

School Days

20-page excerpt

Music and Lyrics by Loretta Lill
Book by Richard Lasser

SCENE 4

Venice High. Music Classroom.

Maria smiles as she comes into the classroom, but the smile drops when she finds it is pure mayhem, with kids bouncing off the walls.

"Cool Trey" graffiti, like she saw on the Boardwalk, is written all over the blackboard.

MARIA

Class. Class.

The students ignore her.

MARIA

Everyone. Be quiet!

DORIE, a Black teen girl, comes up to her.

DORIE

Miss, if you want the kids to settle down, you gotta talk to Cool Trey.

MARIA

Figures. Which one is he?

The girl points to a skinny Black boy, (late teens.) Meet TREY.

Maria weaves in and out of the mayhem to reach Trey.

MARIA

Trey. Trey!

TREY

It's Cool Trey.

MARIA

This is a music classroom, and in a music classroom, no one stands on a pedestal but the conductor.

COOL TREY

And that's you?

MARIA

That's me. You may be cool outside of this classroom, outside of this school. But in here, in my classroom, you are Trey.

Trey throws his music book on the floor in defiance.

Maria slowly and matter-of-factly picks up the book and extends her hand to Trey as a silent peace offering.

Trey takes it from her then storms out of class, followed by Dorie, who is Trey's girlfriend.

Dorie confronts Trey in the hall.

DORIE

What was that in there?

TREY

What was what?

DORIE

Throwing your book down like that.

TREY

I didn't like her attitude. The *conductor*. That's bullshit.

DORIE

No. You're bullshit.

TREY

Dorie, come on.

DORIE

Come on where? To visit you in juvie? To ID your dead body at the damn morgue. Cuz that's where you're headed, Mr. Tough Stuff. I'm tired of covering for you, lying for you. Making excuses for you.

TREY

Then stop. I don't need you to be my mama. I need you to be my girl.

DORIE

Your *girl*. Like I'm your property. Uh-uh. Not me. If that's what you think I am, then we're breaking up.

TREY

Dorie, no. You know I love you, and I need you.

DORIE

You know what I need?

TREY

Yeah, me.

DORIE

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. 'Cause I am done with you disrespecting me. And I am done enabling you. I will not cover for you any more.

Down the hall, unnoticed,
principal DR. PACIFICO (Latino,
50s) watches their interaction.

She sings: "I Could Have Told On
You."

SONG 7:

"I COULD HAVE TOLD ON YOU."

I COULD HAVE TOLD ALL THE WORDS YOU SAID
WHEN ALL THE TEACHERS HAD TURNED THEIR HEADS.
FIVE YEARS AFTER SCHOOL - THAT COULD HAVE BEEN YOU.
I COULD HAVE TOLD ON YOU!
I COULD HAVE TOLD OF THOSE SANDWICH BITES
THAT YOU SNEAKED WHEN THEY TURNED OUT THE LIGHTS
FOR THE FILMS YOU PAID NO ATTENTION TO.
OH, I COULD HAVE TOLD ON YOU!
I COULD HAVE TOLD OF THE SPITBALLS YOU SPEWED
AT THE BACK OF MY HEAD AND MY ARMS AND LEGS TOO.
I WANTED TO SOCK IT RIGHT BACK TO YOU.

OH, I COULD HAVE TOLD ON YOU!
 I COULD HAVE TOLD OF THE TIMES YOU ADMITTED
 THAT YOU LOVED MUSIC WERE MORE THAN YOU GRITTED
 YOUR TEETH WITH IMPATIENCE FOR CLASS TO BE THROUGH.
 OH, I COULD HAVE TOLD, I COULD HAVE TOLD,
 OH, I COULD HAVE TOLD ON YOU!

END OF SONG

DORIE

You hearing me?

TREY

Yes.

