

POST-CINEMATIC ANXIETY

by

GRAHAM PAUL DONOVAN

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Department of Film and Creative Writing  
School of English, Drama and Creative  
Studies  
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## Abstract

This thesis consists of an absurdist detective novel and a critical commentary, both of which engage with the contradictions suggested by the notion of “total cinema” and other similar critiques. The creative aspect is a novel titled *The Palace View*. The novel puts a number of the issues raised throughout the critical work into tension in a fictional world entirely composed of cinema. The critical aspect employs a framework—or “diagnosis”—of “post-cinematic anxiety”. A number of critical texts are explored to chart a genealogy of post-cinematic anxiety as it occurs in short fiction, film theory, and postmodern criticism. These texts provide a theoretical ground upon which to conduct a short survey of modern films, from blockbusters to low-budget exploitation films, all of which display the “symptoms” of the diagnosis. The films reviewed provide a view of post-cinematic anxiety away from theory, and further establish the persistence of the symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety in a popular medium. These symptoms are then applied to a reading of Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, arguing for novel as a sustained expression of post-cinematic anxiety in literary fiction. Finally, the work explores the novel submitted with this thesis, considering it alongside the findings of the critical work and the literary absurd. The ultimate purpose of this work is to create a terminology for otherwise disparate phenomena relating to the ambient anxiety about cinematic presence, and to interrogate the category of “post-cinema” on phenomenological terms.

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## The Palace View

## Prologue

I forget things.

Sometimes temporarily, other times entirely. Think back and it's all just a blank. A big nothing. And those memories, those missing memories, they aren't even so bad. They're *only* missing. But those other memories. Those that have been usurped, replaced for something else. Those are the worst. Some stranger's recollections kicking back in my hippocampus. Or not *even* a stranger's. Just another big nothing. Remembrance out of nowhere.

Sometimes, I'm still myself. Other times, I don't know what I'm thinking but I can watch my own face as though it belongs to someone else. I hover close by, scrutinise my every expression.

Then there are times when I could be anyone. A Russian spy or an aviator down behind enemy lines. A child prodigy or a savant mathematician. A union boss or a strike-breaker. A college bore or a small-town drunk. A hard-nosed reporter on the trail of my latest scoop. An explorer of antiquity. An enlightenment philosopher driving his wife to psychological ruin. A jilted lover or an incorrigible cad whose about to get his just-deserves. I could be a pathological liar, a confidence trickster, a technology entrepreneur. A recently widowed seamstress or the murderer who threw her husband's body in the river after midnight. I could be a man, a woman, or something those words won't allow for. I could be a mother, a brother, a new-born child. Even a labrador. Even a venetian blind. Even a wisp of smoke. Or none of these or all of the above at once. Sometimes a polite society. Sometimes a maddened rabble about to kick the palace gates in.

It's a lot to contend with. So forgive me my digressions. If I tense against false

memories they double-down on me. Until it feels like someone's pouring scalding water right into my cerebellum.

Do you know how that feels?

Of course, you don't. But you might.

So let me give you a piece of advice:

Relax.

Let them breathe and they'll evaporate in their own time. They don't hang around for too long. But they all leave a little something behind. Images of places I've never been. Words for which I know no meaning. Feelings that aren't mine. None of it useful. Just detritus. Laying around the place and getting in the way.

It's there and then it's gone.

It's all happening at once until it isn't.

In addition, I don't always know what time it is. Don't know what counts as now. What *when* we're in. Things that happened in the past feel like they're happening now or haven't yet happened at all.

I know, it's a problem.

I don't enjoy this, I promise you.



## Chapter One

Beyond the window, it's already dark.

Some kind of reception. A loose line of chairs curves into the corner and a series of filing cabinets stand against the far wall. From a standalone lamp beside the desk, a soft globe of golden light illuminates the centre of the room, supplemented only by the silvery glow of the black and white movie that plays on the television, bolted onto the wall. Tastefully dispersed houseplants cast long shadows that taper up the walls and fade into the darkened corners.

Travis, neither old nor young, faded grey jeans, trainers, bed-hair but not the stylish kind, sits in the waiting area. He fidgets with the zip on his jacket, shifts his weight every few seconds. A tremor in his leg sends vibrations through the floorboards.

The woman at the desk thumbs through a stack of papers, crossing out sections of text and writing notes in the margins. Mid-to-late fifties; hair pinned in layers and glasses with a cat's-eye slant about them. Eyes on her work, she mouths along with the movie, seeming to have memorised the scene by heart even though the volume is low and the dialogue is partly submerged beneath a low frequency whir of unknown origin. The lampshade gently quivers. She glances at it, lays down her pen. 'That is acutely annoying.'

He leans into his knees with his elbows, stunts the movement.

She relaxes as the light falls still. Watches him for several seconds then returns to her paperwork.

'Bit late for admin?'

She sighs, pushes her work aside, and goes to the kitchenette in the far corner and

busies herself over the sink. Returning with a small watering can, she circles the room and feeds the plants one by one.

‘I said it’s a bit late for admin.’ Travis raises his voice, spaces the words as though he’s addressing the deaf instead of the simply disinterested.

She drops the can into the sink. ‘It is a little late for most things.’

‘Come on. Saturday night? Great time for a dance.’

She goes back to her desk and takes up her pen.

‘You like a dance?’

Tilting her head and squinting behind her glasses, her mouth retracts into a tight circle, as if in preparation for a ‘*what?*’ that never quite escapes her lips.

‘I’ll probably have a dance later.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Unless I’m here all night. Think he’ll be much longer?’

‘Hard to say. Mr. Barrington operates on an internal clock obscure to the likes of you and I.’

‘Must be difficult to arrange his appointments.’

‘Quite.’

‘Just I’m supposed to be somewhere.’

‘Somewhere other than here?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘And why did you arrange to be somewhere other than here when you had an appointment...here?’

‘I didn’t think it’d take this long.’

‘I’ll remind you that you’re free to leave at any time. No one is forcing you to remain.’

...

\*

*No one is forcing you to remain...*

But you don't know why I was there yet. Late on a Saturday night, half-way up the Holloway Road, waiting for a man named Barrington. This is the point before which things were normal and reliable. Well, not exactly normal. Or reliable, really. Just less abnormal, less unreliable.

It all started—I think—with the demise of the Bow Bells Lettings Company.

The Bow Bells Lettings Company had no offices. Erected no house-front signage. Retained no employees. And consisted of entirely of one man colloquially known as 'Judas'. A crude alias tailored behind his back that he'd later taken on and worn like a finely-cut suit. Judas didn't adhere to the usual business hours. Would arrive unannounced at any time. Thump on the bedsit doors and bellow for rent. Then drink raw gin from a hip flask in the kitchen while he waited for us to come down from our rooms.

We all hated him. But it was cheap. If you lived here, it meant you couldn't afford to live anywhere else. So we accepted it. Because implicit in the discount was a message: the property, *and* the landlord, come as are.

Water leaking over the stairs? Put a washing bowl down. Lock on the front door seizing up again? Go round the back until the weather warms.

Gas leak?

Hold your breath.

And, if you're not enamoured with your landlord rocking up in the middle of the

night, feel free, as always, to *go and live somewhere else*.

As Judas liked to put it:

‘Plen’y of empty benches over the park.’

Which is no longer even true.

Bad as this may sound, it wasn’t without its benefits.

Sure, our rent wasn’t more than ten percent less than other digs of equally dubious legality. But Judas, with his raging alcoholism, failing eyesight, and a penchant for losing great stacks of cash on the dogs, was easy to game. I’d shorted him on thousands over the years. It wasn’t hard. He’d show up drunk or arguing into that knackered Blackberry. Furious or half-asleep or tweaking on that cheap, yellow amphetamine he loved so much. If he was distracted enough you just had to fuck around a bit. Forget your money in your room. Hand over half and feign surprise if he pulled you on it. All of us crammed in the kitchen to get it over with. Nine at the time I think, or thereabouts. Desperate to get away from that smell and crawl back into our own little sanctuaries. It was chaos. And chaos played to my advantage.

Now, that might sound like some kind of rental fraud. Easy mistake to make so I won’t hold it against you. But that’s not how it was. The truth is, Judas was simply an anonymous benefactor. So comprehensively anonymous even *he* didn’t know about his frequent and generous donations. And by depriving him the knowledge of his contributions, thus denying him the facts of his own benevolence, I may well have guarded him from the self-satisfaction and spiritual complacency that can result from such transactions, and chaperoned a truly selfless act on his behalf, therefore saving his soul. The way I saw it, I was out there doing God’s work. And God’s work, as any dedicated missionary will tell you, is always a work-in-progress.

Then he stopped collecting the rent.

Which might sound like a good thing.

But it wasn't.

See, I'd lived there for more than a decade. And unless the house suddenly appeared on the radar of the Housing Standards Department and was subsequently condemned I'd no intention of going anywhere. Sure the communal areas were a wreck and an undeniable sense of shame hung over the place. But I kept my room spotless and perfectly organised, even with my makeshift furniture and the back wall that needed sponging for black spores twice a month when it was too cold to open the window. When I threw the bolt across the door I was home. It was mine.

Except it wasn't mine.

So when Judas disappeared it was cause for all to worry.

At first, no one noticed. His visits were always erratic. After a few weeks, the tenants started to talk. The assumption was that Judas had died. It was plausible. He lived like an animal and had no shortage of local enemies. But we couldn't be sure. Weeks became months. We all owed a backlog now. And none of us were able to hold onto our funds for that long. London ate your money whether you intended to feed it or not. So Judas's absence was as stressful as his possible return. All we could do was wait.

Then the letter came.

'Dear sir,' it began.

'We are writing to inform you that your outstanding balance is now due. Please deposit the funds by the last day of this month, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Failure to settle the balance by this deadline will result in immediate eviction. Details overleaf.'

How this could have happened, I couldn't tell you. Whatever did happen, happened off-stage, behind the scenes. But I'll tell you this, that balance was more

money than I'd earned all year. How was this even possible? Surely Judas hadn't actually kept any records? I scanned the back of the letter. Account number and sort code, payable to a company called WDC Environments. No mention of Bow Bells. It didn't help that the letter looked so official. An elegant letter-head on fine quality paper. A font that said 'fuck you' in the strongest possible terms. The word 'eviction' glowered at the end of the sentence. I ran to the bathroom and threw up.

That was a Friday morning in early October. I cleaned myself up and went to work. Trundled around the aisles with my stupid metal trolley picking up IC chips and remote controls. Taking them back to my bench and packing them up in bubble wrap, boxing them, throwing them into the delivery cage, all in the knowledge that the money I earned that day wouldn't count a damn towards anything. At the end of the shift my boss told me to 'cheer the fuck up'. I said yeah, just a bad day I reckon.

\*

The spirits are lit from beneath and glow in a range of translucent hues. Ambers and browns for the whiskeys and rums, bright whites for the vodkas, and blues and greens and purples for those bottles composed of coloured glass. Wordless, minimal downbeat plays at a medium volume, gently syncopated, pensive melodies. The mirrored backbar reflects the crowd. Not yet shoulder-to-shoulder but not far off. Some patrons are boisterous, jumping from their seats to holler across mahogany tables or chide their latecomers. Others engage in private conversation beneath the din, resting their elbows on the ledges that line the inner walls. Candles light up the brickwork interiors in flickering patches, and tiny spotlights cast narrow bands of light down onto the horde.

Travis stands by the bar with Johnny P.. Johnny wears a red windbreaker and a T-shirt that says DON'T ASK. The strap of worn-leather satchel cuts across his torso from shoulder to hip. With a group of ten or so. The others trade and jokes with Johnny as the drinks go around. Travis looks away aimlessly while Johnny is occupied. When the chance arises, he leans in and speaks into Johnny's ear.

Johnny pulls him away from the huddle. 'That's a lot of money, man. Want a couple-hundred to get you by? Know that probably ain't help much but...' He sets his drink down on the bar and reaches into his pocket.

Travis catches his wrist. 'No. You need that.'

'Serious, I was only gonna blow it on—'

'No you weren't.'

'I was.'

'You weren't.'

'Come on.'

'No.'

'You do this every time.'

'Right? And what's always the result?'

'Fine.' Johnny drains his glass, raises it and jangles the ice cubes. 'Least let me get you another one.'

Johnny points his way around the others collecting drink orders. Another wave of customers approach the bar, competing for elbow room, Travis steps aside and stands away from the queue. He takes a long breath, looks down at the floor and rubs his temples.

A hand appears in front of him.

Long nails painted electric blue, costume bangles loose at the wrist, and a business

card with a triangular emblem, pinched between the fore and index fingers. ‘Ask for Barrington.’

Travis looks up toward the face of the hand’s owner. There’s two of them, faces, directly beneath a spotlight. She is short and he is tall. Her hair matches her nails, while he sports a slate-grey blazer over a white shirt that’s buttoned to the neck without a tie. They both wear glasses. She like an American film star, he like a French film critic. He stands to her rear and off to the side. They wear an identical smile, neither forced nor totally willing.

‘Take it.’

Travis looks behind himself.

‘Yes, *you*. We overheard you.’

The guy stoops and rests his chin on the woman’s shoulder. ‘We’re looking for someone just like you.’

‘Just like me?’

She leans in, slips the card into Travis’s back pocket, and whispers into his ear. ‘Ask for Barrington.’ She steps away, hesitates, leans in once more. ‘Don’t tell anyone.’

‘I don’t really need any more secrets. I’m good.’

She laughs but stops abruptly. ‘It could be lucrative.’ She rubs her thumb on the inside of her fingers.

‘You don’t know me.’

‘Sure we know you.’

‘You’re Johnny’s friend.’

The no-tie guy blows softly into the blue-haired woman’s ear and she responds with a theatrical shiver.



Travis blinks. The couple smiles. None of them speak.

A small skirmish breaks out behind them. Travis gets knocked toward a high table and catches a glass of beer with his elbow. The beer bounces back off another glass and spills all over him. Liquid dripping from his shirt, he apologises to the drink's former owner who says it's fine in a tone that says it isn't. As he backs away from the table, Johnny appears brandishing a beer bottle. 'Drink up. I didn't realise the time.' Johnny looks down at Travis's sodden clothes. 'What happened?'

'Who's that couple?'

'What couple?'

Travis stands up on his toes and glances over the heads of the crowd. 'They were just here. She—'

'Tell me on the way, I got deliveries. Drink that.'

'Think I'm just gonna head.'

'Boo. Come for a dance. You know it makes you feel better.'

'I can't. I've got to—'

'What? What else could you possibly have to do?'

'Well.' Travis pinches at the wet fabric, pulling it away from his skin.

'Right, right. Course. Alright. Go get changed. I'll sort this shit out. Meet you at the place at what...?' Johnny pulls out his phone and swipes the home screen, 'half-eleven?'

'I don't think I can—'

'Okay, midnight.'

'Johnny, I—'

'I don't have time for this.'

'Then go, man.'

‘Not till you say you’re coming.’

‘Okay, fine. I’ll come,’

‘Good man you are.’ Johnny pats down his jacket and his satchel. ‘I’ll text you the place when I get the address.’ He says some hurried goodbyes, stops by the bar to kiss Lula on the cheek, and bolts for the door.

\*

Travis sits on his bed with the debt letter and the business card, eyes flitting between the two. His phone beeps. The alert says it’s from Johnny. Travis leaves the message unopened, folds the letter with the business card inside and slips it into his bedside drawer. He pads around the room, straightens things that don’t need straightening, gets undressed, folds his clothes, and lays down on the bed.

## Chapter Two

The auditorium of the Palace View was replete with all of the architectural ornamentation you'd expect to find inside any of the great Los Angeles movie theatres of the Golden Age—the Earl Carroll, the Orpheum, the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse—only two-thirds the size and straining beneath several decades of structural neglect.

It didn't look like so much from the outside. The triangular marquee hung over the sidewalk, the box office booth directly beneath it, protruding between the doors on either side. The concession stand faced the doors across the lobby, with the stairs that led up to the restrooms and the balcony on the right. But it was in the auditorium where it really came alive. The inner walls peeled away from the screen and gave way to twin balconies that met the upper circle. The house drapes were emerald green, and the seats were upholstered red in the traditional style, often coated in a thin layer of white dust that had escaped the concrete dome beyond the wood-carved ceiling features. During a loud movie, you could see it fall though the projector beam and manifest on screen in spectral plumes, as though the building itself had something to add to the proceedings. A cluster of five seats had been removed from the front two rows, and cordoned off by warning tape, due to an incident with falling masonry that saw someone end up in the emergency room. But in spite of its crumbling walls, threadbare carpet, and the occasional stone projectile, when the lights went down it was spectacular; the dynamic arc of its sweeping interiors unperturbed by cracks, fractures, and fissures in the brickwork. The Palace View was a character in every film I ever saw there, and I viewed it the way someone would their local church, as though all the prayer that had ever been conducted within its walls had infused the

very materials from which it was built with a mystical history that transcended bricks and mortar.

I had been a patron of the Palace View for some years. How I came to be here at all is an unusual tale, but we'll get to that. For now, all you need to know is this: my name is Ella D. Valentine, I was roughly 27 years old, and I loved the movies. Every time I strutted up to the box office, handed over my five dollars and felt that rough, pulpy texture of the ticket, I entered another realm in which my thoughts were free and whatever was missing in my soul was temporarily replenished. How many times I'd repeated this I couldn't tell you. Thousands. *Thousands*, I hear you scoff. You would have to go to the movies every single night of your life for three solid years to reach those numbers! To which I would say yes. Yes you would.

Could you think of a more perfect way to live?

I didn't think so.

"El."

I knew that low-down drawl anywhere.

Marshall loped down the stairs on the far side of the lobby, the shaved-scalp atop his six-seven frame bobbing like a buoy above the heads of the crowd. He squeezed through the queue lined at the door of the auditorium and emerged in front of me by the concession stand. "Got your video tapes," he said.

"All of them?" I said.

"All of 'em."

"What would I do without you, man?" I threw him a hug.

"You'd be watchin' *Mrs. Doubtfire* like everyone else."

"You got them with you?"

"I'll bring 'em by your place. Going outta town for a few days in the mornin'.

Saturday?”

“Saturday’s good. Shall we—”

“Yeah. Fillin’ up quick tonight. Ain’t wanna end up in the circle.”

There were no seat numbers at the Palace. You got your ticket and took your chances, and the dress circle was for squares. We sidled into the line, pushed through the doors and scanned around for free seats.

“Ella!”

“Where’s that from?”

“Yonder.” Marshall pointed towards three sets of hands beckoning us. Ivana, Marlon, and Sherrilyn, another three of our not insignificant number. Each a dedicated cinephile with a taste for the lowest of the low. No matter how you entered this world, if you stayed here long enough and you paid attention, you found yourself in the trashcan. There was only one way and that way was *down*.

“Scooch up, people,” Marlon said to a handful of strangers once we’d clamoured our way to their spot.

Marshall and Marlon bumped chests.

“Night off for the troops?” I said, sitting down and blowing kisses along the row.

“Joe’s got the booth tonight,” Ivana said. Joseph was her step brother. The two of them were the Palace’s projectionists. “Chloe’s out front.”

“Can’t even leave on your downtime,” I said. “That’s some dedication.”

“What else we gunna do?” Sherrilyn said. “Go rough-it down at the Cineplex?”

“I hear *Free Willy 2: The Adventure Home* is a baddie.”

“Catch me when they get to *Fuck Willy 3: The Road To Hell*.”

“Can we switch?” I asked.

“Fine,” Sherrilyn said and switched seats with me.

“Something I said?” Marlon asked.

“Not you, man,” I replied.

“That’s her favourite seat,” Ivana said.

“They’re all the same?”

“Nuh uh,” I said and gripped the armrests. “Dead centre of the house.”

The curtains drew back, the lights dimmed, and the screen came alive. No commercials, just that grimy trailer, its curtains blowing lightly in the breeze beneath the title card: *Pink Flamingos*.

Marlon looked around Ivana towards me. “How many this week?”

“Every screening.”

“Six,” Marshall added.

“Damn, who needs to see *Pink Flamingos* six days in a row?”

“Seven,” I added. “Run’s not over until tomorrow.”

Marlon snorted in that way that he did.

“Who’s free Saturday?” I said. “Marshall’s bringing some new tapes over.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Marlon said. “Movie party up in the hills.”

Sherrilyn nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“No fair,” Ivana moaned.

“Can’t you pull some strings?” I said.

“Nothing I can do,” Sherrilyn said. “Joseph’s off Saturday. Everyone else is—”

“*Shhhhh*.”

We all turned back to look at the shusher. He glared at us like Sergeant Howie scowling at the islanders in *The Wicker Man*. He, too, had wandered into a world whose customs were unfamiliar.

“What’s his problem?” Ivana whispered.

“John Waters,” Marlon said. “Brings out the ‘serious’ types.”

“*Shhhhhhhh.*”

We giggled down into our seats for a few seconds then clammed it for a while. It wasn't worth the argument.

But we weren't the only ones prone to discarding the standard movie theatre etiquette. When “Connie Marble”, one of the film's antagonists, tells another character that “There's just two kinds of people...my kind of people, and assholes”, no less than five people called along with the line before devolving into juvenile laughter.

Now he brought out the big guns: a turbo-powered shush in which you could hear the saliva gurgling behind his teeth like boiling water.

Audible laughter flittered around the auditorium.

You could feel the man seethe without having to look around.

It might not seem like much, but this is where it all started. You never knew when some seemingly insignificant occurrence was going to rear its ugly head and change the world.

So, when “Crackers” and “Cookie” incorporate a live chicken into their fornications in a dirty outhouse, I was hardly surprised when someone produced a rubber chicken and threw it out into the audience. It got tossed from row to row, up into the dress circle, back down again, half the crowd cluck-clucking along, until it finally soared from the front row, missing us by just a few inches and landing slap-down on the shusher, square in the kisser. No shush on Earth was powerful enough to express his rage. He exploded into a torrent of insults aimed at everyone around him. We all stared dumbly at him as he deplored us. We were “heathens”, “cretins”, “uncultured swine”, “animals who should have been locked up in the Los Angeles

Zoo”. No one took it personally. First, it was unclear at whom exactly he was directing his invective. Second, few present were likely to completely disagree.

Our indifference, however, did nothing to temper his rage and only made him madder. He yelled over to an usher, a young, bewildered looking man who’d been having just as good a time as anyone prior to the outburst. The usher tried to calm him to no avail. He was demanding someone, *anyone*, be ejected. To make an example, teach some manners, show that actions have consequences etcetera. The usher shrugged, said he couldn’t just throw anyone out at random. The shusher looked around the auditorium, then directly at us. “Them,” he said. “They started it. I want them removed.”

The usher said he couldn’t remove us.

The shusher spluttered, demanded to know why, emphasising every word with flailing arms.

The usher stuttered.

“That’s it,” the man bellowed. “Get me the manager. Stop the film.” He waved his arms towards the booth.

The film didn’t stop.

“I said *get me the manager!*”

“That is the manager,” said the usher.

Sherrilyn stood up.

“You’re the...? What kind of place is this? What kind of—”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave, sir.”

“You’re asking *me* to leave?”

“We’ve been very tolerant. But we can’t accept this kind of behaviour here.”

“This kind of...how very dare you? Don’t you know who I am?”



“You’re the man who’s ruining the film for the rest of our paying customers.”

Sherrilyn wedged her thumb and forefinger into her teeth and blasted a loud whistle out into the theatre. Two more ushers appeared. “Remove this gentleman, please,” she said.

The other two ushers looked as unsure of themselves as the the first guy. They approached his seat with trepidation. The man lashed out feebly as they neared him.

“Can you help them?” Sherrilyn said to Marshall.

Marshall nodded as if he’d been asked to pass the salt. He squeezed out into the aisle, reached over to the man, grabbed him by the collar of his sports jacket and led him up the gangway, the ushers lagging behind. You could still hear the man squawking as they reached the door. And Marshall threw him out just in time for us to turn back to the screen and catch a man prolapsing his anus in time the jaunty rhythm of “Surfin’ Bird”.

## Chapter Three

I figured it wouldn't hurt to enquire. That couple were weird but all of Johnny's friends were kind of...off. What could you expect from a demographic that spent every weekend on an array of kaleidoscopic drugs? It stoked a certain mood in some. And on a scale of one-to-ten, that couple's odd-factor barely brushed the halfway mark.

I phoned the number. No one answered.

Johnny called. He didn't mention my no-show. But made me promise I'd be out later that night. 'It'll be a mellow one' he said. But all that really meant is we'd be going out local, not trawling back and forth along a half-mile strip of the North Circular looking for the right exit for abandoned UPS sorting depot or an old, boarded-up cinema.

I agreed without protest. I didn't feel like it. But I'd avoided going out for weeks and I was running out of excuses. We were the same age but Johnny retained a youthful energy I couldn't match. I felt old in comparison. I felt old without the comparison. But he had his reasons and I didn't begrudge them. And as long as it was only going to be 'a mellow one'.

I hung up the call. Before I could put my phone away it rang again.

'What is your enquiry?'

'You called me.'

'That is correct. We're returning your call.'

'Right. Okay. Hi. How are you?'

...

'Hello?'

‘What is your enquiry?’

‘I heard about some work.’

‘“Work”?’

‘I was hoping to get some details.’

‘“Details”?’

‘Yep. Details.’

‘About the “work”?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Where did you get this number?’

‘A friend. Or a friend of a friend. She said you were looking for people.’

‘That’s all she said?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘...’

‘Oh. Barrington. She said to ask for Barrington.’

‘Mr. Barrington doesn’t speak on the phone. Appointment only.’

‘But—’

‘Appointment only.’

‘Okay.’

‘9pm.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight. Take down this address.’

‘Couldn’t we do this on Monday?’

‘Mr. Barrington is a busy man. Take down this address.’

\*

BARTHOLOMEW BENEDICT BARRINGTON

OBSCENITY LAWYER

...read the plaque on the third floor.

I pulled the card out. Number and logo only, which I now realised was three Bs linked together in a triangle. No mention of law, obscene or otherwise. I glanced around the hall. Back at the plaque on the door. Back at the card.

Obscenity lawyer?

*We're looking for someone just like you.*

*You don't even know me.*

*Sure we do...*

*...You're Johnny's friend.*

\*

'Mr. Barrington will see you now.'

A man barrels into the waiting area. Over six-feet tall and broad like a doorman, wearing a three-piece suit of an ill-fitting cut and fabric that's mismatched across the outfit. Loose grey slacks in the style of a gentleman's beach trouser, a camel-coloured jacket with a touch of suede about it, and a bold, forest-green waistcoat protruding at the centre, whose breast-pieces meet at the tip of his beard. The kind of suit a lifelong bohemian might wear under duress when forced to go formal for a function or a family wedding.

'Mr. Barrington?' Travis rises to Barrington's outstretched arm but meets his

sizeable grip at an awkward angle, forcing the larger man to guide the handshake.

‘So they call me.’ Barrington shakes his hand with vigour and guides him through to his office with a hand on his shoulder. ‘Sit down, sit down.’ He lumbers over to a filing cabinet and rummages through a drawer.

Unlike the pristine reception area, boxes and folders and papers lay wherever space allows. A small lamp provides the only lighting.

‘Now.’ Barrington produces a slim file and throws it down onto the large desk among the staples and paper clips. ‘I suppose you’re wondering what this whole shitshow is about?’ His chair creaks as he relaxes into it. He removes his glasses and polishes a lens with a faded purple tie.

Travis’s chair is smaller than Barrington’s, narrow, and closer to the ground; his knees and elbows clash between the armrests. ‘Shitshow?’

‘Surveillance. Cold, cold case to be straight with you. Colder than a corpse in the Thames in December. However, certain, ah, parties, with money to burn and a vested interest, have kept an open eye on the last known whereabouts for some time now.’

‘Last known whereabouts?’

‘All in here.’

Travis winces as he flicks through the photographs. He clicks his jaw. Twice. Again. He fans the photos out and lays them on the desk. Dick pictures. Dozens of them. All depicting the male member in various states of existential trauma: contorted by weights, impaled through the urethra, strapped into complex apparatus—steel frames and thin leather straps in intricate weaves—and braced against their bindings like rage-addled gladiators.

‘I’ll be damned. Mix up with the day job.’

‘This isn’t the day job?’

Barrington returns to the filing cabinet, leaving the dicks face-up on the desk. 'This is *not* the day job.' He plucks another file from the drawer and hands it over. 'Try this.'

More photographs. This time, a house. Each is identical save for the light conditions, as though taken at different times of the day. Of the house itself little is notable: plain brick; an gravel drive beside a footpath; a shallow concrete awning over the doorstep. The pictures have the quality of CCTV stills, the kind you might see alongside a direct line to the crime squad.

'What do you think?'

Travis thumbs back and forth through the images.

'Nothing at all?'

'It's a house.'

'The last known whereabouts.'

'Of who?'

'The missing person.'

'What missing person?'

'The missing person to whom these last known whereabouts are attributed.'

Travis stands up. 'There's been some kind of mistake.' He offers a consolation handshake across the desk. 'Sorry for wasting your time.'

Barrington doesn't reciprocate. He takes up a pen and scrawls something on a notepad, tears the page from the spiral binding and slaps it down on top of the dick pictures. 'You will, of course,' he slides the note further toward Travis with his ring finger, 'be handsomely compensated for your time.'

Travis shakes his head.

'Cash.'

He glances down at the note.

‘Per week.’

He lingers.

‘First week up front.’

He withdraws his hand.

‘On board?’

He sits back down. ‘What do you want me to do?’

Barrington retrieves a set of keys from a drawer and flings them over the desk.

‘You’ll relocate tomorrow.’

‘Relocate?’

‘Necessary, I’m afraid. But there’s nothing to stop you from maintaining your current lodgings, should you wish to.’ He writes an address down and hands it to Travis.

‘This is the house in the pictures?’

‘*Those* are the last known whereabouts. *This* is an apartment across the street from which you will monitor said whereabouts. You’ll find all the necessary conveniences for comfortable living have been provided.’

‘I just watch the house? Through the window?’

‘No, no. We wouldn’t want you to be seen gawping from the bedroom like some kind of neighbourhood pervert. Good lord. There’s a bespoke security system, fitted for purpose.’

‘Are there some kind of instructions?’

‘All perfectly self explanatory I assure you. Ever watched a movie?’

‘Sure.’

‘Then you’ve already mastered the skill-set. Park yourself on your *derrière* and

point your face towards the screen with your eyes open.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Anything else I should know?'

'Discretion.' Barrington tosses a brown paper bag into Travis's lap, produces a mobile phone, and slides it over the desk. 'It is of utmost importance that we maintain clandestine operations. Your continued involvement *depends* upon your discretion. You would be wise to make appropriate excuses with whosoever may note your absence. We can't take any chances. Feel free to count.'

Travis pries into the bag and takes a long, measured breath. He closes it, folds the excess paper around the bundle of notes and zips it into his inside pocket. 'It's all good. I'll count it later.'

'Grand. Well, if we're all set, I'd say that concludes our business for today.'

'What's their name?'

'Whose name?'

'The missing person.'

'That won't be necessary. But while we're the subject of names. Listen carefully. You must go to every effort to avoid fraternising with your, ah, neighbours during your stay. Some contact, however, is likely unavoidable. Should anyone enquire, you are not, under any circumstances, to disclose your identity nor your purpose at the property.'

'What should I say?'

'Tell them you are an artist.'

'What kind of artist?'

'Any kind of artist. You're there to rediscover your artistic spirit or some such.'



You're there with your work-in-progress.'

'What's the work-in-progress?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'But what if someone asks?'

'You've seen art before, haven't you? Make something up. Or steal an idea from someone else. And, *should* anyone ask you to identify yourself,' Barrington squeezes out from behind his desk and opens the door. 'Your name, from now on, is Spencer Dean.'

## Chapter Four

Home was a gaudy, fifteen-thousand square-foot mansion sculpted deep into a hillside on Laurel Canyon, south of Mulholland Drive, west of Laurel Canyon Boulevard. On the outside, it looked like any other bruise on the landscape you'd find up in the Hollywood Hills. The inside, not so much. I'd lived there alone for the better part of a decade at that point and I was not exactly what you'd call house proud. I didn't want a cleaner but neither did I want to clean. So I sat there in the dust until I started to sneeze; only then would I get off my ass and wipe the place down. It was a good barometer. Kept me humble enough while ensuring I didn't go totally feral. And anyway, I had to do something to offset myself against my neighbours: various Hollywood luminaries who never set foot on the street and scurried around behind tinted glass only when they thought no one was looking. Me, I'd go stand out front in my pyjamas, pick my nose and gawp at my reflection rippling across the windows of limousines as they rolled slowly by. I'd go for long walks around the neighbourhood, hungover, half a head of hair matted to my scalp from falling asleep somewhere dumb and uncomfortable. Five times now, someone called the cops on me. I let them call. What were they gonna do, throw me in jail for a dirty house, a quarter jar of magic mushrooms, and a pirate copy of *Emmanuel in America*? Good luck. I'd be back on the street before the sun went down.

“Don't you have a projector?” Marlon said from the depths of an oversized armchair. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* played on VHS while we waited for Marshall. Thin shafts of sunlight sliced through the parts of the windows the drapes wouldn't quite cover, no matter how assertively I yanked them closed. One sliver had slipped across the floor in the last hour and now blotted out the picture on the TV set,

leaving us both squinting at the bleached-out image of Joan Crawford scowling at the camera.

I got up and moved the TV to a better spot. "I've got one," I said. "I never use it."

"Why?"

"Too much hassle. Too many cords."

"Like, two more than you're using already, El."

"I know," I said. "Two more's two more too many." I wasn't exactly what you'd call a luddite. Nor was I actively opposed to technology. I just didn't want to fuck around with two more cords if I could help it. And I could help it. Most people up there had their own little movie theatres built. The real goobers even had them with full 35mm projection, or else they mounted Fujitsu plasma screens up in every room of the house. But in spite of my abundance of free time, I didn't have time for that. I just had Marshall mount my TV/VCR combo onto a set of wheels and I dragged it around the house with me wherever I wanted to watch movies. Right now we were in the lobby, which I used more than any of the proper rooms. There were rooms I hadn't even looked in for years now, covered in plastic sheets so I didn't have to clean them.

"Your icebox won't open." Sherrilyn was mixing drinks with Joseph out in the kitchen. Lucky for them I'd reached my dust limit just a few days before so the place wasn't too unsanitary.

"There's another one by the front door," I shouted.

Sherrilyn came out of the kitchen, crossed the tiled foyer and stopped in front of the icebox. "Why's it by the door?"

"That's where he left it."

"Who?"

“The delivery guy.”

“You could have just defrosted the other one.”

“I have no idea how to do that.”

“Switch it off at the outlet and wait. Put some towels down.”

“That’s it?”

She took a tray of ice back to the kitchen. “Fucking rich kids.”

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

The intercom squealed. I rolled off the couch and buzzed the gate open, unlatching the door before I sat back down. Tyres crunched up the drive, followed by the slow bleep of the gate closing behind them. A door slammed, a trunk, then Marshall’s boots, clomping up to the stoop. He shouldered the door open and kicked it closed behind him.

“Hey hey hey.” I jumped out of my seat and took the box he was holding. “Love you, man. Serious like, love love.” I flopped back down onto the sofa and rifled through the tapes.

“You guys seen the paper?”

“Yes,” I said, without looking up. “Never miss an issue.” I pulled out a copy of *Faccia di spia* and scrutinised its Xeroxed cover.

“You’ll wanna see this.”

“Will I?” I looked up from the box.

“Wanna see what?” Sherrilyn snatched the paper from Marshall.

“Check the film reviews.”

Joe came through with a tray of drinks and handed them out, dense cloudy glasses full of crushed ice, topped off with dark red liquor.

“What’s this?” Marshall asked as he took a highball.

Joe cackled. “It goes unnamed. Like only the oldest of evil.”

We all took a sip.

Marlon shuddered as he swallowed. “Jesus, I’m crying here.”

*“Motherfucker!”*

“What?”

Sherrilyn flung the paper across the room and drained her glass. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and went back to the kitchen. “Motherfucker,” she said again, this time quietly to herself.

“Holy shit.” Marlon had picked up the paper.

I watched from the sofa as his eyes scanned rapidly across the text.

“He wrote about us.”

“Who?”

“That guy.”

“What guy?”

“The shusher. Remember that ‘don’t you know who I am’ bit?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, who he is is Randall Haynes.”

“Randal fuckin’ Haynes,” Marshall added, nodding into his unnamed drink.

“Who’s Randall Haynes?” I asked.

“Big-wig milquetoast critic,” Joe said. “Contrarian’s contrarian.”

“What does that mean?”

“That he writes passionate defences of the most insipid shit solely to piss off his former peers who *he* deems too contrarian. And especially those who criticised him for taking backhanders for good reviews of insipid shit.”

“He was good, once,” Marshall said.

“Yeah, he was.”

“So, what did he write?”

Sherrilyn emerged from the kitchen with a fresh drink. “Read it out,” she said.

“It’s at the end of some sort of monthly round up,” Marlon said. ““I have been to a great many movie theatres in my time, but none so vulgar as the Palace View, whose patrons’ bad manners are rivalled only by those of the management. It is a living testament to every bad habit of the basement theatres of the “grindhouse” era. Those deplorable places, however, at least had the good sense to keep themselves out of sight, hidden in bad neighbourhoods behind seedy doorways whose thresholds no right-thinking citizen would ever think to cross. The Palace View exhibits no such humility. Its marquee still glows proudly over a busy street and beckons all and sundry. Only once inside do you see it creak beneath obvious neglect. The detail of its architecture scuffed and sullied, ripe with stale marihuana smoke, and with bathrooms as filthy as the crass vernacular of its guests. It is heartbreaking to see a once-magnificent venue such as the Palace View wasted on the most tawdry of exploitation cinema and its savage disciples. And I, for one, will never visit there again. Avoid at all costs.””.

“Motherfucker.”

“Who cares what some ageing critic thinks?” I took the paper from Marlon and glanced through the passage. “Think of it as a compliment.”

“I care,” Sherrilyn said. “Someone call me a taxi.”

“Why?” I said.

“It might not matter to you. But I have to try and make money. Will someone please call me a taxi. The phone’s probably ringing off the hook right now.”

She was referring to Aubrey, the owner of the Palace. He never visited in person but he was fond of an indignant phone call whenever something went wrong.

Marshall pulled out the directory and dialled for a cab.

“How did this even get through editorial?” Joe asked. “Isn’t this, like, libel? You could sue.”

“Burden of proof’s on the plaintiff in libel cases,” Sherrilyn said. “And I can’t prove libel if half of it’s fucking true!”

“I see,” Joe said. “Guess that’s an issue.”

“The restrooms are fine!” I interjected.

“Right it’s an issue.” Sherrilyn rummaged through her purse. “We’re showing *Sense and Sensibility* this week. What’s the point in debasing ourselves like that if we’re not even gonna make bank.”

“I’ll cover you,” I said. “Dollar for dollar. We’ll launder that shit right into your cash register. Aubrey never need know anything. It’ll blow over.”

“That’s...thank you, El. I mean it. But that’s not a sustainable business plan. What if it doesn’t blow over?”

“It will.”

“It’s the L.A. fucking Times, El.”

“Taxi,” Marshall said, peering from the window.

Sherrilyn said goodbye and grumbled under her breath as she left.

Right now, you’re probably wondering what’s going on with me. How does this person with no job (true), no talent (also true), and no ambition (as before), live up in one of the prosperous neighbourhoods in the Western world, where she slums about with the sun blocked out and drinks in the daytime, yet is still at liberty to offer unspecified amounts of financial aid to ailing movie theatres? Well, the truth is I

inherited all this. The house and every last stick of furniture, the obscene bank balance, the investment portfolio, the icebox, all of it belonged the worst movie mogul in the history of Hollywood. My adoptive father, the now deceased Elmore Leonard Valentine.



## Chapter Five

I sat on the bus trying to conjure a plausible excuse for an extended absence. I hadn't left London in more than a decade. No holidays. No weekends away. No sojourns to the countryside to 'recharge the batteries' or whatever it is other people do. I went out with Johnny on the weekends. Went to work. But aside from that, if I wasn't taping up boxes in a warehouse or out on some unavoidable domestic errand, the only place you'd ever find me was at home. There was nothing that would go unquestioned without spinning some elaborate fiction. It was one thing lying to Johnny by omission. I could manage that and I didn't feel too bad about it. I needed the money. But I wasn't about to construct a whole framework of bullshit. It was pointless, anyway. He'd know I was lying from the off. And not because I was any stranger to lies. I was a prolific liar in several areas of life. I lied to Judas and the Inland Revenue. I lied to my boss. To the council tax office. But I never lied to Johnny and I wasn't about to start. The more I thought about it, the more the whole thing seemed like a bad idea.

But then I felt the significant wedge of cash in my pocket. If I decided against the job, I'd have to return it. Barrington was clearly working for someone he wasn't able to name—*Certain parties with money to burn*—who doled out cash money in brown paper bags to strangers on a handshake. I didn't want these people hounding me any less than WDC environments. And if what I'd seen so far was anything to go by, it seemed unlikely that they believed in such courtesies as written forewarnings. So I decided not to decide at all until the following day. I wouldn't mention it, but figured maybe I could get some info on my sources without giving anything away.

Johnny texted to tell me they'd moved on to a club south of the river. Said to

namecheck him on the door and they'd let me through. The usual drill. Because Johnny was less a punter than a service provider, and fulfilled an important role as the purveyor of fine uppers and hallucinogens sometimes troublesome to come by. A niche in a recreational drug market flooded with jaundiced crystal MDMA and cocaine cut with forty-percent laxative. He also believed in excellent customer service. Never over-charged or sold what he knew to be an inferior product. And was the first drug dealer in the history of England who said 'there in ten minutes' and showed up in eight. This psychotropic service with a smile—money-back guarantee and taste-testers included—saw Johnny welcome backstage anywhere he went. A privilege extended to me whenever I tagged along. But still, he had rules. Business hours were Five to midnight. Weekends only. If he didn't like you he wouldn't sell you anything. And he never, ever sold drugs on the dance floor.

\*

They're gathered around a table beneath a naked purple lightbulb. The room is small and the ceiling is low. Years' worth of graffiti fights for space across the walls. Bottles and plastic glasses and smoking paraphernalia cover the tabletop, tinted gently violet. Loud music close by. A muted bass presses through the space in waves. Several conversations take place at once.

Johnny P. sits in the middle of a bench along one side with a pile of baggies on the table in front of him, nodding along with the intruding rhythm.

Travis speaks into his ear. 'Blue hair. Massive glasses like Jackie O. Friends of that guy.' He mimes the glasses, circling his eyes with his fingers.

Johnny takes something from one of the baggies. 'What guy?' He squints at what

he's holding, tears it in two and holds half out to Travis. 'Aperitif?'

Travis waves it away. 'Come on, what's her name? Who is she?'

'I'll take it.' A blonde guy opposite interrupts. 'Sure you don't want?'

'I'm good.'

The guy reaches out but a woman with a septum ring leans in before he can get there and licks Johnny's finger. The guy bangs on the table. 'Oh, bitch.'

She pokes her tongue out, showing him the blotter before making a big show of swallowing it. 'Better than a slow bitch.'

Johnny wipes his finger on his shirt and offers the remaining half. The guy leans forward with his mouth open and Johnny draws back.

'Hands, people, hands. What are we, dogs?' He presses the half into the guy's outstretched palm.

Travis turns Johnny towards himself. 'So?'

'What were you saying?'

'The woman. Blue hair, big glasses.'

'No idea.'

'They knew your name.'

'That could be anyone. What's this about anyway? You got a thing for her?'

'Nothing like that. She just...told me about a job.'

'And?'

'She left before I could get a number.'

'What was the job?'

Travis hesitates.

'Well?'

'She didn't say.'

