

BUCK LEONARD (CONT'D)

You mean to tell me that your competitive spirit ain't gonna overcome your pride?!

JOSH GIBSON

Well, if I ever do make it into the majors, I won't be as happy at making it than if they hadn't barred me in the first place.

BUCK LEONARD

Maybe. Maybe you'll be even happier. Even euphoric.

Josh sharply turns his head, both startled and confused.

JOSH GIBSON

How could that be?

BUCK LEONARD

Justice long denied will finally have been served. If it had never been denied, we'd probably take it for granted.

JOSH GIBSON

I think I'm going to be angry and bitter that there had to be a "finally" in the first place!

Buck remains calm as he watches Josh.

BUCK LEONARD

Don't be angry and bitter. All that's going to do is eat you up from the inside out. You'll never find happiness and fulfillment that way.

JOSH GIBSON

You going to be happy and fulfilled to play in the majors? After everything they've done?

BUCK LEONARD

Absolutely.

Josh, incredulous, stares at Buck.

JOSH GIBSON

That the way it is, huh? Nothing more? You wouldn't like to show them that you're your own man? That you can stand up for yourself all on your own?! Don't you want to succeed without the white man's big favor?!!

Buck wears a troubled expression as he thinks this through thoroughly.

BUCK LEONARD

(a big admission)
I want that too.

JOSH GIBSON

Mm-hmm.
(watches carefully)
But which do you want more?

Buck struggles with the question. Josh continues to watch. Buck finally shakes his head.

BUCK LEONARD

I don't know.

Josh looks at Buck knowing he has heard the truth. Josh remains silent as he mulls something over.

JOSH GIBSON

(a bigger admission)
Me neither.

BUCK LEONARD

You'd be happy to have the one...
but then you'd be sad you don't have
the satisfaction of the other.

JOSH GIBSON

What we gonna do, Buck?

Buck sighs and searches for words.

BUCK LEONARD

We can be angry and protest. Maybe we should... we'd certainly be justified. But anger begets anger. Lord knows, it's going to be burden enough for the first man to break the color line. And he's likely going to be on his own. He don't need us making things any tougher on him.

Buck turns to Josh as if he just got a great idea.

BUCK LEONARD (CONT'D)

We should concentrate on what we *can* control. We play baseball. A game which we love and enjoy. Let's just make ourselves the best ballplayers we can. If we do that, maybe one day the white man will want to open the door for us.

Josh thinks. Buck patiently waits for the next question.

JOSH GIBSON

And that's going to keep us happy and fulfilled?

BUCK LEONARD

Yes. We'd be working together. For something larger than ourselves. We'd be working for the future. *All* our futures.

Josh takes some time to consider this, then --

JOSH GIBSON

That's fine for others . . . in the future.

(pleading eyes)

But what about *me*? How do *I* find this happiness and fulfillment?

Buck breaks out in a big, broad smile.

BUCK LEONARD

Josh...! There's *all kinds* of ways to find happiness and fulfillment!

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

In a dark hotel room, Josh Gibson and one of his semi-regular FEMALE COMPANIONS collapse on the bed landing chest to chest and cheek to cheek after repeated sexual encounters. They are worn out, sweaty, and catching their breath. They calm down a bit. She has had enough.

FEMALE COMPANION

(dutifully loving-like)

Hey....

Josh picks up his head so they are face to face.

FEMALE COMPANION (CONT'D)

Again?

Josh looks at her with a troubled and dissatisfied expression. He is still at a loss as to how to find his contentment. There is an emptiness inside.

She reads on his face that something is wrong, but across their chasm of distance, she is helpless to know how to fix it.

JOSH GIBSON

Yeah.

Josh pulls her up off the pillow and OUT OF FRAME as she gasps.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Buck Leonard sings "I'm Troubled in Mind" with the congregation.

LEAD SINGER

"When ladened with troubles and
burdened with grief,
To Jesus in secret I'll go for
relief."

CONGREGATION

"I'm troubled
I'm troubled
I'm troubled in mind.
If Jesus don't help me I surely will
die."

Buck sits back down with the congregation. He wears a troubled and dissatisfied expression. He is still at a loss as to how to find his contentment. There is an emptiness inside.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color line of Major League Baseball when he debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers."

SUPER: "In 1952, Buck Leonard was offered a Major League contract with the St. Louis Browns."

SUPER: "At age 45 and well past his prime, Leonard declined so as not to embarrass and hurt the cause of integration."

SUPER: "Three months before Robinson's Dodger debut, Josh Gibson took in a movie matinee where he suffered a stroke."

SUPER: "He died of a brain hemorrhage the next day."

Then add . . .

SUPER: "He was 35 years old."

THE END