DORIE

If I'm gonna stay being your girl, I want to be proud of you. I want to brag about you. I want to brag about somebody who wants to climb out the ghetto and make something of his life. Somebody who isn't always acting out to prove he's somebody big and tough. I want a boy who doesn't have to prove anything to anybody. A boy who already believes, already knows deep down in his heart, "I am somebody."

CROSSFADE:

SCENE 5

Maria's classroom. Dr. Pacifico enters with J.R.

Maria sits at her desk, crying in the empty classroom.

J.R.

Maria?

She sits up, startled, composes her face.

MARIA

I don't know what I was thinking.

DR. PACIFICO

It's OK.

MARIA

No. It's not. These kids deserve a good musical education. Dr. Pacifico, I'm sorry I let you down. As soon as you find a replacement, I'll go.

DR. PACIFICO

I'm not going to look for a replacement.

MARIA

But they won't listen to me.

J.R.

It's Trey, isn't it?

MARIA

It's not just Trey. Yes, he's the ringleader, but if he acts up, they all do.

DR. PACIFICO

We've got a Big Bear Weekend coming up.

MARIA

What's that?

DR. PACIFICO

Big Bear Mountain? You don't know about that?

J.R.

It's about 3 hours east, out by San Bernardino.

MARIA

I don't understand.

DR. PACIFICO

Every fall, the music class has a retreat at Big Bear Mountain. Camping out. Sing-a-longs. It's a great way to get the kids out of the city and bond with nature.

J.R.

And each other.

MARIA

And this retreat. This is supposed to make me a better music teacher.

DR. PACIFICO

You're a fine music teacher. Your references were impeccable.

J.R.

You just need to get over this...speed bump.

DR. PACIFICO

Without cracking your axle.

MARIA

And I'm supposed to know what that means?

J.R.

Look, a weekend like this will get the students

MARIA

And by students, you mean Trey...

J.R.

It'll get him out of the inner city and all the pressures on him. He can relax. Just be a boy.

MARIA

Oh, God. I don't know anything about the outdoors.

J.R.

Don't worry. I'll pitch your tent.

MARIA

Wait. An actual canvas tent? What if it snows? What if a bear, you know a BIG BEAR, drags me off into the woods to feed her cubs? Why don't we just go down to the beach, build a bonfire, sing, and roast wienies and marshmallows?

DR. PACIFICO

You'll have a nice warm, down mummy bag to sleep in.

MARIA

Mummy is right. When they find me in the morning.

CROSSFADE:

SCENE 6

Around a campfire at Big Bear Mountain, the Venice High School music class is gathered. Tents ring the campfire.

DORIE

Wish it would snow.

TREY

It's September!

DORIE

So, we in the mountains. Must be, what, a thousand feet high.

J.R.

Try Six Thousand, Seven Hundred and Fifty-Two.

TREY

That's more than a mile. I need oxygen, I'm choking.

He falls on the ground, choking,
to everyone's delight.

Everyone except Dorie, who shakes
her head, wanders away from the
campfire, looks up at the clear
night sky.

DORIE

Oh, my God. Look at those stars.

The other kids rush over to her,
and Trey quickly gets up, follows.

DORIE

It's like a huge painting, changing every
moment.

TREY

The sky is the ultimate art gallery just above
us.

DORIE

That's beautiful, Trey. You just make that up?

TREY

I wish. Ralph Waldo Emerson.

DORIE

You could have, though. Any ya'll ever read
Trey's poems?

TREY

Dorie, no!

DWAYNE, (18) a big, tough Black
kid ambles over, with his
girlfriend CHERISE, a Black teen.

DWAYNE

No, but I got all the "Where's Waldo" books.

Cherise laughs with him.

Trey ignores them, gazes up into the sky.

TREY
There's Jupiter.

JOHN PAUL, a white teen brings an expensive telescope over, quickly sets it up.

JOHN PAUL
Where? Show me.

TREY
This ain't Ocean Front Walk, man, where all you rich dudes shine spotlights out on the water.