‘So she never gave you a number and never told you what the job was? Sounds amazing.’

‘Come on, man. I need a lead. Just think.’

‘Not getting anything.’

‘What about the guy? Looks like a film nerd from the sixties. Fucking Jean-Luc Godard looking guy.’

‘Hey Johnny, can I get some—’

‘Wait.’ Travis snaps back at the voice.

Johnny sets his drink down. Takes a huge gulp of air and puts his hand on his chest. ‘Oh fuck.’

‘What? You know him?’

‘No, I’m...’ He lets out a long whistle of air. ‘Acid’s just kicked in.’

A newly insistent wave of bass shakes the walls and rattles the bottles around the table. Johnny responds to the increased sound pressure by opening his satchel and swiping the baggies into it with his forearm. ‘That’s us.’ He slides out from behind the table. ‘Sure you don’t want anything. Before we head up?’

‘I do.’

Johnny looks around at the voice. ‘Bar’s closed.’ He turns back to Travis. ‘Last orders.’

Travis takes a deep breath.

Johnny smiles, his head loose on his shoulders.

Travis looks into his eyes, smiles back. ‘Nothing too strong,’

‘Just the thing.’ Johnny extracts something from his bag.

Travis swallows it without asking what it is and follows Johnny out of the room, up an iron staircase, and down a long corridor. They stop before a set of double doors.

Johnny puts his arm around Travis and gives him a squeeze, then they push on through into a hazy underworld of dry ice and strobe lights.

\*

I don't remember saying goodbye to Johnny that night. Only floating home at dawn. The low vibration of the night still reverberating around my bones. In the lucid afterglow of whatever Johnny'd given me, I'd resolved to reject Barrington's offer. Fuck him. Fuck the money. And fuck the landlords. A trajectory of thought that was wholly dependent on a peaceful inner world that cared not for the problems of money or anything so earthly and crude. It wasn't an attitude that hung around. Ecstatic, but ephemeral. And useless in the cold light of the late afternoon.

I sat up in bed and pulled the curtain back.

Grey, but still light.

For a while I just stayed there, slumped against the headboard. Slowly indexing various pains. Gravel-throat. Obligatory headache. Aching hip—a new, recurring pain that had sprung up only in the last year or so. Often the first thing that brought me back to reality when the drugs wore off. Come-downs now far exceeded the twenty-four hour standard. Sometimes stretched from weekend to weekend. Staring at the back wall of my packing bench. Thinking about everyone I've ever known. Missing them all and then forgetting.

Forgetting them all and forgetting myself.

Not knowing where I was.

Who I was.

Looking at my hands, not knowing what they're for.

Until someone said my name and I'd start all over. Thinking, missing, forgetting. Repeat, repeat. This is why I'd tried to stop. I didn't want to think or not think this much about anything.

The sounds of the house brought me round. Singing from the kitchen. Doors banging. The old man next door trying to suppress his worsening cough. I remembered I had a decision to make. One that couldn't wait until tomorrow. I shouldn't have taken anything. Should have come home early and woken up straight. The thought of leaving my room was horrifying. I didn't want to see or speak to anyone.

But if I didn't leave now...

A knot of nervous energy spawned in the pit of my stomach. Like I was about to deliver a speech or hurl myself from an aeroplane. I climbed out of bed and limped around the room on my bad hip. I made the bed. Gathered up the clothes I'd left lying around. I picked up my jacket and a phone dropped out onto the floor. Not mine. The one Barrington had given me. I hung the jacket on the back of the door and picked the phone up.

I looked back at the jacket.

\*

Travis frisks the jacket. Pads down the lining. Pockets in jeans. Down on his knees, searching beneath the furniture. He empties the washing basket, rifles the clothes, shakes them out. He drags the sheets off the bed, lifts the mattress and yanks it away from the frame. Now he's tearing novels off the shelf, sliding his hand up behind them. Saying 'no no no' to no one. He pulls the wardrobe away from the wall, the

bed-frame, the sideboard. He circles the room. Breathes faster. Shallower. He reaches out, steadies himself. Stands there. A pallid shade of green. He sweats from his temples. Still for a moment. Then lowers himself to the floor. Sits cross-legged in the upturned room.

\*

I sat there for over an hour. The solution was obvious but it took me a while to see it. If I put in one week, I'd earn back the lost cash. In a way it was good. Made my decision for me. One week. I could get away for that long without telling Johnny anything. He wouldn't be around till next weekend anyway.

I packed a light bag. A few clothes, the phone, the debt letter, the card. I went to shower but found the bath full of bike parts so I washed in the sink. It felt disrespectful to leave my room that way. But I told myself it didn't matter. I'd fix it up next week when I got back. I didn't have the wherewithal to do anything about it then and I knew I wouldn't want to leave if I cleaned it up. So I gathered my things and checked twice that the door was locked before I left.

\*

It's late when Travis arrives, a cloudless night, with a sky a deeper blue than is usual over London.

He wanders along Highgate's winding lanes, the occasional blossom still hanging brightly among the autumnal colours. Gold-red leaves blow about in the breeze, gathering in the doorways of book shops, cafes, and boutiques selling home-made

children's toys and expensive, hand-carved footstools.

On locating the street, he finds it locked off by a security gate. He takes out Barrington's note. Beneath the address is the gate code. He punches it into the keypad.

The lane beyond the gate is exquisitely illuminated. The street-lamps aren't brighter than those on the roads leading in, but they emit a quality of light that's more atmospheric, warmer. Romantic, almost.

The road curls away downhill in two directions.

Travis follows the road to the left. While there's the occasional gate with a visible plaque or cast-iron digits screwed to the odd door, most of the houses don't have numbers displayed. Or they're obscured by hornbeams and holly trees, hanging baskets, creeping ivy. He meets a crossroads. He can turn left, go straight ahead, or go right, which appears to be the road that leads back to the gate from the opposite side. He goes forward. The road continues to sink into the hill, and tall trees line the backs of the houses. Another minute or so and he's back at the crossroads. Eventually, he finds himself back at the gate. He takes another pass. Paying closer attention.

He stops.

The house from the photographs, situated on the interior side of the loop that heads back up toward the crossroads. Travis looks to the block opposite. Two up, two across. Two doors on either side of the building: one at street level, another directly above at the head of a metal staircase. He checks the numbers on each of the ground-level flats, then comes around to the right-hand side of the block and takes the stairs up to the first-floor entrance.

'Does the sky look different to you?'

He looks toward the voice. A woman, early thirties, in a mixture of leisure wear



and paint-splattered house clothes, sits on the side wall to the next house along, kicking her heels against the brickwork. Nothing else stirs except the clicks and creeks that come from the woods behind the houses.

‘Well?’

‘Different how?’

‘Bluer.’

‘Bluer than what?’

‘Bluer than blue.’ She hops off the wall and approaches the staircase, places her right hand on the wall and her left upon the handrail. ‘What’s your name? What are you doing here?’

Travis steadies himself against the wall. Glances up at the door then back down at the woman. ‘I’m an artist.’

‘What kind of artist?’

He takes the rail with his other hand. ‘A failing artist.’

‘Is that what you’re doing here? Failing at art?’

Travis makes an ‘uh huh’ noise and continues to climb the stairs until he reaches the door.

‘Bye then,’

He looks back around.

‘Go on, then. In you go.’

Travis takes the key from his pocket in slides it into the lock. He twists the key and the door clicks open. He goes inside.

The woman says ‘Welcome.’

\*

Once I arrived I was asleep within minutes. Fell straight into bed without so much as a glance around the place. This was a temporary arrangement. No need to get comfortable.

## Chapter Six

Prior to the nineteen-eighties, the name of Elmore Valentine had never once been uttered in the society pages. He'd used pseudonyms for every project he'd ever been involved with: Walter Stanley, Leonard Bryce, Howard Scott—trying to design an identity as an enigma: an inner-circle Hollywood rumour about a wealthy producer who would swoop in with his millions and save failing productions from going under at the last minute. These funds, however—old California oil money, he'd never worked a day in his life—came with certain caveats: script revisions, the removal of anyone or anything he considered undesirable, and, ultimately, final cut. The anonymity shielded him from his reputation; with no stable name to associate with the hearsay, no one ever knew who he was when he approached. Only that he had abundant funds and was ready to surrender them at the stroke of a fountain pen. Productions were capsizing all the time, desperate for investment and willing to sign anything to secure it. And Valentine saw this vulnerability as a suitable avenue for his own agenda, knowing most filmmakers would choose a compromised movie over no movie at all. But these demands were not issued to serve some personal artistic vision. And, seemingly, prior to the nineteen-sixties, he'd had no connections to show-business at all. No. Valentine had simply been an avid fan of the movies throughout the forties and fifties, but found himself incensed at what he saw on the silver screen as the sixties dawned: the creeping, noxious, relentless march of the New Hollywood. No longer could he settle into his favourite movie theatre and find his personal values soothed and confirmed. Now, if he was to indulge his favourite pastime with any dedication, he was forced to run the gamut of drugs, violence, unruly teenagers and whacked-out hippies having promiscuous sex that didn't even serve the plot. Enough

was enough.

He knew nothing about making movies, although he did make a personal study of what he saw as the essentials. Where for most, however, this would entail dedicating oneself to some aspect of the production cycle: screenwriting or cinematography or production design, Valentine arrested his film-making philosophy from the Hays Code: the rules set out by the Motion Picture Association of America at the dusk of the silent era that restricted filmmakers from depicting depraved scenarios, nefarious language, or any other unchecked delinquency that might “lower the moral standards of those who see it”. The Motion Picture Production Code, as far as Valentine was concerned, had attained the status of scripture, due, in part, to his own sympathies with its message, but also to the document’s undeniable tone of religiosity, having been co-authored by a Catholic priest. The studios were commanded to “recognize the high trust and confidence which has been placed in them by the people of the world”, and to acknowledge the movies’ “value in *rebuilding the bodies and souls* of human beings”. American motion pictures were to “improve the race”, and to serve as a salve for an audience “exhausted with the realities of life”. The job of the producer was to “appeal to the soul through the senses” whilst simultaneously ensuring that no “Law, natural or human”, would ever go “ridiculed” nor “violated” with the affinity of the viewer. “Hence”, the document proclaims, “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin”. And so it was that Valentine’s destiny was settled, as he embarked upon a covert quest to reinstall these Golden Age anachronisms and destroy the New Hollywood from the inside out.

While this was a gradual process, there were two movies that urged Valentine onward from disgruntled customer to crusader for moral purity: one from the States and another from the other side of the Atlantic.

It was the dawn of a new decade. 1960. The invasion of Vietnam was well into its fifth year, Kennedy was elected as the 35<sup>th</sup> president of America, and *Psycho* was released upon an unsuspecting public, none more unsuspecting than Valentine. It was true that the Code no longer wielded the influence it once had—filmmakers were finding ever-more ways to transgress its guidelines—but occasionally a movie would announce its indifference in a way almost designed to stoke Valentine into anger. Although he hated everything about Hitchcock’s film: the violence, the dread, the ambiguity, there were two particular features that he would expound upon again and again. The lesser of these was the “absurd” explanation during the denouement. Norman Bates’s aberrant behaviour rinsed of sin with “psychology”. Were we supposed to feel sorry for the man? Because it felt very much the apology. As though *he* were a victim. Split personalities? Operating at odds? Laughable. Valentine would have no truck with such folly, no matter how many Viennese quacks you could find claiming otherwise. Guilt was guilt and evil did as evil would and that was the end of it. Bates killed those people wilfully. To end the film with these...*excuses*—the conceited expression of the psychiatrist, as though a sage bringing wisdom to the court and not some puffed-up charlatan spinning falsehoods for a pack of fools, rapt with attention, barely an objection between them—was an insult to the viewer and an insult to God. But, for Valentine, even this paled to the film’s most obscene feature: Marion Crane. Crane, and let’s be perfectly clear about this, was a thief. No petty thief either. She stole *forty-thousand dollars!* And not from any old yahoo, but from a fine American business man, the only man with any sense or decency in the entire movie. And yet, there we found the filmmaker portraying her in a compassionate light. Since when were larcenists appropriate subjects for sympathetic characters? Crane could not be victim *and* criminal. To posit her as such was unconscionable. It

mattered not that she had a change of heart at the last minute. Would she have even decided to return the money had she not spent the night at the Bates' Motel? A dubious chance at best. And *The Code* was unambiguous on the matter. Our sympathies should never be on the side of the criminal. No caveats. No exceptions. Not whenever we felt like it for the sake of a sob story and a pretty face. *Never!* How were we supposed to feel the requisite sympathy for her murder whilst knowing what she'd done? Why should anyone care that a swindler had met her consequences?

But this was only one of two catalysts on Valentine's journey of self-discovery. The second film's influence was not about the actual film, moreover the backlash. Because *Peeping Tom*, a British film released the same year as *Psycho* and not dissimilar in its themes, was roundly rejected by the British public: the filmmaker scorned, his career in ruins from which it never recovered. And yet, Alfred Hitchcock was celebrated in the States and went on to become a national treasure, no less. He wasn't even an American! It was humiliating, to say the least, not merely to see Hitchcock lauded, but to be schooled in the appropriate course of action by the British, of all people, with their tiny cars and their queer beverages. Who were they to be ahead of America on anything? Those days were firmly in the past. Yes they were our allies, but how could they continue this charade of being our equals? The sooner they recognised themselves as inferior stock the better for everyone. No wonder that empire of theirs was coming down around them. But then how was it that they saw what American audiences failed to see themselves?

But it wasn't merely the content of the movies that Valentine wished to see replaced. During his investigations, he'd been made aware of certain principles out of Europe, popular with young filmmakers of the day, that positioned movies not as entertaining commodities that provided the public with both moral certitude *and* plans

for Saturday evening, but as *art*. At this notion, he balked. He balked so hard he gave himself a minor heart attack (it was, in fact, during this brief hospital stay where he solidified his plans). Movies were not art, they were *movies*. An entirely different, and far superior, American cultural phenomenon. Art, nebulous a term as ever there was, came from God-knows where. It was bad enough that jazz was so ubiquitous in the movies. Jazz musicians may have been degenerates, but at least they were American! Art, however? Unacceptable. Art was the province of East-Coast dandies, Mid-Western hippies, and elderly widows painting landscapes in watercolour out on the cliffs behind their retirement homes. What did any of that have to do with the movies? Filmmakers were American craftsmen, like the builders of fine automobiles or the makers of pocket watches. Of course there was an artistry about those practices, but one of entirely different presumptions. Because movies, like watches and automobiles, had a use. A purpose. Provided a tangible value to the citizenry. And all while contributing vast riches to the economy and confirming America's status as the most sophisticated nation on Earth. Art, adversely, provided nothing of use whatsoever, made no money, and subverted the youth into thinking about things they should not think about at all. This notion of movies as art was, so he'd heard, embodied by the role of the director—now to be deemed the “author” of the “work”—whose artistic vision was considered supreme over the cast, the characters, the writer, the story and, in some cases, the film itself. An absurd idea that can only have been born in the mind of a pervert or a Frenchman, the latter of whom, naturally, Valentine blamed for this catastrophe. It had been the French, after all, who had spurred this decadent notion of the director artiste. But to finger the French in isolation would be letting the others, German, Italian, and the rest of them, off far too easily. So while he reserved his most pointed criticisms for usual suspects: François

Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, André Bazin (about any of whom he knew practically nothing), his daily gripes and grumbles all came addressed to something he dubbed “Europeanism”, his catch-all term for anything that dared to contaminate the ideals of American life. He now understood why he’d never been partial to *Citizen Kane*. Too expressionistic, too ambiguous, too German. And *too artistic*, much like Welles himself, one of an ever-growing number of Valentine’s homegrown nemeses. After these revelations, he began to note details in other movies that flouted the Code or surrendered to wanton directorial flourish. *Double Indemnity*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Big Sleep*, all movies he’d previously enjoyed, found their way onto his blacklist. A list that grew to such proportions that, by the time he arrived on his deathbed, he’d blackballed almost every major American film that had ever been produced. Because it wasn’t just the prospect of art to which he so objected, much as the crossbreeding of European art films and classic American cinema. An act of mongrelisation which he could not abide. And once he started to see it, he saw it everywhere, and named it an “abomination”. Worse, he claimed, far worse, than its undiluted European variant. Because Valentine didn’t care what went on in other countries. Let them wallow in filth and sin, he said. All the more room in the kingdom of heaven for the rest of us.

With all this talk of heaven and souls, evil and sin, I think it pertinent to mention that my ridicule is not meant to offend, nor deride anyone’s spiritual calling. But Valentine was not a religious man, only an opportunist and a fool of weak conviction. He did not know what he believed, which is why he was so desperate for confirmation. And he was far too selfish to be capable of serious faith. No. Valentine’s only motivation was revenge for his offended sensibilities, only dressed in a clergyman’s robes and whistling the Star Spangled Banner in the back seat of a sky-blue Cadillac.



*“A movie production should be a tight ship, not an artist’s commune.”*

—Elmore Valentine

So in addition to his quest to throw immoral content overboard, Valentine also planned to instigate a mutiny among the crew and degrade the director’s captaincy. As Valentine saw it, the director was more coxswain than captain. Yes, yes, he steered the ship, as someone must, but he does not choose the coordinates! The coxswain’s place was where it had always been, and where it should be: *the rear end of the boat*. And whosoever was to “helm” these productions would know who the real helmsman was, the authority from which the orders were issued: the Producer! He whose prior supremacy had been so rudely demoted in the motion picture hierarchy. And, like the Captain’s, the Producer’s authority was Law. He didn’t get his hands dirty with the rudder like some skivvy on the lower decks. His job was to focus the disparate attentions of the otherwise feckless men and bring them into unity for the common good; so the ship may safely meet its destination; so the war might be won; and so the crew may serve God and Country in a way befitting to its heritage. For was it not true, that if you traced the title of “Captain” through Old French to its Latinate origins, it appropriately translated as “Chief”, “Leader”, or “Head”; follow “coxswain” back to its Middle English, however, and it read as the no less true, and equally appropriate, “boat servant”.

But this ship was an invention of Valentine’s mind. And, as someone once said, when you invent the ship, you invent the shipwreck.

And so, upon discharge from his hospital bed, Valentine decided it was time to redress the offences of the motion picture industry, to temper its lusts, bury its

transgressions, and moderate its messages until they were acceptable for public consumption. It's unclear exactly how he came about his first project. He had no résumé, no connections, and no practical knowledge of film production. But he had something all the more valuable. Something everyone in Hollywood wants to get their hands on: a bottomless supply of American dollars. So he led with the money, and let his copious fortune do the talking. Still, it took him five years to finally muscle his way onto a project, but late in 1968, he took over production duties on his first feature film. He blitzed the script with red ink and paid some lowly screenwriter to implement his corrections before bringing the cast back for reshoots. The original director quit after meeting Valentine for only an hour, and was immediately replaced by someone who accepted the job for a quarter the rate, under no illusions as to who was in charge. Three actors were booted, all women, those he considered too devilish in their looks. He tampered with the sets, the lighting, the wardrobe. And hovered during shooting, oblivious to any on-set etiquette, infuriating the cast and crew with complaints and "recommendations", breathing cigar smoke over anyone within a five foot radius, and firing anyone who questioned his judgement.

He was especially ignorant of screenwriting conventions. His amended script was not amended at all, only heavily censored, and with absolutely no acknowledgement of the accumulating effect of all the changes, resulting in a screenplay that was not only boring and pious—not exactly what the audience was looking for on the annual eve of *Easy Rider*—but also an incomprehensible mess. To call the film a flop would be an understatement. (In truth, it's incredible that it was ever released at all). A movie that no one remembered after the opening weekend. A filmic non-entity. Not even interesting enough to warrant any ongoing negative attention. A result that he would repeat again and again. He killed seventeen films over the next ten years, each

and everyone of them a resounding failure. It would be an understatement to say he failed his original objective. But as the blockbuster came along and laid the New Hollywood to rest with its gargantuan profits, Valentine liked to entertain the notion that he'd been the one to dig the grave, even if he hadn't lowered the coffin.

## Chapter Seven

Travis lays still in the bed, arms by his sides, head tilted on the pillow like a body laid out for display in an open casket. He stares up at the ceiling for several minutes before standing to dress.

There's a living space, a bathroom, a small kitchen. He doesn't linger until he reaches the door at the end of the hallway.

In the otherwise dark and windowless room, numerous screens glow over a control panel: two meters wide, an array of dials and sliders embedded into its stippled vinyl surface. Travis flips a wall switch. A bulb hanging in the centre of the ceiling illuminates the swivel chair beneath it in a warm, fireside orange that pierces the teal-green glare of the monitors. He closes the door, shutting out any natural light, and sits down in the chair.

The screens all display the same image, the house across the street, in shades of greenish monochrome. Some in the modern style: flat screen, hyper-sharp, no bulk to the chassis; others are the cathode-ray tube type: fat little cubes with screens of convex glass; all affixed to the wall via a range of bolts and brackets. A complex web of cables and connectors hang behind them, pinned and guided by cable ties before vanishing into various hubs and mysterious black boxes. It might have looked high-tech a few years back. Now, though, it looks as though it's been assembled from the remaining stock of a bankrupt consumer electronics dealer.

Travis swivels on the chair and takes in the rest of the room.

Plain walls, ivory white. Floorboards with a natural varnish. Clear out the equipment and light a little incense and it could make a comfortable space for a tanning booth or a massage therapist.

Travis settles into the chair, looks up at the screens, and proceeds, as instructed, to monitor the last known whereabouts.

Twelve hours later, he emerges from the room.

The kitchen is reasonably stocked with non-perishable goods. He takes a can of pears to the kitchen table and peels the lid off. He eats half and pushes the can away.

He goes to the bedroom and lays down in the dark.

\*

When I lay down, an afterimage of the monitor arrangement was imprinted on my retinas, the impression splayed out across the ceiling. In place of the house, other images flickered and fizzled. Memories straining but failing to formalise. Faces of people I'd known. Places I'd been or thought I'd been. Close-ups. A shop-front, a raised eyebrow, a tower-block intercom. Then a wide savannah at a distance, a rain-soaked metropolis, snow-covered mountains. Then it's me. I'm younger. Much younger. In a burned out garage, kneeling in a circle around a homemade ouija board. Our fingers on an upturned shot glass robbed from the workingman's. We ask it questions but don't have any good ones. Is anyone there? How did you die? All pushing the glass across the letters. Pretending we're not. Pretending we're talking to the dead. Then we're running. Hiding in back alleys and crawling into bushes. Torchlight sweeps the hedgerows and we're holding our breath. Got caught thrashing out that motorbike we 'found' on that long strip of field up behind the maisonettes. Clinging to that older kid's waist I've never been so fast outside a car. Uneven ground. Wheels off the grass as we fly out the troughs. Lungs full of rushing air and I can't get a breath out. Gonna slip any moment. Right off the back of the saddle and

into the dirt. Then police lights up ahead and back to the bush and the sweeping torchlight. They ain't seen us. Just keep quiet and...

I woke before they saw me.

It was still the middle of the night. I sat on the edge of the bed and opened the window. Someone close by was playing music. Something orchestral. It rose in volume and eventually reached a subtle crescendo before it slowly faded leaving only the trees creaking in the wind.

\*

No one visited the house. No one left. Understandably absent of the usual stream of canvassers and junk-mailers in a gated community. But nothing even passed by. No single thing penetrated the frame of the shot. No cars. Not even a cat or a blackbird. Was the house even occupied? If it was, surely some kind of movement would be expected over the course of a week? And if it wasn't, wouldn't a house in a leafy city suburb like this be sought after? Where were the estate agents and potential buyers? It could be owned by a property investor, happy to let it sit there gathering value. But if profit was the motive, who would miss a trick on renting it out in the meantime? Maybe it was occupied but the owner was away? Or nocturnal? A night worker? Or maybe there was something wrong with the house? Unsafe, in some way. A murderer may have lived there. Buried his victims in the garden or plastered them into the interior walls. Maybe it was cursed. Condemned.

As the week progressed, the border between sleeping and waking softened. The light from the monitors was so vivid in the dark room that the impression it made lasted for hours, sometimes right through to the morning. During the days I sat there

mesmerised by the static image of the last known whereabouts, watching but seeing nothing. I quickly began to rely upon it. Learning to trust in the absence of difference proffered by each new session. And every night I'd take the screens back to bed with me and watch scenes from my life as they flickered across them—although I made no effort to identify them or parse them into discrete categories of time. It was as if each moment I'd lived up to that point was happening at once. I was a foetus, a newborn, a toddler, a child, a teenager and an adult all at once. Sometimes all I saw was myself watching myself watching myself.

Along with the lack of activity came a lack of something else: pain.

I hadn't suffered a single twitch or fidget since I'd arrived. At one point I told myself I needed to take breaks every couple of hours. But I didn't take breaks. The door stayed closed from the moment I entered the room each morning until I reluctantly crept out at night.

\*

'Mr. Barrington is absent.' The receptionist hooks the phone over her shoulder.

'You'll find your payment on his desk.'

A different film plays on the television. And that sound again. Some kind of electrical hum. As though there were a roomful of ageing desktop computers on the floor below, all about to blow their fans out.

'Absent? But...'

'Quickly.'

'I thought...'

'You thought?'

‘I’m supposed to report my findings.’

The receptionist clicks her tongue and ends the phone call.

‘Do you have any findings?’

‘Well, no.’

‘But, just for clarity’s sake, you would like to report them anyway?’

‘Yes.’

‘In spite of not having any?’

‘I thought I was supposed to be...debriefed? Or something.’

‘Debriefed?’

‘Or something.’

‘Debriefed of nothing?’

‘Isn’t nothing to report something to report?’

‘Let’s see.’ She leans onto her elbows and laces her fingers together. ‘Do you have anything to report?’

‘No’

‘Well well.’ She picks up the phone and looks up at the television. ‘You can collect your payment now.’

‘I also wanted to—’

‘Any further questions can be put to Mr. Barrington next week. I’m quite busy, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

Travis moves towards Barrington’s door but pauses before entering. He looks back at the receptionist then back to the door.

‘Why are you still here?’

‘Are you sure it’s okay for me to go in there? If he’s not here.’

‘If it were not, would that not be somewhat at odds with my instruction to collect



your payment from his office?’

\*

Another brown paper bag. I snatched it up, looked inside. Same as before. I stuffed it into my pocket and turned to leave. But I noticed the filing cabinet. The drawer he’d pulled the file from. Open. Not much. But enough to get my attention.

I could hear her talking along with the movie but there was no line of sight between us. The pulse in my throat pumped a little harder. I stepped away from the door. Looked back. Another step. Until I was peering down into the drawer. Files in no obvious order but I didn’t have to search at all. It was right there. One of the photos protruding just enough to see. I slipped it out and flipped through the pictures. As I remembered them. Bland. Basically identical.

Except.

I guess I didn’t look so hard the first time. Because I found one somehow different. But how? When I glanced back and forth between them I could almost see it. But when I focused on the picture in question, I couldn’t pick it out. I moved my eyes rapidly between the images, trying latch onto the anomaly.

In the window.

A shadow. Silhouette, should I say. Right there. Waist up from the windowsill. As though someone were inside, their hands pressed to the glass. But something wasn’t right about it. Too short for an adult. But features too large for a child. The head was too broad, bulbous, misshapen almost. Maybe some kind of elaborate hat or hairstyle that distorted the outline. Skinny arms. Big flat hands.

I turned the picture over, looking for a date. Nothing. I thought about—

\*

‘What’s taking so long in there?’

A shadow slides across the carpet. The receptionist appears at the door. ‘How long does it...what on Earth are you doing?’

Travis is on his knees, surrounded by banknotes. He picks them up one by one. ‘I dropped the bag.’

‘How...nevermind. Just be quick.’

\*

This all makes it sound like she left me without a choice. But truth be told, I didn’t want to go home. Only when I was standing there, jabbering about ‘reports’ and ‘findings’, did I realise that I hadn’t even brought my things. Until I took the next bag of money, I owed them nothing. But that’s not what I was thinking about. I was thinking about the house. The monitoring room. Relaxing beneath the emerald glare of the screens. Drifting weightless across the image. Enough ambiguity to keep me stimulated but not so much it caused me an iota of stress. A safe place to exhaust some surplus anxiety over inconsequential mysteries. Was I curious? Sure. Why else would I go through Barrington’s files. But no revelation could have anything more than a negligible impact. Whoever lived or did not live at the house—whoever did or did not go missing—any and all possible answers (or lack thereof) were trivial with regard to my own existence. This was, categorically, none of my damn business. Which was exactly what was so alluring. And I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t having a

good time. I was having a blast. That's why I stayed. That's why I snooped through Barrington's drawer.

When I heard her footsteps, I'd reached into my pocket, upturned the bag and fell to my knees in one fluid motion. As though I'd received some external instruction that animated my hands before my thoughts could interject and leave me busted. I was thrilled with it. With myself. I'd never had a reputation for rapid reflexes, decisive action, quick-witted rejoinders, or anything that required spontaneous intuition. And that she should buy it? I've got to tell you, I felt like I'd stolen a crown right off the head of the Queen during an address to the nation.

And now, I had a clue.

I looked at the house as I approached. Nothing ignited my imagination. If anything, I felt as though I were looking at the wrong house. Or, not quite the wrong house. But the wrong version of the right house. As though the house up on the screens were the real house and this house the copy.

Inside, I fixated on the lower-left window. I reached out to one of the larger screens and traced the edges of the silhouette as I remembered it. Almost tricked myself into thinking I could see it. And when I went to bed that night, the figure flickered across the ceiling, morphing from screen-to-screen, window-to window. It followed me into my dreams. Surfacing in pools of water and appearing in mirrors. When I first saw it, there was an instant recognition of its overall form. The way certain images are ingrained in your psyche, so ubiquitous in the world, that you could recognise them from just a few key pen-strokes. The Crucifixion, for example. The swastika. The MGM production logo. I couldn't grasp the connection. I just knew that this was...something.

But as the week wore on, my observation failed me. Whatever it was that sparked

that recognition became vague and ill-defined, along with the accompanying feeling. I'd only had a few seconds in the semi-dark of Barrington's office and I started to wonder if I hadn't just imagined it. A trick of the light. A distorted reflection of something out in the street at the time the image was captured, beyond the camera's eye. A workman in a hardhat, stooping to lift a drain cover. A postman's cart. A child in an oversized bike helmet.

I decided I would try to get another look. Maybe even steal the picture. If Barrington was again absent, of course. If he wasn't, I'd just have to wait until a later date. Make a plan. Maybe I'd press him for more information. Not about the house. I wanted to keep that to myself for the mean time. But I wanted to know more about this role I'd taken on. And I figured certain enquiries might be expected under the circumstances.

Once I'd made my decision, I put the whole thing out of my mind with ease. Spent the last days of the week in an effortless reverie. Let the minutes slide by with barely a passing thought. Like a lazy dog, laying in the shade beneath an overhang. Just waiting for the afternoon sun to pass.

When I went to see Barrington at the end of that week, I thought about packing, at which point I fully acknowledged that I'd no intention of doing so. I was staying. I'd already known that, of course. I knew from the moment I sat down in front of the monitors.

## Chapter Eight

So now you know. I wasn't exactly proud of my status. But I'll just say that I didn't have anything to do with any of this. I was a puffball seed blowing about on the breeze, only ever going where the weather took me, and landing where I landed when the wind stopped. And it just so happened to stop while I was floating over the kind of wealth usually reserved for Academy Award winners. *How* Valentine became my legal guardian, well, that's not quite so straightforward. But we'll get to it in due course. And my good fortune was the good fortune of those around me. Because, as it turned out, Sherrilyn was right to worry. There was a noticeable dip in attendance over the next couple of weeks, which only got worse once the letters started.

I was sitting with Sherrilyn in her office: a tiny grey basement space, tidy, but without an pinch of charm, but the only back-of-house room in the whole building that wasn't overflowing with Aubrey's junk.

He was a compulsive hoarder, and the thing he like to hoard most was anything to do with the movies. The walls were hidden beneath posters and photographs. And the storage areas were filled with boxes of movie props and racks full of costumes. Victorian monarchs and German soldiers, peasants' rags and pilots' uniforms, prison guards, nurses' scrubs, dungarees. Then wigs and spectacles, monocles and false moustaches and venetian masks, and a number of wearable animal heads: rodents, birds, dogs and cats, wolves and gorillas. There were mannequins and stunt dummies, medieval goblets, magic keys, hand cuffs and nightsticks, an electric chair, fake sculptures and paintings. And an array of fake weaponry: rubber hatchets and replica machine guns, shotguns, handguns, rocket launchers, broadswords and hunting knives, baseball bats with plastic nails riven through their barrels and fake blood

splattered up their handles.

I watched as Sherrilyn chain-smoked and cooked her books, counting out the cash I'd given her into separate piles for each of the days that had passed since the bad review.

“What if it doesn't get better?”

“It will,” I said.

“But what if it doesn't?”

“Then I'll help you out some more.”

“You can't—”

“You won't even need to ask.” I was there almost every day. I knew when trade was bad without needing to be told.

The phone rang.

Sherrilyn answered it. “What?”

“...”

“Where?”

“...”

“I'm coming up.” She slammed the receiver down. “Motherfucker.”

I followed her up the stairs and across the trance-inducing carpet to the box office.

“Show me,” Sherrilyn said to Chloe.

Chloe handed her a copy of *Hollywood Bulletin*, a weekly magazine printed on poor-quality paper that focused on movie theatres and local events as much as it did showbiz news. A small readership compared to the hard hitters. But its disposability only aided its circulation. Everywhere you went you found discarded copies and it was the cheapest, quickest way to see the listings and well known for guiding the conversation around local issues. Sherrilyn took it and moved away to the concession

stand. She slapped the magazine down on the counter, pulled her glasses out of her hair, and leant on her elbows.

I tried to make small talk with Chloe but she sat there clicking her capacity counter. Chloe didn't like it when people were mad. It didn't matter that they weren't mad at her—no one was ever mad at Chloe—she just didn't want people to be mad at all.

Sherrilyn slammed her hand on the counter.

“It's worse than she thinks,” Chloe said. She pulled a different magazine out from beneath the cash register and handed it to me.

Before I could read it Sherrilyn was behind me.

“What's that?” She took it out of my hand and walked away with it. A few seconds later a forlorn whine pierced the persistent rumble of *Eraserhead* playing in the background.

As became apparent, Randall Haynes was not the only person to have been offended by our establishment: his review of the Palace View had struck a nerve among the film-going public from all corners of Los Angeles. Over the next few months, various outlets published letters, editorials, and retroactive reviews, all of which outlined the grievances of formally disgruntled customers, some of whom, going by the dates of the incidents cited, had been carrying a silent resentment in their hearts since the late 1970s. They praised Haynes for his “courageous” reportage. Finally, they said, someone had dared challenge our “noxious culture of spite and misery”. Some called for reform, where others wished to see the Palace razed before the next tremor too high on the Richter scale saw “that deathtrap collapse in on itself and kill everyone inside”.

It's important to point out that we understood our way of doing things was not for

everybody. But here's the thing, if you wanted to sit deathly static in the dark, slack-jawed and hollow-eyed like propped-up corpses awaiting the gravedigger, you could do that anywhere. *Literally* anywhere. There must have been a hundred other theatres in Los Angeles, all of which catered to those needs. When we visited those places, which we did all the time, we didn't go into their auditoriums and talk over the movies and roll around in the aisles. We sat there in silence like everyone else. And yet, when one of these head-boy hall monitors walked into a theatre in which almost everyone present seemed at ease with a little hubbub, out came the big letter-writing pen and the next thing you knew every one of these nerds was out crying in the press about their boobos.

This carried on for a while and, just as it seemed to be dying down, one last letter was published in the *Bulletin*. This one didn't make Sherrilyn mad, it made her cry.

Sherrilyn, Ivana, Marlon, and I were at a booth in Jenny's Diner, two blocks up from the Palace. We were waiting for Marshall and then we were going to drive out to San Bernardino to see *The Black Cat*, which none of us had ever seen in a theatre. The Diner was almost empty, save a couple of construction workers sitting at the counter and a couple smooching at the back by the restroom. It was dusk, and I sat there prodding at some cold pancakes and drawing swirls in the syrup with my fork, gazing through the window as the last golden-orange smudge of sun dipped below the horizon. Ivana was explaining something about projector repairs to Marlon when Marshall arrived. Clutched in his hand was a copy of the *Bulletin*.

"No." Sherrilyn raised her palm to Marshall like a crossing guard. She'd been having increasingly Pavlovian reactions to the sight of any L.A. rag in the preceding weeks. "Whatever it says, I don't want to know."

Marshall grimaced. "I know, but, I think you should anyway."



“What difference does another one make?”

“It’s a letter.”

“So?”

“About the Palace.”

“And?”

“From Hugo Lund.”

Sherrilyn snatched the magazine and pulled her glasses down. None of us spoke. We just watched as she read the letter. She didn’t say anything else. Got up with tears in her eyes, pulled a handful of napkins from the dispenser, and walked away from the table.

“Come on,” I called to her, standing from the booth. “*The Black Cat.*”

She glared around at me through watery eyes.

I apologised and sat back down, let her go.

“Should we even ask?” Marlon said.

Hugo Lund was the owner of a movie theatre a few blocks over called the New Los Angeles Cinematheque. Lund had been trying to gouge us out of the local market for the last few years, ripping-off our listings, undercutting our cover charge, all because he was jealous of The Palace’s grandeur. Despite its disrepair, it was a *real* theatre. The kind such an elegant word summoned. Unlike the sterile shoe box he called an auditorium. But it wasn’t just that he’d been actively attempting to put us out of business. It was more important than that. A matter of aesthetic perspective. Sure, our listings were now barely distinguishable. We were both at the mercy of every new multi-screen monster that appeared within our midst, so we both scraped by on a diet of art and exploitation films, with just enough concession to the middling tastes of John Doe to keep the popcorn machine in working order.

But here's the thing.

The Cinematheque didn't believe in it.

Until the early nineties, they wouldn't touch trash cinema. They'd simply hopped onto a wagon that was gathering speed at that time. Several decades of low-budget, no-budget filmmaking had created quite the repository for ambitious critics and obsessive academics, and movies previously considered too low for serious consideration were now cropping up in discussion alongside "serious" cinema.

This was old news as far as we were concerned. And, in spite of the Cinematheque's effort to appear cool with the B-movie generation, you could see a hard line stressed between these films and those they still considered serious cinema. They hosted "trash nights" and "exploitation extravaganzas". Fine if you meant it, lame as hell if you didn't. Because if you paid enough attention, there was only one conclusion.

Every night was trash night...

...because cinema *was* trash, no matter how you spun it. And to allow yourself to believe otherwise was to leave yourself at its mercy.

Ivana read the letter out.

More of the same, a record of several visits to the Palace that left him dissatisfied. But that wasn't all. He went on to encourage a "boycott" before recommending the Cinematheque to anyone in the area who didn't want to miss out on their daily dose of movies.

"Who'd have guessed all this from one annoying guy," Ivana said. "Anyone would think we'd gone to *their* theatres to cause trouble."

"Right," said Marlon.

"Maybe we should," I said.

“Should what?”

“Pass me the listings,” I said and pushed my plate aside.

Ivana slid the *Bulletin* across the table. I flicked through to the listings and scanned through the next couple of weeks.

“Should what, El?”

“You still know that FX guy?” I asked Marshall.

“Bones?”

“Yeah, Bones. You got his number?”

## Chapter Nine

‘Mr. Barrington is with a client.’ The receptionist points toward the seats without looking away from the television. ‘He will be with you as soon as possible.’

A minor cacophony resounds around the waiting room. Along with the film soundtrack and the ever-present electrical drone, disquieting noises come stifled from Barrington’s office. Muffled voices. Sluggish thuds like small bodies hitting concrete. Something like furniture being dragged across the floor. Scratching, scuffling. Travis looks to the receptionist each time one of these intrudes through the wall. She doesn’t react. Forty minutes pass. When Travis’s leg starts to bounce she looks away from the movie and glowers in his direction. She gets up, knocks on Barrington’s door, and goes inside.

The scuffling ceases. A minute later she reappears. ‘You may go in. *Quickly.*’

Travis finds Barrington with two clients. A woman with a ponytail, scrolling through her phone, wearing an unreadable expression. And a smaller man who appears to be in some kind of quiet physical pain. They sit either side of the too-small chair, which Barrington offers to Travis.

‘Not interrupting am I?’

Barrington reclines behind his desk, twisting the strands of his beard. ‘Only insofar as you are. We’re just preparing a little reconstruction for a jury. Been a bit hit-and-miss I’m afraid.’

The man lets out a whimper.

The woman is unresponsive.

Barrington slowly nods to himself and opens a drawer.

‘Is he okay?’ Travis points his thumb at the man to his left. ‘He seems unhappy.’

The woman scoffs. ‘He will be.’

He whimpers again, less restrained. Almost a sob.

She reaches past Travis, pulls the man towards her, and whispers into into his ear, inches from Travis’s face. She releases him and settles into her former posture. ‘Now be quiet, until this...character, leaves.’

Barrington observes the exchange unperturbed, nodding along in quiet approval as the smaller man calms himself with some kind of breathing exercise. Barrington takes a paper bag from the drawer and tosses it over the desk. ‘You’ll find it’s all there, If you’d like to count.’

Travis catches the bag with ease and slips it straight into his pocket.

‘If that’s everything, you’re free to go.’

‘Don’t you want me to report my findings?’

Barrington squints. ‘Let’s hear it, then.’ He speaks slowly. ‘What do you have to report?’

‘Nothing, per se. I thought it best—’

‘Let me stop you there.’ Barrington scribbles something onto a note pad. ‘In your expert opinion,’ he tears off the page and slides it across the desk, ‘would this be an accurate summation of your findings?’

Travis raises himself to read the note, with Barrington’s clients peering at it over his shoulders. The note simply says, ‘nothing’.

‘Come on, lad. Time is money etcetera etcetera.’

‘Give or take.’

‘And that’s that cleared up. If—’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I have some questions.’

‘What kind of...questions?’

‘About my role.’

‘Have you not already received adequate explanation?’

‘I just—’

‘Because if you are unsure of what the role entails, that could be a problem. If you had your misgivings, why would you accept said role? Seems a little disingenuous to me. A little...unprofessional.’

‘I’m up to it.’

‘How do you know you are up to it? If you are unsure to what “it” is?’

‘I just thought if I knew some more about—’

‘What were you told during your initial interview? What is the central purpose of your appointment?’

‘To monitor the last known whereabouts.’

‘And is there anything especially ambiguous about that statement?’

‘Not exactly, but—’

‘And is it not a relatively simple task, put simply into action,’

‘I’ve not found it to be a problem.’

‘Good, good. And, just to clarify, have you not been supplied with all of the equipment required to execute this simple instruction?’

‘I have.’

‘And, to extend that clarification, is said equipment in working order, functioning as it should?’

‘It is.’

‘Marvellous. Now, I must insist you bid us adieu, as we have important work to

attend to and the night, just like all present, is not getting any younger.’ At which Barrington escorts Travis from the office.

The smaller man shudders.

\*

In the absence of new clues, I spent most of the next week almost totally unaware of my body. I could feel it. If I pinched myself I knew I was *there*. But whenever my attention wandered there was nothing to order me back. No intermittent twinges or aching joints. No acid reflux. No short, sharp shocks to the brain. Or any of the other maladies to which I’d grown accustomed in the last few years. These things kept me Earth-bound: worrying about them was a significant aspect of my usual routine.

Without them, I felt in absence. Like phantom-limb syndrome in reverse. Each appendage was exactly where it should be, operating at maximum capacity. But they appeared opaque and far away, as though I were glaring down at them from the peak of a mountain through heavy mist.

Around my mid-to-late thirties, I acquired a flurry of body-based paranoias, due to to having decided to quit drugs. Well, not entirely. But I made an effort to space out the sessions. Weeks apart, not days. Unfortunately, my new-found sobriety exposed the extent of two decades’ worth of physiological damage and neurological trauma entirely of my own doing. On the upside, it kept me on my partial wagon. I became too fearful of overdoing it, which put a natural limit on my intake. On the downside, my daily existence was now fraught with a catalogue of alarming bodily malfunctions, each of which seeded a recurring internal narrative that inevitably led to my own untimely, and often gruesome demise. Coronary events. Embolisms,

aneurysms. Exploding kidneys (is that something that can happen? I don't know. But I worried about it anyway). I began to wonder if it hadn't happened already. Death, I mean. Happened and I'd simply failed to notice. Maybe I'd never even lived at all. Always already dead. Which is, of course, absurd, but seriously, I'm not a hypochondriac. Yes, I spent considerable time attempting to predict which minor ailment might bloom into the poison flower that would finish me off. But it was more like a retroactive risk assessment than a mental health disorder. I'd mistreated my body for so long; there couldn't *not* be consequences. I went to a doctor and she told me I was okay. Fine, I said. I'd hoped they'd tell me I was dying just to get it over with. Not the dying. Just the telling. To be told how, and when. To get *that* out of the way. So I wasn't left waiting for some silver-haired specialist to slink through a pair of rubber-sealed double doors, armed with a clipboard and a thespian's knack for expressing sympathy with the eyes. Just tell me now. Clue me in. Then, I thought I'd be able to forget about it. Then maybe I'd be able to live! I just needed to know the ending. So I could get on with getting on with everything that led up to that point in the appropriate order.

And that was the crux of it. I wasn't fearing the void of death or lamenting over my own future non-existence. I wasn't thinking that far ahead. Yes, I was afraid that my own body was about to commit some kind of unspeakable violence against me. But that wasn't my overriding concern either. It wasn't about pain, or death; it was about endings. How was I supposed to know which route to take if I didn't know where I was going? It's not something I'd considered before. But suddenly my ultimate earthly destination became of high importance and, not only could I not stop thinking about it, it felt ludicrous that we all go about our lives with no foreknowledge of our own finale. How much time do we have? What resources are



available to us? What's the underlying theme of all this effort? You'd think we'd need to know all this. So we could expedite the process with stealth and precision, in good faith that our choices were evenly proportioned and meaningful to the whole.

\*

'Forgive me for rushing you out. I have a important call.'

'Quite late for an important call.'

'"Late" is only a matter of perspective.'

'I was hoping to get another look at those photographs.'

'Which photographs?'

'The ones you showed me before.'

The corners of Barrington's mouth curl downwards and he glances about himself, as though checking for interlopers. He lowers his voice. 'May I ask why?'

'Curiosity.'

'That's all?'

'That's all.'

'This is highly irregular. But I don't see the harm. Never let it be told that old Barrington wouldn't spare a favour. As long as it's just the one. It *is* just the one?'

'Just the one.'

Barrington locates the file and hands it over.

Travis opens it, winces, and passes it back. 'The pictures of the last known whereabouts.'

'Ah. Not possible I'm afraid. I'm no longer in possession of those documents.'

'Where are they?'

‘Stolen! Would you believe? Swiped in the middle of the night. Anyway, as I said, I—’

‘The missing person,’

Barrington stalls. He gets up, closes the door, and perches his formidable bulk on the front of the desk, looming over Travis in his tiny chair. ‘Go on.’

‘I think it would help to know who I’m looking for.’

‘Let me reiterate, you are not, *looking*, for anyone. You are there to monitor—’

‘...the last known whereabouts. I understand. For what purpose?’

‘That information is classified. It is not within the parameters of my charge to divulge the persons or purposes about which you enquire. At no point during your induction was it suggested that you would be privileged to these details and yet, here you are, persistently, and, might I add, quite irritatingly, requesting said information as though you had some natural right to it. Do you believe yourself to have rights to this information?’

‘No, but—’

‘And are you—and let me be clear—suggesting that the terms of our arrangement are no longer acceptable if you do not receive said information?’

Travis stammers over errant syllables, as though trying to locate a satisfactory answer by trial and error.

‘Now is not the time for apprehension, boy. We need to take care of this.’

‘Ethics!’

‘What about them?’

‘This is a sensitive issue, right? There are people involved. Interests. Family? Friends? Business associates? If I knew more about the circumstances, I might...more effectively fulfil my own charge. I could be negligent. What if someone shows up on

a Monday morning and by the time I've reported it the trail's gone cold?'

At this, Barrington opens his mouth to speak, yet doesn't say anything. He pushes himself away from the desk and paces around the room, muttering and tugging on the strands of his beard. He leaves the office, shutting the door behind him. Five minutes later he returns and composes himself behind the desk. 'You're absolutely right. And it's a credit to your conscience and your sense of duty that you should broach the subject at the cost of personal risk. I see we made a good choice in you. Now, as I've told you, I cannot provide this information without authorisation. However, if you can be patient, I will make some enquires, state your case, and see if we can't get some permissions granted. They will be *basic* permissions, mind, and it's unlikely that I'll be able to enter discussion with you regarding other questions that might arise. Answers often stimulate more curiosity than they satisfy. But, with that caveat in mind, I will see what I can do.'

\*

That hadn't gone the way I'd wanted. But I'd learned some important things anyway. Firstly, the stolen photographs presented only two possible options. Entertaining for a moment that (a) they had been stolen, meant there was something important about them, as why else would a dozen bland pictures of a house be worth stealing? But that was almost certainly untrue, which lead me to (b): Barrington lied. And if he lied it's because there was something in the pictures he didn't want me to see. Either way, it proved I was right. There was, or had been, someone or something inside the house. And they didn't want me to know about it. I'd have preferred another look at the picture, but this was better than nothing. Secondly, there was no way I'd won him

over with that argument. I hadn't meant to blurt about the missing person. It just slipped out. And 'ethics'? What did that even mean? I was sure he was about to send me on my way. What happened?

Despite having extracted the possibility of a name, something felt wrong. Like I hadn't earned it somehow. Like I wasn't playing the game by the proper rules. I had to remember, there was no imperative here. And I was accruing bags of cash every week for doing nothing. The only rule seemed to be don't ask questions. There was no other interference. They didn't even try to hold me to any kind of daily schedule. For all they knew I could be lying in bed all day, which I hadn't done once since I'd arrived. So, all things considered, I *was* doing a good job. I was glued to that camera feed for all my waking hours; and I was sleeping less and less.

So I decided to ease up. There must be some other source of information that didn't involve Barrington. I just had to discover what it was. In the meantime, I'd back off. Next time, I'd take my pay, exchange a few pleasantries and get out. If he did make good on his claim, I'd receive that information as indifferently as possible. As though it were purely in the name of professionalism. It seemed, at the time, a simple plan. All I had to do, I thought, was nothing at all.

\*

Travis's arms hang limp at his sides. Amid the expressionless face, his eyelids slowly close. Falling shut for a moment here, there, failing to fully reopen each time.

His head falls back, mouth hanging open.

Something appears on the screens. Just a smear at first. As though a dustball had stuck to the lens. But then more. The back of a head. Shoulders. Moving toward the

house. Replicated across the monitors. Slow. An awkward gait. At the foot of the path, the figure stops. Looks behind itself, beyond the frame. It waits, then reaches out to the gate.

Travis wakes, finding himself sliding off the chair.

He sits up straight, rubs his eyes. and stares at the figure.

He leans forward.

‘Johnny?’

He jumps up, runs into the hallway and trips on a rug. He falls, cracks his head on the corner of the table by the front door and hits the floor, unconscious, blood seeping from the wound on his temple.

## Chapter Ten

Ten days later, and nine of us were dotted around the Cinematheque's auditorium. Lund's letter had really twisted the knife; The Palace was deader than I'd ever seen it. None of us knew him in person, aside from Sherrilyn, whom we'd decided not to clue in for the purposes of plausible deniability. Still, we'd arrived in twos and threes so as not to appear conspicuous, and now sat awkwardly in our seats, each with a bag stashed at our ankles, waiting for the film to start. It really was a soul-sapping environment. Like a flat, rectangular crate, no lift in the ceiling, and dull grey carpet that covered the floors and half the walls that flattened the ambient sound to a lifeless absence, like we weren't in a real live room at all. None of the absurd nobility of a real theatre, and none of the low-slung charm of a real flea-pit. As expected, the audience's pulse was all but absent, even before the movie had started. Besides the occasional whispered vowel or the rustle of polyester, it was like sitting in a padded cell that hadn't even been host to any madness.

We played along and kept our mouths shut.

Sonny Bones hadn't been so sure when Marshall first brought him over. It was the day after Sherrilyn had run out of Jenny's, and we were hanging out in my kitchen drinking beers with lime wedges stuffed into the bottle necks.

"I don't know," Sonny said, swirling the last drops of beer at the bottom of his bottle. He was a short guy with a heavy moustache, broad and extremely low-key, with a quiet voice that lilted upwards at the end of each sentence. "I guess it's possible. When?"

"Soon as possible."

"I'm kinda busy for the next—"

“Whatever you’re getting paid, I’ll double it,” I said.

“It’s not just the money, you know. Professional etiquette.”

“Triple.”

“Dude.”

“I will pay you ten times what you’re getting now.”

Sonny finished the last of his beer. “Intense,” he said, and took a joint from Marshall, taking a deep lungful before passing it to me.

“Ten times,” I croaked through a mouthful of smoke.

Sonny thought to himself for a moment. “Can I use your phone?”

He spent the next twenty minutes making calls while Marshall and I sat in the foyer watching the last half-hour of *Shock Corridor*. When he was done he joined us on the couch. He didn’t say anything, just sunk into the cushion and watched the end of the movie.

“Well?” I said, sitting forward.

“Oh, sure, all good. Got a buddy on that other job.”

“So now what?”

“Come over to my workshop.”

“You just made bank,” I said.

“I don’t want ten times.”

“You don’t.”

“That’s too intense. Triple’s good.”

“Triple of what?”

“What do you mean?”

“You never told me the original price.”

“You never asked.”

“Well,” I said. “Whatever you want triple of, just say that and I’ll take care of it.”  
I was, if nothing else, a generous negotiator. Ideal, some might say.

Sonny named his price and I went upstairs, grabbed a handful of cash from a tattered cardboard box and counted it out on the bed. I threw in a couple-hundred extra and paid him the total up-front, just so he wasn’t worrying about blowing off a paying job while we got to work.

We spent the next week surrounded by the bobbing silicone penises, severed heads, and demonic masks that lined the shelves of his mad laboratory. We did a bunch of tests, tried a few different things out, and two weeks later, there we were in the Cinematheque, watching the opening sequence of *Evil Dead II*.

No one so much as twitched.

They watched Bruce Campbell mugging and chewing up the scenery as if he was Lamberto Maggiorani chasing down his stolen bike. Don’t misunderstand me. I loved that movie as much as the next sucker. When I saw it for the first time at The Palace, I cried when I suddenly realised why the “Thieves” of the title was pluralised. And no one made a peep throughout the film. Because it wasn’t *Pink Flamingos*! *Bicycle Thieves* was not designed to inspire collective mirth so was unlikely to do so. *Evil Dead II*, however? You were supposed to enjoy it with your buddies. Laugh out loud. Squirm. Gag. For us, wherever possible, movies were glue for communion. We shared movies with one another and we shared one another with the movies.

The funny thing was, you quickly got used to it. You might not hear every word of dialogue, catch every nuance of the *mis-en-scene* and, sure, it was always possible you were only a few moments away from the rubbery slap of a novelty poultry item tumbling down from the balcony, but there was all the time in the world for that kind of thing. And if you could remove the stick from your ass for long enough not to give



a damn, it didn't matter. This way, every time you re-watched a film you got a whole new experience, one where you all gathered in the globular mist of the silver screen and explored it together. That was more important than any film could ever be. Because, and this was important: that shit *was not real*. Real people were real. Movies were largely a game of the rich and the beautiful. You could not allow those people to have that much power over you. They would swallow you up whole and never spit you back out. And I said this as someone who never, ever stopped thinking about films. Not for a second. Just like Sherrilyn and Marshall and Marlon and all the rest of them. All of us had been trapped, *captured* by the movies somewhere in the past. We hopelessly adored against our will. There was no "choice" involved in the process. The world we came into, in one way or another, had already been colonised by cinema by the time we arrived. We all understood this. No one ever needed to say it out loud. But what it came down to was this: however seriously you took it, you had to counter it somehow, trivialise it back down to something manageable.

Maybe it wasn't like that everywhere. I didn't know. I'd never been anywhere else (as far as I knew). But in Los Angeles, everywhere you went it was movies movies movies. Universal, Paramount, MGM, all the rest of them, sprawled out in vast lots around the city; red-carpet premieres at El Capitan on Hollywood Boulevard once a week, thronged with squealing teens who'd garrotte themselves on the velvet rope just to get two inches closer Johnny Depp's hair; movie theatres, video stores, ten-foot tall advertisements cruising by on mobile billboards; the onslaught of aspiring actors and directors and screenwriters arriving by bus in their hundreds every day, before finding their vices in the service industry: cast an eye around any downtown bar, look for the saddest face you can find and nine shots out of ten you'd hit someone who it's *just not working out for*; and sun-bleached, hand-written signs, cable-tied to street lamps and

chain-link fences everywhere, directing extras to on-location sets for films that wrapped when Welles was still alive.

And that was just outside the movies.

No city ever preened for the camera as often or as hard as Los Angeles. But no matter how many poses it struck, Hollywood hated L.A. and it showed. Do you know how many times Los Angeles has been destroyed in the movies? Or else depicted as broken and hopeless to begin with. This image of Los Angeles was global. And as far as the rest of the world was concerned, there was no notable population beyond the maniacal mobsters, soused detectives, and querulous broads.

Marshall nudged me in the ribs.

Onscreen, “Ash” clamps “Linda’s” possessed and severed head in the vise. The head tells him Linda’s soul suffers torment in hell.

Cue: “Chainsaw.”

Linda’s headless body burst through the cabin door as we sprang from our seats and bloodied up the auditorium.

## Chapter Eleven

The pain in my head woke me up. No idea how long I was out. The blood was dry so a while. I washed off the worst and lay down on the bed. Only then did I remember. I bolted down the hall to the monitoring room.

Nothing.

I went outside. Everything was still. Maybe I'd dreamt it? Would be easy enough. But I had to act for now as though it were real. If it wasn't, no loss. I crossed the road, opened the gate, and walked towards the door. Half way up the path I felt a rush in my blood; I'd never been this close to the house before. I reached the door and found it firmly locked. Why wouldn't it be? The windows were sealed and blacked out from the inside. In addition to my newly cracked skull, just being that close to the place rendered me light-headed. So I moved back onto the road and did the only thing I could think of: I paced the street calling Johnny's name. But he was long gone. For the first time I saw activity in the street. Lights came on in the house next to mine; curtains twitched. Whoever they were, I didn't want to meet them. I gave up and went back inside.

How could this have happened? I hadn't told anyone I was here. Who would I even tell aside from Johnny? Then I remembered what Barrington had told me. *You would be wise to make appropriate excuses with whosoever may note your absence.* Almost a month I'd been away and I hadn't told him anything. And what, from my perspective, was simply 'away', from Johnny's, was 'disappeared'. Of course he'd come looking. I'd have done the same if he upped and vanished for that long. But that didn't explain how he knew to come here. I hadn't left any clues. Unless...

Blue hair, big glasses.

It was the last thing we'd spoken about. If someone disappears, the last conversation you had with them would be scoured for clues? Johnny must have asked around. Tenuous, though. They may have been the source of Barrington's contact, but that didn't mean they knew anything beyond that. Unless Johnny had gone to Barrington? But Barrington wouldn't send him here. He'd likely deny all knowledge. And if Johnny was looking for me, what was he doing out there? Why didn't he come to this apartment?

I searched for my phone as I exhausted myself of possible explanations. Johnny must have sent messages. Maybe there was a clue in there. And I could call him, right? Why didn't I even think of that? But I couldn't find my phone. Only the one Barrington had given me. I realised I hadn't even seen mine since...I couldn't remember when.

Back in the monitoring room, a tight singularity of guilt formed in the pit of my stomach. How could I have been so thoughtless? As though I could just vanish without consequence. Here, I found my only certitude:

This was all my fault.

I didn't so much wake the following morning as finally abandon the idea of sleep. Throughout the night, my thoughts had circled the limited details, grasping for connections that weren't there until every possible interpretation was dull with repetition.

Having rejected all possible reasons for Johnny's late-night cameo, I turned my attention to where he might be now. The last thing I saw was him walking towards the house. But it wasn't plausible that he would have gone inside. For all I could tell, the house was empty and sealed up tight. So maybe he just went home. As long as he was okay, his reasons for being here were secondary.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that Johnny P. was not okay.

I decided it couldn't wait.

It was Saturday, early enough to swing by Lula's before I went to Barrington. I left before nightfall with hours to spare, hoping to intercept him outside; I was in no mood for socialising. I'd think of an excuse on the way. Tell him I wouldn't be around for a while, so he needn't worry, and things here could get back to normal.

I installed myself at the bus stop opposite Lula's. I was prepared to be patient. But after three hours there was still no sign of him. It was almost time to go to Barrington. I went inside.

\*

It's quieter than last time. Only a handful of drinkers. No music. Just the low murmur of conversation and the occasional clink of glass. Travis asks at the bar after Johnny.

'Who?'

'Johnny P.. Scruffy hair. Skinny. Taller than me.'

The bartender shakes her head.

'Probably wearing a rain mac in this weather. Carries a satchel. Corduroys. Like he never left 1999.'

'I wasn't even born in 1999.'

'He comes in to see Lula.'

'Ain't know no Lula,'

'But this is Lula's bar?'

'Maybe they sent her somewhere else.'

'Who's "they"?''

‘Company what owns this place.’

‘I thought it was independent.’

‘Not any more.’

‘Since when?’

‘Month or so. More, maybe.’

‘What about last night? Anyone fitting that description?’

‘Wasn’t here last night.’

‘Okay. Look. If he comes by later can you give him a message? Tell him I came by. Tell him not to worry and I’ll be back soon.’

The bartender laughs. ‘You want me to tell some guy I don’t know that some other guy I don’t know says not to worry?’

‘If you could.’

‘Fine. What’s your name?’

‘Why do you need my name?’

‘So I can tell your friend you came by.’

‘Right, right...it’s...’

After several seconds, the bartender shrugs and sidesteps away to a waiting customer, leaving Travis staring at his reflection. She serves the drink, walks out onto the floor to collect glasses.

Travis turns to leave, stops, and calls across the room to her.

‘Where would they have sent her?’

‘Who?’

‘Lula.’

She drops her empties by the bar hatch. ‘Ain’t know no Lula.’

\*

Out on the street it was raining. I pulled my hood up but the rain fell harder so I ducked into a phone box to wait out the worst of it. The phone's receiver had been ripped away, leaving the torn silver cord hanging limp. My name came back to me. I repeated it to myself, making a conscious effort to memorise the shape of the mouth, especially of the opening consonant (flat of the tongue to the front of the palette).

As I stared at the broken phone something occurred to me. I didn't know Johnny's number by heart, but once, when I'd been without a phone for a while, I'd had it written down on a scrap of paper. I'd call him from a pay-phone and eventually internalised the pattern on the keypad. I practiced the sequence until I'd recalled all the numbers, then punched it into Barrington's loaner. It rang three times before Johnny's answer service kicked in. I tried again. Same result. I called dozens of times. This was bad. Saturday night. Prime business hours. No way he'd leave his phone off or get caught up on a call for so long.

The rain showed no signs of stopping, so I jumped on a bus up to Holloway, calling Johnny repeatedly for the duration of the ride. By the time I got off the bus I'd resolved to tell Barrington everything, whatever the consequences. This was no longer fun. And I had no idea what else to do.

\*

'You look truly awful. Here.' Barrington writes a number down, slips it into the money bag and hands it to Travis, who sits there dripping, hair stuck to his face, shivering. 'A good doctor. Private. He'll prescribe something. We'll take care of the

invoice.’

‘I want to report my findings.’

‘Of course, of course. Proceed.’

Travis explains everything. That Johnny P. was at the house. That his phone’s off. That he’s nowhere to be found. ‘There was no reason for him to be there. I never told him. I never told anyone.’

‘Good, good. Everything in order, then.’

‘No. Not everything in order. Everything out of order. What was he doing there? How did he know I was there? Where is he?’

Barrington’s brow softens, as though Travis were a child reporting some trivial distress he nonetheless finds imperative. ‘I’d assumed this might happen.’ He removes his glasses with a sigh and lets them hang by the cord. ‘But if you’ll allow me to repeat what I told you last week, we were only looking for basic clearance. I warned you that answers to your inquiries would likely raise further questions, the answers to which you would not be privileged, did I not?’

‘This isn’t about that. I don’t care about that.’

‘You’ll excuse me if I remark that it seems very much as though you care about it. Indeed, you have not shut up about it for the last ten minutes.’

‘I don’t care about the missing person. I just want to know what happened to Johnny. He’s...’

‘Yes?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘And there we have it. Never let anyone tell you I don’t look after the staff! So, if we’re done, I have work to—’

‘We’re not done.’



‘Something you wish to add?’

‘Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said?’

‘I believe I have. A friend of yours, one Mr. P., went missing last night.’

‘Yes. Exactly.’

‘And where was the last place you saw him?’

‘Outside the house. On camera.’

‘Excellent.’

‘It’s not excellent. We need to look for him.’

‘Couldn’t agree more. It’s good that we have that covered. Now, if you’ll—’

‘Covered? Listen to me. I’m trying—’

‘I have done nothing but listen to you so now you listen to me. State your report, one final time, in the most succinct and direct fashion you’re able to muster. Go.’

‘Johnny P. is missing.’

‘And is there anything ambiguous about that statement?’

‘No, but—’

‘And, is it not, a succinct and direct answer to the very question you posed to me just this last week passed?’

‘What? Wait, no that’s not what—’

‘And *did I not say*, that if we were able to grant you clearance—a favour fulfilled and for which, if you don’t mind my saying, you seem rather ungrateful—that provision of the answers sought could potentially raise further questions with which you would simply have to make your peace?’

‘That’s not...no...that was before. I’m not talking about *that* missing person. This is a different missing person.’

‘Different to whom?’

‘To the other missing person.’

‘There’s more than one missing person?’

‘Yes!’

‘Well, well. Please accept my sincerest apologies. Wires crossed, as they say. So, what’s the name?’

‘Who’s name?’

‘The other missing person.’

‘Will you just...I don’t have a name. You never told me a name.’

‘If there’s no name then it’s hard to say what’s to be done. How do you look for someone if you don’t know for whom you’re looking, eh? Do you know anything else about this missing person? Something to go by in lieu of a name?’

‘I don’t know anything else.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘No.’

‘No place of birth?’

‘No.’

‘No description: hair colour, height?’

‘No.’

‘Gender, ethnicity, marital status, any profession of which to speak?’

‘No.’

‘Tattoos, hobbies, known dietary requirements?’

‘No.’

‘Well, if I didn’t know better, and you were here in front of me, enquiring after a person you believe to be missing but about whom you clearly don’t have a single piece of information and have never seen with your own eyes, I’d think you’d gone

quite mad! So, if it's all the same to you, we'll focus on the missing person who does have a name and see if we can't take care of that first. How does that sound?

'Yes! Thank you. Good. So, what's the plan?'

'Accuse me of being the proverbial broken record if you must, but would it not be prudent to monitor the last known whereabouts?'

## Chapter Twelve

My bathroom was as ample in size as any bathroom reasonably needed to be. But that didn't make it any less hard to move with eight people jammed in there. Marshall, Marlon, and myself; plus Bonnie, who'd spent the last few months in Vegas, working the boom for Paul Verhoeven; Fitch, another rich kid slumming it; Celia, whose beeper went off every five minutes on account of her new job as Charlie Sheen's PA's PA; Celia's boyfriend, Vanderhorn, who, as far as I knew, did nothing but watch horror movies between skateboarding sessions; and Whitney, Marlon's boss at the video store they both worked at. All Palace regulars, but no staff. Ivana, Joe, and Chloe all knew what we'd been up to. But I thought it best that no one on the payroll at the Palace got involved.

The bright ivory tiles than lined the bathroom wall were smeared with handprints in the blue-black blood as we rinsed it from our hair, stripped from our soiled clothes, and washed our faces in the sink or leaning over the edge of the bath. I pulled down the shower head and blasted myself in the face with it, hanging my head around the sliding door of the shower and watching the sewer-grey water as it swirled into the drain. I was probably due a hair-wash anyway.

"Those faces," Marlon said, echoing a point that had been voiced several times since we'd been ejected from the Cinematheque. The whole thing had been a shambles, hardly the virtual reality, blowing-your-mind extravaganza I'd pictured in my head. But I doubted it would have mattered either way. I don't think anyone present was scrutinising our efforts on the merit of artistic accuracy. We'd been in four couples, spaced out around the room. When our cue came, each of the boys jumped up in terror, while each of the girls whipped out a foldable rubber chainsaw,

sound-packs strapped to our belts that kicked out zxxooming noises. I had wanted us to be headless, like the chainsaw wielding demon in the movie, but there'd been no way to make it happen fast without giving ourselves away, so we went at it with our heads firmly in place. We attacked the boys, just like in the film, but we must have looked ridiculous, squashed in our rows, cackling and poking the boys in their faces with our chainsaws. But the squibs, the squibs worked perfectly: little packets of fake blood sewn into our clothes, controlled by Sonny who sat at the back with a remote. When he'd asked, "How much blood?" my answer had been as much as possible. So we'd gone in there with dozens of the things strapped all over us. It'd been so stiff to walk around like that I thought for sure we'd get busted on the way in. But everyone in there was stiff so I guess it was good camouflage. When Ash turns the chainsaw back on the headless demon, Sonny had triggered the squibs and they exploded in all directions. Our clothes all got twisted and the squibs moved, and next thing you knew Marshal was shooting a mixture of Karo Syrup, creamer, and food colouring right out of his ass. I did feel kinda bad for those people around us who got glooped, but it was a one-time thing. Lund forced our hands, and there were always going to be a couple of casualties. They'd get over it.

Once we'd got the worst of it, we changed our clothes and went downstairs where Sonny was alternating between a too-long joint and a bagel, watching *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* on fifth generation pirate that trembled on-screen with the quirks of every tape it had ever passed through. We all flopped down around him, with wet hair and fake blood still encrusted in our ears and clinging to our eyelashes. Sonny passed the joint around, and ten minutes later we were all zoned out on *Tetsuo*, except Celia, who was on the phone chasing all the pages she'd missed in the last few hours.

When the movie finished, Bonnie searched through my tapes, which were

organised in the correct way: in a huge a pile behind the couch. She grabbed a copy of *Messiah of Evil* and crawled over to the VCR. “Denied,” she said as she opened the case and pulled the cassette out.

Half the boxes had the wrong tapes in them.

“*Bonfire of the Vanities.*”

“Worst film ever,” Marlon said.

“It’s not the worst film ever,” I said.

“No?”

“*Rebel Without A Cause* is the worst film ever,” I said. “James Dean losing his Goddamned mind ‘cause his dad does the dishes once in a while.”

“Pass that over,” Fitch said.

Marshall grabbed the *Bulletin* that was behind him and tossed it over. Fitch flipped to the listings and scanned through them.

“I like *Bonfire of the Vanities*,” said Whitney. “It’s like Brian De Palma doing the worst Brian De Palma rip-off I’ve ever seen. Mesmerising.”

“Marshall was a grip on *Bonfire*,” I said.

“You were?” Whitney’s eyes widened with obvious glee.

“Tell her the *Bonfire* story,” I said.

Marshall put the finishing touches to another joint and lit it up. “I’m not telling the *Bonfire* story.”

“Please,” Whitney pleaded, pressing her hands into prayer. “Please tell us the *Bonfire* story.”

“I’ll tell you the *Bonfire* story,” I said.

Marshall rolled his eyes at me, took a deep hit on the joint, passed it along and left the room. Now I thought about it, Marshall never told the *Bonfire* story. I had heard it

from Marlon who had heard it from a friend who heard it from someone who was there. Marshall wouldn't even confirm or deny it. And every time one of us told it, he rolled his eyes and walked away. Maybe he was modest, or maybe a master myth-maker, who knew? "You know how the production was all fucked-up, right?"

"Yeah."

"You hear about the locals carpet-bombing the set?"

"No!"

I told them the story. De Palma had insisted it all be shot on-location in the Bronx, for 'authenticity' or whatever. They barged into these run-down neighbourhoods with their cameras and cordons and pissed off all the locals, closing down their streets, and filling them with fifty-plus extras dressed to look like "pimps" and "dealers" as they imagined them. Half-way through the shoot, the residents had had enough. They crowded around the edges of the set, jeering and hissing at the crew. After a while they started throwing things, eggs, rocks, lightbulbs. Everyone was manic on the set, trying to cover the equipment while avoiding projectiles from all angles. Marshall had disappeared, so someone set out to look for him, thinking he might have got hurt or whatever. The guy's searching everywhere with no luck when some glass shatters at his feet. He jumps back, looks up across the street and there's Marshall, up on a roof, sharing a forty-ouncer with some guy and lobbing bottles at the crew. He didn't even go back to work that day. Got drunk with his new buddy for a night. Later, when someone asked him why he'd done it, he just said that it "seemed like the right thing to do" so they fired him.

Whitney, rolled around on the floor, squeaking and wriggling with joy at each increasingly ludicrous detail.

It wasn't like Marshall was really like that. Personally, I'd never seen him once

throw anything at anyone. But he'd had a rough life. His whole family were movie people, the tech side. But unforeseen illness had swiped their savings when he was still a kid and it broke his whole family apart. So, it's likely that, given the dichotomy of the moment, he'd just gravitated towards the side he felt closest to, and that wasn't the side of Warner Brothers.

Marshall came back and sat down, and everyone mellowed out a little. Static fizzed on the TV screen while Bonnie searched for the *Messiah* tape.

"So," Fitch said, looking up from the *Bulletin*. "What next?"

"Jenny's?" I said. "I want one of those ridiculous shakes."

"I'd go for that," Marlon said.

"That's not what I meant," Fitch said. "I mean, when's our next hit? I was thinking *Blood Diner*, next week at the Vista. What ya saying, Bones? Game?"

"You wanna pay what El paid and I'll consider it."

"What she pay?"

"No, man, no." I stood up, crossed to where Fitch was sprawled on the floor and kicked him in the ass. "That was a one-time only thing. We're not going around messing up everyone's shit. We did that to make a point and the point's been made."

"Anyone else?" Fitch said.

"Come on, dude. The Vista's a cool place I know a guy down there he's decent."

"Didn't you have fun?"

"Yeah, I had fun but the fun's done now. Plenty of other fun in the sea."

Something occurred to me here. While I didn't want to go and piss everyone off at the Vista or anywhere else. I did already kinda miss it. Not so much the event, but figuring it all out, working with Sonny. I had felt some kind of purpose. I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt so motivated to do anything other than just watch



movies.

“You okay, El? *Ella*.”

“What?”

Everyone was staring at me.

“You’ve been zoning on the static for two minutes.”

“I want to go to Jenny’s,” I said.

“You’ve got blood on your neck,” Celia pointed out.

I turned to look in the mirror. “That’s fine,” I said. “Little fake blood never hurt nobody.”

## Chapter Thirteen

The sensation of being pelted by the rain was the only thing keeping me grounded. So I took the least-direct route back to the apartment, aiming to pay close attention to each individual raindrop as it hit me in the face. When I finally arrived, I dumped my wet clothes in the bath and stared into the mirror over the sink. In spite of Barrington's claim, I did not, in fact, look awful. I should have looked awful. All the elements of looking awful were present. Dark circles beneath my eyes. Straggled wet hair stuck to my face. A violet bruise, yellowing at the edges, surrounding the cut on my head. Yet, somehow, each of these details fused in such a way as to make me look far better than I usually do. The patches under my eyes accentuated my otherwise unremarkable cheekbones. Bloodshot eyes added a weary, knowing nonchalance to my gaze. My hair, limp and wet, yet just the length to extend my jawline. And the small gash added something rugged—although I noticed it was healing quickly, already half the size it had been only a day since the accident.

Later, I sat by the glow of the monitors and tried to think things through, which turned out to be impossible. Too much conflicting information and no way to draw any lines between it. The word 'information' felt far too generous. Johnny's sudden appearance and subsequent disappearance. Whatever it was that had gone on at Lula's. Barrington's now undeniable mystification of whatever it was that was going on here. But Johnny was missing. And I was the last person to see him. He'd looked for me when he thought I'd disappeared. Now I'd do the same for him.

In the event of a disappearance, most people's first call would be the police. But that wasn't an option. At least not until every other angle had been explored. Johnny was a drug dealer. Small time, but still. Enough to cause serious trouble if they caught

up with him at the wrong moment. Added to the fact that I had serious doubts about the legality of my own current circumstances. And there was no way I was going to bring it up with Barrington again because one thing was for sure: he was no simple eccentric. Whatever was going on he was in on it. He couldn't be trusted.

I had to work to some kind of logic. To troubleshoot the problem in such a way as not to miss anything or waste time. I couldn't just go around hollering Johnny's name as though he were a lost dog in the park. I had to find a logical lead and follow it. And in order to do that I needed a reasonable assumption to start with, and I wasn't sure I had one. So I asked myself, before I went further: was Johnny P. really missing?

With every hour that had passed I'd become less and less sure of what I'd seen. And his absence from Lula's was understandable if Lula herself was no longer there. And while that in itself seemed wrong, who was I to tell? I had no idea what went on in that place. I'd been gone for a while. Anything could have happened. Bars like that were likely being bought out all the time. I called Johnny several times after leaving Barrington to no avail. But he could have lost his phone. It wasn't enough to declare him definitively missing. And I had to confirm he was *missing* missing and not just weekend missing. It was Saturday, well after midnight. He could have been anywhere within a thirty-mile radius. But if he followed his usual routine, he'd be arriving home some time between mid-morning and mid-afternoon. So in the morning, I made my way across the city to Johnny's parents' house.

The temperature had dropped overnight and the rain-washed streets had frosted over. I left early and arrived at Johnny's street as the sun was rising behind slate-grey clouds. A residential street, no bus stops or benches to rest on. But there was a low brick wall a few houses down that adjoined to the gate of a dental surgery that was closed on Sunday. I wiped away the thin layer of ice with the sleeve of my jacket, sat

down on the wall, and blew into my hands.

Eight hours later and no one had arrived or departed. Nor had anything stirred. Once it was dark, I got off the wall and went up to the house.

I knocked on the door.

\*

Travis takes a respectful step backwards and waits. No one answers. He knocks again. He sidesteps off the path, visors his eyes with his hand and leans into the window. It's not possible to see inside. Only the lightly yellowing nets cloaked from behind by heavy drapes. He raps his knuckles on the glass. Once. Twice. Again. Until a neighbour pokes his head through an adjacent door to complain about the noise. Travis apologises and backs away from the window. Asks the old man if he's seen Johnny P. in the last few days.

'Who's that now?'

'Jonathan. Jonathan Packer.'

'Never heard of him.'

'He lives here.'

'News to me. Don't much concern myself with the neighbours.'

'What about Eileen and Stan? Mrs. Packer's not well. I wouldn't think they'd be out in this weather.'

'Don't know 'em.'

'They've lived here since the seventies. Mr. and Mrs. Packer? She was in a wheelchair these last few years. Stan's got a bad leg too but he still walks on it.'

'Oh them. They're gone.'

‘They can’t be gone. They live here.’

‘He died. She got taken away on account of there being no one to look after her.’

‘Died? How?’

‘Accident at work or some such.’

Travis sits down on the garden wall and puts his head in his hands. ‘When?’

‘Dunno. Three, four months maybe.’

‘That’s not possible.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I only saw Johnny last month. Everything was fine.’

‘Who’s Johnny?’

‘And she did have someone to look after her. He’d been looking after her while his dad was at work this whole time. He moved back just for that reason. Like three years ago.’

‘Don’t know nothing about that. Anyway, if it’s all the same to you I—’

‘If Johnny’s dad died and his mum got taken away I...and I’ve been off fucking around this whole time...didn’t even bother to...why didn’t I just tell him what was going on right from the start. It’s not like it even mattered why would anyone even care if—’

The click of the door closing cuts Travis off mid-sentence, leaving him sitting alone on the wall, staring up at another empty house.

The temperature drops as the sun sets. Travis walks, looking in bars and fast-food outlets, the launderette, tube stations. Snow begins to fall. Not heavy. Just enough to dust roofs of cars and tops of pillar boxes. Passing Lula’s he peers through the door. No Lula. No Johnny. Not even the bartender he’d spoken with the previous night. He calls Johnny’s phone until his battery dies. Then clomps back to Highgate, footprints

layering up behind him in the snow.

\*

Footprints. One set leading up to my door, another back down. I couldn't see where they'd originated. They curled around the corner in the opposite direction. I thought about following them but didn't want to leave a trail of my own. I should have been alarmed but didn't have room for any more questions. Whoever it was, I hadn't missed them by long. The snow couldn't have been falling for more than two hours. I stared at them for a couple of minutes before going inside.

By the glow of the screens, I acknowledged my current assumption: Johnny was missing. I wasn't yet ready to contemplate what had happened to his parents. I couldn't further complicate the situation. I still felt there was something right in front of me that I hadn't thought to try. I stared up at the screens. Then I realised I was looking right at it. He was on camera. All I needed to do was rewind the footage to Friday night. I could see where he went for myself.

I turned my attention to the control console. I'd barely acknowledged it since the day arrived. None of the controls were labelled. I pressed buttons and twisted dials, looking for a rewind function. But nothing seemed to have any effect. Was it even recording? Frustrated, I leaned onto the board and swiped my arms across the controls. The console issued some kind of error sound, which beeped three times before all the screens went blank. The sudden loss of light startled me. In the dark, I could see the image fading slowly upon some of the older screens, the house disappearing into hazy white dots. I switched the overhead light on. I had no idea which of the controls had caused the blackout. I tested each individually, working my

way across the board with an impending sense of panic. Before I got to the last control I stopped. Someone was knocking on my door.

## Chapter Fourteen

It was no understatement to say that Sherrilyn was mad. Like Wile E. Coyote mad. She was so mad that she wouldn't even let me into the Palace for forty-eight hours. She relented, of course. But after another two days of following her around like a lost dog and begging her to talk to me she finally cancelled the silent treatment and let me have it. "You're a selfish, dumb asshole, El," she said as she slammed the concession register. "Too much money and too much free time and, God, too little fucking forethought. What'd you think you'd accomplish?"

"I just wanted to show him, you know? Sucks to have someone come into your theatre and break the rules of the house. I made sure no one from here got involved."

"*You're* from here."

"You know what I mean."

"And so do you. You could have gone down to the beer festival, hired a bunch of blonde-haired, blue-eyed bears in Lederhosen and he still would have known. Who else was it gonna be? Did you even consider what trouble that might cause for me?"

Honestly, I had not really considered that.

"What did you actually think was going to happen?"

I hadn't really thought about that, either.

"You know he sent one of his lackeys round?"

I did know. Chloe had told me all about it. Guy named Blayne, Lund's right-hand man. Real film-school guy. He hadn't even made any threat. Just came around to inform us that they knew. That made it worse. Sherrilyn supposed that there was no way Lund would let it go. Which meant she had to wait, wondering what he might do.

"Look," I said. "I know it was dumb, but—"



“Do you really? It was so OTT, El, spraying fake blood over a bunch of strangers. I’ll be getting that cleaning bill.”

“I’ll pay it.”

“Right of course, just throw money at the problem.”

“What else can I—”

“I mean, Christ, we don’t even get that wild in here. You bet I’d be pissed if I was out somewhere nice and suddenly I’m blasted in the face with that gross shit. Wouldn’t you be?”

“Ehh.” I shrugged

“Bad example, but you’re not normal, El.”

“Thanks.”

“You don’t get to be butt-hurt about this, you...” she broke into a smirk, “you fucking rich-kid bitch.”

We both laughed.

“It’s not funny,” she said and wiped her eyes.

“You’re laughing.”

“I can laugh at whatever I want. *You* don’t get to laugh. You hear me?”

I pulled a sad Chaplin face.

“No more laughing for you. Ever.”

“No more laughing,” I said.

Sherrilyn turned around and started counting the soda bottles in the cooler. “Now stop snivelling around me and make yourself useful.”

“Useful?”

She wheeled a mop and bucket around the counter. “Sink’s there. Detergent’s underneath. Mop any patch of floor that doesn’t have carpet. Start upstairs behind the

circle, far away from me.”

“Are you kidding?” I said as she pushed the mop handle at me.

“Do I look at all like I am kidding?”

She did not look like she was kidding.

As it turned out, I quite enjoyed mopping the floor. It felt good to do something useful for a change. And I took my time without slacking, got right into the difficult corners, imagining Sherrilyn’s boundless gratitude when she saw what an excellent job I’d done. She was still on the concession stand when I finally finished. I rolled the bucket towards her, grinning like a madwoman as I pushed handle out.

“That needs emptying,” she said.

I rounded the counter and tried to lift the bucket towards the sink.

“Not there, dumbass.” She directed me to the service entrance. “Drain out back. By the hose.”

I trundled my little bucket towards the door.

“Rinse the mop,” she shouted after me.

I did as I was told. Rinsed that mop so hard I almost sprained my wrist wringing it into the gutter.

“Put it over there,” she said when I got back.

“All clean,” I said.

She didn’t reply.

“Got all the floors up top. All the corridors. The restrooms.”

“Okay,” she said.

I put the mop away. “That difficult bit by the railing near the—”

“You’re not getting praise for mopping, El.”

I stammered a little.

“Thank you, though.”

That was enough.

It was getting dark when I left the building. I stood out on the sidewalk wondering where to go. I got that that feeling again. Some sense of purpose. It wasn't quite the same, it wasn't as fun, but it was something. Now it was over though, a felt kinda...loose. And maybe kinda guilty. Guiltier, than I had when she was still mad at me. Like I needed to mop another floor, and another. But all the floors were mopped. I thought about going back in, asking if there was anything else I could do, but instead I went to an ATM, drew out as much cash as I could, and flagged down a cab.

“Where to?” the driver said.

“The New Los Angeles Cinematheque,” I told him.

It was pretty quiet when I got there. *Vivre Sa Vie* had just started and there was no one milling around in the small, grey lobby. The girl at the box office startled slightly when she saw me. She couldn't have been more than nineteen. Her face half-obscurd by her curly, strawberry hair. I guessed she recognised me. After all, it'd taken five of them to get us out of there. Maybe she was one of them. I wouldn't have known. I could barely see where I was going with all that gloop in my eyes. She looked around awkwardly, hoping that she wouldn't have to be the one to refuse entry to someone last seen there causing a ruckus while covered in blood.

“It's okay,” I told her. “I don't want a ticket.”

She relaxed behind the glass.

“Any chance I could talk to Hugo?”

She scrunched her face.

“Your boss. Hugo Lund?”

“Oh, *Mr.* Lund.” Her voice wavered over his name. “He's not, I mean, he hasn't

been back since you...no, I don't mean *you* you...just like, a general "you", you know...I mean—"

"It's okay...?"

"Belle."

"Belle." Trying to make myself sound as sweet and good as I could manage. I placed my hand across my heart. "Ella."

She gave a little wave and tucker her hair behind her ear.

"Is Blayne here?"

"He's just inside."

"Could you get him?"

"I'm not allowed to leave the box."

"Then, could I—"

She grimaced. "I don't know. I shouldn't."

"I won't tell him you let me in," I said. "You're not allowed to leave the box, right? If I walked straight past you, you'd be breaking the rules if you followed me."

"I guess," she said.

"Where is he?"

"Inside that door there, where he always is."