JOHN PAUL
Sometimes we see dolphins.

TREY
OK, Jacques Cousteau. You don't need that thing here. Look, Jupiter's right up there.

JOHN PAUL
Point it out to me.

Trey helps John Paul sight it.

JOHN PAUL
Oh, man. It's huge.

DWAYNE
Like Uranus?

JOHN PAUL
I don't know. Where is it?

DWAYNE
It's uh, below your

Cherise goads him to go on.

But Trey scowls at him.

TREY
Come on, man.

DWAYNE
Jes' havin' a little fun.

TREY
It's below the horizon, John Paul. Can't see it tonight.

But pretty soon the moon'll rise and just about
all the stars'll disappear. Then you can see
it.

Maria calls the kids back to the
campfire.

MARIA

Come on back, kids. Marshmallows.

The kids race back to the campfire
and put marshmallows on sticks,
sit around the campfire. Dr.
Pacifico and J.R. join them.

ALBERTO (17) a Latino kid shares a
marshmallow with a Latino girl,
ISABELLA, about his age.

Their lips come together, enjoying
the gooey treat.

She laughs, and gets up to clean
the marshmallow off her mouth.

Then she looks back on him, his
face warmly lit by the fire.

Isabella sings.

SONG 8:

“HE SAYS I’M A BEAUTY”

HE SAYS I’M A BEAUTY,
DO I THANK THE STARS ABOVE?
I THINK HE REALLY SEES ME.
COULD I BE HIS LADYLOVE?
THERE MAY BE PLENTY OF FISH
RIGHT HERE AND IN THE SEA,
BUT HE’S MY GUY
AND I’M HIS GAL,
AND THAT’S THE WAY IT SHOULD BE,
AND THIS PRETTY LITTLE MAMA

CAN JUST BE HIS CHICK-A-DEE!
 SOMEONE SAID WE'RE THE PERFECT AGE
 FOR FIRST LOVE TO COME AROUND.
 ALL WHO MAY NOT SEE THIS
 ARE MUCH MORE LOST THAN FOUND.
 THERE MAY BE PLENTY OF FISH
 RIGHT HERE AND IN THE SEA,
 BUT HE'S MY GUY
 AND I'M HIS GAL,
 AND THAT'S THE WAY IT SHOULD BE,
 AND THIS PRETTY LITTLE MAMA
 CAN JUST BE HIS CHICK-A-DEE!

END OF SONG.

Isabella heads back to Alberto,
 who's engaged in conversation with
 Dr. Pacifico.

ALBERTO

Dr. Pacifico, is it gonna snow tonight?

DR. PACIFICO

It's not forecast to, but the weather can
 change pretty quickly up at this elevation.

DORIE

Damn, I wanna see it snow. Just once.

MARIA

Be careful what you wish for. Back in Philly,
 the snow buried us every winter. Couldn't go
 anywhere.

DWAYNE

Philly. Home of Rocky! Da-duh-da-duh-da-duh-
 duh-duh-dun.

All the kids sing the "Rocky"
 theme, burst out laughing.

J.R.

Everybody have their fill of marshmallows?

KIDS

Mmmph.

J.R.

All right, get in those tents before the temperature drops.

The students crawl into their tents, but with their heads poked out, they keep chattering.

DORIE

Hey, Miss Tucci. Why'd you decide to become a teacher? I think that'd be a cool job, standing up in front of the classroom, knowing everything and teaching kids about life and stuff.

MARIA

That's pretty much why I chose teaching. Or rather, it chose me.

TREY

Chose you? How?

MARIA

I was a pretty good songwriter in high school, so I went to a fancy school for arts and music in Pennsylvania. Wanted to compose Broadway musicals.

CHERISE

What happened?

MARIA

I really didn't have the talent, but one of my professors saw something in me. Something that could inspire others.

JOHN PAUL

Which school? My dad wants me to go to Penn. It's Ivy League.