"I'm walking right by you, Belle. Didn't even look you in the eye." I went inside and pushed the auditorium door open. The first thing I saw was Maria Falconetti's giant face, then Anna Karina's tearful response. I stopped for a moment and watched the two woman cry at each other from either side of the screen within the screen. Then became aware of a presence beside me: Blayne, standing behind the last row with his arms folded, staring at me. I turned back towards the door and gestured for him to follow me without making a sound. He tailed me out into the lobby without

once unfolding his arms.

While the name “Blayne” may have conjured the image of a box-jawed, all-American hero, huffing on a Cuban cigar with his foot on the neck of a dead peasant, that idea stood in stark contrast to the sickly pallor and skeletal frame of the man before me. He stood there silently while I garbled an apology. What was I going to say? It was a coordinated effort that took two weeks planning. “It was all me,” I told him. “My idea. The others, I paid them. Made them an offer they couldn’t refuse. If anyone’s gonna get, you know, it should be me. You wanna call the cops, I get it, I’ll stand outside and wait for them. Guilty as charged.”

This guy, he just stood there, twitching his Goddamned nose, arms still folded, loving every minute of his joyful scorn. I’d only met him once before and my impression wasn’t getting any better. But I was in the mood for salvation so I kept at it. When he still didn’t respond I reached into my purse, whipped out a thousand dollars in cash and thrust it towards him.

He looked at it like it was roadkill.

“For your customer’s cleaning bills,” I said. “And your upholstery. I can give you more if it’s not enough.” I tried to push it into his hand.

He lowered his hands and folded his arms behind his back. “People like you,” he said, “give cinema a bad name”.

Normally, here, someone would say, “People like me?” But I didn’t really feel I had much ground to stand on. So I didn’t say anything at all, just stood there holding out the cash.

He looked down his nose at me one more time and turned to walk away.

“Blayne.”

He stalled at the sound of his name.

“I’m trying to make things right here.”

“Things will be made right,” he said, and walked away.

“What does that mean?” I called after him.

He ignored me and went back into the auditorium.

I put the money away and went outside. There was something tense inside of me that I didn’t like. Maybe the saintly thing wasn’t really for me. “Fuck,” I shouted.

Belle yelped and dropped her book.

“Sorry, Belle,” I said. “Is he always that...”

“Uh huh,” she murmured.

“Are you, I mean, do you like it here?”

She looked around at the auditorium door. “We’re not all like that,” she said.

“Some of us,” she lowered her voice. “Some of us thought it was really cool.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said. “I mean, no, it wasn’t cool, immature, you know, it really wasn’t...” But now I saw her smirking at me I couldn’t keep it up.

“Was so. It was fun. Nothing fun ever happens here.”

“Come on up to the Palace View. Nothing like this place.”

“We’re not allowed?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, they really hate you all. I would come. We got caught we’d lose our jobs I reckon.”

“You got friends who like the movies?”

“Yeah?”

“And fun?”

She giggled. “Course, yeah.”

“Well, Belle, what if I could get you a better job?”

## Chapter Fifteen

Three measured raps. Evenly spaced at a confident velocity. Travis startles, looks toward the sound. He creeps out of the room towards the front door and leans toward the spy-hole as the knock comes again.

‘I’m a friend, bro.’ The voice is calm and balanced.

Hand still covering his mouth, Travis rests his forehead on the door and peers into the glassy eye. A man. Broad like Barrington but younger, sturdier. Neatly clipped afro and a burst of freckles across his nose, thinning out across the cheekbones. He looks right into the pinhole. ‘Open the door.’

Travis steps backwards and falls against the wall with an audible thud.

‘I can hear you.’

He raises his hand towards the latch then pulls it back again.

‘I can help you, bro.’

Both men stand silent on either side of the door.

‘Have it your way, bro.’ The man turns toward the stairs. ‘When you’re ready, I’m at number sixty six. Day or night.’

Travis waits at the door for several minutes. Then he packs his things, stuffs the money into the bag, and leaves the apartment, closing the door quietly and leaving in the opposite direction to the other man’s footprints.

\*

I wanted to open the door. To talk to someone, anyone, who wasn’t Barrington. He’d said he could help me. But every time I’d reached out, something stopped me. As

though opening that door were some monumental choice I'd never be able to unmake. I didn't feel threatened. If anything, it was a comfort. A friendly voice. But it created questions. Questions I didn't want. I'd had enough.

I was going home.

My key wouldn't open the front door so I slid up the side of the house, stepping over the boxes and broken appliances, and let myself in through the back. It was the early hours. The house was silent. I crept up the stairs and tried my door but it wouldn't open. I shifted the key around, looking for the sweet spot. It wouldn't budge. I twisted harder, straining my wrist against the lock.

'Who is it? What do you want?'

'Why are you in my room?'

'This is our room.'

'Our room?'

'Yeah, our room.'

'This is my room.'

'If this is your room then why are we in the room while you're outside the room?'

'My key doesn't work.'

'Because this is our room.'

'My stuff's in there.'

'Oh.'

'Oh?'

'You're the old tenant?'

'No, I'm not the old tenant. I'm the tenant. The current tenant. *The* tenant.'

'If you're *the* tenant where have you been? We've been here for months.'

'How many months?'



‘Like, five.’

‘Five!’

‘Six, maybe.’

‘How can you have been here for six months?’

‘I don’t know how to answer that.’

‘I live here. I’ve been away.’

‘They told us you racked up a massive debt and vanished.’

There was nothing I could say because there was nothing about that statement that wasn’t true. I apologised and turned to leave, before turning back to ask if any of my belongings were still in there. The latch clicked and the door opened.

Young guy. A woman in the bed behind him, hugging her knees, looking terrified. I raised my palms and apologised again. He held the door open so I could see inside. They had minimal possessions, all that remained was the furniture, never mine to begin with.

‘There were boxes in the hallway when we moved in, for a few weeks until someone moved them.’

‘Where?’

‘The garden.’

‘You’ve been here six months?’

‘Uh huh.’

The garden was full of junk, mostly unclaimed belongings of previous tenants who’d also ‘vanished’. I groped around in the dark and found the boxes. Fragile with frost and soaked through from all the recent rain. I opened one and the box disintegrated into mulch. The contents were sodden. Books, clothes. Things of no value to anyone but me. I didn’t even look through it all. Some of it might have

survived, but to find it I'd have had to plough through everything that got destroyed.

What would I do with it now anyway?

I went back into the house, dropped my bag for a pillow, and lay down on the floor in the hallway.

\*

'I don't know.'

...

'A vagrant of some sort.'

...

'No, he's asleep.'

...

'In the corridor.'

...

'I don't know. I found him this way.'

...

'Wait. He's moving.'

...

'Please send someone ASAP. Stay where you are. The police are coming.'

...

'He's opening his eyes in a threatening manner.'

...

'Don't come near me. I'll...'

...

‘My God...he’s coming at me...he’s...!’

\*

The word ‘police’ burst the fug of semi-consciousness like a hot needle piercing a cheap balloon and I went from slumber to sprint in seconds. The guy on the phone yelped and flattened himself against the wall as I raced past him. Half-way up the street I heard sirens. Distant. I picked up the pace anyway. Kept to the backstreets until I was unable to push on.

I limped into a park and looked for a bench to rest on.

The snow had melted overnight so I hadn’t left any footprints. But still it was freezing, and my temperature fluctuated as I sat there, wheezing and disoriented. It was the most notable bodily flux I’d felt in a long time and I hated it. I could feel my skin flashing through the colour spectrum, heart stumbling over itself, lungs on the threshold of convulsions. Were it not for this hyper-awareness of my body, I might have wondered if I wasn’t still asleep in the hallway, or dozing in front of the monitors. I focused on breathing until the adrenaline passed, leaving me exhausted and nauseated and shrouded in a film of cold sweat, companioned by a sudden crushing loneliness. I felt that saline sting behind the eyes when your tear ducts are preparing to lubricate. So I shifted my attention to the nausea, told myself there was no time to get upset, and found a place to wash up.

I barely recognised myself in the mirror. Maybe just the lighting. That brutal, municipal tungsten of public bathrooms that rendered everything beneath it in a sickly pallor. But that wasn’t enough to count for the disparity between how I appeared now and the healthily dishevelled rogue I saw back at the apartment. Never looked so bad.

Fatigued and unwashed and unwell. Patches around my eyes like pools of polluted water, a dirty green-like grey beneath an oily surface. And the gash on my forehead about to go septic.

With no soap, I washed my face as well as I could. Straightened my clothes. Prodded my hair. But it made little difference.

I sat in a cubicle and braced my foot against the lockless door. I wasn't ready to go back outside and didn't want to spend any more time with my mirror-self. Not this mirror-self. And I wasn't yet sure what to do, so couldn't even commit to a direction.

It occurred to me that I hadn't actually done anything wrong. Legally speaking. My predicament was dire. But I hadn't committed any crimes. Not that that always mattered.

I needed to get the money out of my immediate possession. It was all I had at that point. And, being technically homeless with no way to claim legitimate ownership, I couldn't be found carrying this much cash. If I didn't get pulled for loitering or some other minor misdemeanour and lose it that way, it wouldn't be long until someone else was happy to relieve me of it. And it was unlikely I'd find a new place to live by brandishing handfuls of cash at prospective landlords. Judas's brand of laissez-faire lettings were increasingly rare. People wanted assurances. References. Financial statements. So I washed my face again while trying not to look at my reflection. Then I did the only thing I could think of. The first, sensible, normal thing I'd done in a long time. I went to the bank.

\*

Travis stands in the queue, holding the bag close. His ragged look and tense posture

set him off from the rest of the customers, most of whom look patiently bored, and whose clean and sensible clothes compliment the mottled beige of the bank's interior stylings.

When he reaches the window, he places a debit card into the silver tray and pushes it towards the cashier. 'I'd like to make a deposit.'

The cashier takes the card with a smile and slices it through the reader. 'This account has been inactive for some time. Could you just confirm a few details?'

'Inactive? For how long?'

She consults her computer. 'Thirteen months since the last transaction.'

'That's not possible.'

'There's no need to worry, sir. Just a few details and we'll be on our way.'

'Okay.'

'Great. Full name and date of birth?'

Travis doesn't speak. He leans forward, trying to glimpse the card in the cashier's hand.

The cashier puts the card face down on her side of the counter.

'I'm sorry, what was the question?'

'Full name and date of birth?'

'I'm...it's...sorry. My name's right there on the card. If you'd just tell me what it says.'

'Bear with me for a minute, sir.' She picks up a phone, speaks inaudibly, then replaces the receiver.

'It's fine. It's my card. You don't have to call someone.'

'There's no need to worry, sir. I just need to confirm—'

'Why would I deposit money into an account that wasn't mine? I'm not'

withdrawing. Why would I—’

‘Calm down, sir. There’s nothing to—’

‘Look. I have money! Why would I...’ Travis unzips his rucksack and pulls out fistfuls of cash. Far more than it previously appeared. The bag is stuffed to the brim, crumpled notes falling onto the floor. The cashier’s eyes widen.

Something appears behind Travis in the window’s reflection.

He sees it. Stuffs the money back into the bag and zips it closed. ‘You know what. It’s fine. I don’t need to do this now. Have a good day.’ As he turns from the counter a security guard reaches out to grab him. Travis sees him in the reflection, ducks beneath his reach towards the door. The guard catches one of the bag straps. Travis yanks hard and the guard loses his grip, although it tears the bag where the strap meets the back panel. Travis tumbles onto the street, runs as fast as he can while holding the bag closed. Sirens and lights appear in front of him and he ducks into an alley. He flies around corners, hurdles an overturned recycling bin, and winds his way back out onto the street, only for another police car to screech to a halt in front of him. He skids on his heels and turns a sharp one-eighty back into the alley, this time taking an alternate route and sticking to passages too narrow for a car. Sirens whoop in the background. Travis hits a dead end. He starts back but the sound of police radios stops him. He looks about himself. Nothing but bins and a wall too high to climb over. He peeks around the corner and snaps back quickly, winces to himself, opens one of the wheelie bins and climbs inside, and buries himself beneath the refuse. The police pass the alley, take a quick look and move on.

Eventually the sirens dissipate, but the bin doesn’t open. Hours pass, and when it’s finally dark Travis cracks the lid and peeks outside. He climbs out of the bin, tripping on the rim as he goes. He groans as he hits the floor, before standing up and

limping out of the alleyway, clutching the bag to his chest.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Are you crazy?” Sherrilyn was sitting in the box-office with me while ticking off boxes on a clipboard. “You want me to poach—”

“Hire.”

“*Poach*...staff from Hugo? After everything? Are you...”

I hadn't told her about my attempt to pay the cleaning bill, nor their refusal, nor Blayne's claim about things being made right. There was nothing I could do and it'd only make her worry more. I just told her I went over to apologise, tried to take the heat off the Palace. I think she was sort of grateful, but at the same time suspicious. The way she narrowed her eyes at me when I told her. I could see her making a mental inventory of all the things I might have said or done, sorting through them trying to identify what seemed most plausible. When I told her about Belle she did that little head shake thing that she did whenever she heard something she deemed especially stupid.

“We need to get some young blood in here,” I said. “You know, the kids, the future of the country etcetera.”

“Even if it wasn't a dumb idea, I'm not exactly flush right now.” She gestured around her. “Why do you think I'm sitting in the box-office. Chloe's sick. So it's me or no one.”

“All the more reason to—”

“Money, El.” She clicked open the register drawer, snatched up a fistful of quarters and jangled them at me. “*Real* money, not that toy money of yours that flutters out of a bottomless pit. I can't afford more staff.”

“What if I paid for her?”



She threw the change back into the register and slammed it shut. “No. *No.*”

“I kind of promised her.”

“You did what? El...no...stop. *Shut up!*”

I shut up.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully. Are you listening?”

I nodded.

“First, you don’t work here, okay, you can’t go around—”

“I mopped the floor!”

“Are you trying to test me?”

I covered my mouth.

“You do not work here. Don’t ever go making promises on my behalf, okay?”

I nodded.

“More important. You have to learn to take no for an answer. Trying to wind your way around every problem you encounter with sweet-talk, throwing cash around when it fails does not endear you to people. Don’t give me that face. I love you, El. You know that, but it’s like, insulting, to some of us. Do you get that? Can’t you see when I’m sweating over the books, or when Marlon can’t make rent, we don’t all need to see, well, you know what I mean? And I can see you thoughts. That face. Right now. I can tell your just busting to say you’ll pay for everything but that’s not how this shit works. So please, calm your bones a bit. Honestly, it’s a good job you dress like a such a shit bag or else I’d have to be mad at you for being pretty, too.”

“Was that your way of saying something nice for being mean to me?”

“It was the best I could do under the circumstances.”

I pushed the tangled hair out of my face and tried to bat my lashes. “You think I’m pretty?” I could see my reflection in the glass behind her. I looked the same when

I got smoke in my eyes.

“I think you’re an overgrown teenage boy trapped in the body of a young woman and while we’re on that, what’s even going on with you? It’s eleven am on a Monday. Why aren’t you face down in your beanbag or stoned on your couch watching Tex Avery cartoons? Why are you here pestering me about giving a job to some girl I’ve never met?”

I didn’t answer.

“Seriously, What’s up?”

“I just feel a bit...I don’t know...like I want to do something?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’ve got all the time and resources you could ever dream of. And in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, you’re not actually that stupid. Figure it out and go and do something with your life.”

That was easier said than done. It was true, I did feel some urge to do something. But what that something was always just outside my field of vision. As if my imagination were a movie screen with hard, unbreachable borders. There was always the suggestion, the *idea* of something that existed beyond that threshold, but when you swooped the camera around to see it, the border swooped with it. No matter how hard you tried to sneak up on it, to catch it unaware, it was always that much faster than you. Sherrilyn was right, though. Since the Cinematheque fiasco I’d been watching movies less and less. And when I did watch them, my eyes kinda slid around on the surface of the screen until they slipped right off like raindrops on tilted glass. Ordinarily, I’d have a list of movies as long as my arm I was dying to see. Literal lists that I would scrawl on napkins or old receipts or the back of my hand. I

would write new lists before I'd finished the old lists and find them stuffed in my pockets or crumpled under the furniture around the house, a written record of a life of perpetual digression. And where I normally existed on a pivot point between all the movies I was about to see and all those I'd just seen, now, I was floating in some kind of nowhere, unsure of where I was going or where I'd just been. The screen was still there. It was always there. But it was still and all but empty. Like a portal to nowhere, a vague outline of a door without a key, windows that refused to open.

I went home and sulked around the house. I slumped from room to room, opening doors I hadn't opened in years. I found these rooms foreboding. Musty, old-fashioned furniture of exactly the kind you would expect someone like Valentine to own, covered in dust sheets. No photographs, books. No signs of anything peculiar to a life actually lived. Just enormous mahogany dressers with empty drawers beds that had never been slept in.

I went down to the basement. It was huge but had been shaped into a labyrinth of narrow gangways with an array of shelving units bolted into the ground. Only there could you sense him, what remained of his inexplicable intentions, entombed within the film cans stacked in piles along the shelves. I had never as much set a foot in there since he died, but as I remember from the paperwork, the collection was made up of all of his own films, whether successfully released or aborted, plus a large number of movies by other people. Whether he owned these movies because he loved them or hated them, I couldn't tell you for sure. I would fall toward the latter, if forced to guess. I don't know that Valentine had *enjoyed* a movie since the fifties. Was this what that felt like? When that good old movie magic lost all of its power and all you could do was look at the real world with bewilderment and nothing to help you comprehend it but all the films you'd ever seen.

I schlepped along the slender aisles, poking around at the cans. The occasional movie I recognised, some I didn't, but most were unidentified, faded labels or positioned in the stacks in such a way that it was difficult to see them. I tried to pick one up and almost dropped it. I had no idea they were so heavy. So I proceeded around the thin passageways with my arms held close to my chest, trying to make sure I didn't shoulder into a pile and topple it onto me. How long would it be until someone even found me, crushed in my own basement beneath a heap of Valentine's films? I glanced along the last rack, and was turning to leave when I saw the word *Molly* glaring at me. I stumbled backwards into the cans behind me, followed by a loud metallic clang as one of them slipped off the shelf and hit the floor. I jumped, let out an involuntary yelp that I didn't even recognise as my own voice. The can gyrated on the floor like a spun quarter, grinding and ringing on the naked concrete until it collided with the opposing shelf and fell flat. The sudden transition from cacophony to silence left me stupefied. I stood there for several seconds with my eyes down and my arms pulled close and waited for my stomach to settle. I slowly moved out of the basement. I needed to get out of the house for a while. I got dressed and went to the Palace.

I watched *Short Night of Glass Dolls* with Marlon and Bonnie. The place was all but empty. I was barely there myself, half of my mind still stuck in the basement with the film cans. When we came out we found Marshall, Sherrilyn, and Ivana in the lobby. Sherrilyn evidently upset while the others consoled her. It could only mean one thing.

I asked what had happened.

Marshall handed me the latest *Bulletin*. I was starting to hate the sight of that thing too. I skipped to the letters' page.

“Page five,” he said.

“Five?”

“Editor’s Note.”

So this was how things would be made right. On page five. I took a deep breath and started to read. A whole page, the Goddamned Editor’s Note, entirely dedicated to reiterating every complaint made over the previous weeks, while adding new and vicious points of contention. It called for us to be shut down, and went on to accuse us of vandalising the Cinematheque, intimidating its staff, and even suggested that we’d done it before elsewhere, which was entirely untrue. I handed the magazine back to Marshall.

“Page twelve,” he said.

I flipped to page twelve. A four-page puff piece on The New Los Angeles Cinematheque. Small portraits of its staff beaming out of the page, recommending upcoming films, and photographs that made the place look far better than it did in real life.

Sherrilyn was flopped onto the concession counter crying. I started babbling at her but she just raised her head up to look at me, shook her head slowly and walked outside, lit a cigarette, and sat down on the asphalt against a phone booth, staring back at me through the glass door while she smoked. Marlon, Ivana, and Bonnie went outside and sat with her.

“What can we do?” I said.

“Don’t think there’s anythin’,” Marshall said.

“They can’t just print this stuff, can they. Some of this is just bullshit.”

“A lot of it ain’t.”

“Vandalism?”

“We damaged their shit. That’s what vandalism is.”

“Why doesn’t Lund just call the cops? If we did so much damage, why go crying to the editor of the fucking *Bulletin*?”

“He’s a business man. He calls the cops, then what? Whole thing sounds dumb as shit when you say it out loud. We got corn syrup on his seats. Ain’t exactly the crime of the century. This way he can wring it for all it’s worth. Gets to play the underdog, boost his profile. Even if it ain’t work, he ain’t lost nothin’.”

“Doesn’t *this* make him look bad? And the editor? Airing personal grievances in a showbiz rag.”

“Shoulda seen what got printed in these things in the fifties.”

“It’s not the fifties.”

“I was curious too. Asked around.”

“Well?”

Marshall took the *Bulletin* and slid his finger down the page beneath the Masthead, settled at the bottom.

“Executive Editor: Stephen Wiseman,” I read aloud. “So? Who’s Stephen Wiseman?”

“Stephen Wiseman was an old pen name of Randall Haynes.”

“Motherfucker.”

“He ain’t write under that name anymore. Did for a few years when he was comin’ under a lot of fire. Still uses it for certain business shit, so I’m told.”

“So what...Lund knows Haynes?”

“I guess so.”

“How?”

“Does it matter? They’re united in hatred.”

“Of us.”

“Yeah.”

Sherrilyn’s voice suddenly erupted. We both looked to the door to see her standing, shouting something at a cluster of people. We went outside to find Fitch, Sonny, Vanderhorn, and two other guys I’d never seen before absolutely drenched in fake blood.

She snapped her head around towards me as I exited the Palace. “You did this?”

*Blood Diner* at the Astor.

“I told you not to do that.” I backhanded Fitch across the chest, smearing fake blood on my knuckles.

“You should have seen it. It was—”

“Look what you started,” Sherrilyn sobbed at me. “They’re proud of it. Look at them!”

The five of them stood there, partly stunned at Sherrilyn’s outbursts but unable to disguise their satisfaction.

“This wasn’t my idea,” I said. “I told them not to...I told you not to—”

“Sorry, mom.” Fitch laughed at me. “Next time I’ll check with you before I play outside.”

Sherrilyn lit another cigarette and sat back down against the phone booth.

“And you came straight here with that shit all over you,” I said. “You’re leaving a literal fucking trail from the crime scene.” I pointed down at the streaks of blood on the sidewalk. I started to push them away from the entrance and convinced them to go.

I had to fight every impulse not to offer Sherrilyn money. I sat down beside her and tried to convince her that I hadn’t had anything to do with it. But I think she knew

that anyway. It didn't matter. She was right. I'd started it. It never would have occurred to them if it wasn't for me. And with that newly published Editor's Note detailing a remarkably similar recent event, attributed to us, there'd be no ambiguity as to who was responsible. So I guessed we'd now have to count the Astor among our enemies, along with the Cinematheque, the *Bulletin*, and anyone else we'd upset over the years.



## Chapter Seventeen

I scuttled all the way back to Highgate. Away from main roads as much as possible. Ducking behind cars and bushes whenever I saw a pair of headlights coming. Took me three times longer than it should have.

When I arrived back at the apartment the loneliness I felt in the park returned and threatened to overwhelm me. I couldn't settle. I tried to zone out in front of the monitors but it wasn't happening. I lay down on the bed, unable to keep my eyes closed let alone sleep. I got up, paced back and forth between rooms until I couldn't take it anymore. As though I were being pulled in some direction but didn't know which. I got into the shower. It felt strange. Heavy, somehow. Then I realised I was still dressed. Water seeped from my clothes the colour of dirt. I removed them and threw them onto the floor, then stayed in shower until the hot water ran out and my whole body vibrated with cold. I got dressed and dried my hair. I looked much better in the bathroom mirror than I had earlier that day but I didn't feel any better. So I stashed the bag under the bed and took the only option available to me at that moment.

I went to find number sixty-six.

'Good choice, bro.' It was him. The same guy I'd seen through the spyhole. He looked relieved as he stepped back to let me in. 'Come through, be warm.' He cast around outside before closing and bolting the door. 'You're safe here.'

It was as though each word were perfectly calibrated to soothe my most immediate fears. Having felt increasingly unsafe, freezing cold, and like I'd made nothing but terrible choices for as far back as I could easily remember, being told the otherwise put me at an ease I'd forgotten was possible. He led me through to his

living room and told me to sit on the sofa. He sat down on a swivel chair at a corner desk.

The walls were painted a deep purple. Black fixtures and fittings. Cushions strewn about the floor, piled up into one corner. A screensaver of a waterfall played across the large flat-screen television set, and an angle poise lamp, faced upwards towards a corner, dispersed its light like a seashell into the ninety degree angle where the walls met. The low lighting and soft furnishings felt like medicine. I never wanted to get off that sofa again for the rest of my life.

‘Name’s Kane,’ he said. ‘Buddy Kane III.’

Buddy gently swivelled on the chair, going as far to each side as he could without dragging his feet, arms down by his sides, gripping the base of the seat. More meditative than anxious, like a slow-swinging pendulum. I watched him sway for a moment without speaking. I’d forgotten my name again but didn’t want to mention it. I still wasn’t sure why I was there. And I didn’t want to disrupt the peaceful atmosphere. So I watched him twist slowly back and forth, sinking further into the sofa until I was practically laying down, only my knees at ninety-degrees preventing me from being entirely horizontal. And Buddy’s languid demeanour told me it was okay, that I could take my time if I needed to. He seemed so in tune with his surroundings, as though he were vibrating at the exact frequency of the universe. A few more minutes passed without a word until I felt ready to speak. ‘I don’t know where to start.’

‘Take your time.’ Like his physical presence, his tone of voice and manner of speaking were warm and measured.

I took the advice. I felt comfortable, but I was hyper aware of that comfortability. And I really just wanted to start telling him everything. Barrington. Johnny. The

disintegration of my life outside this little enclave. But now I had the chance I truly didn't know where to begin. So I hoisted myself up a little, tried to let my mind go blank, and said the first thing that occurred to me. 'How did you know about me? I never saw you before.'

'I heard you.'

'You heard me?'

'A few nights back, out on the street at midnight. Calling "Johnny, Johnny".'

'I'd forgotten about that.'

'You were really howling it out.'

'Do you...I mean...do you know about that? Do you know about...'

'Slow down, bro.' Buddy could see me getting confused. He raised his palms towards me in a slow pushing motion, indicating that I should relax back into the sofa.

'We don't have to go there yet. You don't have to say anything you don't want to.'

'You said you could help me.'

'I can. But there's a process we have to follow.'

'What do you mean, "a process"?''

'We'll get to that.'

'You can tell me what's going on here?'

'I'm still trying to figure that out myself.'

'But, there is, *something*, going on here? Something that's...not right.'

'There is most definitely something going on here.'

'So what *can* you tell me?'

'Fundamentally, I can't "tell" you anything. I can ask you some questions, though. You might find some of your answers illuminating. But I have to warn you, some of those answers—'

‘Might raise further questions with which I’ll have to make my peace?’

‘You’ve heard this before?’

I didn’t reply.

‘Hmm.’ Buddy stopped swaying, as though he were making a mental note to remember something. I wasn’t in any hurry, so I diverted my attention away and let him think. I watched the screensaver on the television set. A tropical setting, the waterfall cascaded over the rocks, framed by exotic flora, into a deep lagoon, an eye-popping aqua marine. The water looked so fresh and real I could almost feel it washing over me, and the display was of such high resolution that it was almost as if you could see the individual molecules as they crashed into the pool beneath the rocks. I watched for another minute, convinced the water looked more real than any real water I’d ever seen.

I turned my attention back to Buddy, now swinging again in the chair. ‘So what are the questions?’ I said.

‘You sure?’

‘I want to know.’

Buddy nodded. ‘No rush to answer,’ he said. ‘Take your time, and if the answer doesn’t feel right, just let it pass. This isn’t a test.’

‘I’m ready.’

‘Okay. When was the last time you ate?’

‘The last time I ate?’

‘Yes. When was that?’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t worry too much about why. Just think back. What was the last thing you ate? When?’

I felt somehow affronted but I could figure out why. It was such a benign question. But as I sat there, I realised that it wasn't the question that was the problem. The problem was the answer. I thought back through the previous few days and couldn't remember eating at any time. Thought back further still and nothing. Finally I had a vague recollection. 'I ate half a can of pears,' I said.

'When?'

'I don't know exactly. A few weeks ago, maybe.'

'Are you hungry?' he said.

'No. I'm not.'

'The average human male needs two-thousand five-hundred calories per day to maintain a healthy body weight.'

'I hadn't even thought about it.'

'Let me ask you this. When was the last time you did something normal?'

'What's "normal"?''

'Just normal. Something with no imperative attached to it, nothing riding on the outcome. When did you last hang out with someone for no reason? Nothing important to talk about. Just shooting the breeze about insignificant shit. When was the last time you watched a movie? Or read a book? When was the last time you cleaned your bathroom? Filled out a long and boring form? When was the last time you remember doing any normal quotidian shit with a normal person on a normal day?'

'I went to the bank this morning.'

'Was it a normal trip to the bank?'

'It was not a normal trip to the bank.'

'Some major shit happened, right? Always some major shit happening.'

'Always.'

‘Look at us right now. Two dudes. Same sort of age. Neighbours. Seem to get on okay. Don’t really know each other, though. Is this how people get to know each other? Why aren’t *we* just shooting the breeze about insignificant shit?’

‘I don’t... What does this all mean?’

‘That’s a big one. You sure you want to hear that?’

I wasn’t sure I did but I said yes anyway.

‘It means we’ve undergone a massive, paradigmatic shift in universal logic. Deeply altering our relation to time, space, memory, and our corporeal selves.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Understand?’

‘No.’

‘But you do *know* what I mean. Don’t you?’

‘I do.’

‘Feel like you’ve been losing or gaining time?’

‘Yes.’

‘Having strange memories while others are entirely absent? Forgetting things. Whole swathes of time just missing.’

‘Like Alzheimer’s.’

‘Alzheimer’s comes from *inside* the body. Proteins fucking up your neurotransmitters. Plaque on the brain cells, bro. Painful shit. That’s not what this is. This is coming from outside the house.’

‘Someone’s doing this to us?’

‘You got it.’

‘Who?’

‘If we knew that this would all be over. But it *feels* right. Doesn’t it?’

‘It does. So if we find out who’s doing this—’

‘We get out of here.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘There’s more. Whatever it is that’s going on here, this isn’t how it’s supposed to be. Something’s gone wrong.’

‘In what way?’

‘There are aberrations. Errors. Inconsistencies. Whenever these get too great, something changes. There’ll be adjustments. Things reset themselves, occur out of sequence. Sound familiar?’

‘Too familiar. So how do we get out? How do we find out who’s doing this?’

‘You’ve had some troubles, recently, right? Big troubles. More than seems reasonable. It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me about it yet. You want to keep some things to yourself for now. That’s fine. It’s what you’re supposed to do. But generally, it’d be fair to say that things have not been good. A crisis, even?’

‘It would be fair to say that.’

‘And what did you do? When you first realised something wasn’t right. How did you try to proceed?’

‘I tried to ask around. People I knew pertaining to my...crisis.’

‘That’s not quite what I mean. I mean, what were your thoughts about how you should proceed. By what process did you try to move forward?’

‘I don’t really understand. I just tried to figure out what the right thing to do was, to follow a logical path.’

‘There’s your answer. If we want to find out what’s going on here, we have to follow the logical path.’

‘That didn’t really work out so well. Last few days haven’t been so good.’

‘No, it worked out perfectly. It might not seem that way but it did. You’re here. This is where you’re supposed to be.’

‘What did you mean, something’s gone wrong?’

‘I mean, that whatever’s happening. Whoever is doing this. It’s not working the way it’s supposed to. Remember back to a time before all this. If you can do that. In normal life, there’s not always one right thing to do, right? You’re presented with a problem, nothing serious, clashing social engagements say. You’ve got to choose one. Now you might have a preference, one more suited to your personal tastes. But there’s no clear right or wrong choice. And there’s a multitude of considerations and contextual elements, any of which may cause you to make an arbitrary choice, one of these events is closer to your home, maybe. Or one place sells a beer you happen to like. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter which one you’ll choose.’

‘Okay.’

‘We’re no longer playing by those rules. We have a new version of the rules. It’s not entirely different. In some way it’s quite similar. But for us, right now. To follow the logic, means not to make any logical choice, but the *right* logical choice. There’s always only one. But each possible choice is surrounded by a multitude of other choices, all of which are wrong. If we make the wrong logical choice, that’s when shit gets convoluted. That’s when bad shit happens.’

‘What kind of bad shit?’

Buddy stilled himself, looking mildly apprehensive since the first time I arrived. ‘Listen. Carefully. When we make the wrong choices, that’s when things change. Think of it as compensating. Some of these things seem insignificant, harmless. And sometimes they are. Sometimes you’ll notice it happen. Other times you won’t notice at all. There seems to be flux of small details. You can’t worry too much about those.



They're largely benign but they'll disorient you if you let them. But you still have to pay attention. Nothing is a coincidence. If something falls into your lap, it's never an accident. Other changes aren't so...easy. Watch out for things that'll lead you astray. There are wrong turns everywhere. But if you concentrate, don't make too-quick judgements, you'll see the way. It becomes obvious. Don't say anything yet. You just asked me what happens if you make the wrong choice. I'll tell you, in a roundabout way. But first, you want to ask me another question. It hasn't quite occurred to you yet but it's out there, it's almost the right time to ask. Take a moment. Think about what you want to say. Ask when you're ready.'

I did as he said. Looked straight at him, thought about what I wanted to say. 'How do you know all of this?'

Buddy handed me a folded note. 'Because we've had this conversation twice before.'

I opened the note, it said: 'how do you know all this?'

'Take your time,' he said, the tone of apprehension present again.

'I've never met you before tonight,' I said.

'It wasn't you. I mean, It was you. But you were someone else.'

'That's...I mean...'

'Humour me.'

'What went wrong?'

'We didn't follow the logic. The wrong choices were made.'

'But what went wrong specifically?'

'I couldn't convince you. First time, you were agitated from the moment you walked through the door. Wouldn't settle. Sat bolt upright. That leg there bouncing like a piston. Ten minutes in you got up, called me crazy and stormed out.'

‘And the second time.’

‘Second time was similar to this. Not word for word but the general progression of the conversation was the same. You were here until just a few minutes ago, just a moment after you asked how I knew all this.’

‘But I walked out again.’

‘You did.’

‘What did you say to make me walk out?’

‘Nothing important. Just wasn’t the right combination of the right words at the right moment.’

‘That’s why you gave me the note this time? Proof so I’d believe you.’

‘Smart guy.’

‘Wait, though. If you’re back here for a third time, why am I only here for the first? Why didn’t the other me come back for a third time?’

‘Sure you want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because that other you is dead, bro.’

‘Dead! How?’

‘Believe me, you don’t want to know. But I do have an unfortunate statistic that I need to share with you.’

‘What?’

‘Before you finally died...’

‘Finally?’

‘You killed seventeen people.’

Each word in the sentence pounded down upon me exponentially harder than the one that preceded it. Among the fury of erroneous information I’d received in recent

memory, this was more furious than all that had come before it combined. I opened my mouth to speak but no words came out. Buddy just swayed and nodded and waited patiently for me to squeeze the obvious question out which eventually I managed: ‘How?’

‘I don’t think the details are necessary. Not right now, anyway.’

‘Okay.’

‘You didn’t do it on purpose. I can tell you that much. But at the same time, it was your fault. Your negligence that killed them all.’

‘I..I don’t. I would never—’

‘Never underestimate what you’re capable of under the right conditions.’

‘How do I make sure it doesn’t happen again?’

‘You don’t have to worry about that. You followed the wrong logical path. But the moment’s passed for that precise course of action. You’d already left by now. The chain that led to those events was already underway.’

I relaxed a little, relieved that I wasn’t on my way to slaughter seventeen people.

‘That doesn’t mean you won’t end up doing something equally awful, though. Never let your guard down.’

‘So what do I do to make sure I don’t do that? I really don’t want to do something equally awful as killing seventeen people.’

‘Pay attention. Look for the signs. Follow the logic.’

‘You keep saying that but it’s not exactly practical advice. I don’t really know how to enact any of that. I don’t really even know what you mean by logic. Like, what’s that thing about Socrates? If all men...?’

‘If all men are mortal. And Socrates is a man. Then Socrates must be mortal?’

‘That’s it.’

‘No.’

‘So what then.’

‘It’s more contextual than that. Whenever you’re presented with a choice there’ll be a multitude of other choices. One is right. The rest are wrong. The right choice will be supported by a number of other factors. Signs. Feelings. Resonance. The memories or thoughts most present in your mind at that moment. Think about what the outcome of any choice is likely to be. Does it seem like you’ll progress towards your goal, or get further away from it.’

‘But what’s the goal.’

‘To get the hell out of here. Keep that in your mind when you’re making your decisions. Before, when you said you tried to figure out the logical thing to do. What was the logic that got you this far. How did it work?’

‘There was something that I thought was happening. Had happened. I was looking for...someone close to me has gone missing.’

Buddy heard this with a sympathetic expression. Rolled his hand in air, urging me to keep going.

‘But I wasn’t sure. I thought I might have imagined it. Or been mistaken.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘I tried to verify my presumptions about what was happening. So I knew I wasn’t wasting my time before I went down any particular path.’

‘Exactly as you should have done. So that’s what we’ll do.’

‘How?’

‘We distil our experiences down to some kind of core thesis and put it to the test.’

‘What’s the thesis?’

‘How’s this. We’ll say, in this place, normal, boring, quotidian things don’t

happen. Sound about right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘There it is then. Meet me here tomorrow at noon.’

‘What are we going to do?’

Buddy stood up and opened the living room door. ‘Something normal,’ he said.

He saw me to the front door. It wasn’t cold outside any more. Or if it was I didn’t notice. In spite of everything he’d told me, I somehow felt less confused than I did when I’d arrived there. Or maybe it wasn’t less confusion. Just finally someone to share some camaraderie with, someone I could talk to who wouldn’t think I was going mad. I was glad the conversation was over, but I was already looking forward to meeting him again the next day. It felt good to have a plan to follow. We stood on the doorstep together for a moment, the sky was cloudless and full of stars. Vivid. Bluer than blue.

‘Beautiful. Isn’t it?’ Buddy said.

‘It is,’ I replied.

We shook hands and I turned to take my leave.

‘One more thing, bro,’ Buddy said, before he closed the door.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘You never told me your name.’

‘Spencer,’ I told him. ‘My name is Spencer Dean.’

## Chapter Eighteen

We all saw ourselves in the movies different ways. Some people watched them and saw themselves as great actors, directors, screenwriters, lauded and awarded and responsible for the joy of millions, sculpting dreams and nightmares out of nothing but light. Others saw themselves *in* the movies. They didn't linger on the craft or daydream about life-time achievement awards, they wanted to *be* Philip Marlowe, Doralee Rhodes, Harry Callahan. Others wanted to be explorers and vampire hunters and samurai warriors. Those friends of mine who liked their psychedelics, they yearned to meld their minds with the screen like Max Renn on his knees before his television set, Nicki Brand's full, pouting mouth swelling outwards, ready to suck them inside forever. Personally, I don't think I'd ever identified with characters in films, but always imagined some sort of third space that occurred during the screening of any film. A not-quite-here not-quite-there otherworld, made up as much of the theatre and its audience as the film itself. A place that could only exist at that exact place and time and would vanish forever the moment the credits rolled, never to return. Until that time, I had never needed to question it nor, consider it at all. It was only now that I found myself incapable of going there that I needed to set it to words at all.

I moped around my house for a couple of weeks, gawping through the TV as if it wasn't even there, or else just watching that static as it fizzed with disarray. I turned the volume up moved the TV to different position throughout the house, listened to it hiss while I paced laps around the house After a week of my ignoring the phone, Marshall, Marlon, Ivana, and Celia showed up at my door to check on me.

Celia started going around and opening my drapes. I protested. We settled on a

deal, half of them open, half closed. I crawled into a patch of shade away from the harsh sunlight filling the centre of the room. I had spent most of the week thinking about what Sherrilyn had said to me, about finding something to do with my life. But I didn't want to talk about it with anyone anymore. I couldn't think of a single thing to do with my time and I was ashamed. I couldn't even imagine a starting point. They made me wash and dress and coerced me out of the house and into Marshall's car. We went to Jenny's and then they dragged me up to the Palace. I didn't want to go but they assured me it was fine. I slipped sheepishly through the door and almost averted my eyes when I saw Sherrilyn, but she hugged me and smiled and went about her business.

“What's going on?” I asked.

Marlon pointed towards a stack of fanzines on the counter. “Take a look.”

I picked one up. *The Cultist*. I had a bunch of them at home. “What am I looking for?”

Marshall took it, found a page and handed it back to me.

I started to read.

At first I panicked, as the article I was reading was clearly written by the owner of the Astor, Martin Wade. But as I read on I saw why Sherrilyn's mood had changed. *The Cultist* was a popular zine, and what he'd written was essentially a defence of us against the invective being tossed around in the *Bulletin*. He talked about how many good times he'd had here, and how the idea that we were degenerates was preposterous and overblown. “Of course, the Palace View is not for everybody,” he wrote, “But it doesn't have to be. And for those who do enjoy something a little more raucous. You'll find lots to love there.” He addressed the recent blood-bombing of his own theatre, and politely suggested that maybe such a “messy” way of expressing

oneself wasn't the best idea. But he'd made it clear that those responsible were not there at the behest of the Palace. He then said that he and his staff had found themselves laughing about it afterwards, and that the Cinematheque has blown the thing all out of proportion, before going on to write that they were now considering reserving one night a week for a more lively experience, "if that kind of thing is in the air right now. Just maybe leave the squibs at home". But he then went on to say that, for anyone who wanted that more than just one night a week, the place people should really be coming to was the Palace View, signing off, "Maybe I'll see you there."

"Incredible," I said.

"Sherrilyn went straight over to thank him," Celia said.

He had been following what was going on in the *Bulletin*, as had the editor of *The Cultist*. Neither were fond of Lund or Haynes. And when they'd seen that editorial, they'd decided to publish their response.

"Is this enough?" I said, "Doesn't really have the reach of the *Bulletin*."

"You'd be surprised," Marshall said, picking up a copy and wagging it in front of him. "This been around for years. Everyone I know reads it. Only came out two days ago and already the numbers are up, so Sherrilyn said anyway."

I took a look inside the auditorium. Hardly full but significantly better than the last time I'd been there.

And it didn't end there.

Over the next two months, more letters appeared in *The Cultist*. Readers responding to Wade's article, or relaying good times they'd had at the Palace. Then other zines picked up on it too. *In the Zone*, *Horror Hounds*, *Terrorzine*. And a month later, KMZD News called up and asked if they could do a "local interest" story on us. It took a bit of convincing, but we persuaded Sherrilyn to play up the "lively" angle.



“I don’t want people going mad in here every night,” she’d said.

“You want to make money right?” I’d told her. “If this is what some people want, and we’re the only one’s who can give it to them, we should play up to that, find those people.”

So we raided Aubrey’s prop stash, got a few dozen regulars, dressed them up like mad scientists and zombies and whatever animals we could find, told everyone to cut loose right about the time the news crew were due. They came and filmed their segment—I made sure I wasn’t around when they got there—and they aired it several times over the course of a week, using it as a light-hearted buffer between stories about murder and traffic accidents.

Within a month, the Palace was busier than I’d ever seen it. Sherrilyn had amended the listings, getting rid of the middlebrow stuff altogether, and pushing the slow films out to the matinees and filling the nights and weekends with the kind of thing everyone seemed to want. She hired more staff, including Marlon who was now a kind of plain-clothes security guard who mooched around making sure nothing got too out of hand.

While I was helping everyone get ready for the news crew, I felt kinda useful again, but now everything was up and running, I still didn’t feel like myself. It was great to see everyone happy again. But I felt as though I’d lost something and I wasn’t even sure exactly what *it* was.

We were bumming around at my place one afternoon. Marshall and Ivana were absorbed in *The Birds*, while Bonnie read the listings for later that night and I lay on my back on the rug, staring at the dusty chandelier.

“Shall we go somewhere else tonight?” Bonnie said. No one really wanted to say it but we were all getting a little tired of the Palace in its new form. Turns out, none of

us actually wanted to watch movies that way all the time. But what was done was done, and the important thing was Sherrilyn was happy and the Palace was making stacks of cash.

“*Sunset Boulevard*. Pasadena?” she said.

“I’ve never seen *Sunset Boulevard*,” I admitted.

“You are fuckin’ kiddin’ me.” Marshall grabbed the remote and paused *The Birds*.

“I’ve got it on tape somewhere,” I said. “I never watched it.”

“Good,” he said. “VHS ain’t no way to see *Sunset Boulevard* for the first time.

Time?”

Bonnie looked back at the magazine. “Nine,” she said.

“Better get goin’ then.”

We drove to Pasadena in Marshall’s beat-up old wagon. I didn’t care one way or another about the film. It didn’t matter what we saw, I was just going to sit there numb and irritable and then I’d come home and do the same there too. We arrived at the theatre and took our seats.

When we left, I didn’t say a word. Didn’t speak at all on the journey home.

I then watched *Sunset Boulevard* on repeat for three days straight on tape. Most specifically the scene in which Norma Desmond sits with Joe, watching herself in her old silent movies. You might wonder why that should be, so it’s probably time to tell you about how I came to be adopted by Valentine, and my short life as a “movie star” in the years before he died.

## Chapter Nineteen

Spencer leans on the gate outside his apartment, fingers laced across his belt buckle, winding his thumbs around each other as though driven by a wheel. It's been raining and there's no depth to the clouds. Blank. Buddy strolls up, glances down at Spencer's hands and lifts an eyebrow. 'What's this?'

'What's what?'

'This.' Buddy slots his hands together and mimics the motion.

'Calms me down.'

Buddy rests on the fence alongside him, continues to copy the thumb-rolling. 'I see what you mean. Very cool, bro. Very visual. Come.'

An eye peers out between the slightly parted curtains of the house next door and follows their trajectory.

They leave the street and head on down past the boutiques and cafes and the carousel that's been erected on the green. Buddy confident in his stride. Spencer less so. 'What day is it?'

'What day do you think it is?'

'I don't know. Do you know?'

'Let's check.'

Buddy approaches a newsstand, lifts a paper to his eye-line while the vendor watches, annoyed. He turns the front page towards Spencer. 'Look good to you?'

'Not sure.'

'Read it aloud. See how it feels.'

'Monday February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013.'

'Good?'

Spencer counts on his fingers and mouths to himself in silence. 'I think so. I think Monday's right.'

Buddy replaces the paper. 'Let's go then.'

'Where are we going?'

'Where else on a weekday afternoon. The movies.'

They stop outside the Odeon on Holloway Road and browse the promotional posters. Spencer looks at Buddy. 'What shall we see?'

'Whatever's up next.'

They buy tickets from the box office and vanish into a darkened auditorium.

The remains of the February afternoon fade into moonlight as they exit the cinema. They walk silently together with their hands in their pockets. Buddy leads Spencer to a pub. A calm place, medium sized. Traditional oak interiors. A few low-key lamps and maybe a dozen customers, quietly talking or sitting alone. They buy two beers and take them to a small table in the corner, Buddy with his back to the wall and facing the bar, Spencer opposite. Buddy raises his glass to Spencer's. 'How did you like the film?'

'It was fine I guess.'

'Just fine?'

'I guess.'

'What did you like about it?'

'It was...'

'Come on, what was your favourite part, bro?'

'I didn't have a favourite part.'

'Just any part, then. Describe just one thing that happened in the film?'

'Okay, just give me a....' Spencer lifts the beer to his mouth and drinks a third of

the pint in one go.

‘You can’t, can you?’

‘No, I can, I just need—’

‘What do you need? Just tell me the name of the movie, at least. What did we see?’

Spencer doesn’t answer.

‘It’s almost as if we went in and walked straight back out, right?’

‘Maybe we fell asleep?’

‘Both of us? In the afternoon?’

‘Why not?’

‘Spencer, what is a movie?’

‘A movie?’

‘Yeah, a movie. What’s a movie?’

‘It’s a...you know, it’s like a what do you call it, I don’t know. It’s just a figure of speech.’

‘A figure of speech?’

‘What’s the point of all this? What does it prove?’

‘It proves that we can’t...’ Buddy glances over Spencer’s shoulder and lowers his voice, ‘...that we can’t partake in a normal, leisurely activity. That if we try, time gets snatched away from us.’

‘What about now? We’re doing something normal now, aren’t we?’

‘We might be,’ Buddy takes a long draw from his pint, ‘if it weren’t for the fact that we’re being watched.’

Spencer twitches, starts to turn his head before Buddy stops him.

‘Ride it out for a minute, bro. Play it cool.’

‘Who’s watching us?’

‘I said play it cool. Be natural. Act like we’re talking.’

‘We are talking.’

‘You know what I mean. Just stop...no. Spencer.’ Buddy reaches across the table and hooks a hand around Spencer’s neck, pulls him closer until their foreheads are almost touching. ‘Don’t look. Listen to me. We’re just having a little heart-to-heart, right? Your girl just blew you out. You’re all a mess, life’s not worth living etcetera. I’m lifting your spirits, telling you it’s all gonna be fine but you’re not ready to hear it. Come on, play along.’

‘How?’

‘Follow my lead.’ Buddy removes his hand and leans back into his seat. ‘It’s all for the best, bro. You two just weren’t supposed to be. Best let it go.’

‘Uh...It’s not that simple.’

‘Why isn’t it simple? Not like you have kids and a mortgage. And it was only like, what?’

‘Two years, man.’

‘Two years isn’t that long.’

‘But that’s not it, man. There’s things you don’t know.’

‘Come on, bro. All relationships have—’

‘You’re not listening!’ Spencer slams his fist into the table.

One of the glasses crashes to the floor, splinters into shards.

The other customers look up from their drinks.

‘If I can’t be with her then I...I don’t want to live.’ Tears cascade from his eyes and he flops onto the table.

Buddy flashes an apologetic expression toward the onlookers and lowers his

voice. 'I said play it cool, what are you—'

'It's game over, man. Game over.' Spencer bangs his head on the table sending the remaining glass onto the floor. 'I can't live without her.' A protracted groan escapes his lips and morphs into a heaving sob.

'Bro, what the—'

A barman appears with an incredulous expression and a dustpan. 'You're gonna have to get him out of here.' He sweeps the glass. 'Can't be having this at 6pm. This is last-orders behaviour.'

Buddy intervenes. 'Can we just have a minute?'

'Fraid not. He's putting people off their—'

Spencer swings around and grabs the man by his apron, bloodshot eyes, raw streaks of tears over his cheekbones. 'You don't understand. She was everything to me. *Everything!*' He falls to his knees before the barman, pulling him down towards the floor.

'If he doesn't let go of me right now, I won't be responsible for what happens.'

Buddy tries to pull him off but he's locked on tight, garbling. 'Why doesn't she want me?'

'I can think of a few reasons.' The barman turns to Buddy. 'Get him off me.'

Buddy tries to convince Spencer to let go but before he can the barman lifts a leg, plants his foot on Spencer's chest and kicks him across the room, sending him crashing into another table. His head hits the wooden tabletop. He stops wailing, looks up at Buddy and the barman standing over him. 'Why am I on the floor?'

A tall man in thick rimmed glasses stands from a table on the other side of the bar and leaves the pub. Buddy watches him from the corner of his eye. As soon as the door closes behind him he pulls Spencer up, apologises, and takes him outside. He

drops him against the wall and looks up and down the street. ‘Damn. We lost him.

What *was* that?’

Spencer looks up from his slump. ‘We lost who?’

‘The guy who was following us.’

‘What guy?’

‘I don’t know. Just a guy.’

Spencer springs up from the pavement. ‘We’ve got to find him.’

‘That was the plan until you...whatever that was.’

‘Which way did he go?’

‘We’ll never know now, will we? What happened in there? You were out of control.’

‘I don’t know. You said play along so—’

‘I said play along, not go all method-actor.’

‘I couldn’t help it. It felt really *real*. Like I was completely heartbroken.

Devastated, I could even see what she looked like and everything.’

‘Can you still remember it now?’

‘Not all of it. I remember how it felt, though.’

‘This is going to be harder than I thought.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let’s get off the street.’ Buddy puts his arm around Spencer’s shoulders and leads him across the road. ‘You okay, bro?’

‘I hit my head.’

‘I saw. Does it hurt?’

‘I don’t know.’ Spencer rests his head on Buddy’s shoulder as they walk. ‘I really don’t know.’



\*

We didn't see him again that night. But I couldn't discard the feeling of being watched, as if eyes were everywhere. Prying behind curtains, squinting and blinking in the distance. Buddy invited me over, but I wasn't ready to talk about what had happened back in the bar, so I made my excuses and told him I'd see him the following day. I wanted to sleep, to forget. But as I lay down I still felt as though someone were watching me. I looked outside, the street was still as it always was, then went to the back of the apartment and peered out into the woods. Wind rustled the leaves, causing the black mass of trees to slowly surge. I felt an urge to go outside and wander among them but I overrode it. It was an errant impulse. Didn't seem to fit with the 'logic'.

I went back to bed but my eyes wouldn't stay closed, so I went to the monitoring room and stared at the screens. I decided to tell Buddy about Johnny P.. He was supposed to be my priority right now. And I was alarmed at how easily I kept forgetting him. Not only his disappearance, but his face. Our friendship. Even his name at times. I'd get an itch in the back of my mind, faint at first, but more insistent with each passing moment until Johnny's name cut through and replaced the itch with a deep sense of shame at having yet again forgotten him. If I told Buddy, maybe that would help me remember. Of course, this would likely cause a need for further explanations: Barrington, everything that led up to that, my supposed purpose here. But I'd figure that out when it came time. I could barely explain the situation to myself anymore. And Buddy was good at taking things at face value. Chances are he wouldn't ask any questions I didn't want to answer.

But forgetting things wasn't the only issue, here. I felt something else. Sadness. Not just for Johnny or any of my ongoing problems, but from the incident in the pub. It was as though I'd watched it happen to someone else while simultaneously experiencing it as deeply personal. And some kind of sorrow remained, as if the lost love of the episode were now a part of my own history.

\*

'So, now what do we do?' Spencer sits on the edge of Buddy's sofa with his elbows on his knees.

Buddy relaxes in an armchair, the afternoon sun passing through the half-open blinds and falling onto his face. 'Would you say that yesterday was successful?'

'I don't know if being kicked into a table by an angry bartender counts as a success.'

'That was unfortunate. Could have been worse, though.'

'Could it?'

'Never underestimate the potential negative outcome of any course of events. Always consider things in exponential terms.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means don't expect any trajectory to maintain a stable velocity. However fast you seem to be approaching an event, you have to account for an increase in speed in addition to the reduced proximity.'

Spencer nods and juts his lower lip. 'Sure.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Only in abstract terms. I have no idea how to apply that to normal living.'

‘This isn’t normal anything.’

‘Okay look, I fucked up, I won’t...I’ll try not to do it again.’

‘It wasn’t you that fucked up, bro. It was me. We just need to learn from it. Make sure it doesn’t happen again.’

‘It wasn’t me?’

‘It wasn’t you.’

‘How was it you?’

‘I told you to act a certain way. To pretend to be someone that you’re not. That’s obviously a no no. I won’t make that mistake again. I panicked.’

‘You didn’t look like you were panicking. You never look like you’re panicking. I wish I could be more like—’

‘Gonna stop you there, bro.’

‘Why?’

‘You were just about repeat my mistake.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You were going to say you wished you were more like me. Don’t do that. Don’t think that. That’s what I did. In the pub. I told you to be someone you’re not. And the next thing you *were* that person, fully embodied. That’s something we need to watch out for now. It’s dangerous. We need to take that knowledge and apply it across the board. Never say anything about being someone you’re not, or having qualities that you don’t have. Don’t even think it.’

‘Right.’

‘Right.’

‘Follow the logic.’

‘Follow the logic.’

‘I think I understand now.’

‘And you know what that means?’

‘What does it mean?’

‘That we didn’t fuck up. That was something we needed to do. And now you get it.’

‘Right.’ Spencer takes a breath. ‘I need to tell you something.’

‘I presumed you would.’

## Chapter Twenty

At that time, no one else knew what I'm about to tell you. I'd never spoken with my friends about Valentine, nor what occurred between us between the years of 1981 to 1986. Due to his extremely marginal Hollywood status, I had never heard another person mention him, neither in depth nor in passing. And it had taken me some years to block out my own recollections. Until then, I had been happy with that, for want of a better word. And it wasn't until I went snooping around in the basement and saw *Sunset Boulevard*, that I started to think about him again at all.

Elmore Valentine was outed by a society columnist in 1979 as the producer previously rumoured to be wrecking potentially good movies, destroying careers, etcetera. They treated him like a side-show. Stories of his shambolic practices became a regular bit in said columnist's page for six months or so. This rich, industry outsider who thought he could make good movies just because he was loaded. They weren't even leading stories. Just a bit of tacked-on gossip to fill out a news page. Like a little monkey in a funny hat that waves goodbye as you exit the circus. That humiliated him more than anything that was said about his films in the past. He always brushed those criticisms aside without any trouble. But he couldn't stand the personal ridicule. Readers sent letters to the paper mocking him for his philistinism and vulgar habits. Pictures, too. Taken without his knowledge. None of them flattering. And in the wake of this personal tragedy, in a deep malaise about his place in the world, Valentine "discovered" me.

I wouldn't expect anything less than incredulity at what I'm about to tell you. But this is the only history I have and I am cursed to tell it. So here goes.

Imagine, if you will, a complete erasure of everything you've ever experienced up

until this point. Every thought you've ever had, everything you've ever done, anyone you've ever loved and every memory you have of these things vanished in an instant. It sounds frightening, but I assure you it isn't. Because your ability to feel fear or to even recognise a threat when you see it, has evaporated along with everything else. It is not an experience that has any tangibility while it's happening. You can't connect anything to anything else so nothing means anything. No word, no image, no gesture ignites the cognitive chain reaction of association natural of a life of experience.

Imagine yourself in this state. You are wearing a cornflower-blue dress, and you are staring up at a fairytale castle without a single thought in your mind. You have no idea that you're in a place called "Disneyland". As far as you know, this is the world as it is, nothing but bright colours and smiling faces, nursery rhymes and the smell of cotton candy. You are nothing but another curious shape in the landscape, no more substantial than a wisp of cloud. However, before you can even think to contemplate your own sudden sentience, you become aware of a mountainous man looming over you. He is unlike everything else around you. He is heavy and grey in a three-piece suit and suffers from a laboured respiration that crackles and heaves as he speaks to you. This is Elmore Valentine, and he is enquiring after a young girl who appears to be lost.

Before I knew it, I found myself in the back of what I learned was a car. For the next few weeks I was poked, prodded, scanned, questioned, and ferried about from place to place while various adults discussed me in words I didn't understand. I was diagnosed with retrograde amnesia, extremely uncommon for someone my age, which they guessed was around thirteen, and handed over to Valentine, who in lieu of any parents—no child was reported missing in the area that day—became my temporary legal guardian. Therefore, this is a retrospective account of something that was barely

experienced at all, only recollected. I cannot tell you what actually happened, only what I remember as *I* remember it.

I had retained full, instinctual control over my motor functions. I could walk and hold objects, understood that I needed to ingest food and drink water, that I needed to sleep. And I could speak. Although I had little to say, answering most of those questions I did understand with some variation of “I don’t know”. I understood basic grammar without effort, knew the difference between up and down, left and right, here and there; and could follow basic instructions: sit down, stand in the corner, go to sleep. But my vocabulary was limited to a few general nouns and verbs, which I was able to speak and read and write, but anything more specific sounded to my ears like not more than errant noise, no more meaningful than the hoot of an owl or the whine of a dog. I was completely unacquainted with the names of things. As if I were running on some kind of emergency back-up consciousness designed for limited resources. I knew what a house was, a car, a street; I knew what water was, the Earth, the sky. But if you spoke to me of the “ocean”, referred to “dusk”, told me to wait for a “limousine”, all I could do was smile politely and wait until I heard another word with which I was familiar. The only thing about me that suggested anything of my origins was the fact, so I was told, I seemed to have an English accent. But with no name nor any other identification of any kind, no trace of my existence could be found there. It was as if I’d just appeared that day. No one could even ascertain how I’d entered the park, which surrounded by fences. This was my allure. In Valentine’s conception of things, not only was I a symbol of purity, a *tabula rasa* unsullied by experience or memory or history, but no rational theory could be drawn upon to explain my existence. My appearance that day could only be viewed in fated terms. Valentine thought I was what he’d been missing in his equations.

I wasn't a missing child.

I was a miracle.

And for Valentine, there was only one thing you could do with a miracle.

You put her in the movies.

Unfortunately, as miracles went, I was of an especially dumb variety, which only made the following years all the more inexplicable. Because a "movie" is a terribly complex cultural artefact. So complex, in fact, that it's almost impossible to comprehend as a concept if you're lacking certain background knowledge. A crude understanding of a great many things is required. The technical evolution of the photograph. Some concept of theatre, drama, acting, and so forth. A general idea about the pleasures of lending oneself temporarily to a preconceived chain of events written for purpose: entertainment, moral guidance, the illumination of societal ills and so forth. Even the projection of the final film: the act of replaying moments from the past in the present. And many more things besides. Of course, it's unnecessary to know how any of these things actually work; all that's required is to accept their existence. Something that took me quite some time and unaided by the fact that no one took the time to explain it to me.

Nor did anyone think to prepare me, to *show* me a movie. The first film I ever saw in a theatre was the first I starred in. A terrifying experience which I endured on the edge of outright panic. My first experience of terror of any kind. Prior to the premiere, confusing as my daily life could be, I still had not accrued the required contexts to feel any genuine fear. I did feel discomfort during filming, most of which was aroused by the camera, pointing at me. I had no idea what it was, but I found its presence imposing. So when, finally, I found myself in a half-filled auditorium on opening night, I had no idea why we were there or what was going to happen. That in itself



was not alarming, as I rarely knew where I was or what was going to happen. And being told what to do, where to go, what to say and what to wear had been a constant in my life ever since Valentine had brought me home.

The lights dropped, the audience fell silent, and the curtains drew back. For the first minute or so I was mesmerised by the sheer scale of the image and depth of the sound, until I saw my own face looking back at me onscreen, my giant features bearing down upon me. That I was up there performing actions I'd performed, saying lines I'd said before, wearing clothes I'd previously worn meant nothing. Too all-encompassing was the shock to even notice those repetitions. All I knew was this: I had been duplicated. There was another me on the other side of the screen, every bit as real as I. As though I'd been stolen from myself and rebuilt elsewhere with a different name and a different life. When she spoke, she spoke to me, and me only, each word tinged with spite; the rest of the audience were simply eavesdropping on my violation.

While the worst of the feeling wore off after a few days, a sliver of resentment remained. Like a scar that continued to itch long after the injury. So when, several months later, I found myself on-set again, that resentment came along with me. It is, however, important to remember that I while I had now experienced a far wider range of emotion than I had a year previous, I was still as naive as a toddler, only in the body of a teenage girl. As such, I did not yet realise that this whole affair was being orchestrated by Valentine and others and bore my grudge not towards him or his collaborators, but towards what, at that time, I saw as the true agent of my violation, the thing I now, precariously, understood to be the instrument that had cleaved my visage:

The camera.

Cameras became my number-one enemy. I loathed the sight of them, mounted high, targeted upon me like some unholy weapon. Worse still was when they moved, rolling along a dolly track or swooping from above, suspended from some abominable contraption. I never could shed the feeling of malignant intent hidden within them. It is to the camera that I attribute my failure as an actor. Off-set, I excelled at whatever I was asked to do. Thanks to voice coaching, I was soon able to shift my accent around with little trouble. I could adjust my body language in the subtlest of ways to reflect a character's disposition. During rehearsals my line recall was excellent, as was my ability to follow blocking instructions—I had plenty of unused space in my memory banks. Yet, when it was time to shoot, it was as though I'd learned nothing. The camera occupied my thoughts so thoroughly that I was not able to concentrate at all. I could barely remember my lines. And when I did I spoke them aloud in a mechanical fashion, unable to inhabit the character or imbue the dialogue with any kind of nuance. Of course, this caused enormous trouble. No one could figure out why I was suddenly so useless. Which was not helped by the fact that I could not explain it to anyone, and did not try. It was a private vendetta between me and the camera. And while I did not realise at the time, the reason I was so protective over this aspect of myself was because it was my *only* aspect. The rest of me was empty. I had no real feelings or thoughts about anything else. My hatred of the camera was mine, the only thing that was mine, and as such, as precious to me as love itself.

I remember standing there, before the lights and the camera, while several people argued over the contentious issue of my face. What's wrong with her face? Why does she do that with her face? Why is her face like that? No one seemed to be able to solve the problem of my face. The prevailing opinion appeared to be that it was not something I was doing with my face, but something I was not doing. And what I was

not doing, was anything at all. Vacant. Empty. Expressionless, they said. But the problem of my face was a drop in a swimming pool. And suffice to say, we never successfully wrapped another film, in spite of another five years of trying. Of course, many wondered out loud why they could not replace this useless girl. For were there not hundreds just like me, waiting to be hired onto the hallowed sound stages of Hollywood? Those who would not turn to stone before the lens's glare? Of course, there were. But Valentine was never going to let that happen. His...renewal, his sense of purpose, was tied in with me to such a degree, that to ask him to replace me was like asking him to replace an arm or a leg. Simply too painful to contemplate.

Then, late in 1986, just after I had turned eighteen—according to the age they'd assigned me—Valentine suffered a series of heart attacks and died. As he had no immediate family, I inherited everything he owned, including *Molly*, a film that that no one ever saw or remember beyond its under-attended premiere, and the only film we worked on together that was ever completed. *Molly* told Valentine's version of our relationship as he wished it to be. It began, as our own story had, at Disneyland. Only in this version of the story, we'd gone on to a prolific cinematic partnership through which we'd changed the course of movie history and saved the world.

I had never once seen that film again and was later prone to nightmares in which the giant me climbed out of the screen and...I couldn't even say the last part out loud: I smoked so much grass because it suppressed my dreams. And to that day I still hated being around cameras. I wasn't as bad as I had been when I was young: for several years I refused to be anywhere near them, would squeal and flee if someone pulled one out. But this was Hollywood and everyone I knew was obsessed with the movies, I had to get used to seeing them from time to time. I still refused to allow anyone to photograph me in any capacity. And the handful of times someone tried, it was fair to

say I did not react well to the violation. So, why did I love the movies so much if I hated cameras? Because watching a movie was, in some ways, the opposite of making movies. Cameras stole life out of the world, film projectors put it back in.

## Chapter Twenty-One

I told Buddy only of Johnny P.'s disappearance. I said nothing about the money, nothing about Barrington, nothing about the house across the street or the shadow in the window in the photographs. Nothing about the monitoring room. I just said I'd 'seen' Johnny and then he'd vanished. Buddy accepted this at face value and didn't ask any questions about the event. Although he did ask what I intended to do about it. I told him I'd already asked around, been to Johnny's home and there was no sign of him, but that I didn't know what to do from here. He asked if I'd inspected the scene of the disappearance. I said there was nothing to inspect. He was there and then he wasn't.

'There's always something to inspect,' he said. 'There are clues everywhere, some might come to you without any effort, but others you have to search for. So that's what we'll do.'

'Right now?'

'No,' Buddy said. 'We'll wait until it's late. Until we can get up close without anyone noticing. If there's something there to find, we're going to find it.'

I wasn't thrilled about the idea.

To Buddy, the house was just a house like any other house and I couldn't detect an iota of apprehension in his manner. But my house and his house were not the same house. I'd formed a bond with its likeness, but safely contained within the borders of the monitors. The real house, the house on the street, the last known whereabouts of Johnny P., was not the same house. That house had the spectral quality of a doppelgänger. I couldn't tell you what was different about the house on the street and the house on the screens. But it was. It vibrated at a different frequency. Since

Johnny's disappearance, I'd averted my eyes every time I'd passed it. It alarmed me in a way I didn't like to dwell upon. The way it refused to fit with the architecture the street. A darkened gravestone between the neighbouring houses, casting its mournful expression, that gravel drive jutting out in front like a bed of glass chippings, sealed off by the loping chain.

As we waited for night to fall, my muscles began to tense incrementally. Buddy asked what was wrong but I deflected, told him I had mild sciatica, to which he simply nodded. I pestered him throughout the evening. Should we go now? How about now? Now? I knew there was no getting out of it and I wanted to get it over with. How long could it take? But Buddy didn't want to take any chances and made us wait until three in the morning. He produced two torches.

'Don't use this if you don't have to,' he said. 'We need to search the area. Thoroughly. But we don't want anyone to see. Keep the torch off until you need it, and aim it at the ground, don't go flashing it around the place. And keep quiet. No matter what happen. Don't even talk. Whisper if you must.'

Leaving Buddy's house, I did everything I could to appear unfazed. Happy not to speak, a nervous waver in my throat that would surely betray me. I tried to take deep, slow breaths as we approached the house. But it was hard to get a proper lungful of air, some impulse within me wanted to exhale constantly, to push all of the air out of my system as if it were poisoning me.

Buddy moved silently toward the gate. I watched his hand reach out towards the latch in slow motion. The gate whined on its hinges as he pushed it open. The sound, a rusty, high-pitched objection, sliced into my nerves and lingered in ears. I followed him onto the path but stopped half-way while he continued to the doorstep without hesitation. He placed his palms on the front door, as though trying to divine what lay

on the other side through touch. He lowered himself to a squat, sliding his hands down the door as he stooped, and pressed his ear to the letterbox. I wouldn't have been able to speak if I wanted to. Watching him, I could barely even draw breath. My head was filled with noise, as though I'd been submerged in water, the volume of all my bodily functions amplified over any sound from outside. Buddy sidled away from the door, still touching the brickwork. He visored his eyes and leaned into the window, sliding across the surface as though looking for a split to see through.

A florescent hue flashed across the window. Like oil on water. Fleeting. But it left an impression. Buddy didn't see it.

But I saw it.

Faint but unmistakable.

The silhouette. From the photograph.

I strained to fill my lungs with air, throat contracting, fist-like tight, discharging a rough, toneless rasp as I forced an inhalation. Buddy turned at the disturbance. Held his arms apart as if to chide me. Mouthing words I couldn't decipher. I just stood there, fused to the concrete, unable to move, unable to speak. Buddy shook his head, stepped back from the building and switched his torch on. He aimed it down at the ground and searched along the wall. Then he disappeared around the side of the house.

Then the music.

The same I'd heard from the window that night. Still muted, far away, but louder than before. Enough to discern the occasional melody. There was a whimsy to it. Like a nursery rhyme.

The windows began to glow. Slowly at first, but then brighter. Purples and yellows and pinks and blues. Filling all four windows, silhouettes present in each,

vaguely human but contorted, warped, glaring into me, beckoning me, drawing me in.  
Begging to enter.

And then I was screaming.

And then Buddy was there.

Hand across my mouth.

Dragging me into the street.

He pulled me all the back to his house that way. My thwarted screams turning to spittle on his fingers. I couldn't stop because I knew. Eyes everywhere. In the house. In all the houses. In the street-lamps and the manhole covers. In the woods behind the houses. Everywhere.

For the first time since we'd met, Buddy was stressed. He paced the room while I lay tangled on the sofa unable to talk. He'd already castigated me for the racket, to which I responded by dribbling on my shirt and whimpering like a child. But that wasn't what was causing him to run laps around his living room.

'It doesn't make sense,' he said. 'There can't just be nothing. You're sure you didn't find anything on the night of the disappearance? Anything at all? A footprint? A torn piece of clothing? A cryptic note?'

I just lolled onto my side, shook my head and rolled off the sofa, landing with a thunk on the floor. Buddy knelt down to help me, sat me up straight and propped my head onto a pillow.

'You look fucked-up, bro,' he said. 'What did you see?'

I couldn't believe he hadn't seen it, heard it. It was as if the whole house was about to explode with light and colour, it lit the whole street, my eyes could barely cope with the intensity, like looking directly into the sun.

'I'm sorry I shouted at you,' he said. 'I just... what happened?'



Even if I'd wanted to explain it I couldn't have. I had no idea what had happened, only that the house was, what? Alive? Whatever it was I wasn't ready to rationalise it. Finally I managed to speak. 'I want to go home.'

What I'd meant was *home* home. Not back to that apartment. But there's no way Buddy could have known that and that other home was gone. So I let him help me to the door. He offered to walk me back but I said no. There was no way I was walking past that house again in the middle of the night. So once Buddy had closed the door, I crossed the road, ducked behind one of the houses on the opposite side, and jumped the garden fence into the woods. I walked along the fence so I wouldn't lose my way in the dark, then climbed back to the other side when I was behind my apartment.

Back inside, my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I didn't want to do this anymore. I wanted to be someone else. Anyone but me.

\*

'It's been three days, bro.' It's dusk and Buddy stands on the landing, banging his fist on Spencer's door. He crouches down and opens the letterbox. 'You can't hide in there forever.'

Spencer stumbles out of the bedroom, eyes puffed, hair matted, clutching a pillow to his chest like a child with a stuffed animal. 'I can.'

'You can't. We have to...you have to—'

Spencer flops onto his knees and stares at Buddy's eyes through the letterbox. 'I don't have to do anything.'

'Maybe if you tell me what happened.'

'I can't do that. Nothing happened.'

‘Right. You were just wailing out there for no reason.’

‘I didn’t wail. No wailing. I think you’re having memory troubles. Not me. I’m fine.’

‘You didn’t scream?’

‘That’s right. I don’t scream. Who screams? Babies scream. Not me though.’

‘I didn’t have to drag you off the street spitting all over me?’

‘Yes. That’s correct. That never happened. Good job, bro.’

‘You didn’t lay on my sofa for an hour like you’d just had some kind of seizure?’

‘Also correct.’

‘Stop playing. What’s got—’

‘I’m not playing who’s playing? Are you playing?’

‘I am not playing.’

‘Then I think you’d better get your head checked. Seems like you’re hallucinating. Seeing shit that’s not there. Hearing things! Sign of a crazy person.’

‘Open the door, bro. Come on. Let me in.’

‘That’s not possible I’m afraid. I’ve got a lot to do, you see.’

‘What could you possibly have to do?’

‘Work. Important work. Very important work.’

‘You never mentioned any work.’

‘I don’t tell you everything, you know? I don’t have to. That’s what you said.’

‘I know I said that but...I’m worried about you. What could be more important than getting—’

‘Art is more important.’

‘What’s art got to do with it?’

‘Art work. Very sensitive. Very nuanced. You wouldn’t understand.’

‘That’s what you’re doing in there?’

‘That’s what I’m doing in here. So you see. Priorities. Can’t help you I’m afraid. So if you’ll just, you know, go away.’

‘I really think we should talk, bro. Not through the door.’

‘I couldn’t possibly spare the minutes. Art, you know, time consuming. Solitude. Eh? That’s what I need. To be completely on my own all the time. No talking.’

‘Maybe I could help. What are you working on?’

‘Very nuanced. Very sensitive. I couldn’t let another pair of eyes on it. Could contaminate the work, taint my inspiration, you know. It’s all very specialised. Years of careful practice and diligent study. You wouldn’t understand.’

‘You don’t sound good, bro. You don’t even sound like you. Remember we’ve got to watch out for that. Careful not to—’

‘We? No there’s no we. There’s me. There’s you. No we though. You can watch out for whatever you like. Me, I’m good.’

‘Can you hear how you sound right now? Are you listening to yourself?’

‘Well I really think you’re the crazy one Mr. Remembering things that never happened. You just don’t understand the artistic temperament, that’s all. You wouldn’t understand. It’s all very nuanced. Very—’

‘Sensitive?’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Told me what?’

‘Who’ve you been talking to?’

‘I haven’t... what are you talking about?’

‘I think it’s best we end this conversation right now.’ Spencer drags himself to his feet and moves away from the door. He shouts back at the open letterbox. ‘Can’t have

anyone stealing my secrets. I can't take the risk.'

'No. Spencer, come back. Talk to me here.'

'No!' He scuttles into the bedroom, closes the door, lays on the bed and covers his head with a pillow. Buddy calls his name from outside, pleading him to come back and talk. After a minute or so, Spencer gets up, grabs all the pillows and the duvet, opens the wardrobe, climbs inside and shuts the door.

Buddy gives up. He sits down on the stairs and rubs his temples and talks quietly to himself. Someone watches him from the window of the house next door, just a single eye between a split in the curtains. Buddy gets up, slowly descends the remaining stairs. The eye watches him lope onto the street and follows him until he's out of sight.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

This was how Norma Desmond became my hero. She saw joy and contentment in herself onscreen. She felt pain, too, at her treatment, at her loss of youth, but she was able to overcome it. And as Joe Gillis, the narrator of the tale, tells us, she did this several times a week. This, to me, was the epitome of courage, and I was obsessed. This was the first time I wanted to *be* the character in the film, and it hurt all the way down to my bones that I wasn't.

Eventually, I no longer watched the whole film. I just watched the scene in question over and over, especially the first part, where we see Norma's contented expression as she watches herself, before she begins to speak. I watched it so many times that the tape began to catch, and eventually it got tangled in the machine. I called Marshall to ask him to bring me a copy, but his roommate told me he was away for the next few days, working on a shoot out in the desert. So I went out and found a copy, brought it home and started the process all over again. But something had changed. I no longer felt myself wanting to watch it over and over again. What was the end goal? I still wanted to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life. Watching the same sixty seconds of Sunset Boulevard a thousand times couldn't be it. But I knew it was trying to tell me something. I just had to figure out what that was.

It came to me one morning. I was watching the scene, and got up to move the TV away from a shaft of light. Once I'd repositioned it, flat against the wall, I noticed that I was approximating Norma's posture. Upright. Attentive, without my usual slump. I guessed I'd just taken the mannerisms on subconsciously from seeing it so many times. Once I became aware of it, I started to do it more deliberately, watching each small manoeuvre, holding onto the arm of a phantom Joe I imagined next to me,

placing an invisible teacup on the coffee table without removing my eyes from the screen. I always stopped short of the dialogue in the scene. It disrupted my sense of immersion as I could not apply it directly to myself. After a few times through the scene, I got up and rearranged the furniture again, trying to approximate the exact angle and proximity of the couch to the TV. Norma's screen was much higher than mine, so I dragged an ottoman in from another room and hoofed the TV stand up onto it, then sat back down. For a moment it was perfect. But after a few repetitions, I started to get annoyed with Joe's voiceover. I turned the TV down. Again, better for a moment, but now I was annoyed that I had to rewind the tape every few seconds. This, I could resolve with the push of a button. I tried pausing it, and looking at the static image. But that didn't work. I wanted to see her move, follow her actions.

"You want what?" Marshall said.

I played the scene again. "I want this scene from here." I let it play through. "To here. Fifty-four seconds, from the moment it cuts from Max up the the split-second before Norma starts to talk."

"Looped up over and over again?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. Can you do it?"

"Course I can do it. Just, why?"

"How much will it cost?"

"Won't cost nothin' I can do it at home. How many times you want it looped?"

"As many as possible. Longest tape you can find."

"Why's your TV up on that box?"

"That doesn't matter." I went upstairs, grabbed some cash from the box and gave

it to Marshall.

“You ain’t gotta pay me.”

“I want to. I might need you to do more stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Not sure yet.”

Marshall brought me the tape a couple of days later. I hurried him out and slid it into the VCR, turned the volume down, and took up my position. It felt amazing. I could just go through the movements again and again without having to stop for anything. With each new repetition the particularities Norma’s gestures seeped into my posture. And during the moments where we don’t see her, the film instead showing us the film that she’s watching, I improvised based on her other movements.

For long stretches at a time I completely lost myself to the dreamlike otherworld I’d missed so much over the preceding weeks. And this was a concentrated dose. No story to follow. No words. And, aside from having to rewind the tape every couple of hours, using that time to refresh myself in whatever way seemed most immediately required, no definitive beginning, middle, or end. Just a never ending stream of pure cinema.

I kept that up for a few days but, as before, other small annoyances kept into the experience: the absence of Joe alongside me; the room, its wildly different decor; the light from the projector over their heads. But mostly it was the awkward tension of wanting to feel like I *was* Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* while watching Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. I found I felt far lighter during the shot where we see the film. There, I could more easily imagine myself as her as I could see what she was seeing. At first, I considered asking Marshall for another tape of those shots. But they were just a few seconds long. And I anticipated further annoyances as a

result.

For the first time since I'd first seen the film, I turned the tape off. I looked at my cavernous living room, which I barely ever used. The room was far larger than Norma's, the ceiling higher, the dimensions wrong. I went around the house looking at the other rooms, but none of them suggested themselves as appropriate replicas. I went back downstairs and looked at the living room again. Then It came to me.

I called Marshall. "Are you working at the moment?"

"Just finished a job."

"For how long?"

"Nothin' on the books for another couple of months. Why?"

"I want you to come and work for me."



## Chapter Twenty-Three

I found myself suddenly aware of my location in the wardrobe, torch in hand, buried beneath several pillows and a duvet. How long I'd been in there I could only guess. Two days or more was my estimate, although, if I'd learned anything, it was to no longer trust in the natural passage of time. Maybe I'd been in there a year. Ten years! I felt exhausted, as if I'd lived out another dozen lives whose memories only lingered in my muscles. Maybe I'd been in there so long time had reached its zenith and was now going backwards. It wouldn't be so bad. No vanished friends, no outstanding balances, and no foresight: no knowledge of any of...this.

Watching the water swirl into the drain beneath the lukewarm shower, I resolved to visit Buddy and make my apologies. As little sense as he often made, no one else was going to help me out of this mess. He'd done nothing but help since the night we'd met. What did he do when he was alone? He'd never once mentioned a thing. Of course I hadn't told him all that much myself. But it was there, wasn't it? My circumstances. My troubles. Debts. Errors. Unspoken as they were. What were Buddy's complaints and causes? How did he get here? Where did he come from? He had never once referred to anything outside of this predicament. It was as if his sole purpose was to assist me. As if he'd fallen from the sky fully formed with the express purpose of doing so. He reminded me of Johnny, in that way. He always helped me out. I realised right then how much I missed him. Johnny P., the only drug dealer in London who says ten minutes and shows up in eight.

I had no idea what time it was but it was dark outside. I was half way out when I heard a sound. What was it? I closed the door and moved from room to room until I came upon my phone, ringing, on the floor under the bed. I stooped to pick it up.

Barrington? Why was he calling? He never called. The phone rang off. How many days had it been?

The phone started to ring again.

I stared at the phone for a few seconds, closed my eyes, and answered the call.

\*

‘And there he is. All limbs and appendages present I see. We thought you might be dead, boy. Glad to know you’re still among the living. How’s the project coming along?’

Spencer creeps into the office and sits in the chair. ‘The project, it’s...’

‘Still waiting for inspiration to strike, eh?’

‘Um...’

‘No need to be fearful. We understand these things can’t be rushed. It will take as long as it takes and you’ll have our full backing for as long as is required.’

‘...’

‘You’re looking quite peaky The artist’s toll, no doubt. Do see our doctor, won’t you. He’s there to help there’s no shame to it. Do you still have the address?’

‘I think so. I have it. Somewhere.’

‘Let’s just be sure about that.’

Barrington tears a page from the notepad and writes it out again. ‘Tell him anything, it’s all confidential. Don’t be shy.’

‘Okay. If it feels necessary.’

‘I should say some necessity appears to be already present. You look practically a corpse to my eyes. No, this isn’t a request, I’d say. I’d say it was important you saw

him immediately. I can arrange an appointment on your behalf, if you'd prefer.

'No I'll...It's fine. I'll go. I'll go this week.'

'See that you do. And get some sleep.'

Spencer rises to leave. He's almost out of the door when Barrington clears his throat and opens a desk drawer. 'Forgetting something?'

'No. I mean...no.'

'You're quite sure.'

'I think so.'

'You don't want this?'

Barrington produces another money bag, holds it aloft, punctuating its appearance with a theatrical cough.

'Right.' Spencer reaches out for the bag as Barrington pulls it away.

'You will see the Doctor, won't you?'

Spencer hesitates, squints at Barrington. 'I will.'

'This week?'

'This week.'

'Good lad. We've a certain responsibility for your well-being, you know? We take that very seriously. Can't have you wasting away up there.' Barrington hands over the money bag.

Spencer takes it and walks out of the door.

Barrington calls after him. 'We're all expecting great things from you! You have our full support! We understand these things can't be rushed! No need to be fearful! It'll take as long as it...'

\*

Buddy envelopes Spencer in a hug right there on the doorstep. Spencer reciprocates. They slap each other's backs, murmur apologies. Spencer breaks away. 'I was going crazy. That night. When you were searching around the back of the house. It—'

'Slow down.' Buddy takes a deep lungful of air, exhales with a satisfied sigh, and steps out onto the path. 'Let's just...chill. Know what I'm saying?'

'Right. Let me just sit down for a minute.'

'It's a beautiful summer evening, bro.' Buddy turns to close the door. 'Just in time for sunset. Let's go for a walk.'

'Can I leave this here?' Spencer takes off his coat and hands it over.

Buddy takes it. 'Why are you even wearing this? It's twenty-five degrees.'

'Where are we going?'

'I'll show you.'

Buddy leads the way to a narrow alley that splits two semi-detached houses, too tight to accommodate the breadth of a single pair of shoulders, leaving them to slide through sideways.

They emerge in the woods behind Spencer's apartment and wander among the trees without speaking, only the crunch of summer dirt beneath their feet breaking up the birdsong from the higher branches. Within minutes the street is out of view, nothing but trees and weeds and the wildflowers that sprout in frenzied clusters alongside the the brook that splices the land.

'Sometimes you just need a moment like this.' Buddy strides over to the felled trunk of an old oak tree and hoists himself up onto it. He waves Spencer over and turns him around so they're both facing toward the lowering sun. 'Look.'

Spencer hops up next to Buddy and they gaze together, swinging gently their legs,

knocking their heels against the flaking bark, stream water rippling in the distance. Shards of a blazing sunset pierce the foliage. Tiny sparkling orbs of pinkish orange and purplish pink hang in the air like particles of smouldering dust.

‘Can I lean on you?’

‘Go right ahead, bro.’

Spencer flops into Buddy’s bulk and rests his head upon his broad shoulder. For several minutes they sit this way, until Spencer rights himself, reaches out and grasps at the air. Buddy watches him. ‘What you doing?’

‘I want to touch it.’

‘Touch what?’

‘The sunset.’

Buddy laughs and partakes of the game, both men now swishing their hands around before them, out to catch the fading grains of sunshine before they fade to darkness.

‘The other night,’ Spencer slides off the log and turns to face his friend. ‘I’m going to tell you what happened.’

‘You sure? You’ve thought it through? You’re clear in what you want to say?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me as we walk.’ Buddy jumps off the tree trunk. ‘It’ll be dark in a few minutes.’

‘Can I just tell you here? It feels good here. It’s not just the other night. There’s more. A lot more.’

‘Okay, bro. Hit me.’

‘Right. Well, first of all there was...’

‘There was...?’

Spencer doesn't speak, his eyes fixed on a spot in the woods over Buddy's shoulder.

'Everything all—'

'We're being watched.'

Buddy lowers his voice. 'Where? Who?'