MARIA

Carnegie Mellon.

ALBERTO

Like cantaloupe melon, honeydew melon?

Some of the students laugh. But not Trey, who's dead serious.

TREY

No, numbskull. Ever watch "Hill Street Blues"?

ALBERTO

Every Friday.

TREY

Steven Bochco produced it. He went to Carnegie Mellon. Carol Channing. "Hello Dolly." She went there. Ever watch "Cheers?"

ALBERTO

You know it.

TREY

Ted Danson. Bartender. He's an alum. Barbara Feldon. "Get Smart." Henry Mancini, four Oscars. He went there.

ALBERTO

Hey, how about some vatos?

TREY

Seen "Night of the Living Dead?"

ALBERTO

Hell yeah.

TREY

George Romero. He went to Carnegie.

ALBERTO

Damn.

TREY

Dorie's goin' there one day.

DWAYNE

Bullshit.

It looks like Dwayne and Trey might come out of their tents and get into it.

Dr. Pacifico breaks them up.

DR. PACIFICO

All right, everyone. Lights out. Into those tents and zip 'em shut. You don't want any critters crawling in there with you in the middle of the night, do you?

MARIA

Critters?

Dr. Pacifico signals to her he was just kidding, before he crawls into his tent.

The kids now in their tents, J.R. and Maria put out the fire.

J.R.

I didn't know all that about you. That was pretty inspiring.

MARIA

It was hard at first. I've made peace with it. Now I just want to do the best job I can to help kids with real talent do what I couldn't.

J.R.

Yet.

Maria sings

SONG 9:

“WHY WERE WE TEACHERS?”

ONE BY ONE, FIFTEEN BOLD SOULS PEEKED OUT
OF THEIR TENTS. THEY REELED US IN
WITH THEIR TEN-POUND LINES.

WHY WERE WE TEACHERS?

JOHN PAUL, KEEP ASKING.

ALBERTO, KEEP CARING.

TREY, JUST KEEP ASKING THOSE QUESTIONS.

ARE WE JUST GHOST STORIES, TOASTED MARSHMALLOWS?

HOW DID WE KNOW?

WHEN DID WE KNOW WE COULD REACH THEM?

HOW DID WE KNOW?

WHEN DID WE KNOW WE COULD TEACH THEM?

END OF SONG

The moon rises. Everyone is asleep in his or her tents. A very gentle snow gradually falls.

Dorie wakes and sees the snow in the middle of the moonlit night.

She goes to the next tent and wakes Isabella up.

DORIE

Isabella, wake up. It's snowing.

Isabella comes out, looks up in wonder.

She wakes Alberto.

ISABELLA

Alberto. Come out. The snow's falling. It's beautiful!

Alberto comes out and is stunned by the beauty of something he's never experienced.

ALBERTO

Trey, check this out.

Trey comes out of his tent and sees snow for the first time. It is a quiet windless moonlit night. There is a magical powdery snow that slowly falls.

In a choreographed dance, some of the students pair off and waltz through the snow, reveling in it.

Dorie takes a reluctant Trey's hand, and she teaches him how to waltz.

She sings.

SONG 10: "I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE SNOW"

I FELL IN LOVE WITH ALL THE SNOW THIS NIGHT.

HOW HAVE I LIVED WITHOUT THIS WONDROUS SIGHT?

THE GUESTS AT THE BALL ARE ALL THE TREES IN WHITE.

HEAVEN ON EARTH WITHOUT A SOUND.
 CATCH A LITTLE SNOWFLAKE,
 FACE TURNED TOWARD THE SKY.
 NEVER SEEN SO MANY TREES,
 MOTHER NATURE'S NATURAL HIGH.
 OH, I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE CRYSTAL WHITE.
 I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE SNOW.

END OF SONG

SCENE 7

Music classroom. It's lunch break and Maria is alone in the room, noodling on the piano.

Trey comes in, takes a seat near the piano. She stops playing.