'Behind you. I don't know. What do we do?'

'Have they seen you?'

'I said it's watching us.'

'Has it seen that you've seen?'

'I don't know. What do we do?'

'All we can do. We walk back. We can't stand out here all night.'

'What if it attacks us?'

'It won't.'

'How do you know?'

'Money down it's the same guy who followed us into the pub. He's probably been on us for days. If he was going to do something he would have done it already.'

'You sure?'

Buddy claps Spencer on the back and raises his voice, enough that anyone in the vicinity would hear. 'Let's get out of here.' He twists in the direction of Spencer's glare.

An audible cracking of twigs and the shuffle of hurried footsteps cuts through the quiet wood. Buddy starts to walk towards the fading sound. 'Come on.'

'What are you doing?'

'Going to investigate.'

'No.'

‘He’s gone.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Same as before. He split as soon as that commotion happened. He doesn’t want us to see him.’

‘I don’t trust it.’

‘Come on, follow the logic.’

Spencer takes a few steps backwards. ‘I’m not going that way.’

‘We have to go that way.’

‘We’ll go around.’

‘It’s almost pitch dark, bro. Look. Stay here. I’ll go ahead, make sure he’s gone.’

‘No. Don’t. It’s not—’

‘Don’t leave this spot.’ Buddy slaps the fallen tree ‘I’ll be right back.’

Buddy walks away and within seconds he’s no longer visible. Spencer squats and leans against the trunk. The remaining light vanishes. He’s alone there, in the dark now.

Minutes later Buddy still hasn’t returned. Spencer stands and gropes around. He calls Buddy’s name out in a loud whisper. No answer comes. He creeps around the area, clutching at trees and branches. He swivels on the spot. Looking. Searching.

A shrill ring bursts from his pocket causing him yelp. He covers his own mouth, leans against a tree and takes the phone from his pocket. He answers it. ‘Buddy?’

A woman’s voice, a low rasp. ‘Listen very carefully.’

‘Who is this?’

‘Your little buddy there’s a liar.’

‘Who is this?’

‘Everything he’s told you is a lie.’

‘Tell me who this is.’

‘A friend.’

‘You don’t sound like a friend.’

‘I’m the best friend you never knew you needed. Now listen up, Spencer Dean, or whatever you call yourself.’

‘How do you know my name?’

‘As your new best friend I’m telling you this for your own damn good. Buddy Kane is a fraud and a madman. Trust him at your peril.’

‘Why should I believe you?’

‘Midnight tomorrow. Right where you’re standing now. Don’t be late.’

Spencer casts around behind him. ‘Wait. Where are you?’

The line clicks dead.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

There were still some final touches to add. A few of Norma's framed photographs had yet to be replicated, and the original camelback couch we'd acquired wasn't right. So I paid for one made from scratch to my exact specifications and it was due any minute. The old couch had just been removed, and I'd asked everyone to go home and leave me be for a while. Besides the couch and the photographs, the only thing I was yet to receive was a working copy of *Queen Kelly*, the silent film Norma watches in the movie. It had needed to be in a particular format to fit the type of projector used in the film, which we'd already bought. But we couldn't find the film anywhere for months. Finally, we had found a copy, and the reels were currently winging their way from New York.

"I don't really understand," Ivana had said across the table at Jenny's, the night after I'd had my epiphany. After explaining it a dozen times to Marshall, and assuring him he'd be well compensated for his time, I'd arranged an informal meeting with the others.

I explained it one more time. I wanted to build Norma Desmond's screening room in my house, down to every last ornament. We were going to install a false floor, false walls, acquire every stick of furniture, get the lighting perfect, everything.

"But, why?"

"That doesn't matter," I said. "We've assessed the situation, and we need lots of people. We need carpenters. Set designers. Tech for the projector and lights. Someone to make the photographs. People to track stuff down. People to drive around and collect it once we do. There's work for anyone who wants it. And I need you to contact your friends, anyone you know who can do these things. I will pay you all for

your time.”

“But—”

“Part of the job is not to ask me why. I’m not sure why. But this is what I want to do and I’m going to do it. Whoever wants in, you’re in.”

Sherrilyn eyed me with an expression I hadn’t seen before. “This is pretty weird, El,” she finally said. “I know I said you should find something to do with yourself. I meant, like, get a job, but, I guess...”

“You guess?”

“It’s good to see you doing *something*. And, you know, that shit you pulled...I guess it’s worked out pretty well.”

“Still doing good up there?”

“I’m out of the theatre on a weeknight, aren’t I?”

After that we went up to the Palace and watched *Godzilla Vs Megalon*. It was the first time I’d been up there since Fitch and his idiots had shown up and it was crazy in there. I had a pretty good time. I wasn’t totally with the movie like I used to be, but I didn’t need to be. I was happy enough letting it all wash over me while I dreamed about my project.

After the film, I hung around in the lobby with Marlon and Bonnie. They’d heard about my plans from Marshall. “Do you need crew?” Bonnie asked. “If you need sound recordists, or whatever, and I know some camera guys I could—”

“No cameras,” I said, bluntly.

Bonnie startled a little.

“No I didn’t mean...” I touched her arm. “We’re not filming, not recording in any way.”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought Marshall said you were remaking the scene.”

I paused, considered the statement for a moment. “No, I’m not...”

“You’re not...?”

I paused again. “I’m not...*remaking* the scene. I’m...” I shuffled on the spot.

“I’m...I just want to...”

“Is it like an art project?”

I had not considered that. But that didn’t sound right either.

“Whatever you’re doing, It’s catching,” Marlon said.

“Catching?”

“Two more theatres have hopped on the wagon. Some run-down place called the Mercury started doing “anything goes” nights. Fake blood welcome. And some other place started doing, like, easy-going stuff. All musicals and singalong shit. Discounts for anyone dressed the part. You started a bona fide craze.”

“Damn,” I said.

The next morning, Marshall and I started to make long lists of things to acquire and tasks to accomplish. The first thing we did was got hold of as much information about the film as we could. Anything we could find from old magazines, memorabilia specialists, newspapers, style supplements, etcetera. Then we had to identify the dimensions of the room. Marshall brought a set builder called Vincent to my place. We watched through the movie multiple times, trying to use the various angles of the room showed in other scenes to narrow down its actually shape and size. Vincent drew sketches, increasing in complexity until we were satisfied that it was correct to the film, and confirming that it would fit inside my house. While we were doing this, we had a set dresser and a furniture expert scouring every frame of the film, with the goal of naming and itemising every single object present in the room. Even if it was not visible in the scene in question, if it was visible elsewhere, I wanted it.

As soon as the room's dimensions were confirmed, the builders moved in and spent several days sawing and hammering and cursing at one another. All of the other furniture was moved out, and within a week there was new room within the old room. Next they had to add its built-in features. The grand arches behind the couch, the alcove in which Norma's screen hangs behind the oil painting. Once this had been done the walls were covered and treated to appear identical. This proved to be our first tripping point. The decorators were trying to approximate what colours and shades they thought the walls would be.

"What the hell is that?" I said when I walked in and saw the feature wall. It was a kind of marbled mahogany. "Why does it look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Brown. It doesn't look like that in the film."

"The film is black and white," one of the guys said. "We had to guess a bit. There's no way to tell exactly what shade it is."

I grabbed the guy by his overalls and dragged him through to the foyer and pressed play on the VCR. "I want it to look like that."

"But it's...black and white."

"So fix it that way. Not like that." I pointed into the room. "Like this."

"You want the room to be all black and white?"

"Yes. Like the film."

"We'll have to completely start over."

"Well, what am I paying you for?"

They got the idea in the end. I called Marshall and added that to our requirements. Everything had to be black and white. Not the colours they thought things should be. That meant everything had to be made in a particular way, or painted, treated,

whatever was required to render it a convincing monochrome.

After that it was those gothic mirrors, the sconces, then the tables, the lampshades, the oil painting that rolled up to reveal the screen. The projector and a platform to stand it on behind its arch. We got a photographer to make digital manipulations of the photographs people to frame them. Most of this went on without my direct involvement. I couldn't be getting caught up calling framers and electricians and vintage drapery specialists. I didn't have time for that. My job was to scrutinise every single new item that arrived and send it away to be replaced if it didn't feel right. "Watch the damn film," I said a thousand times. "Does this *look* like the cushion on the floor by the armchair? Does it?"

In six months, it was almost finished. I had begrudgingly allowed Marshall to take another job for a couple of weeks, and I was getting antsy because the new couch had still not arrived. I paged him several times but he wasn't getting back to me. I called Ivana but she was at work. Then I called Celia who'd been helping me keep track of the money, making sure everyone got paid. I'd furnished her with all the permissions she needed to approve orders and settle invoices without my involvement. When she answered the phone I complained to her about the couch and told her I was hungry.

"I'm not your PA, El," she said. "Why don't you just order a takeout."

"I can't find the menus."

"Where did you put them last?"

I didn't know. The whole house was littered with tools and stacks of bricks and wood, boxes half filled with packing peanuts and empty paint cans.

"Will you be my PA?" I asked.

"No, El."

"Do you know anyone who will?"

“I...uh,”

“Actually, forget it. Can you find out about the couch?”

“Sure.”

I went and washed up. Tried to make myself look like less of a “shit bag”, as Sherrilyn put it, grabbed some money and called a taxi.

I got out in front of the Cinematheque.

Belle was in the box-office reading a book.

“Remember me,” I said.

“Sure,” she said.

“How much do they pay you?” I asked.

“Not much,” she said.

“Would you like to earn a lot more than not much?”

“Doing what?”

“Being my personal assistant.”

“What do you do?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What’s your job? Why do you need an assistant?”

“I work for myself.”

“Doing what?”

“That’s not important. What’s important is this.” I took a five-hundred dollars out of my purse and pushed it through the hole in the window. “I will pay you this much, every day, if you will be my assistant.”

She gawked at the money. Back at me. Back at the money.

“Every day.”

“Okay,” she said. “When do I start?”

“Right now.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

It couldn't be true. Buddy had done more than anyone to help me. But before I'd had a minute to think it over he came stumbling out of the dark.

'Where were you, what happened?'

'Let's get out of here.' He lead them away. 'I found something.'

'What?'

'Who were you talking to?'

'No one. Myself, I mean. Just voicing my discontent, you know.'

They squeezed through the passage back onto the street. 'My place,' Buddy said.

'You can tell me what's on your mind.'

'I'm just gonna head home.'

'Yeah?'

'Being watched out there has muddied the waters a bit. I don't feel so clear on what I want to say now.'

We stopped beneath a street lamp.

'Understood, bro.' Buddy reached into his pocket. 'Before you go, take a look at this. Any ideas?'

The embossed insignia glinted in the lamplight. A business card. Barrington's business card. Those three 'B's linked together. The phone number. Identical in every way to the one given to me.

I took the card and held it up as though I was inspecting it from all angles looking for clues. But I did not expect to find any clues. I just wanted to think before I replied. An hour ago I would have told him everything, but now I wasn't so sure. I'd no idea who that was on the phone. No reason at all to trust her. But what if she was right? I



didn't really know him. And, in any other context, I too would think he was a madman. I needed to time to think, away, on my own. I flipped the card back and forth, held it close to my eye then away at a distance before I simply said: 'No.'

Buddy took the card back and conducted his own inspection. 'The important thing is we have a lead.'

'Maybe it's just litter.' I said.

'It's spotless.' Buddy said. 'Right there fresh on the top soil. If this had been out there for even a day it'd be dirty. Whoever was watching us, they dropped this.'

I feigned nonchalance and shrugged off Buddy's excitement.

'I thought you'd be happy, bro. This is what we needed.'

'Is it? Do we need any of this?'

'Come on, this is huge. I knew there was a reason I took you out there. This was why?'

'What if...'

'What?'

'What if there is no reason. No logic. No signs. No reasons for anything. What if this is all just stuff happening and nothing we do matters at all. What if this is all just...normal, and we just don't want it to be.'

'What's got into you?'

'Nothing. I'm just saying. What if this is just what normal is now and we just have to accept it? What if we're wasting our time even trying to make it otherwise.'

'You need rest.' Buddy placed his hand on my shoulder. 'I'll come see you tomorrow and we can talk then.'

I felt a twinge of discomfort being touched. I wanted to pull away but I didn't.

'I'll come to you.'

‘You cool?’

‘I’m just...like you said...tired.’

‘Tomorrow then. We’re going to find out who’s at the other end of this number.’

Buddy walked away towards his house, still studying the business card.

\*

Worlds were about to collide and I wasn’t ready for that to happen. I had to find a way to stop Buddy calling the number on the business card. How did it wind up out there? Who dropped it? Barrington? It’d been too dark to make a positive identification of what I saw out there. But it couldn’t have been Barrington. A man who suffered a laboured respiration just crossing his office. There’s no way he’d be able to sneak around in the woods at night unseen, unheard, let alone track us around town, if Buddy was right about that; he was six-and-a-half feet tall and dressed like retired wizard. You could spot him half-a-mile away. So someone else. But who? Why? To report back to Barrington? If that was the case, that meant that Barrington already knew that Buddy and I were cutting about together. But how much did he know beyond that? How keen was our stalker’s hearing? Had he heard us talking in the pub, or out in the woods? Where else had he followed us? Was he following us both, or just following me. Or following Buddy. We’d been together both times we’d spotted him so there was no way to know. That night in the pub was before my last meeting with Barrington, so if he did already know, he was keeping it to himself.

I told myself to prioritise. I wouldn’t have to see Barrington for another week. The first thing I had to do was to stop Buddy from calling the number, delay him, at the very least. It wasn’t going to be easy. He seemed so determined. I didn’t have to think

about it for long. All I had to do was adhere to Buddy's own rules, which meant I didn't technically have to lie. I'd just tell him I didn't want to call the number. That it felt wrong. But he'd want to know by what logic I'd arrived at that position. And I didn't know how to answer that, because if I hadn't recognised the card, I would think the most logical response was to call the number, or at least to track it down. So maybe that was it? I'd tell him that it felt wrong to call without knowing who might be on the other end. That we should attempt to trace the number before we called it. That could still lead to Barrington, of course. But it was better than just calling him up. And, I supposed, it might reveal something useful about Barrington that I could make use of. Like who he worked for. And if he was out gathering information on me, maybe it was only right, only logical, that I did the same.

But then, the phone call. I wanted to trust Buddy. I liked him. And I needed his help. But I couldn't lie and say that the woman's claims hadn't affected my feelings about him. A lot of what he said was pretty out there. I found it hard to think of him as a liar. In fact I was sure that he wasn't attempting to wilfully mislead me. Regarding his sanity, however. Let's just say I'd struggle to mount an argument in his defence if required to do so. And that's not to say his observations didn't fit with my recent experiences. On a strictly instinctual basis, I agreed with him completely. Which would fit with the rules. But then, they were Buddy's rules, and if Buddy was insane, it's likely that his rules weren't really the rules anyone wanted to follow.

I didn't want to spend the next however long agonising over all this and I realised that meant I had no choice. Tomorrow I would try to stall Buddy from calling the number, for at least a day, and then I would go out into the woods the following night to meet with the woman and see what she had to say.

\*

Spencer descends the stairs outside his apartment and picks his way along the street in the torrid afternoon sun. He raises an elbow and leans in to dry his brow on his T-shirt sleeve as he walks, repeating the action on the alternate arm, then standing on Buddy's doorstep, lifting the front of the shirt with two hands and dragging it down over his face, leaving a smeared, inverted face-print in the fabric. 'What's with this heat?'

Buddy steps back from the door and lets Spencer past. 'You look terrible.'

'Why does everyone feel so comfortable telling me that?' Spencer slouches into the living room and flops onto the sofa.

Buddy disappears into another room and returns with a towel. Spencer takes it and wipes his face again. 'Water?'

'What?'

'Water? Do you want some?'

'Do I want some what?'

'*Water*. War-ter. Do you want some?'

Spencer straightens himself so he's sitting upright, tilts his face up towards Buddy standing over him, and openly scrutinises his expression. A look of partial recognition passes across his face. He blinks. Leans back and rests his arms out from side to side along the back of the sofa cushions like a playboy in a VIP lounge. 'I guess I could go for some.'

'You guess you could go for some water?'

'Yeah, I guess I could.'

'Whatever you say, bro.' Buddy brings him a glass of water.

Spencer takes it. He looks at it. Then up at Buddy. Back at the glass. He raises it and holds it against the side of his face. Looks back at Buddy. Holds the glass to his mouth, and sips. His eyes widen. He looks up at Buddy with a broadening smile. Takes another long draw from the glass. ‘Amazing.’ He finishes the glass and holds it out. ‘Another. Please.’

Buddy refills the glass and brings it back. Spencer drains it in one long pull and holds it out again. They repeat this two more times until Spencer lifts a palm after the fourth glass. ‘Thank you.’ He settles into the backrest. ‘Incredible. Just incredible.’

Buddy sits down opposite and gives Spencer a serious look. ‘How are you feeling now?’

‘I don’t think we should call the number.’

‘I agree.’

‘It’s just, if we call, we might give ourselves away, we have to be smart about it.’

‘You’re right.’

‘Because, you know, if we—’

‘Spencer. I’m agreeing with you.’

‘Right. I know. I’m just saying, you know. I thought, last night, you said...’

‘I was thinking too far ahead.’

‘Too far ahead. My own thoughts exactly. So we just, take it slow, just have a few days to think about it. Then, maybe, you know, we could try to trace the number, or something.’

‘I did that already.’

‘You did?’

‘I did.’

‘How?’

‘That doesn’t matter. What matters is that we have an address.’

Spencer tenses. ‘We do?’

‘Some shithole on Holloway Road. Not listed to any recognisable business.’

‘Oh well, I guess that’s it then. Bit of an unknown quantity. Too big a risk maybe. Should probably just forget all about it. Can I see the card?’

‘We’re not forgetting it, bro. This is our lead, we just have to be careful. First, we need to identify who’s following us. Draw him out somehow. But without him knowing. If we can find out who it is, maybe we can get an upper-hand in this. I feel like we’re due one.’

‘How are we going to do that? If he’s following us that means he knows where we are. And if he knows where we are how can we draw him out? Won’t he see whatever we try to do? Can I look at the card again?’

Buddy makes no gesture to showing Spencer the card. ‘All valid questions. You don’t need to worry about it. I’ve got a plan.’

‘What sort of plan?’

‘I’ll take care of it. I need a day to make some enquiries. But I need you to do something for me. Tomorrow evening, I want you to go out for a long walk. Come back after sundown.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m bringing someone in to help. If there are prying eyes outside. I need you to draw them away.’

‘You’re bringing someone in? Who?’

‘Don’t worry about that for now.’

‘Where should I go?’

‘Anywhere. As long as it’s away from here. Leave before sundown. Come back

after dark.’

\*

I sat in front of the monitors for a while. The days when I’d just sit here and zone out on the screens was long behind me. I tried. I studied each monitor in turn. Tried to look past the surface into whatever lay beyond. But nothing came.

At eleven-thirty I grabbed the torch, slid as quietly as I could out of the front door, and jumped the fence behind the building into the woods. I kept the beam of the torch close to my feet and headed down the slope, in the direction I thought the fallen tree was in. But I stumbled on it almost immediately. I could have sworn the night before we’d walked for several minutes until we got there. But here it was, right behind my house. I could even see the backs of the houses, mine and the one next door. I looked around for a place to hide, and started off in the direction of a large bush when I heard something behind me.

\*

A hand wraps itself around Spencer’s mouth while another grasps his left wrist and folds his arm into the furrow between his shoulder blades. The assailant presses a dirty rag hard into Spencer’s face until his knees buckle and his eyes roll away, then lowers his unconscious body to the ground, grabbing him at the ankles, and dragging him back towards the houses. Face up toward the sky, eyes closed, Spencer’s arms lag loose above his head, snagging in the ground-level bushes, weeds, twigs, and insects the cover the forest floor. They disappear into the darkness, leaving the torch behind

to illuminate the fallen tree.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

The couch was delivered the following day. It was just right. And a few days later *Queen Kelly* arrived in the morning. I stayed out of the way while Ivana checked over the reels and got the whole thing working. Now it was almost complete, I started to feel anxious, which wasn't helped by the large number of people who were coming and going from the house at all hours, touching up paintwork, making tiny adjustments to the furniture, and replacing small items I'd forgotten I'd complained about.

A few hours later and Ivana was ready to go. I asked everyone but her and Belle to go outside. Ivana started rolling the movie, but before I'd even sat down I knew something was wrong. Something was missing. What? We'd been over the inventory again and again. We had everything down to the last picture frame. "Stop the film," I said.

Ivana stopped the film.

I sat down and looked around the room, scrutinising every single item. Nothing came to mind. I went and stood in front of the screen, looked back at the couch. "Joe." I clapped my hands together. "I need a Joe! And you." I pointed at Ivana. "You're not right at all. You're supposed to be Max."

Ivana called around, looking for a projectionist with the correct body type, while we audition Joes. Most of them had a hard time understanding what was expected of them. "I just sit there and watch the movie?" one guy asked.

"And smoke," I said. "And you have to blow the smoke up into the projector beam, so it swirls around like this." I drew a swirl in the air with my finger.

"For how long?"

“As long as I ask.”

“I have to smoke the whole time?”

“Yes.”

This proved to be an issue. Even the smokers didn't want to smoke for hours on end. But eventually we found a guy, a real dummy named Jordan who seemed fine with the idea of smoking on a couch all day. “No lines?” he asked again.

“No lines,” I reconfirmed.

“Score,” he said and pumped his fist.

While he was being fitted with his suit Ivana showed up with our new projectionist. I was thrilled as his real name was Max. He was perfect, except for one thing. “Shave his head,” I said.

They shaved his head and fitted him for a suit too.

Once both guys were good to go. We installed them in their positions. I knelt in front of Joe and arranged his posture “You smoke with your right hand, first,” I said. “And then you switch to this hand. When you smoke with your right hand, you put your left hand here.” I placed his left hand on his knee. “I and will slip my hand through here and grip your arm. When I put the teacup down, I will let your arm go and that's when you switch smoking hands. When I pick up the teacup again, that's when you switch back. Get it?”

He said he did although he didn't look so sure. I figured he would get it eventually.

Everyone cleared out, we dropped the lights, and Max rolled the film.

Tentatively, I sat down. For a brief moment I felt an electric thrill. More than I even hoped. But it fizzled out after just a second. “Stop, stop,” I said. “Film off, lights on. Stop!”

What was it?

I looked over at Belle who was watching from the edge of the room. She'd become invaluable within just a few short days. Unless specifically asked to do so, she never veered out of earshot. If I needed something, I just said it out loud and the next thing I knew there she was, whipping out her notepad, scribbling down my request. I shrugged towards her, annoyed.

"Maybe you'll feel better in costume," she said.

"Costume?"

"You're not going to do it dressed like that, are you?"

I looked down at my ratty, paint-stained T-shirt, round at Joe, back at myself. I'd been so busy with everything else that I hadn't even stopped to consider my own outfit. I stepped out of the room and grabbed Belle by the shoulders. "Do you know anything about clothes," I said.

"Not really." She shook her head.

I frowned.

"My roommate does."

"Call your roommate. I'll give you a bonus if you can get her here today."

Later that day, Belle's roommate, Maya, arrived. I had her watch the scene with me and she wrote things down and made drawings, then went off to search through different types of fabric, looking for the exact kind Norma wears in the scene, and for a seamstress to make the garment.

"What about hair and make-up?" Belle said.

Later that day I was in a salon having my hair dyed while Belle looked for a stylist to come to the house. We hired a make-up guy, too, David. And Maya sourced all of Norma's Jewellery.

Two weeks later, after I'd been dressed and my hair had been done, I sat staring into the mirror while David did my make up. I didn't speak up at first, but straight away something was wrong with it. It came to me as he started to paint my lips. "No, no," I said, and wiped the red paint away with a tissue. "It has to look like the movie."

I had the same talk with him that I'd had with the decorators and everyone else. We'd been through the same thing with May and the seamstress, too. Once I'd got my point across, he went away and came back with new supplies, and painted my face in a kind of silvery white. "The boys, too," I said. "I don't want to see a single colour, anywhere."

Once everything was ready I stopped by the side of the set. I couldn't even remember how long it'd been since we started. It felt like I'd never done anything else. But something was stopping me from taking up my position. One last thing I'd forgotten. I didn't know what. I switched the tape on in the foyer, being careful not to ruin my outfit, and watched through the scene several times. Nothing came to me. I switched it off. Looked back at the set. What was it? I watched the scene again. Then I remember something. I turned the volume up. "Tuberoses!"

I dispatched Belle immediately. A couple of hours later she was back with a bottle of tuberose perfume, the type Joe complains about in the voiceover. Belle sprayed a small amount onto my neck and my wrists, and as the scent hit my sinuses I felt faint and lightheaded. I'd never worn perfume before. Under other circumstances, I don't think I would have liked it. Even a small amount was overpowering. But this was what Norma smelled like. And here I was, after all these months, looking and smelling and sounding like Norma—I had taken to impersonating her here and there and I was getting better.

"Are you ready," Belle said, slightly apprehensive.

“I’ve always been ready, darling,” I replied

They dimmed the lights, the men got into position, and they started rolling the film.

Belle walked me in and held my dress out of the way while I sat down next to Joe. She picked up the teacup and handed it to me. I took it, nodded for her to go. Joe took a cigarette from his pack and lit it up, blew smoke up into the projector beam just like he was supposed to. I slipped my hand around his arm, splayed my fingers just like Norma, and watched *Queen Kelly* from beginning to end, after which I had them replay it. Then again. And again. It felt as though time had stopped entirely while the film was playing, only to be jolted back to reality each time the film came to an end. We would take a few minutes to eat, use the bathroom, whatever. Then start all over again. After eight hours Joe could no longer sit without fidgeting and Max was complaining that the heat from the projector was making him sick.

We made plans to reconvene the next morning. But after a few days more issues came about. The abundance of smoke was causing all sorts of problems. So we had a little machine installed above the projector to suck the worst of it out of the room. And everyone was finding it difficult to keep up to my standards. Joe fidgeted constantly. And Max must have had the bladder of a small child. After a few days I stopped the whole thing and got everyone together. I gave authority to Celia to approve any costs that would assist in the smooth running of the project. And over the next few weeks we hired multiple Joes, and a couple more people to fill in for Max and had them running in shifts. We even hired a replacement Norma, who would sit there in my stead, whenever I wanted to get up. Ivana had had copies of *Queen Kelly* made, to ensure we had spares so the original didn’t get worn out. And there were a number of tech people working on the lighting, maintaining the projector, and anyone

else we needed to keep the whole thing running smoothly. After a few weeks of that, we really started to get into the groove, I was troubled less and less by inconstancies. I spent hours at a time, just being Norma, and whenever I did need to stop, I always found myself alarmed at how many dozens of people there were in my house at all times.

“Who are all these people?” I asked Belle.

“Your staff,” she said.

“All of them?”

“Mostly, some are just their friends, boyfriends, girlfriends. Word’s been getting around.”

“Word? About little old me?” I said in Norma’s voice.

“Uh huh,” Belle said. “People want to see. You’ve had so many people come and go from here in the last few months. Like I said, word get around. People are curious. They want to see.”

“They want to see...me?” I let the end of the word stretch out and tail upwards.

“You betcha.”

I stopped to think for a minute. It had never been my intention to draw attention to myself. But I hadn’t really considered that enlisting so many people would have that effect. At first, I felt a little unsure of the matter. But those were Ella’s reservations. And I had to ask, what would Norma want? “Let them come in their droves,” I intoned. “Of course they want to see me. I’m Norma Desmond. The brightest star of the silent era!”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

‘Wake him up.’

A big man with no neck nuds and holds a small bottle beneath Spencer’s nose.

Spencer rouses, his eyes flickering, head swinging, squinting at the woman who’s facing him.

Cheekbones high and head shaved razor-close. She wears an asymmetrical dress, a lightly-peppered charcoal, whose slanted collar cuts an angled contour through to its diagonal hem. One heeled boot on the floor, the other planted against the wall, she moves her head from side to side, mimicking Spencer’s swaying eye-line. ‘More.’

The man holds the bottle under Spencer’s nose again. His eyes widen a little further. He looks around the room. Back up at the woman. ‘Johnny?’ He tilts his neck so he facing upwards at the man standing over him. ‘Barrington?’

The woman approaches the chair that Spencer is tied to. ‘What’s he talking about?’ She grabs him by the chin and directs his gaze towards her own.

Spencer stares up at her through half-open eyes and slurs. ‘Where did you go?’ He lurches forward within his restraints, gags, again, saliva dripping from his mouth, then heaving until he coughs a viscous, silvery bile right onto the floor in front of him.

The woman jumps backwards in time to avoid the regurgitated fluid, covers her mouth with her hand, and orders the big man to clean it up. He leaves the room and returns with a bucket and falls to his knees.

Spencer’s eyes open fully. He blinks. Looks down at the ropes binding him to the chair, back up at the woman. ‘I know you.’

‘Doubtful.’ She sits on another chair and crosses her legs.

‘That night. Outside.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You’re different. Your hair. But it’s you.’

‘You’re mistaken.’

‘Bluer than blue.’

‘Excuse me.’

‘That’s what you said.’

‘I think you’re imagining things, Mr. Dean.’

‘Mr. Dean?’

‘That is your name? Mr. Spencer Dean?’

‘What did you do to me?’

‘Chloroform. It was necessary, I’m afraid. It won’t do you any lasting damage.

There’s no need to worry. We don’t mean you any harm.’

‘Why was it necessary?’

‘I couldn’t allow you to know my location.’

‘We’re in the house next door to my apartment.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure, Mr. Dean.’

‘Your curtains.’

The woman and the big man both glance across the room at the curtained window.

Spencer juts his chin towards it. ‘That pattern. You can see it from outside.’

‘It’s a popular design.’ The woman paces over to the window and takes the corner of the material between her thumb and forefinger. ‘We could be anywhere.’

‘Sure.’ Spencer nods and protrudes his lower lip.

‘I told you to sit him over there, dumbass.’ The woman rises and backhands the big man’s solid pectoral.

A crestfallen look overwhelms the big man’s previously neutral expression. He



shifts his weight awkwardly for a moment, before rushing to amend the miscalculation, grabbing the back of the chair and dragging it to the other side of the room on its hind legs. He then switches the vacant chair to the opposite position and looks to the woman for approval.

The woman slowly claps the heel of her palm with the other hand. 'Bravo.'

'You didn't have to tie me up. I'm not going to run off.'

'Maybe we mean to torture you.'

'Do you?'

'Actually, no.'

'Then why tie me up?'

'A little flair never goes amiss. Untie him.'

The big man loosens the ropes.

Spencer watches him until his wrists and ankles are freed. 'Obliged.'

The woman turns toward the empty chair. 'Leave us.'

The big man gathers up the rope and the cleaning utensils and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

The woman takes out a pack of cigarettes. 'Do you mind if I smoke?'

'Go ahead.'

She extends the offer and Spencer shakes his head. She shrugs and lights up. 'So. Tell me about yourself.'

'You seem to know enough about me already.'

'Humour me. Pretend we're on a date.' She takes a drag and blows right into Spencer's face.

He waves the smoke away. 'I don't do that. Bad things can happen.'

'You don't go on dates?'

‘I don’t pretend.’

‘Why not? Don’t we all want to pretend in some way?’

‘It’s hard to explain.’

‘Forget that. Tell me about yourself. That’s not pretending, is it? Unless you’re a liar.

‘I thought you had something to tell me. That’s why you brought me here. To tell me something about Buddy?’

‘In good time. First I want you to tell me about yourself.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Yeah. No.’

‘Because you can’t? Or because you don’t want to?’

‘Because...’ Spencer looks down at himself, small leaves and twigs still clinging to his clothes, long streaks where he’d been dragged through the dirt, splashes of vomit on his knees. ‘Because fuck you, that’s why. Fuck all of you. Forever.’ He stands up and moves towards the door.

‘That’s quite abrupt, Mr. Dean.’

‘Abrupt? You knocked me out in the woods and tied me to a chair! Abrupt!’

‘Please retake your seat.’

‘No, I know where this is going.’

‘Where?’

‘Where it always goes. Nowhere. You’re going to ask me a whole bunch of vague questions to which I will give insufficient answers and we’ll do that for the next few hours and I’ll leave here feeling like I’ve just had a rusty drill rammed into skull. I’m not doing it again.’

‘Slug!’

The big man appears in the doorway, his bulk filling the entire frame.

‘Please sit back down, Mr. Dean.’

‘Stop calling me Mr. Dean. How about you answer some questions. Who are you?’

‘My name is Audrey Lee.’

‘And who’s this big fucking tombstone?’

‘This is Slug.’

Slug places his giant hand across his chest and gives a deferential nod.

‘What do you people want from me? Why does every conversation have to go around in fucking circles?’

‘If you’ll sit back down, Mr...if you’ll sit down, please?’

‘I’m not answering any questions. Not until you tell me what you know. I’ll sit here all fucking night like...’ Spencer makes a zipping motion over his mouth. ‘You can get yer fucking lunk here to beat the crap out of me. I don’t give a shit.’

Slug frowns.

‘No offence, man, you seem like a good dude and all.’

‘Leave us.’

Spencer moves up to Slug and looks up at him, lowering his voice, inches away.

‘You don’t have to let her talk to you like that. You deserve respect in the workplace. She’s got you chloroforming dudes in the woods—’

‘That’s his job!’ Audrey Lee plants her fists on her hips.

‘...ordering you around. Disparaging your good name. Insults. Mopping up vomit.’ Spencer turns to Audrey. ‘Is that his job?’ Back to Slug, closer, whispering.

‘Is that in your contract, Slug? Fucking puke-cleaner?’

Slug trembles and looks down at his feet.

‘He’s quite happy.’

‘Speaking on your behalf. Denying your true feelings, brother.’

Audrey scoffs

‘You should join a union. Get the reps down here. All the way to a tribunal!’

‘You can leave, now.’

‘Don’t listen to her, Slug.’

‘Do you want to talk or not?’

‘No.’ Spencer backs away from the door. ‘I don’t want to talk. I want you to talk.’

‘Then please sit back down. Slug...if you would...could you wait outside.’

‘Forgetting something?’

Audrey seethes beneath her rigid angles. ‘Please.’

Slug looks to Spencer and Spencer nods, sagely. Slug bows to the room and backs out of the doorway. Audrey closes the door.

‘I think he’d like to hear your gratitude.’ Spencer reseats himself.

Audrey mumbles a thank you.

‘He’s never going to hear that.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘Do you want to talk or not?’

All of the muscles in Audrey’s face tense around her narrowed eyes. Her sharp intake of breath quite audible, a tantrum threatening her remaining composure until she closes her eyes and mouths a silent mantra, lowering her hands, palms to the varnished floorboards, allowing her breathing to return to a steadier rhythm.

‘Open the door.’

She opens it.

‘Loud enough for him to hear you, say, “thank you, Slug”.’

She follows his instruction, calling awkwardly but audibly then closing the door.

‘Why don’t you sit down?’

She complies.

‘I’m listening.’

Her cigarette has burned to white cinders in a stand-alone ashtray so she lights another, this time expelling the smoke away to her side across her shoulder. She burns through it in a few long drags and crushes it out with a slow determination, twisting the butt hard into the base of the ashtray long after the last ember is extinguished. Straightening her dress and placing her both of her hands atop the raised knee of her crossed leg, she clears her throat. ‘What would you say if—’

‘No, no. I meant what I said. No questions. No whats. No whens or whys or who’s. Don’t ask me about myself. Tell me what you know and what you want.’

‘We want you warn you.’

‘About what?’

‘About Mr. Kane.’

‘Why?’

‘We believe he is misleading you.’

‘So. What’s it to you if he’s misleading me?’

‘You don’t care that you’re being misled?’

‘No questions.’

‘We believe that it would be to your detriment, should you continue along that particular path.’

‘Why?’

‘Mr. Kane has some very, how should I say, problematic existential notions. We

believe these notions to be erroneous and potentially harmful.’

‘And why do you care if I’m harmed? What am I to you? There must be thousands out there, millions, of people at the mercy of “potentially harmful problematic existential notions”. Why me?’

‘We just happen to be especially concerned with *these* problematic existential notions. Our interest in you is an extension of those concerns. They represent something of an antithesis of our own beliefs.’

‘Wait, wait, wait. You keep saying “we”. Who’s “we”?’

‘We are the...organisation, that I represent.’

‘What kind of organisation.’

‘I’m not at liberty to disclose that information.’

‘Do you work for...who do you work for?’

‘We don’t “work” for anyone. We represent our own interests.’

‘Why are you following me?’

‘We are not the ones who are following you’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘That is your own prerogative.’

‘If you’re not following me then who is?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘But I am being followed?’

‘It would appear so.’

‘Who are they?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘Are they watching me now?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘How big is your organisation?’

‘I’m not at liberty to—’

‘Fine, fine. Would it be fair to say that it extends beyond you and citizen Slug out there? Assuming no two-person operation could be rightly called an organisation.’

‘That would be fair to say.’

‘So then why is your organisation so concerned about Buddy’s existential notions? He’s just one harmless crank.’

‘He is quite a lot more than a “harmless crank”. Neither is he “just one” of anything. Mr Kane is a member of a dangerous sect intent on undermining the very nature of our existence.’

‘Like a cult?’

‘Exactly like that.’

‘Buddy’s in a cult?’

‘A prominent member.’

‘You, however, are not part of a cult.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘You’re in an...“organisation”?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s quite a claim.’

‘Yet true, nonetheless.’

‘Funny he’s never mentioned anything like that. Never even heard him to refer to another person,’ Spencer lies. ‘Never seen him with anyone.’

‘You will. He’s biding his time.’

‘Until what?’

‘Until you’re ready to be radicalised. He’s grooming you. Waiting.’

‘Why should I believe you?’

‘Because you already have your doubts. How could you not? You’d do well to listen to them.’

‘How do you know I have doubts?’

‘Because doubt is the only rational reaction to Mr. Kane’s...philosophy.’

‘Explain.’

‘Will you permit me to ask some questions of my own? Simple questions.

Requiring only a yes/no answer.’

Spencer doesn’t answer.

Audrey lights another cigarette. ‘It will greatly assist an explanation.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Would it be accurate to say that, per Mr Kane’s own outlook, he’s been engaged in an effort to convince you that you, he, maybe all of us, are trapped inside some kind of ungodly machination, administered by persons unknown, in which the normal rules of time, space, and causality don’t apply?’

Spencer nods. ‘Continue.’

‘And that he’s told you that, in order to escape from said machination, you must learn to adhere to a certain kind of “logic”, by which you’re to constantly observe surroundings and your own internal reflections, and through which you should be able to divine the right course of action. That if you are able to choose the correct sequence of events you will eventually find your way...out.’

‘It’s in the ballpark.’

‘And, finally, would you say that you’ve struggled to find a satisfactory way to implement these suggestions?’

‘Yes and no.’



‘More yes than no, though?’

‘He talks a lot about making the right decisions. Trying to “feel” what the right thing to do is. To look for signs. And follow the logical path.’

‘But you’ve found that difficult?’

‘Why don’t you get back to explaining and less with the questions.’

‘Okay. Firstly, he’s asking you to operate by both instinct and logic. Not the most comfortable bedfellows, to say the least. But beyond that. Him and his ilk, view the process of decision making as though it were simply a matter of completing a set of discrete equations that have no contextual connections to anything else.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Decision making isn’t a process you can break down into distinct, manageable items and resolve in a sequential manner. Every choice you’ve ever made is dependent on numerous subconscious factors to which you have no conscious access.’

‘You may not like Buddy but I really think you guys would get along. You sound just like him.’

An expression of disgust passes over Audrey’s face at the suggestion of camaraderie between them. ‘I’ll not dignify that with a response.’

‘Seriously. I could put a word in for you. Make myself scarce.’

‘You don’t seem to be taking this seriously, Mr. Dean’.

Spencer, lifting his arms up, hands behind his head, stretches his back out as though he’s just woken from a deep and satisfying slumber. He relaxes into the chair and extends his legs out in front of him. ‘Well, Mr. Dean’s tired off all this shit. You’re all insane. You, Buddy, Barrington. I can’t remember that last time someone spoke to me in normal words.’

Audrey halts at the second mention of Barrington’s name. Spencer yawns and

clasps his hands behind his head.

‘I’m just attempting to explain—’

‘You want me to understand, don’t you? What are you trying to say?’

‘That what Mr. Kane is asking of you is impossible.’

‘Why? Simple words please.’

‘It’s impossible because you’re making decisions constantly. Some conscious. Some subconscious. Some in-between. At any given moment your brain is processing information at a rate far quicker than your conscious mind can keep up with. You’ve probably made a thousand tiny choices since you sat down in that chair, most of which you will be blissfully unaware. Whilst constantly re-evaluating choices you’ve already made and weighing the pros and cons of choices you’ll have to make in both the near and distant futures. It is not humanly possible to make the “correct” decisions, based on logic or signs or instinct or anything. You are encountering a potentially infinite amount of sense data during every minute of your life. Sounds, smells, images, physical sensation, perceived distance, in both time and space, all of which intersect into an staggering number of variables and combinations. The gospel that Mr. Kane preaches is based on the erroneous belief that these elements can be isolated into detached categories and dealt with discretely. This is fundamentally untrue.’

‘If it’s fundamentally untrue what does it matter? Of what danger is it to you?’

‘I’m not finished.’

‘What else is there?’

‘There is no “out”.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Mr. Kane has you believing that you’re trapped in some kind of altered reality,

has he not? And that, were you to follow his methods, you would be able to liberate yourselves, to return to a previous model of reality, in which the normal rules of time and space and causality have been restored.'

'It's a fair summary.'

'Does that not strike you as somewhat...unlikely?'

'If you'd asked me that before I would have said yes.'

'Before what?'

'I've seen things. Experienced things. Things that aren't...right. It's the only explanation that makes sense.'

'What if I told you there's another explanation?'

'What if you just got on with it and told me what it was?'

'It is not the world around you that's changed. It's you.'

'Meaning what? I've lost my mind?'

'No. Your mind is still where it should be. It's just that your sense of perception has been altered. The outside world is the same as it ever was.'

'How does that account for what I've seen? Things have happened to me. Things that aren't right. Aren't normal.'

'I can assure you, the things that have happened to you are no more or less normal than anything that's ever happened to you. You are just perceiving those events in a different way.'

'Well it sucks.'

'That, as with all other things, is just a matter of perception.'

'Well then what do I do? How do I get out?'

'As I've said, there is no "out", there is no "back". There is only now and it is in the now that you must act.'

‘How?’

‘Just do the opposite of what he tells you.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Succumb, Mr. Dean.’

‘Succumb?’

‘Yes. Do not pit yourself against the moment like a matador facing down a raging bull. Imagine yourself like water. Never stop flowing. But allow yourself to be shaped by the dimensions of the riverbed.’

‘Nice to finally get some solid, practical advice.’

‘Acceptance, Mr. Dean. Accept that things are as they’ve always been. That there is no “out”. That there is no correct logic and no wrong decisions. Accept these things. Accept your own unconditional subjectivity. And acquiesce.’

‘What about my memories? Why am I losing them? Why am I forgetting things?’

‘You’re not losing your memories. But your *perception* of your own memories has changed. If you can’t remember something, it’s not lost. It’s all still in there. But your new sense of perception is not settled. It is under a constant flux. It wants to redraw your old memories to rationalise new experiences that don’t fit into the old paradigm. I won’t ask you to tell me about yourself again. But I will say, that my purpose in asking was in an attempt to be illustrative. May I recommend conducting a thought experiment in your own time?’

‘Such as?’

‘Try to recall as much as you can about yourself. About your life. The past. Look for things that don’t fit. Contradictions. Chronological impossibilities. Other discrepancies. Where you find error you’ll find clues to the objective world.’

‘I thought there was no objective world. Isn’t that what all this has been about?’

‘I never said that.’

‘But you said—’

‘Just because you can’t access the objective world, doesn’t mean it isn’t there.’

‘But if I find clues, error, that will...what? Let me back into an objective world?’

‘I never said that.’

‘Then what’s the point?’

‘There isn’t one.’

‘Then why look for error? Why bother doing any of this?’

‘Very good question. If you ever find an answer, be sure to let me know.’

Spencer doesn’t respond. They stare at each other in silence for a couple of minutes.

‘Can I go now?’ Spencer rubs his eyes and stretches his neck out.

Audrey Lights another cigarette. ‘You’re free to leave, if that’s what you want.’

‘Great, catch you around sometime, no doubt.’ Spencer stands and moves towards the door.

‘Although...’ Audrey blocks Spencer at the doorway, putting her hand on the doorframe to prevent his exit. She looks him up and down. ‘...We could always...’

‘We could always...what?’

‘Well, if you don’t have any plans for the remainder of the evening, maybe we could...?’ She drags on the cigarette and blows smoke in Spencer’s face.

‘Maybe we could what?’

‘Sex, Mr. Dean. Would you like to have sex?’

‘Sex?’

‘Yes. Sex, Mr. Dean. Sex.’

‘With you?’

‘Yes, with me. Sex with me.’

‘Right.’

‘Well?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I’m good for now. Thanks though.’

‘You’re “good for now”?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘You...you can’t say “no”.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you...have you seen yourself lately, Mr. Dean?’

Spencer look down at his clothes, covered in dirt and vomit.

‘So?’

‘I’m just not really in the mood.’

‘You’re not “in the mood”?’

‘That’s right.’

Audrey Lee scoffs and unblocks the doorway.

Spencer leaves and walks down the stairs towards the door. He shouts back before he goes outside. ‘Thanks though.’

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

And come, they did. They brought their friends and their friends' friends. Everyone wanted to come and see the real-life Norma Desmond. My one rule was that no one, no one, stepped into Norma's room who wasn't there in a professional capacity. Outside of that, I didn't care. If anything, I enjoyed the attention. Whenever someone played *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma had an audience, so why shouldn't I? I imagined them, on the other side of the screen, while I, Norma, watched *Queen Kelly* with any one of my interchangeable Joes. Honestly, most of the time I didn't even notice. I was too absorbed in watching Queen Kelly, placing the teacup on the coffee table, picking it up again, taking Joe's arm, replacing the teacup. Whenever I had to stop, I went through the motions of washing, eating, napping, on a kind of autopilot while my replacement sat in for me. Then I'd go back to my spot and start all over. I'd instructed Belle to handle all issues, enquires, and anything else without bothering me with it. Unless it was some imperative issue that would force us to stop, I gave her full authority to make any decisions she wanted on my behalf. Which was working out perfectly until one afternoon that I later learned was late in the autumn of 1996.

We were a perfectly calibrated unit by that stage. *Queen Kelly* was always rolling, and everyone knew exactly what to do no matter what happened. Every flaw that might occur had been observed, repeated, and incorporated into our extensive checklist. I was picking up my teacup, sliding my hand around Joe's arm, when a bright, sharp light shattered the smoky darkness of the room. I turned towards the source of the light and squinted towards the people gathered at the edge of the room. The light exploded again. And as it faded, my eyes adjusted and I saw a man with a camera.

Camera.

I threw the teacup at him and it bounced off his shoulder. I got up and started to yell at him. He backed away and out of the room.

“What the hell?” I said to Belle.

She looked around awkwardly. “They’re from the *Times*,” she said. “I thought you said—”

“I said *no* cameras. Ever.”

“You never said that to me.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t.”

“I...well, I said it to someone.”

“Not me,” she said.

“What do they want?”

“They wanted to do a piece on you. I thought it would be okay. I said they couldn’t talk to you. Couldn’t interrupt you, I mean. But I told them it was okay to take pictures, and they talked to everyone else.”

The photographer and another man were standing by the doorway.

“Get out,” I yelled. “Yes, you. Out.”

They left the building.

“That was stupid, Belle.”

“I...I’m sorry...I didn’t know.”

“New rule,” I said. “No press. And *no* cameras.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Make sure everyone knows.”

But it didn’t matter. Once I sat back down in my chair, she was gone. Norma was



gone. I was just me again. Whatever vacant space I'd carried around all those years, it was back, emptier than ever. I didn't have to sit there for more than a minute. The connection had been severed. It was over. For the first time in weeks, I told everyone to stop. Told everyone to get out. I stood there at the door myself, watching every last person leave except Belle. Once they were all out, I went upstairs, pulled off Norma's clothes which now felt heavy and uncomfortable. I washed all the crap off my face and pulled my hair out of its tight curls, and went to bed. Belle came up to check on me. Then left when I told her to go.

The next morning. Marshall, Belle, and Sherrilyn came to see me. I opened the door and let them in, then flopped down on my old couch, switched the TV on and watched the static. Belle handed me the paper. Opened to a page around the middle.

MEET THE LAUREL CANYON RESIDENT WHO WANTS TO "LIVE" IN THE  
MOVIES

There were two pictures. The one he'd taken before I'd seen him, placid, just like Norma. And another of me scowling into the camera, looking like a ghost who's just been woken after years of slumber. "Please take this out of the house." I handed it back. It was the first time I'd seen a picture of myself in years. I didn't want it near me. As Belle took the paper away it dawned upon me that that picture, that headline, was now all over the city. I felt as though I'd been split into a million tiny pieces and scattered throughout the land. "I don't want to *live* in the movies," I said. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. What does it even mean?"

Sherrilyn sat down and put her arm around me. "What were you trying to do, El? Because it does kinda look like—"

"I don't know," I said. I really didn't know. "It was just supposed to be...I

thought it would make me feel better.”

“Did it?” Marshall asked.

“I don’t remember,” I said. “I think it did. For a bit. But now...” I started to cry. Whatever sized hole had been there before I’d started all this, it was bigger than ever. Just a huge empty screen with no light dancing upon it. It was all just a blank, a big nothing. “My house is so fucked-up,” I sobbed. “Look at all this shit.”

I hadn’t even noticed how complex the whole thing was. Like the film sets I was forced onto by Valentine. Everywhere were cables and boxes and tools and racks of suits and film cans and mirrors and flight cases.

“What do you want to do?” Sherrilyn asked.

“I want to get rid of it all.”

Trucks started to arrive the next day. I stayed out of the way. It had been a while since I’d spent any meaningful time outside, so I sat out by my empty swimming pool and smoked joints while they took everything apart. As I sat there, I suddenly found myself thinking of *Sunset Boulevard* again. Joe, not Norma, floating face down in the pool at the beginning of the movie. It had never really occurred to me before, but *Sunset Boulevard* was narrated from beyond the grave. Joe is dead, two bullets in his back and one in his belly. The more I thought about it the more uptight I felt. How languid he sounded throughout, even knowing his own end. I was torn between fear and envy. Fear at the idea that I, too, might be dead already, just like Joe, stuck repeating the same story again and again for all eternity, his entire consciousness contained on reels of film stock and videotape that sat silent in the dark whenever the they weren’t being watched. What happened to Joe then? Did he just cease to exist until the next time someone, somewhere in the world put the film on. Was that me too? Was I sealed up on the reels of *Molly*, down at the back of the basement? Yet I

was envious of the same thing. There was nothing Joe could do to avert the outcome. That's why he sounded so blasé about it all. All that responsibility lifted from his shoulders, the struggle to figure out how to live no longer a burden.

"There's some men who who want to speak with you." It was Belle, standing by the door to the kitchen.

"What men? I don't want to speak with any men. Get rid of them."

"They look important."

"Important how?"

"Like, suits and briefcases. Expensive suits."

"I don't care how expensive their suits are," I said. "I don't want to talk to them."

Belle shuffled away and came back a couple of minutes later. "They really want to talk to you," she said. "They said if you'll just give them two minutes. They want to make you an offer."

"They better not be journalists."

"They're not. I checked."

I dragged myself up and slopped into the kitchen where they were gathered around the counter, staying out of the way of the removal people clomping back and forth though the house. "What do you want?" I snapped. "I need water."

Belle grabbed a glass from the draining board, filled it with water and gave it to me.

"We were hoping to see your performance," one of the two men said. One wore a blue suit, the other grey. Aside from that I couldn't tell the difference between them.

"I said no journalists."

"We're not journalists."

"And I'm not a performer."

“Well.” The man in the blue suit clicked open his briefcase. “Whatever you are, you’ve made quite an impression on our employer.”

“Who’s your employer?” I said.

“He works on behalf of one of a major studio. He’s interested in funding your next project.”

“There is no next project,” I said.

“That’s a shame,” said the grey suit. “We have a very generous offer for you.”

The blue suit handed me an envelope.

I handed it back. “If I wanted to do another project I could pay for it myself.”

“I’m sure you could,” said the grey suit. But why spend your own money when you can spend ours. Plus all of your marketing, merchandising, other commercial aspects would be taken care of. All you’d have to concern yourself with are your...creative matters.”

“I don’t understand any of what you’re saying.”

“Our employer, his real purpose is to think ahead of the game. Years, ahead. Whatever you’re seeing now in the movies, that’s always old news. We think *you* might be onto something that’s years ahead. Fully interactive movies, not in the theatre, or sequestered away behind fences in theme parks. But in the home. In the streets.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” I laughed at them. “How would that even work? How would you even make money from that?”

“There’s always a way to make money,” he said. “And our employer is offering you a lot to help answer those questions. Have you not lived inside a movie yourself for the last several weeks?”

“I was not ‘living’ inside a movie,” I said.

“Forgive us for saying so,” the grey suit said. “But that is a minority opinion.”

“And this is a one-time offer,” the blue suit said. “Our employer’s interest has been piqued. We’ll be going ahead with or without your help.”

I looked around at Belle, then back at the men. “Get out,” I said. I started pushing them out of the kitchen, into the foyer with the removal men. I kept pushing until I’d got them out the front. “Don’t come back,” I said.

I went back out to the empty pool, and thought some more about Joe Gillis.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

I wasn't about to believe all that. I found Audrey even less credible than Buddy Kane. She wasn't wrong to scrutinise his claims. Nor was she wrong about my own doubts, which were numerous. But Buddy offered me something that said I could believe my own eyes, however incredulous. Audrey didn't. And I wasn't yet ready to disbelieve what was right in front me for some kind of vague solipsism. The encounter, however, had not been a waste of time. I'd gleaned a lot more from it than might appear first appear. Audrey had provided a new context. Opposed to that offered by Buddy. And it'd opened up a space between that I felt could be more flexible. Most importantly, however, I'd realised something else. I was able, it appeared, to take command of what was going on around me if I wanted to. I hadn't intended that. I'd simply been too agitated to sit through another opaque inquisition which only led to more confusion. In spite of Slug's initially intimidating presence and the fact that I'd been tied to a chair, I hadn't felt any fear. I didn't know exactly why. I'd never been kidnapped before (at least I didn't think I had), and if you'd presented me with the scenario as a hypothetical I would have imagined I'd take it rather badly. Maybe it was just pure exasperation, fatigue, or leftover chloroform influencing my actions. But whatever it was didn't really matter. What mattered was, it had worked. I'd turned the situation to my advantage, and all I'd had to do was stop giving a shit. And while I wasn't about to abandon Buddy's cause entirely, I was going to approach it differently. No more blind following of Buddy's suggestions. I'd been suspicious from the minute he'd asked me to take that long walk without clarifying its purpose. So I decided not to do it. From now on I'd make my own rules about what to do next. So when it came time, I camped out by the window and kept my eye on the street,

then I snuck out around the back of the houses. The weather had calmed. The heat and humidity of the previous days having been replaced by an autumn cool that I appreciated. I hopped back over the fence near the security gate, and wandered down to Buddy's place as if I'd just returned from a long walk. I didn't need to take a long walk. I didn't need to do anything.

\*

Buddy opens the door and lets Spencer pass into the hallway. He stops him before he can go into the living room. 'Before you go through.' He lowers his voice. 'There's someone here. Just, he can be a bit... brusque. Eccentric, you know? Give him a bit of leeway, he's going to help us out.'

'Sure' Spencer yawns and stretches his back out. 'All good with me, bro.'

Buddy leans backwards and looks Spencer up and down. 'Everything cool?'

'Very cool.' Spencer claps Buddy on the back. 'Happy to be here.'

Buddy squints. 'You did what I asked, right?'

'Of course. Love a good constitutional. Feel like a million bucks.'

Buddy looks skeptical but stands aside and lets Spencer go through to the living room. A man stands in the doorway that leads through to the kitchen, leaning into the frame. Shorter than the other two men, five-five, five-six maybe. Wearing a double-breasted tan Mackintosh with the collar popped, partially unbuttoned over a lightly rumpled suit; freshly burnished burgundy brogues, one of which was pressed toe-first to the ground as one leg crossed the other; and a short-brimmed fedora, slightly too spacious for his smallish head, and identical in colour and texture to the dress Audrey Lee had worn the previous night.

‘Spencer, this is Dix.’

The man stepped forward and flicked the brim of his hat upwards, allowing the light to fall on his previously shadowed face.

Spencer looks to Buddy and back, eyes slightly widened, a smirk portending at the corners of his mouth. ‘Dicks?’

‘Yeah, Dix.’ He speaks with an American accent, takes a step towards Spencer and cracks his knuckles. ‘Got a problem with that?’

‘No, no problem, Dicks.’ Spencer extends a hand. ‘Buddy tells me you’re our guy. Welcome aboard the Good Ship Lollipop, Bright Eyes.’

‘What’s this guy yammering about?’ Dix circles Spencer, inspecting him from all angles. ‘The good ship what?’

Spencer Laughs.

‘He’s just saying hello, Dix.’ Buddy places a hand on each of the men’s shoulders, like a referee calming two boxers before a match. ‘He don’t mean nothing by it.’

‘You vouch for this gink?’ Dix’s hat slips down over his eyes. He takes it off and tosses onto a chair, revealing a thin head of hair, side-parted and slicked with a fragrant pomade. ‘I don’t know if I like what I’m seeing.’

‘Yeah, I vouch. He’s on a level. Come on, shake it out.’

Dix takes one last narrow-eyed stab at Spencer’s wry expression and seizes the handshake. ‘Spencer, eh?’ He squeezes hard on his hand. ‘I knew I cat called Spencer a ways back.’

Spencer winces. ‘Oh yeah, what happened to him?’

‘Talked down to the wrong guy. Found his sorry carcass floating down the Hudson River.’ Dix lets go of Spencer’s hand and turns to Buddy. ‘Fix me a drink, why doncha? Bourbon. Neat.’



Buddy turns to the drinks cabinet and upends a whiskey tumbler.

Spencer sits down on the sofa. 'I'll take one of those.'

Buddy fixes three drinks and hands them out. Dix sips at the liquor. Spencer swallows his in one and hands the glass back. 'So, Dicks. What's your business? How do you know my good buddy Buddy here?'

Dix pulls up a hard-backed wooden chair, swivels it around and sits down on it backwards. He retrieves a silver tin from his pocket and rolls a cigarette.

'Dix is a private detective. We're both a part of the same...network.' Buddy sits too, the three men forming a triangle.

'Gum-shoe, eh? Nice.' Spencer yawns again, stretching over his head and laying his arms down along the back of the sofa. 'What kind of "network"?''

'Just a loose web of contacts.' Buddy places his glass down by his side without drinking any. 'You know. Sharing information. Resources. That kind of thing. All on the hush.'

'All clandestine like. I'm down. Very cool.' Spencer gets up and pours himself another short, brings it back to the sofa. 'Always good to be in the company of the likeminded, right?'

No one responds. Dix lights his cigarette and blows smoke right into Spencer's face. Spencer blinks and tastes the whiskey, inhaling the smoke that plumes around him.

Buddy leans forward. 'Dix is gonna help us with our little problem.'

'Which one?' Spencer slaps his thigh and snickers into his drink.

Dix drains his glass and repurposes it as an ashtray. 'How many you got?'

'Oh, Dicks. I got more problems than there are fish in the Mississippi. You name it, I got it.' Spencer blinks. 'Say, Dick. Can I get one of those.'

‘What’s he sayin’?’

‘A smoke. Can I get one?’

Dix looks to Buddy. Buddy nods. Dix passes the tin to Spencer. Spencer proceeds to roll a smoke, spilling strands of tobacco on his legs and fumbling the papers, finally producing a crooked cigarette. He throws it the air and tries to catch it between his teeth. It bounces off his forehead. He tries two more times before giving up. ‘I’d never make it in the circus.’ He hands the tin back.

Dix takes out a book of matches, folds one out of the pack and scrapes it over the strike without detaching it. He holds the book out and Spencer leans in, lights the tip then blows the match out. He takes a deep, long pull, and blows a slow line of smoke right into Dix’s face. ‘So. You’re gonna *blow* this whole thing wide open, eh?’

Buddy shifts his weight awkwardly in his seat.

Dix takes another long drag on his own cigarette and exhales in Spencer’s direction.

Spencer mimics the action, sucking as much into his lungs as he can manage, then leans forward and releases the smoke.

Dix returns the favour.

‘You don’t want that?’ Spencer motions toward the tumbler of bourbon at Buddy’s feet. ‘Hand it over. I’m in the mood.’

Buddy passes the glass to Spencer who takes it, now alternating between sips of whiskey and blowing smoke into Dix’s face.

The room a fog of silvery clouds, Buddy looks back and forth between the two men, an incredulous look on his face. Dix drops his dog-end into his glass. Spencer, surrounded by ash and tobacco, a smirk askew across his face, finishes the third drink and replicates the action.

Buddy collects both of the glasses and lays them away. ‘Maybe we can get down to business?’

Neither man responds. Eyes fixed upon each other, they sit. Dix’s glare pointed and fierce. Spencer’s lazy and wavering.

‘Dix is going to find out who’s following us.’

‘You the man, Mr Dick.’

‘It’s Dix. *Dix!*’ Dix rises and balls his hands.

‘You’re right. Please...’ Spencer presses his palms together in a prayer. ‘...accept my humble and earnest apologies. Sincerely. Did I say that already? No? Well seriously and sincerely and truthfully. Won’t make that mistake again. I swear it.’

Dix lowers himself, gives a gentle nod.

‘Because you, my friend, are no solitary dick. You’re a bundle, a stash, a veritable plethora of—’

‘Listen, wise guy—’

‘Wise guy!’ Spencer cackles and throws his head back.

Dix shoots up and kicks the chair away. ‘This mug’s about to get a fist in the kisser.’ He cracks his knuckles and yanks Spencer up by the scruff.

Spencer wheezes, tears in his eyes, howling right in Dix’s face.

Dix raises his arm above his head. ‘You asked for it, punk!’

Buddy springs up and catches Dix’s fist. He squeezes between them, prying Dix’s grip from Spencer’s shirt collar.

Dix breaks away, straightens his shirt and tie smooths his hair. ‘This cat’s crazy. I’m outta here.’

Spencer falls howling back onto the sofa, wiping the tears on his shirt sleeves.

‘No, Dix.’ Buddy puts an arm around Dix and walks him to the kitchen,

whispering into his ear. Spencer gets up and grabs the whiskey, drops back down and tilts it into his mouth, swallowing until the bottle is empty. A minute later Buddy returns, alone. ‘Spencer.’ He opens the door to the hallway and stands aside it.

Spencer looks up.

‘Now.’

Spencer blinks, streaks over his cheekbones, folded into the curve of the sofa cushions.

‘Spencer.’

‘Don’t know anyone by that name.’

‘Don’t make me drag you.’

‘That’s not my name. Who are you?’

‘Spencer.’

‘Nope. Don’t know no Spencer, my name’s—’

Buddy scoops Spencer off the sofa in a single motion and drags him by the arm to the hallway. He shuts the door. ‘Bro, what the fuck are you doing? You’ve been weird ever since we came back from the woods.’

Spencer twists out of Buddy’s grip and backs up to the wall. He narrows his eyes and sizes Buddy up. ‘Barrington?’

‘Who?’

‘You’re big like him.’

‘Who’s Barrington?’

‘You’re Barrington.’

‘I’m not Barrington. I’m—’

‘Slug?’

‘Bro, what the...I’m Buddy. Buh-dee.’

Spencer stops still. Silent. He looks in Buddy's eyes and all the colour drains from his face. He leans forward and whispers into Buddy's ear. 'The outside world is the same as it ever was.'

Buddy's eyes widen at the statement. 'Where did you hear that?'

'It is not the world around you that's changed. It's you.'

'Bro, where did you hear that?'

'No correct logic and no wrong decisions. Accept your—'

'Spencer—'

'Accept your own unconditional subjectivity.'

'Was she out there? In the woods? Did she get to you?'

'Decision making isn't a process you can break down into distinct, manageable items and resolve in a sequential manner. Every choice you've ever made is dependent on numerous subconscious factors to which you have no conscious access. Bla bla bla.'

Buddy pins Spencer to the wall and shouts in his face. 'She's got you brainwashed. Listen to yourself. You want to get out of here or—'

'There is no "out".'

Buddy stands back. 'Lies.'

At that Spencer starts to wail, a drawn out shriek that rises in pitch as he slides down the wall. Buddy rears back, lifts a giant hand and slaps Spencer hard across the face. Spencer falls to the ground. Looks up. A flash of recognition across his face. He places his hand on his reddened cheek. 'Motherfuck. What was that for?'

'Who am I?'

'Why am I on the floor?'

*'Who am I?'*

‘Buddy. Buddy Kane. The third.’

‘Who are you?’

Spencer’s eyes flit beneath his eyelids. ‘What?’

‘Your name. What’s your name?’

‘Spencer. I’m Spencer.’

‘Spencer what?’

‘Spencer....’

Spencer’s eyes suddenly fall closed, like an electrical appliance that’s been suddenly shut off from the wall socket. He slides sideways and falls unconscious on the floor.

## Chapter Thirty

I wish I could say it all ended there, that the whole thing was nothing but a bad idea, mercifully put to rest. Prior to the events relayed here, nothing I'd done in my life had ever been a matter of any consequence. Even to my own immediate circumstances. There was always an answer to any question that came begging: get a little high and watch movies with my friends, focus on the screen and let the world fall away. I'm not saying I didn't try. I did exactly that for the next six months. But between my inability to give myself over to the movies, and the omnipresent evidence of the chain reaction I'd started, nothing was able to still the chaos in my mind, in the Palace View, or any of the other locations where my dumb idea had taken root.

Without realising it, I'd scattered seeds far and wide. It had been bad enough when it was just the *Bulletin*, *The Cultist*, whatever else. But those publications had limited readerships. And once the *Times* had published its feature on me, that was it. I hoped it would die off, eventually. Fads came and went in Los Angeles like the tide. But it didn't die off. Because the thing about movies, almost everybody loved them. Some were like us. You know, movie people. But even people who weren't movie people, they loved them just as much, they just didn't labour over them the way we did. Didn't think about them in those terms. From little kids in the suburbs to retired Supreme Court judges, parking valets to oil barons, surfers to mathematician, Satanists to evangelical Christians, cops, waitresses, nursery school teachers, sanitation workers, life guards, dressmakers, insurance salesmen. Actors, crew, studio executives: these were the people who worked at the chocolate factory and still went home and ate nothing but chocolate. I could have named you a dozen people who never read books, never went to an art gallery, the theatre, listened to music, even. I

did not know a single human being who didn't watch movies. They watched them in theatres, at home on VCR, broadcast on television, they read magazines about them, books about them, newspaper articles, gushed about them around the water cooler.

Every wealthy Los Angeles neighbourhood now saw a growing number of its residents converting their homes to look just like those in their favourite films. And the more it was reported, the more competitive they became. A company with connections to the major studios had appeared almost overnight. They provided a full service that would help you live out your movie dreams. Whatever you needed, from props and costumes, all the way up to architecture and full landscaping services. I never found out who they were, but I'm guessing those guys who came to see me had something to do with it. And it didn't end there. People were building replica rocket ships in their yards, spooky graveyards, pirate ships. The last I'd heard, some millionaire newspaper magnate was attempting to build *Kane's* Xanadu from scratch up in the mountains.

Those who couldn't afford such extravagances found other outlets. They memorised scenes from films and acted them out in public spaces, or played as their favourite characters, out downtown dressed like Indiana Jones, Mary Poppins, Scarlet O'Hara, lurching along Hollywood Boulevard done up like zombies or chasing unsuspecting shoppers around the mall, wearing a hockey mask and wielding a rubber machete. There were now two communes out in the Mojave Desert who encouraged people to join them to live their "movie truth". Some people called them cults, no better than the Mansons or the Branch Davidians. Other people flocked to join them. All over Los Angeles were men in trilbies and trench coats, living out their private detective fantasies, poking their noses where they weren't needed. And five people ended up in hospital after three had tried to reenact the car chase from *The Terminator*



along Sixth, Seventh, and Broadway where it had been originally filmed. Of the five admitted, one was the dead body of the woman playing Sarah Connor, who'd careened through the windshield after the driver of the lead car smashed into an ambulance that was on its way to Fox Plaza, after a man had jumper off the roof with a firehose around his waist and plummeted to his death.

Of course, not everybody was happy about it. A public menace, it was called. People wrote letters to the newspapers, to local politicians, the governor of California. Worried family members turned up on daytime talk shows after their loved ones had run off to join a communes, or they got fired from their jobs when they refused to answer to any name but Tony Montana. Whole committees were formed to petition the police to take action. But there was nothing the police could do. As they repeated a hundred times, it was not a centralised effort. There was no way to cut it off at the source. And most of what was happening was not against the law. What rich people did with their own money in their own homes was up to them. As for the rest of it, sure, they could make a few arrests when something went awry, but that was about it. You couldn't arrest someone for eating out at a restaurant dressed like Obi-Wan Kenobi and talking in riddles.

"Hear about the guy in Wyoming? Thinks he's Blondie from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*," Marlon asked me one night at the Palace.

I had not heard about him.

"Some big-time stockbroker. Bought a bunch of land out there. He's had every location built, whole cast on stand-by in full costume. He's out there chuffing on cigars, riding around on horseback, and duelling with pistols, all day every day."

This was the first I'd heard about outside of Los Angeles.

Maybe I could have been okay with this if it wasn't for one thing. Many of those

who were indulging themselves had likely never gave me a second-thought, if they knew who I was at all. But some saw me as some kind of new messiah, all the more elusive due to my refusal to explain myself, or even comment on the matter. That was bad enough. Worse, those who were less enamoured by the whole thing laid the blame squarely upon my shoulders. The photograph of me dressed as Norma Desmond had been widely circulated in the intervening months and in some circles I was public enemy number one. Fortunately, I looked so different in the picture that I hadn't yet been recognised in person. But they had my name, and both sides were digging around in my past, looking for gossip, scandal, any other hearsay. Nothing had yet been unearthed, but that only made them all the more determined. Where had I come from? Where did I get my ideas? Where did I get my money? What would I do next? What did the "D" in my name stand for?

And when I left the Palace View that night, I finally found the problem on my doorstep. My address had finally leaked. Someone had put it on one of those new "websites" that people were using on their computers. And when I got home I found a small mob crowded in the street at the end of my drive, shouting insults at the empty house I told the taxi driver to keep going, and asked him drive me back to the Palace.

## Chapter Thirty-One

I woke up on Buddy's sofa. When I opened my eyes the first thing I saw was Dix glowering down at me from the doorway while Buddy sat in his chair. And while waking up with two men staring at me was hardly ideal, I didn't mention it. I just sat up slowly and rubbed my eyes and looked toward Buddy as if asking for instructions. He asked if I was feeling rough and I said I was because it felt like what I was supposed to say. But in truth I couldn't feel anything. I had the emotional substance of a bubble floating slowly through the room. Just a thin membrane of soapy water that does nothing but separate the air. Dix scowled beneath the brim of his hat, standing in exactly the position he had been when we'd been first introduced the previous evening. I couldn't exactly remember what had happened, but it was clear he didn't like me. But I didn't care enough to apologise. I tried to remember what was happening, what we were all doing there, who we all were, but aside from each of our names nothing was apparent.

I asked what was going on?

Buddy explained that from now on, Dix was going to follow us wherever we went, at a distance, in the hopes of finding out who was following us. Dix would then follow them and report back to us when he had any intel. Buddy told me to go home and take a shower and meet him outside in an hour. Dix didn't speak and neither did I. I just got up and went outside.

As I stood in the shower little bits and pieces started coming back to me. The debt letter. Buddy. The business card. Barrington. The blue-haired woman. The house. The woods. The photographs. Audrey. But I couldn't remember how it all fit together. If I focused too hard on one name, one event, it evaded me. Fell apart under scrutiny. But

as I got ready to leave the last few days came back to me. I remembered what Audrey had told me. It still didn't make any sense but I remembered the words. And then as I was thinking about that I wandered into the monitoring room and remembered Johnny P. up on the monitors. He'd gone missing. *That's* what this was all about now. That's what I was supposed to be focused on. Johnny P. The missing person. Who'd disappeared on account of me.

\*

As Spencer waits for Buddy out in the street, Audrey can be seen spying from behind her curtains. Spencer glances up at her but doesn't react to her observing him. He holds her eye for a moment, as if to make sure she knows he knows she's there, then turns away to look at the sky, dramatic with multilayered clouds, white and light up front, but dark and heavy in the distance. The wind blows leaves around Spencer's feet, swirling here and there in pockets before getting caught up in evergreens or garden fences. Buddy appears and Spencer pushes off the wall.

They move away from Audrey's place up towards the gate and slowly leave the street. The wind picks up, rippling their clothes and blowing Spencer's hair about. Both men put their hands in their pockets and their heads down into the wind. Spencer visors his eyes with his hand and turns toward Buddy as they walk. 'What time of year is this? I'm sure it wasn't like this a few days ago.'

'Late Autumn, I'd say. The leaves are crumbling. November?'

'Feels like November. I like it.'

'What do you like about it?'

'The wind rushing past my ears. The dry air. Reminds me of something.'

‘What does it remind you of?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Something good, though?’

‘Yeah, something good.’

They stop at the news stand and check the date. Buddy reads it aloud. ‘November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001.’

‘Good guess.’

Buddy puts the paper back.

They stop at a crossroads. Spencer looks back and forth for oncoming traffic. ‘So where first?’

‘This way.’

\*

Buddy went to the counter and told me to find a seat that was visible from the street. I found one right next to the window and sat down. Buddy came over with the coffee and sat down opposite me. Keep your eyes open, he said, but don’t look. I didn’t respond verbally, only nodded, while the statement rolled around in my brain. *Keep your eyes open but don’t look*. I felt like that’d been the only thing that anyone had really said to me for what felt like years and years. I sipped at my coffee. It tasted incredible. I wanted to swim in it. I tried to enjoy a moment of nothingness. Just a coffee and a quiet moment watching people’s clothes blow about in the wind outside. I asked where we were going and he said it didn’t matter. We just need to be outside in nice visible places with lots of people. If we wanted to find out who was following us we needed to give them lots of opportunity to do so. The events of the previous

night came back to me and I apologised for causing trouble. But he said it didn't matter. Then he said: "So you've met Audrey Lee?"

\*

'I have.'

'When?'

'Night before last. I think.'

'How?'

'She called me. Out in the woods. When you went off to look for that guy.'

'I knew it. How did she get your number?'

'I have no idea.'

'Then what?'

'She told me to meet her the following night.'

'And you just went? Without telling me?'

'I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to hear what she had to say. If it's any consolation, she had her henchman chloroform me and drag me unconscious through the woods.'

'Henchman?'

'Some body-builder-looking guy. "Slug" she called him. Doesn't say much.'

'So she's brought the muscle in? Upping her game.'

'What game would that be?'

'That depends. What did she say to you?'

'Well she's no fan of yours. Calls you "Mr. Kane".' Spencer looks Buddy right in the eye. 'Reckons you're a member of some kind of cult.'

‘She said...She thinks I’m the...*She’s* the cultist!’

‘She calls it an “organisation”.’

Buddy scoffs.

‘I’m just reporting what she said. You asked. What did she mean by that anyway?’

‘So you believed her?’

‘I didn’t say that. Weird that she would say that though.’

‘You do believe it! You know she’s insane, right?’

‘You don’t do a bad line in insanity yourself.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You told me that we’re stuck in some kind altered reality. That it’s malfunctioning. That I’ve died twice before and once killed seventeen people in an act of fatal negligence. That if I don’t “follow the logic” I might well end up doing it again.’

‘And? That’s all true.’

‘I’m not saying it isn’t. I’m saying, whatever way you try to spin it, telling me I’m the third iteration of the same person sounds fucking crazy.’

‘We’ve been through all this. We’ve done tests, remember? Has Audrey done any tests? You don’t have to believe me but surely you believe your own eyes?’

‘Buddy?’

‘What?’

‘How, exactly, can I have died twice already? What does that even mean?’

‘I never claimed to be able to explain it, bro. We’re both in the same situation here. She told you to stay away from me?’

‘Not exactly, no. She “warned” me about you. Said I couldn’t trust your, what was

it she called them? “problematic existential notions”.’

‘My problematic existential notions?’

‘She said you were misleading me. That it’d be to my detriment.’

‘What do *you* think?’

‘Honestly?’

‘Honestly.’

‘I think you both have your merits. But there’s some stuff, both of you, I mean, that I can’t...I mean, not that I just don’t understand it...I can’t even formulate a query. And all this stuff about organisations, sects, cults, whatever it is. I don’t like it. It’s all starting to sound like...’

‘Like what?’

‘Like mysticism. Why would she say that about you? *Are you in a cult?*’

‘Look, Bro. Let me ask you a question? What were—’

‘No, man. No more questions answered with questions. I want you to tell me—’

‘Indulge me. Just for a—’

‘No. Who are you? Where did you come from? What do you do for a living? Where do you get money? Why aren’t you starving to death? How did you end up in that house? What do you do in there all day? What “network” are you part of? When do you sleep? It’s like you exist in a vacuum, just disconnected from everything.’

‘I’ll do you a deal.’

‘What deal?’

‘If you agree, I’ll answer every one of those questions.’

‘Fine. What’s the deal?’

‘You have to answer all of them too.’



## Chapter Thirty-Two

“What happened?” I said. Two squad cars and an ambulance were parked outside the Palace, their swirling lights flickering across the sidewalk and lighting up the glass in blue and red streaks. Sherrilyn talked with the police by the box office. And I was standing with Chloe, Bonnie, Marshall, and Belle, who’d been working at the Palace since I let her go.

Before anyone could answer my question, two paramedics exited the auditorium carrying a stretcher. On it was a body bag.

My stomach writhed as they passed us by. They pushed through the main doors into the street and loaded the stretcher onto the back of the ambulance.

“Ain’t exactly sure,” Marshall said.

“*Demons*,” said Bonnie.

“Demons?”

“Bava,” Marlon said. He’d followed the paramedic out of the auditorium.

“Oh, that *Demons*,” I said.

*Demons* was set in a movie theatre.

“Did you see what happened?” Chloe asked.

“Pretty much,” Marlon said. “Bunch of guys burst out half-way through the movie. Started chasing everyone around with their faces all gored up. It was weird, though. People freaked out more than usual. Maybe because of the film, I don’t know. Anyway, some guy panicked, ran too fast down the aisle upstairs. Went head first over the circle railing. They took two others already. The couple he landed on. They weren’t in too bad shape. Shook up. But the guy, his head smashed right into the back of the seat. They ain’t said nothing to me. But it looked like he broke his neck.”

Once the police left, Sherrilyn went straight downstairs without speaking to any of us. Chloe followed her down, and then rest of us went outside. I asked Marshall if I could sleep at his apartment. I fell asleep on his couch with *Night Watch* playing on TV with the sound turned down.

The following day, Marshall drove me home. The crowd was bigger than it had been the night before. And they were spread out further along the street, gathering at the gates of my neighbours as well as my own, We drove straight past and parked a hundred feet along the road. After a few minutes searching, we found a patch of free land between two separate properties, followed it round, clambered down a rocky hillside, and emerged behind my house.

Inside, I eyed the crowd through a gap in the drapes. “What exactly do they think I can do for them?” I said. “And why’re they hanging outside my neighbour’s places. What do they have to do with it?”

“They think you’re gonna to lead ’em to movie heaven.” Marshall laughed.

I stepped away from the window. “It’s not funny,” I said. “How am I supposed to live like this?”

“Ain’t this what you wanted?” he said. “Everyone’s having fun with the movies.”

“Come on, man.” I could hear my own hurt feelings in my tone of voice. “People are dying. How could I predict...*this*?”

“Just fuckin’ with ya,” he said. “Stay with me as long as you want.”

“Can I?”

“Sure. Get what you need and lets get out of here.”

We drove back to the Palace. When we got there, Sherrilyn had all the staff in the lobby. As we opened the door she’d just finished speaking. The staff dispersed, most of them leaving by the front door. Sherrilyn locked the doors behind them. Belle,

Marlon, Chloe, and Ivana stayed behind.

“That’s it,” Sherrilyn said. She sat down on the stairs with her elbows on her knees.

“What’s it?” I said.

“Closed until further notice,” Marlon said. “Pending investigation.”

I tensed and looked at Sherrilyn.

“Don’t worry, I don’t blame you,” she said. “I’ve been letting this happen. I was happy about it. We were making money. And I’ve seen all that shit they’re saying about you.”

I sat down next to her and put my head on her shoulder.

“I didn’t know you’d been in a movie,” she said.

“What?” I felt sick.

“*Molly*, was it? Said you were the daughter of some old-school mogul guy. Saying that’s where you got your money.”

“I’m not his...he was my...” I got up, went behind the concession stand, and knelt down in front of the sink. “Who says that?” I called out.

“It’s everywhere,” Marlon said.

“Everywhere?” I leant forward and wretched. It echoed around the deep metal sink. I sounded barely human.

“Pretty much.”

“Are they...have they...the film?” I wretched again.

“What?”

“Is the film...is it out there?”

“No,” Sherrilyn said. “No one can find it. People are searching for it.”

A white hot-sting hit the back of my throat. I wretched again, then blasted the sink

with bile.

Belle came around the counter and tried to hold my hair back but I jerked away from her when she touched me. I wiped my mouth and stood up. Then I threw up again, just standing there, hot beige fluid bursting from my face all over the counter. Everyone stopped talking and stared at me. Sherrilyn stood and walked towards me but I put my arms out, waved her away. I threw up one more time, this time on the carpet, then fell into a slump on the floor.

“Is it really that bad?” Chloe said. “I mean, it’s just a movie.”

“It’s not just a movie,” I gurgled.

A loud bang from behind startled me up onto my feet. I turned around, covered in puke, and saw a man standing at the door.

Sherrilyn went to the door. “We’re closed.” She swiped her fingers back and forth across her throat. “Closed.”

The man shouted something back through the glass.

Sherrilyn shrugged and shook her head.

He left, his muffled complaints still audible through the glass.

“Can someone help me?” I said. I looked down at myself. “My clothes.”

“Take her downstairs and get her something,” Sherrilyn said.

Chloe and Belle took me downstairs and through to one of the storage rooms. It was crammed with boxes and racks of clothes. The both looked me up and down, then started searching through the racks. But they weren’t real clothes, they were all movie costumes. They threw things out and I tried them on, but most of it was too big for me, or was made out of scratchy, cheap material, not designed to be worn against bare skin. After a minute or two we’d been through all the racks and nothing was working, when Belle pulled something out from the back.

“I don’t want to wear that,” I said.

“Would you rather put these back on?” she pointed at my puke drenched clothes which she’d stuffed into a garbage sack. “Or maybe this?” She took a hanger off the rack and laid a skintight jumpsuit across her arm, sprayed gold and covered in interlocking plastic hexagons. “It’s either sexy robot, vomit monster, or this.”

I took the stupid blue dress, slipped it over my head, and put my Chucks back on.

Everyone laughed at me when we got back upstairs. I didn’t mind. It made me feel a bit better, if only for a moment. Marlon was on his knees, spraying soda on the carpet and scrubbing it with a brush, while Sherrilyn mopped behind the counter.

“Sorry,” I said. Just a general sorry to everyone. For everything.

The phone rang in the box office. Chloe went to answer it but Sherrilyn stopped her. “It’ll only be him,” she said. “I talked to him once today. That’s my quotient, he can wait until tomorrow.”

The phone stopped ringing.

“There’s nothing else we can do here,” Sherrilyn said. “Let’s go to Jenny’s. We can—”

Another bang on the door. Three people this time, their faces pressed up against the glass panels.

“We are closed,” Sherrilyn said. “No. Closed. *Closed.*” She shooed them, flapping the back of her hand towards the door.

The phone started to ring again

They shouted something back.

“I don’t care,” she shouted back. “Go away.”

The phone stopped ringing and the guys left. Sherrilyn took a stack of paper from the box office and wrote “Closed” in black marker on four or five sheets, then went

taped one up on against any available patch of glass across the doors.

The phone started ringing again.

“Can you please let me answer that? It’s driving me insane,” Chloe said.

“No. We’re going,” Sherrilyn said. “Someone turn the lights off.”

Marlon opened and panel at the back of the concession stand and started flipping switches. The lights went off in stages, until the whole lobby was dark. The phone was still ringing and Chloe was standing stiff looking as close to angry as I’d ever seen her.

Something crashed into the doors.

We all jumped.

“What was that?” someone said.

We all stepped towards the windows.

About ten people now. A guy in the middle lifted a garbage can over his head, reared back, and threw it at the doors.

Marshall stood towards the door as if he was going to open it.

“Don’t you dare open that door,” Sherrilyn said.

“Can’t let ’em do that,” he said.

“They can and they just did,” she said. “There are more of them than us. You’re not going out there to fight them.”

The phone stopped.

The garbage can crashed into the door again.

“Don’t worry,” Sherrilyn said. “They’re not getting in here. I just had those doors fixed up. They’re solid enough to hold back a handful of idiots.”

“What do they think’s gonna happen?” Ivana said. “They gonna run the movies themselves.”

“I don’t think they want to watch movies.” Chloe was standing at the box office door with the phone receiver in her hand. “It’s Martin, from the Astor.”

“Tell him I can’t go over there today.” Sherrilyn went along each door, rattling the bar on each, checking the locks. “I’ll call him back.”

“You can’t go over there,” Chloe repeated.

“That’s what I said.”

“No. You can’t go over there because it’s on fire.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

That about brings us up to speed, with Buddy and I sat staring at each other across the table, neither of us able to answer the other's questions. I don't know how long we sat there in silence like that, long enough for me to tell this to you, whoever you are. I thought maybe, maybe, if I tried to go through it all one last time I'd be able to clear some of it up for him. But now I'm back here I don't remember any of it anyway, and there's no guarantee that, if you asked me another time, I wouldn't say something else. This was just how I remembered it this time. And I knew it was the same for him too. It was the same for everyone. But Buddy wasn't ready to admit that, yet. And whatever happened next or happens next or will be happening next, whatever I've done, am about to do, just know, that I'm not always myself.

\*

'Come on, Bro. You wanna play who's who? What are you doing here?'

Spencer puts his head in his hands, shaking. 'I can't—'

'No, come on. What the fuck are *you* doing in that apartment all day?'

'Buddy.'

'Who the fuck is Barrington?'

'Please.'

No, come on. When have I ever pressed you on any of this?'

Spencer looks up.

'You're the one with the secrets. Got them leaking out your ears.'

'I'm sorry. Look. I...I'm confused.'



‘You’re not exactly free with details from your own life. Apart from that guy Johnny I’ve never even heard you mention another name.’

‘Who?’

‘Johnny, what was it? Johnny P.. The guy who went missing out in the street?’

‘Right. Johnny P. Where is he?’

‘That’s what we’ve been trying to find out!’

‘But...but how have we been doing that, though? I feel like I haven’t even thought about it for...what are we doing here again?’

\*

When they step outside, Spencer looks across the street at the front of Barrington’s building. He stands still and stares at it.