MARIA

You looked like you really enjoyed the camping trip.

TREY

It was amazing.

MARIA

I didn't realize you knew so much about the students who went to my college. Seems like you want to go there.

TREY

Nah, but Dorie should.

MARIA

And your knowledge of astronomy and music. Quite impressive.

TREY

Ever hear of Pat Martino?

MARIA

Sure. One of the great jazz guitarists.

TREY

Till he got amnesia after emergency brain surgery and forgot every lick he ever knew.

MARIA

Oh, what a shame.

TREY

But he taught himself all over again, got it all back.

MARIA

Oh, wow.

TREY

He mapped the constellations on sheet music, connected notes and created geometric shapes. He also connected theory and time, comparing a chromatic circle to a clock. That's why I study astronomy.

MARIA

If Pat Martino could overcome what he didn't deserve, you could too.

TREY

Something like that.

MARIA

Then why do you act out in class?

TREY

You could never understand what it's like to live in the hood. Never relate to my everyday reality.

MARIA

Probably not. But I care about you, and all of my students, and I'm willing to work on understanding you and your situation.

TREY

Never gonna happen.

MARIA

OK. I'm not going to fight you, so just let me teach you. Give me a chance.

TREY

Don't waste your time on me. Soon as I graduate...*if* I graduate...going to New York.

MARIA

What'll you do there? How will you survive?

TREY

Same way I do here.

MARIA

Learning in school is like a rung in the ladder
of life.

TREY

'Fraid I'm already rung up.

He appears to not be listening to
her words, gets up to go.

MARIA

If you quit school, what'll your parents say?

She hears his ECHOING FOOTSTEPS
fading as he walks down the hall.

She goes back to playing, this
time, ripping into an instrumental
version of "Some of These Days".

Covered by the piano playing, we
don't hear Trey come back into the
classroom. She doesn't see him
there either.

He pauses at the door, obviously
impressed with her piano chops.
The music, Pied Piper-like, draws
him back to her.

TREY

You sure there ain't no black in you?

MARIA

Pretty sure, yeah.

TREY

That's an Ella tune.

MARIA

Sure is. Sophie Tucker before her.

TREY

Last of the red hot mamas.

He nods to her to slide over on
the piano bench, and he plays
while they sing a duet, "Are You
Sure There Ain't No Black in You?"

SONG 11: "ARE YOU SURE THERE AIN'T NO BLACK IN
YOU?"

ARE YOU SURE THERE AIN'T NO BLACK IN YOU?

NOW, WHAT KIND OF QUESTION IS THAT?

COULD WHAT'S ON THE INSIDE BE BLACK?

HE THINKS I HAVE CHOPS.

I'M GAINING HIS TRUST.

A DUSTY OLD PIANO,

A WHOLE NEW LANGUAGE FOR US.

THERE JUST MIGHT BE SOME BLACK IN YOU.

I SAID, THERE JUST MIGHT BE SOME BLACK IN YOU.

Then she goes back to playing
"Some of These Days".

END OF SONG

MARIA

Play it with me.

They start playing a four-handed
version of "Some of These Days",
really rocking it.

The students filter into the room
after lunch.

DWAYNE

Look at the teacher's pet.

On instant alert to the trash-
talk, Trey jumps up, ready to
rumble.

MARIA

Trey, settle down. Dwayne, that was uncalled
for.

DWAYNE

You lettin' her speak for you, homie? No,
wait. I don't wanna diss my homies. Pussy.

TREY

You watch your mouth, punk.

DWAYNE

And playin' a white band tune, too. Pussy
Sellout.

On the defensive, his reputation as class tough guy at stake, Trey pulls a switchblade knife.

TREY

If I was a pussy, would I have this?

Some students run from the classroom in fear, but not Dwayne. And where Dwayne goes, Cherise goes.

DWAYNE

That what you need to feel like a man?

CHERISE

Dwayne, get out the classroom. Now!

Dwayne ignores her, moves on Trey. The two circle, feigning as though they will attack each other.

Maria is enraged at Trey.

MARIA

Trey, put that away.

TREY

Stay back, Miss Tucci.

MARIA

Drop the knife, Trey. I'm not kidding.

DWAYNE

Hear that, Trey? Do what teacher says.

CHERISE

Dwayne, stop acting like a fool. You leave this classroom now, or, I swear, we are through.

Cherise pulls Dwayne towards the door.

DWAYNE

We aren't done. You hear me?

TREY

Yeah, run chicken-shit. You just talk, that's all.

DWAYNE

See you on the playground.

TREY

What are you, eleven? The playground, shit.

He waves the knife at Dwayne once more before Cherise pulls her boyfriend out of the classroom.

Maria confronts Trey head on. She reaches out.

MARIA

The knife. Now.

TREY

You can't possibly understand.

MARIA

I don't need to understand.

TREY

You said you wanted to help me. But you don't get me. You're just a honky who can play the piano.

MARIA

Yes, I'm a honky. And I can't help that, anymore than you can help being Black. Who we are is not a choice. But choosing to bring that knife into this place of learning, that was a choice you made. Schools may not be churches, but they are sacred places. Cathedrals of learning. And no one, no one has the right to desecrate it by bringing a lethal weapon into a school.

TREY

I didn't bring it into school to hurt anybody. I need it to defend myself on my way to and from school - so the gangs don't intimidate me.

MARIA

The knife doesn't know that, Trey. It's made to slice and cut and perhaps kill. It's the person who chooses to pick up that knife and threaten somebody with it that makes the potentially life or death choice to carry it.

TREY

You are not hearing me. So why should I listen to you?

Trey sings.

SONG 12:

“WHY SHOULD I LISTEN?”

WHY SHOULD I LISTEN?
 WHAT DOES SHE KNOW ABOUT MY LIFE?
 SHE CAN'T IMAGINE
 A KID LIKE ME WOULD NEED A KNIFE.
 HOW TO KEEP FROM GETTING HIGH?
 STAY AWAY FROM SHADOWY TIES.
 THE LAW CAUGHT UP WITH MY BROTHER.
 IT ALMOST KILLED YOUR MOTHER.
 IT'S A HELL OF A TIME TO BE ALIVE.
 JUST EARN THAT DIPLOMA AND SLAP ME FIVE.
 LISTEN TO YOUR TEACHER,
 THAT'S WHAT MAMA SAY.
 LISTEN TO YOUR MAMA,
 THAT'S WHAT TEACHER SAY.
 I AM THE MAN OF THE HOUSE,
 THAT'S WHAT MY GRAMMA SAY.
 YOU'RE NOT A MAN.
 MY FATHER'S GONE,
 SO, I'M A MAN.

END OF SONG

AN LAPD OFFICER comes into the classroom, pounces on Trey, grabs the knife, throws him up against the blackboard, so the white chalk dust showers over him.

LAPD OFFICER

This is an illegal weapon, boy. Carrying it is an automatic felony.

TREY

Sir, I--

LAPD OFFICER

--Spread 'em.

MARIA

Hey. Hey! You can't do that in here.

LAPD OFFICER

Stay out of this, ma'am. Stay back.

MARIA

No. You cannot treat him like this in my classroom.

TREY

Miss Tucci, please.

Maria moves back.

The LAPD Officer pats Trey down.

Then he roughly handcuffs Trey and hustles him toward the door, where the other students have all gathered, looking on in horror.

Even Dwayne, seeing a Black kid handled like a common criminal, is stunned.

MARIA

Where are you taking him?

The Policeman ignores her, so she blocks his path.

MARIA

I demand to know where you are taking my student!

TREY

Miss Tucci, no!

LAPD OFFICER

Pacific Station.

The Policeman takes him away.

INTERMISSION