Buddy looks in the direction of Spencer’s gaze. ‘What is it?’

‘That wasn’t here when we went inside.’

‘What wasn’t?’

‘That building. I’ve seen that place before.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Let’s go and take a look.’

They move towards the road, both stopping before they reach the kerb.

Spencer nods across the street. ‘You saw her?’

‘Him?’

‘Him.’

‘I’m looking at him right now.’

‘Where?’

‘Guy from the pub. Bus Stop. Eyeballing us over his paper.’

‘Then there’s more than one.’

‘Who do you see?’

‘Phone booth. Across the street. I recognise her.’

‘From where?’

‘I don’t know. What do we do?’

‘Walk. Slowly.’

Buddy places a hand on Spencer’s shoulder and directs him. As they move away from the coffee shop, the man folds his paper and stands to follow at a distance. He’s tall with glasses. White shirt buttoned to the neck. No tie. On the other side of the street the woman replaces the phone receiver and steps out of the booth. Short. Blue hair. Glasses. She follows on the opposite side of the road.

‘This way.’ Buddy grabs Spencer by the arm and guides him into an underground station. They descend to the southbound and board the next Northern Line towards the West End. The train is only sparsely populated, rings loud with the shriek of the rails as it pulls away from the station. Spencer sits down and side-eyes the other passengers. Buddy stands, holding onto the canvas strap that hangs from an overhead bar. At Camden half the passengers alight, and Buddy sits down next to Spencer. He whispers into his ear. ‘You’ve noticed it too. I see you looking.’

‘Yeah.’

‘These...people. They’re not...’

‘Not...right. Like, vacant.’

‘Right. All placid. All...look.’

‘What?’

‘That guy. Standing at the end of the carriage.’

‘What about him.’

‘Now look at him. In the booth seat.’

Spencer looks back and forth between the two men. ‘They’re both wearing identical outfits.’

‘Keep looking.’

‘What am I looking for?’

The guy sitting down gets up and walks past them, getting off the train at Warren Street. They get a good look at his face as he goes. Spencer looks back up at the guy at the end of the carriage. ‘It’s the same fucking guy!’

‘The same fucking guy.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Come on, we’re getting off.’

They stand and move towards the door, the motion of the train threatening to knock them off their balance as it pulls into Tottenham Court Road station. Buddy taps Spencer on the shoulder and signals for him to follow. They pass between the seats towards the doppelgänger. The platform comes into view as they reach the end of the carriage, and Buddy allows the halt to force a misstep, causing him to fall into the standing man. ‘Sorry, bro.’ He rights himself against the glass partition. ‘Didn’t see you there.’

The man tilts his face towards them but his eyes are focused nowhere. His lips move but no words come out. Spencer and Buddy stare back at him but he reverts to his former posture, ignoring them. They step off the train, look back at the man from the platform, watch as the door slides closed.

‘It’s getting worse.’ Buddy leads them down the platform towards the exit. ‘These

people aren't real.'

As they exit the station onto Charring Cross Road they see Dix, leaning against a glass-fronted luggage shop, peering at them over the broadsheet newspaper he holds out in front of him. Buddy turns and murmurs into Spencer's ear. 'Eyes in front.'

'Speaking of people who aren't real.'

'Keep your voice down.'

'Where are we going?'

'Just follow me. Do not look behind you.'

'Wait.'

'What?'

'This isn't. Where are we supposed to be?'

'Central. Oxford Street.'

'This isn't Oxford Street. This is...'

Audrey turns her head on the pillow and blows smoke from the side of her mouth before passing the cigarette to Spencer. 'Don't you feel better now?'

'This is...' Spencer holds the cigarette but doesn't smoke.

'This is what?'

Spencer pushes himself into an upright position. 'I don't remember...'. He passes the cigarette back and turns to look at Audrey. 'Do I know you?'

Audrey scoffs. 'I should think so.'

He gets out of the bed and looks down on the street. A man in a long white coat stares up at him from behind a rosebush on the other side of the street. He steps back from the window, grabs his scattered clothes, dresses.

'Where are you going?' Audrey says.

'I'm...I'm just...going.' Spencer pushes through the door and runs down the

stairs, passes Slug snoozing in an armchair, and bolts out of the door. He ignores his own apartment, the house, and runs all the way to Buddy's house. He bangs on the front door with his fist.

'Good choice, bro.' He looks relieved as he steps back to let Spencer in. 'Come through, be warm.'

Spencer freezes.

'I said, good choice, bro. Come through, be warm.'

Spencer takes a step backwards. 'This is...we've already...' He takes another few steps back until he reaches the gate. He squints at the doorway. 'You're not Buddy.'

'I said, good choice, bro. Come through, be warm.'

Spencer turns and starts. The man in the white coat, standing just yards away. Silent. Staring. He looks back at the fake Buddy who stands in the doorway. Silent. Staring. He takes another step backwards, out of the gate and onto the street. The man in the white coat takes a step. Fake Buddy takes a step. Spencer takes another. They take another.

Spencer runs.

Audrey watches from her window as he passes her house. Spencer glances up at her, trips, falls face down, hitting his head hard on the floor.

Buddy picks him up by the arm. 'Bro, are you...'

Spencer holds his head. Looks at Buddy. 'I just...It's you again.'

'Who else would it be?'

'No. I mean. I was just with you. The night I showed up at your door. But it wasn't you. You were someone else?'

'Like you were someone else.'

'But you're not dead. Shouldn't I only get another you if you died?'

‘I guess the rules have changed again. How was I different?’

‘See for yourself.’ Spencer directs Buddy’s attention to the other side of the street.

‘You’re over there.’

Fake Buddy stands as he had in his doorway.

‘Geez’ Buddy says. ‘There’s another one.’ Buddy spots the man in the white coat.

‘He was there too.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘Never seen him before.’

‘He looks like a doctor.’

‘I’m not feeling good.’

‘Let’s move.’

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere.’

They start to walk, faster than before. The doctor, fake Buddy, the blue-haired woman and the man without a tie all move from their respective spots and follow behind, closer than before. Spencer looks around. ‘I don’t recognise this place. Where are we?’

All of the street that surround them are identical. Glass fronted buildings with no signs or discrete markings. Every direction looks the same. All the other pedestrians are faceless and move as if on a conveyer belt.

Buddy looks around. ‘I have no idea.’

‘Which way should we go?’

‘Does it even matter?’

‘Buddy. I really don’t feel good I feel...’ Spencer looks into the glass of the building beside him. In the reflection he is older. Much older. Decades. His face,

covered with scars and bruises, blood on one side of his face from a fresh wound. The reflection stares back without expression. Spencer's eyes glaze with tears as he sees himself standing there. 'Is that me?'

Buddy looks back and forth. 'That's not you. You're you. Don't look at it.' Buddy takes Spencer by the arm and drags him away from the reflection.

'What's that sound?' Spencer's voice trembles as he speaks.

'Sounds like...Music, kids laughing.'

'Where's it coming from?'

'Over there. By the carousel.'

They walk through the fairground. Desolate. Rides and stalls abandoned aside from the carousel in the distance. Still they're followed by their stalkers. More of them now. A dozen of so, all creeping after them hiding behind the attractions.

When they emerge from the park they're on the street, outside Barrington's office.

Buddy nudges Spencer in the arm. 'That place again.'

'I remember it now.'

'From where?'

'This is where it all began.'

'What's in there?'

'The man who hired me.'

'What did he hire you for?'

'You know, I've never really found that out.'

'Well,' Buddy takes a step towards the door. 'Let's go ask.'

## Chapter Thirty-Four

We all stared at Chloe as she stood by the box office holding the phone.

“On fire?” Sherrilyn repeated.

“That’s what he said.”

“Is he still on the line?”

Chloe held the receiver out.

Sherrilyn took it, pushed it into her ear and disappeared into the box office.

The trash can hit the door again.

I looked outside. The crowd had doubled in size. They spread out along the doors and pressed their faces to the glass.

“Cover the windows,” Marlon said.

“How?” I said.

“I know.” Belle ran off towards the stairs to the basement and came back a minute later with a box of clothes and a roll of duct tape.

We taped the clothes over the windows until it was completely dark inside, the doors now lined with sailor’s uniforms. Marlon switched the lobby lights back on.

“What did he say?” I asked Chloe.

“It was a hard to understand him. Sounded something like...this.”

“Why would this happen at the Astor?” Ivana said. “They aren’t closed down.”

“Yes they were.” Sherrilyn closed the box office door behind her. Her expression was blank. She walked across the lobby and sat on the stairs.

“Why were they closed?” I asked.

“Same reason as us.” She pushed her hair away from her face, twisted it into a coil on top of her head and tied a band around it. “Someone got hurt there last night.



Police shut them down this morning. Same as us.”

“Two theatres on the same night,” Marlon said. “What are the chances of that?”

“Not two. The Classic, the Drafthouse, the Cinematheque. All Closed.”

“The Cinematheque?” I said. “What do they have to do with this? They haven’t been—”

“It appears that no one cares about that anymore.”

All of the doors started rattling. I peeked outside. An even bigger crowd now. They’d abandoned the trash can and were pushing on the doors all along the front of the theatre.

“And they set it on fire?”

“They trashed the place first. Martin only just got out, he was standing outside trying to call the cops from a phone booth when he saw smoke coming out of the roof.”

Marshall smoothed his hand over his scalp. “It ain’t make any sense. All these people ever do’s watch movies. Why’d they burn a theatre down?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think they just want to watch movies anymore,” Sherrilyn said.

“We should get out of here,” Marlon said. “They’re all out front. We could get out the back.”

“No fucking way am I gonna let these people destroy my theatre.”

“That’s Aubrey’s problem,” he said. “Let him deal with this.”

“Fuck Aubrey. This is my theatre and I’m not letting it get torched. Anyone wants to go, you can head off out the back.”

“What do we do, just sit here?”

“Call the cops,” Sherrilyn said.

Chloe went to the box office and picked up the phone.

The doors rattled.

“Sure they’re gonna hold?” Marshall said. He looked outside. “I know they’re solid doors but...”

“But?” Sherrilyn stood up.

“Ain’t exactly a handful anymore. More like a busload.”

Sherrilyn peeked out through the window. “Help me,” she said. She went to the soda machine and pulled the cord from the outlet.

Marshall helped her drag it across the lobby. They laid it on its side and braced it against the doors on the right hand side of the box office.

“Someone go upstairs and get the couch.”

Marlon and I rushed to the top of the stairs. We manoeuvred the three-seat sofa away from of the window.

“Look,” he said.

We both stood at the window and stared down at the street. It looked like a crowd of extras waiting to be called to set, all dressed up in costumes, but instead of milling about smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, they were all trained on our doors, pushing forward in a mob.

“There’s more,” he said. “Across the street. Over there, too. And look.” He pointed through the window at an angle up the street.

I turned and leant my head on the glass. It was hard to see. People running back and forth. What looked like a police cruiser that had crashed into the back of a garbage truck, smoke billowing from beneath the crumpled hood.

We shouted out to clear the stairs and pushed the couch down. It hit the floor at with a thunk and the others pulled it over to the other doors.

“What did the cops say?” Marlon asked.

“I couldn’t even get through to the operator,” Chloe said.

We went around the building and brought every heavy object we could find to the lobby, wedging them in wherever it seemed like they might help hold the doors.

“Get the TV from the rec-room,” Sherrilyn said.

Marlon fetched the television and hoisted it onto the concessions counter, plugging it in underneath. “Reception sucks,” he said, flicking through the channel after channel of static. He adjusted the aerial, and shifted the TV to different positions on the counter.

We all stood there and looked at the TV, the doors shaking behind us, while Marlon tried to find a working channel.

“Stop,” Sherrilyn said. “Go back one. There. That’s the Astor.”

I squinted into the fuzz. She was right. You could barely make out the picture, and the sound just crackled and popped. But you could see the Astor, blurry flames and smoke flickering out of its roof-top. Marlon tried to tune the channel but he couldn’t get the image any clearer.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“Let’s get away from these doors,” Sherrilyn said. “I can’t think with that racket.”

She opened the door to the auditorium and motioned for us to go inside.

“I’ll watch the doors,” Marshall said.

The rest of us followed Sherrilyn.

We sat down around the around the front row. That far from the entrance it was quiet. I sat on the edge of the shallow stage and stared back at the empty seats. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen it that way. I realised that I’d never once looked back at the entire house from the front. It was beautiful. The balcony looked

like a wide, satisfied smile. The tasseled drapes above it wisps of hair. So, I thought, this is what the screen saw every night.

“None of this makes any sense,” Belle said. “Don’t these people love the movies? Why would they want to destroy a movie theatre?”

“I don’t think they love the movies anymore,” Chloe said. “This is something else.”

“But what?”

“They don’t love the movies. They want to live in the movies.”

“You can’t ‘live’ in a movie,” Marlon said.

I cringed to myself.

“Tell that to them,” Chloe replied.

“Movies don’t exist in the movies,” Sherrilyn said.

“What does that mean?”

“What I said it means. Movies don’t exist in the movies.”

“Of course they do,” Marlon said. “There are stacks of movies about movies.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, like... a movie is only an idea in the movies. Or they only exist in fragments.”

“Right,” I said. “You can’t watch a movie in a movie.”

“Of course you can.” Marlon stood up and paced the carpet. “What about—”

“No,” I said. “Not a whole proper movie. You might see it for a second or two. But if a character watched a whole movie in a movie there would be no movie. Only the movie being watched.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Of course it does,” Sherrilyn said. “If I made a movie that was about nothing but you, watching *The Exorcist*, it would just be *The Exorcist*, like, once removed.”

Marlon sat back down and rubbed his eyes.

“So they have to destroy the movies,” I said. “They can’t *become* the movies while movies still exist.”

“That’s so dumb,” Marlon said.

“Yeah, well,” I said. “Movies are dumb.”

“Movies are not life!” Marlon said. “They are two hours long. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. You cannot ‘live’ in a movie. What do you do with yourself when it jumps forward a year, or jumps back in time? How would you make it end? How would you bring it to a close when the credits rolled? How do you make your movie end when you go on living? You’d have to kill yourself.”

The sound from the lobby got a little louder.

“Or everyone else,” I said.

“So what,” Chloe said. “This is happening at theatres all over town.”

“It’s not just theatres,” I said. “I’m staying at Marshall’s. There’s been a mob outside my house for the last three days.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Sherrilyn said.

I pushed off the stage and sat beside her. “I’ve caused enough trouble.”

“They’re at your house, El.”

“I figured they were just there to give me shit. I thought they’d go away if I got out of there for a while.”

“What if they’re not there just for you?” Sherrilyn said.

“Who else would they be there for?”

“You live in the hills, El. You know, where all the movie stars live.”

“You think they...?”

“Makes sense.”

“None of this makes sense,” Marlon said.

“But if it did make sense, and they want to get rid of the movies, maybe they want to get rid of the movie stars, too.”

“This whole town is the movies,” Marlon said. “You’d have to set all of Los Angeles on fire.”

“Well,” I said. “They seem to off to a fine start.”

“Aren’t you worried?” Chloe asked.

“Of course I’m worried,” I said “We’re all worried.”

“About your house?” she said.

“Fuck it,” I said. “I don’t really have any valuables. There’s nothing that I can’t live...” Something froze over in my mind.

They all looked at me.

“I need to get back there, now.” I said.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

‘Mr. Barrington is busy. Appointment only.’

They ignore the receptionist and approach Barrington’s door.

‘Appointment only!’

Spencer stops. Faces the receptionist. ‘I think you should clear his calendar.’

Buddy nods his approval.

They enter the office and close the door behind them.

Barrington sits at his desk, staring into space like a toy that’s drained its batteries.

Slowly, he acknowledges their presence and his eyes fade into focus. ‘Gentlemen.’ He rises and extends a large hand across the desk. ‘I don’t believe I’ve had the honour?’

Buddy, more than equal Barrington’s size, hovers aside the desk. Barrington withdraws his hand and lowers himself while looking up at Buddy.

‘Not there.’ Spencer takes Barrington by the arm and guides him around to the visitor’s side of the desk. ‘Sit.’ He points at the tiny chair.

Barrington hesitates.

Buddy moves towards him. ‘Do what he says.’

Barrington squeezes himself into the chair, leaving his face peering out over a tangle of limbs. Buddy sits on the edge of the desk and looms over him. Spencer circles the desk and sits down in Barrington’s chair. He lays his hands down on the desk and taps out a drum roll. ‘I think you’ll find we’ve met before.’

‘I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t believe we—’

‘Buddy. If you would.’

Buddy slaps Barrington hard in the face. The chair teeters as Barrington’s head snaps to the side.

‘Remember now?’ Spencer leans back and stretches his arms above his head.

Barrington narrows his eyes. ‘Ah. Right you are. Apologies. It’s been some time.

Who’s your Buddy?’

‘I was here last week.’

‘I should say it’s been a fair bit longer than that.’

‘How much longer?’

‘I don’t know, exactly. The old brain’s not what it—’

‘Guess.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t want to...’

Buddy raises his hand again.

‘Guess. When was the last time you saw me in this office?’

Barrington looks back and forth between the two men. ‘Well, if I had to estimate—’

‘You do.’

‘I’d say it’s been about...five years.’

‘Five years?’

‘If I had to estimate.’

‘And does that not strike you as unusual? That an...employee, of yours, should be absent for five years?’

‘It most certainly would.’

‘So? How do you account for that?’

‘I can’t image why I would be required to do that?’

‘Why?’

‘Well...you’re...no longer an employee.’

‘Since when?’



‘Well, I should say it’s been about five years since...’

‘Since what?’

‘Since you went missing.’

‘I did not go missing. I am right here.’

‘Then where have you been for the last five years?’

‘I haven’t been anywhere. I’ve been at the apartment where I’ve always been.’

‘That can’t be possible.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, when you went missing, we had no choice but to replace you.’

‘Replace me?’

‘I’m afraid so. How else could we monitor the last known whereabouts?’

‘Who replaced me?’

‘You’ll forgive me if I can’t recall.’

‘Recall? You don’t even know who’s working for you?’

‘Worked. Past tense, my boy.’

‘Explain.’

‘Not possible. Permissions, you see.’

‘Buddy, why don’t you give our friend here his permissions.’

Buddy moves in on Barrington, grabs him by the collar and raises a fist.

‘That won’t help you.’ Barrington’s voice quivers as he protests. ‘I’m not at liberty to—’

‘Buddy.’

Buddy punches Barrington hard in the face. Barrington squeals as blood drips from his nose.’

‘You can’t—’

‘Again.’

Buddy hits him again, this time sending Barrington backwards onto the floor where he lands with a dull thud.

‘Help him up.’ Spencer leans onto his elbows. ‘If he refuses again. Beat him to death.’

Buddy rights the chair and helps Barrington off the floor.

Barrington sits back down, blood smears on his tie, one eye already starting to swell into a purple welt.

‘You look awful.’ Spencer drums on the desktop again. ‘You should see a doctor. I’m sure there’s one around.’

Barrington sneers, wipes the blood from his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

‘Now. Why don’t you remember who replaced me?’

‘Because he too has been replaced.’

‘Did he go missing too?’

‘Now that you mention it, yes. He also was replaced.’

‘And his replacement?’

‘Also missing.’

‘How many times have I been replaced.’

‘Technically they’re not replacing you, per se.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Well, you yourself were a replacement for those before you.’

‘How many? Who was the first?’

‘Before my time, I’m afraid to say. I was a replacement for my predecessor. As he was for his and so forth.’

Spencer shakes his head and looks to Buddy then back to Barrington. ‘Who do

you work for?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Do you know?’

‘Do I know what?’

‘For whom you work?’

‘I work...worked...for you.’

‘Flattered as I am, I’m afraid it isn’t so. I am only, have ever only been, a middle-man. I pass on instructions, issue payments. That’s all. I know no more than you do.’

‘Okay, lets try something else. What’s inside the house?’

‘I don’t know. No one knows.’

‘Show me the pictures.’

‘What pictures?’

‘The pictures you showed me the first time I was here. Show them to me.’

Barrington gulps, looks up to Buddy. ‘May I?’ He nods towards the filing cabinet.

Buddy looks to Spencer.

‘Let him up.’

Barrington liberates himself from the chair and waddles over to the cabinet, blood still dripping from his nose onto the floor. He opens a drawer, pulls out a file and drops it onto the desk.

Spencer opens it. Then he stands and throws the folder at Barrington’s face. ‘The pictures of the house you fucking moron.’ The photographs fly out into the air like a snow globe of traumatised penises and float to the ground. Dicks laying everywhere, glaring out into the room in pain. ‘The house! The pictures of the fucking house!’

Barrington covers his face with his arm and falls backwards, clanking into the row

of cabinets.

‘The house! Now!’

Barrington nods. He extends a shaky hand, pulls open another drawer and reaches inside.

‘God help me, if you don’t do what I ask we’re going to—’

Barrington pulls a semi-automatic handgun out of the drawer. Points it towards them in his trembling hands.

Buddy and Spencer both take a step back, hands raised.

‘Okay, old man.’ Spencer moves another step back. ‘I’m sure we can sort this out without resorting to anything drastic.’

Barrington side-steps toward the desk. Spencer and Buddy move in the opposite direction until Barrington is back behind the desk, they, with their back to the door.

‘Why don’t you put that away? Why don’t we just...’

Barrington presses the barrel into the side of his jaw.

Both men spring towards him.

He pulls the trigger.

His head explodes into the room. More blood than any human head should be able to hold. Spencer and Buddy freeze as the shower of blood and cartilage slashes across them. They stand there with faces like red devils, bone fragments in their hair.

Barrington’s body falls forward onto the desk. His jaw is half missing on one side, half his skull blown out on the other. From Spencer’s position, he can see right into the crater and up into his oozing, puss-like brain. For a brief moment, Barrington’s eyeballs still twitch and flicker, until one of them rolls right out of its socket, slides across a dick picture and falls onto the floor at Spencer’s feet.

Buddy turns to Spencer. ‘Bro.’

Spencer doesn't say anything. He goes to the cabinet and starts to search through the files, pulling them out, throwing them onto the floor. 'They're gone.'

'What's gone?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'What do we do now?'

Spencer takes Barrington's gun, still tangled in his fingers hanging over one side of the desk. 'The only thing we can do.' He reaches down and closes Barrington's remaining eye. 'We have to go into the house.'

They leave the office and pass through the waiting area, the receptionist stares at them wide-eyed as they walk by covered in blood. Spencer then turns back, points the gun up at the film playing, pulls the trigger. The tube explodes in a shower of glass, leaving sparks pouring out of the shattered screen.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

“I need you to drive me home,” I said to Marshall. He’d piled more chairs and boxes against the barricade and was sitting on the counter of the concession stand, watching the doors and chewing on a candy bar.

“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said without taking his eyes off the doors.

The others followed me out of the auditorium.

“I’ll go on my own if I have to.”

“You’re not going out there, El,” Sherrilyn said.

“Are you saying I’m a prisoner?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she said. “You’re being selfish. If you go outside they might get in.”

“Not if I go out the back.”

“We don’t know they’re not around the back.”

“I’ll check.” I ran off through the building with Sherrilyn calling my name after me. When I got to the back door I peeped through the spy hole. “All clear,” I said when I got back to the lobby. “Will you drive me?”

Marshall looked at Sherrilyn. Sherrilyn frowned.

“Fine,” I said. “Can someone please let me out?”

“What’s so important all of a sudden?” Sherrilyn said. “A minute ago you were saying you didn’t have anything that mattered there.”

“I forgot something.”

“What?”

I knew I was being unreasonable. There was nothing I could do about that. But I had to get that film before something happened to it. “*Molly*,” I said.

“The movie you were in?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I’ve got the only copy.”

“All you’ve got left of your father?”

“Yes,” I lied. I started to cry. “Please drive me, man. Please?”

Sherrilyn sighed into her hands. She grabbed a bunch of keys from the box office, and threw them to Marshall. “Don’t lose those. Don’t let anyone see you. And make sure you lock the door.”

I hugged her. She hugged me back, then pushed me off and rolled her eyes at me. “Don’t be too long,” she said. “Don’t let them see you.”

Marshall and I let ourselves out the back door and locked it behind us. We slipped along the back of the buildings and up through an alley half way up the block. We could see the mob outside the Palace so we crossed the street by the smoking cop car and cut through the back streets until we got to the parking lot.

Marshall backed out of the lot and drove slowly in the direction of my house. The sun was all but set. And the streets were far quieter in some places than they should be at that time in the evening. Then we’d turn a corner and there’d be another mob, braying at a movie theatre or a video store, or tearing down advertisements pasted to walls.

I got to thinking about what Marlon had said as I watched Los Angeles pass by the windows. He was right. Of course, he was. No matter what these people did, they couldn’t “live” in the movies. The whole thing was a bad joke gone seriously wrong. Yet, all these people had lived their whole lives obeying the rules, going to work, paying their taxes, and heading out to the cineplex for a couple of hours downtime on the weekend. And now, here they were, rampaging through their own city, dressed like the von Trapp family or hordes of zombies or whatever else, destroying every

cinematic artefact they found. It was then that I realised that I had caused this so much as I had just...ignited it. I had caused it the way a struck match caused a house to burn to the ground after it had been doused in gasoline. Sure, I'd set the fire going with my tiny little flame. But it never would have caught alight if it hadn't already been soaked inch by inch in flammable liquids. Or maybe that's just what I needed to tell myself. That it could have been anyone really. That the whole of the city was just waiting for an excuse, any excuse.

But what was their endgame? Once they'd burned all the movie theatres, trashed all the video tapes, destroyed all the studios, killed all the movie stars? What then? And how would it all even fit together. If someone was living out their Hollywood fantasy, they unlikely to want to get caught up in downtown shootout, or get pulled in for questioning on a murder case. Movie logic only works for the movie in question. The logic of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* will not accord itself to the logic of *It's A wonderful Life*. Imagine that a hundred times over, all genres overlapping, at constant odds with one another. Life would be so chaotic, so confusing. Time would fold in half and back again and you'd drive yourself mad trying to make any sense of it. Every new event, scene, shot, line of dialogue, would just confuse the whole thing that much more. There'd be no way to reach your conclusion. No logic to follow to tie it up in a neat little bow. I couldn't imagine anything more maddening.

It was quiet outside my house when we got to Laurel Canyon. We soon saw why.

Marshall drove past the broken gate and up the drive.

The front door was wide open.

We got out of the car. There was smoking rising somewhere up along the hillside.

It was mostly quiet, but every few seconds you hear a collision of some sort,



somewhere in the distance, or hollering, screaming. Faint. But coming from all directions.

Marshall went in first. "I think we're good," he said. "Your house is fucked-up, though."

"I don't care about the house." I followed him inside.

"That's fortunate," he said.

The whole foyer was strewn with broken cassettes, black, tangled tape everywhere. The furniture had been tipped, the lights ripped out, and the kitchen floor was covered with broken glass and shattered crockery.

"Guess they got tired of waitin' for you to come home," he said.

"I guess." I stepped around the debris towards the basement door. "It's down here," I said.

The basement had been ransacked. Torn and twisted film stock hung snarled around the shelving racks and empty film cans cluttered up the aisles.

"What is all this?" Marshall said. He sounded impressed.

"All...my father's," I said. "He left me all this when he died. Why have they left some of them untouched," I said. There were several cans still closed.

"Probably couldn't get 'em all open. Sometimes need a tyre iron to open an old can."

We cleared a space as we went, pushing all the cans aside.

"What a collection," Marshall said, reading the labels.

"I've never really looked though it," I said.

"There's some seriously nasty stuff here. Your dad had great taste."

I shuddered at the word "dad". I didn't have a dad. I had a producer. The worst to ever live. "He didn't have them because he liked them," I said. "He wanted all this

stuff out of circulation.”

“Then why didn’t he destroy them?”

“Who knows?” I said.

“I could hazard a guess.” Marshall scooped up a bunch of cans and we squeezed around into the next gangway.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got this aunt, right. Don’t really see her none no more. She married this real uptight guy. Some kinda politician. Or not a politician. Like an advisor or somethin’. I dunno. I don’t really understand all that shit. Anyway he was like, a crusader. Music, movies, anything. All devil’s work as far as he was concerned.”

“Sounds familiar,” I said. “What’s that got to do with this though?”

“Never met a guy who watched more filth,” he said. “Completely obsessed, couldn’t get enough of it. Sure, he was rantin’ and ravin’ about it in public, but he was completely addicted. No less ’an any of us. Worse, you know? I mean, we watch all sorts of shit. Him, nothin’ but the nastiest stuff, day in, day out.”

“You think that’s what my...you think that’s what’s gone on here?”

“Why else keep it?”

“I guess we’ll never know,” I said.

When we finally got to the back of the room I could find the reel. Then Marshall found an empty can on the floor labelled *Molly*. He showed it to me.

I held my breath. Touched my body.

“Where’s the rest of ’em?”

“The rest?”

“There’s only like eleven minutes of film in one of these. Whole film’s usually nine or ten reels. This one says number six.”

We searched through the empty cans. We found number four, seven, three and eventually all the rest except for the first reel.

“There,” he said, and pulled out a closed can that had slipped behind a pile “*Molly.*” He flipped the can over. “Number one.”

So that was it, all of me, stored on eleven minutes of film. I took it from him and hugged it close to my chest.

“Good to split?” Marshall said.

“Just let me change my clothes” I said as I clambered toward the door over the cans.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Spencer and Buddy descend the stairs to the street, leaving bloody handprints on the wall. Outside, it's the same greasy stretch of Holloway Road it's always been. But as they glance back and forth along the street they see the road break down into fragments of other places. The fairground, the woods, a wide boulevard lined by palm trees, and, to the south, what looks like a heavy black fog that obscures whatever might lay behind it. Eyes glare at them from every direction. Spencer tucks the gun into his belt, points the fog-blurred road out to Buddy. 'What do you think?'

'It's moving. Getting closer.'

'We don't have much time.'

They turn from the fog towards Highgate.

Buddy turns to Spencer as they walk. 'That was...how are you feeling?'

'Like a million bucks.'

'Wanna tell me about this house?'

'I will if I—'

He springs from a doorway. The man in the long white coat. He swings a black gladstone bag and cracks Buddy in the jaw. Buddy falls. Spencer fumbles for the gun but the man pounces, knocking him backwards, landing on top of him. He pins Spencer to the ground, kneeling on his arms, his groin hovering near his face. He opens his bag and reaches inside. He seethes through his teeth. 'Don't you know it's rude to miss an appointment?' He pulls a handful of pills, throws the bag aside, and forces them into Spencer's mouth.

Spencer chews at his fingers but the man doesn't react, ramming in pills until he can no longer bite down. The man covers Spencer's mouth with one hand and rubs his

throat with the other.

Spencer writhes, howls beneath the blockage in his throat, muffled yelps escaping the doctor's bloody fingers as the man puts his weight into it.

Buddy stands up behind him.

His bag cracks the doctor in the face, breaking his nose open. He falls back momentarily, before forcing himself forward onto Spencer's face. Buddy hits him again. The doctor loses grip. Spencer claws at his belt. The doctor leans in once more.

The gun goes off.

The doctor falls backwards, his white coat soaking claret.

Spencer pushes himself up onto his knees, spits the pills out, fragments and pill-dust stuck in the dried blood around his mouth. He stands up and looks down at the doctor squirming, holding the wound in his chest.

Spencer lifts the gun and puts a bullet between his eyes.

The doctor falls back, dead, blood squirting from the holes in his body.

'Bro.' Buddy waves his hand in front of Spencer's face. 'Quick.' He directs his attention toward someone running towards them, head down, a trench coat billowing behind him. 'Dix.'

Spencer raises the gun again. Waits until he's almost upon him and fires. The force of his head snapping backwards counters with his running speed and his legs fly up in front of him. He spins in the air and lands upside down on his shoulders, cracking his neck ninety degrees in the wrong direction. He looks like a child half-way through a backwards roll, legs splayed out towards the tips of his fingers.

'Sorry about that, Dick.' Spencer kicks him in the back.

No response.

'Looks like I put a hole in your stupid fucking hat.'

‘That black shit’s not going any slower.’ Buddy takes a few steps backwards.

‘We’ve gotta get out of here.’

Spencer looks around. Approaches a parked car and shoots the passenger window out. ‘Get in.’

‘You can drive? You never said you can drive.’

‘Let’s find out.’

They get into the car and Spencer rips the steering column out. He reaches in and twists the wires. The engine sputters to life. He looks behind him and reverses away from the car parked in front. As he turns into the road two faces appear in front of the car. Both in glasses, one high one low. Buddy sees them first, nudges Spencer. He looks up, rams hard on the accelerator, hitting them both. He mounts the kerb and slams into the wall, crushing both bodies between the fender and the brickwork. He reverses out a few meters than slams back into the wall. Again. Again until their innards are exploding from every hole in their faces and they fall forward onto the bonnet, both a wreck of broken limbs. Spencer backs away slowly from the wall. ‘I guess I can drive.’

Buddy recoils at the sight of the bodies as they fall to the floor. ‘Who are these people?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘One moment.’ Spencer gets out of the car. ‘I’ll be right back.’

He kicks open Barrington’s street door, walks slowly up the stairs, shoots the receptionist, then heads back down and gets into the car. He pulls out onto the street and drives towards Highgate.

‘What was that for?’ Buddy pulls on his seat belt.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

The car speeds away towards Highgate, hitting anyone who stands in its way.

## Chapter Thirty-eight

“Wait.” Marshall put his hand on my shoulder as I was reaching out for the door handle.

“What?”

“Listen.”

We both stood there in silence on the basement stairs.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Listen.”

I put my ear to the door. I could hear the crunch of broken glass underfoot. “I hear it. What do we do?”

“Make a run for it.”

I tugged on the dress. “I want to change.”

Something crashed into the floor outside the door.

“Don’t think you got no choice.”

More footsteps, this time right outside the door.

“They find us in here, we’re trapped,” Marshall said. “Ready?”

I took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Marshall slipped beside me, counted to three, and shouldered the door open.

I ran out behind him, gripping the can as hard as I could.

They chased us out of the house and onto the drive.

We pulled the car doors open and dived inside, slamming them closed and locking them. A cluster of marauders circled the car, pawing at the door handles and scratching at the windows. Marshall started the engine and reversed out of the drive.

The chased us out to the road. Marshall put his foot down and we sped away down the



hill, leaving them behind. “What’re they supposed to be?” he said.

“Who knows?”

We drove through West Hollywood, down past Fairfax and through La Brea. Police sirens sounded in the distance, and when we turned onto Wilshire Boulevard Marshall slammed on the brakes. Up ahead was some kind of pile-up. It was too far away to see exactly what was happening. Marshall backed up, and we turned onto a side street and drove slowly along it, turning again until we were running parallel to our original direction. We stayed away from the main thoroughfares, and cut a jagged pattern around the backstreets.

“Where are we?” I asked, looking from window to window trying to see something I recognised. I never really went out around town. I went to Jenny’s, I went home, and I went to the movies. How many years with this sprawling city on my doorstep? We were only a few kilometres from my house, but If Marshall had kicked me out of the car right there, It would have taken hours of wandering until I found my way back there.

“Comin’ up the back.” He juttred his chin out to the left “Palace is over there.”

We turned a corner into a narrow passage and stopped when we saw the blockage up ahead. Marshall backed out of the alley and something slammed into the trunk from the left. The car swung around and smashed into a concrete wall. The passenger window shattered and sprayed glass into the car.

“El,” Marshall said.

I felt almost immobile for a moment. Like in the movies, when someone gets a sudden shock and it shifts into slow motion, draws a silent second out, stretches it over the minute until it snaps back to now.

I gripped the can. It was still safe in my arms. “I’m fine,” I said. “You?”

Marshall was breathing hard. “Thought that was it for a minute there. I just... You sure you’re—”

“I’m good,” I said. “Is that blood?” I poked at Marshall’s neck.

He wiped it with the back of his hand and looked at the small red steak across his knuckles. “It’s nothin’” he said. “You too.”

“Where?”

“You got glass in you.”

I looked down at my arm. There was a tiny glass splinter sticking out of my elbow. I tried to pull it out but yelped as soon as I touched it.

“Here,” Marshall reached across me. “Lemme see your other arm.”

“It’s fine. It’s this one.”

“Just lemme see.”

Another car flew past. I saw the flash of red from the corner of my eye as the sound of the engine tore past our ears.

I twisted in my seat and showed him my other arm. He took it in one hand and pulled it towards him. Then he pinched me, right in the fold of the elbow.

“Hey, man, what the...”

He held out the splinter in his other hand.

A thin line of blood seeped from the puncture wound and dripped onto the dress. I leaned over and wiped the rest of the blood on Marshall’s shirt. “Thanks, man,” I said.

We sat there for another minute without speaking, listening to the engine tick over. I felt lightheaded so I just focused on the sound and waited for it to pass. It was a nice sound. Gentle. I’d never really paid it much attention before.

Marshall, turned around and looked through the rear windshield into the street. He changed gear, pushed down hard on the steering wheel, and tried to pull away from

the wall. But the car didn't go anywhere, only groaned under the hood and vibrated as he pressed the accelerator. He tried again with the same result.

Marshall opened the door and got out. My side was wedged into the wall so I climbed over the driver's seat, still clinging to the reel, shards of glass falling out of my dress as I stood up. Marshall was standing back, looking at the car. He kicked the back wheel which was pointing out at an angle beneath the wheel arch. He reached into the car and took Sherrilyn's keys from the glove box and dropped them in his pocket. "This way."

I followed him, completely lost. We ducked through the alleys until we came out on a quiet crossroads. Marshall said "There," and pointed up towards the sky at what looked like the back of the Palace.

I looked up at the building, then further up still until I was standing on the spot with my neck craned backwards beneath a cloudless night that was full of stars. I tilted my head from side to side and slowly twirled on the spot, looking at all the different clusters of light dispersed across the sky, between patches of deep, dark blue. It wasn't like the night skies in the movies. It was subtle, almost dull in a way I'd never seen before. I realised right there that I had never really paid it any attention. For a moment, I was convinced I could feel the individual motion of all the hairs on my arms, my neck, as they shivered against the gentle breeze beneath a sky that didn't vanish at the edge of a screen. Whichever way I turned there was more of it, and even as it met the horizon there was a depth that said, this goes on. It didn't snuff out cold on a hard border. It wrapped itself around the earth and went on forever in every direction. I had to get the others. They had to see this. Everyone in Los Angeles had to see this. This was the answer, all you had to do was look up!

In the distance I heard Marshall calling my name.

I didn't even see the car until it hit me.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

The car smashes through the gate, pitches to the left and crashes into a tree. Buddy and Spencer get out and head along the road towards the house. When they arrive at the gate all is still, the weatherless sky a blank grey slate, without depth or dimension in any direction. They approach the house and slide around its exterior, testing the door, the windows. There's no sign of life, all is dark within the house and it's sealed tight. Spencer takes a few steps back from one of the windows. 'Mind yourself.' He raises the gun.

Buddy steps away from the window.

Spencer shoots.

The bullet ricochets off of the glass.

Both men duck instinctively.

He shoots another window.

Same result.

Buddy rams the door with a shoulder.

Locked tight like a bank vault.

'Maybe we're going about this all wrong.' Spencer walks away from the house.

'Come with me.'

They cross the street and ascend the stair's to Spencer's apartment. He tries to open the door but his key doesn't fit the lock, so he braces himself against the railing, and kicks it off its hinges. They enter the apartment and Spencer leads Buddy through to the monitoring room. Inside sits a man, staring up at the screens, wearing Spencer's clothes with a different face.

Spencer shoots him in the head.

They stare at the monitors together.

Something appears on the screens.

Just a smear at first. As though a dustball had stuck to the lens. But then more. The back of a head. Shoulders. Moving toward the house. Replicated across the monitors. Slow. An awkward gait. At the foot of the path, the figure stops. Looks behind itself, beyond the frame. It waits, then reaches out to the gate.

‘Wait here.’ Spencer leaves the room.

Buddy watches the screens. Spencer strides into the frame, approaches the man, aims the gun and fires. The man falls onto his back, arms and legs splayed like an angel. A moment passes. Then Spencer looks up directly at the camera and waves Buddy down. Buddy gets up and leaves, leaving the room empty aside from the dead Spencer, whose face is still pointed at the screens from the chair. Buddy enters the frame. He and Spencer stare down at the body. A gangly man, the strap of a leather satchel that cuts across a T-shirt that says DON’T ASK, a ragged gape where his left eye used to be spurting blood onto the pavement.

Buddy leans in for a closer inspection. ‘Who is he?’

‘Never seen him before.’ Spencer belts the gun.

Behind them, the windows in the house begin to gently glow. It fades through the colours of the spectrum like oil on water, set against a sky darkening to black, the fog, coming from all sides now. A wisp of music escapes the windows. Light. Pretty.

Buddy hears it first and looks away from the body towards the house. ‘Bro.’

Spencer looks around. Opens the gate and walks into the path. ‘This is it. Come on.’ He reaches the door and pushes on it. It doesn’t budge. He pushes again. ‘Help me.’

No response.

He looks behind him.

Buddy stands hesitant at the gate. 'I don't think that's for me, bro.'

'This is for both of us.'

'How do you know that?'

'I don't know I just...know.' Spencer turns back to the door Pushes at it again.

Rears back and kicks it hard. Nothing 'Fuck, man. Come and help me!' Spencer points into the distance behind Buddy, the dark clouds now so close they obscure everything beyond the gate. 'Look. There's nowhere else to go. This is our only...this is all there is.'

Buddy doesn't move.

'Bro, come on.'

Buddy takes a step forward.

'That's it.'

Another.

'Come on.'

A hulking figure emerges from the fog. He grabs Buddy from behind and holds a knife to his throat.

Buddy goes stiff.

Spencer squints into the gloom. 'Slug?'

Slugs nods, sadness stained across his broad, flat face.

Audrey appears behind him. She marches around the two large men, lights a cigarette and blows a contemptuous plume of smoke into Buddy's face. 'I see you finally got what you wanted.'

Buddy doesn't respond.

Spencer moves towards them. 'He hasn't done anything.'

‘That’s quite close enough. Slug.’

Slug tightens his grip, pushes the knife a little harder into Buddy’s skin.

Audrey stamps out her cigarette. ‘And of course *he* hasn’t done anything. You, on the other hand.’ She looks at the dead body by the gate. ‘Seem to have been quite busy.’

‘It’s not what it looks like.’

‘What it looks like...’ Audrey grabs the body by its ankle and pulls it onto the path. They all watch as she drags it slowly, scraping through the gravel as she goes around the two men, finally dropping it half way up the path. ‘...is that you just murdered a number of people in cold blood. Including this poor man.’

‘Those aren’t...’

‘Aren’t what, Mr. Dean?’

‘They aren’t real people.’

‘And there we have it. Did I not warn you of this man? Did I not tell you he was part of a dangerous cult.’

‘I haven’t seen any evidence of that.’

‘Evidence?’ Audrey crouches down towards the dead man. ‘It would appear that you have left a trail of...evidence some miles long.’

‘That wasn’t Buddy. I did that.’

‘Yes, you did, Mr. Dean. You have just spent the last hour killing anyone who crosses your path based on the belief that they are... not *real*. That’s quite cultish behaviour, wouldn’t you say?’

‘It’s not like that.’

Audrey reaches down to the dead man pushes her fingers into the hole in his face, twisting it in before pulling out a fistful of flesh. She stands, walks towards Spencer,



and holds out a handful of bloody brains and squeezes it so it sluices through her fingers and splats on the concrete at their feet. ‘Does this not look real to you, Mr. Dean?’ She backs up the path and wipes her hand on Buddy chest.

Spencer looks down at the body. Back up to the others. Back at the body.

‘Am I real, Mr. Dean? Is Mr. Kane here, real? Is it only you? Are you the only one who’s real?’

Without looking up Spencer draws the gun and shoots Slug between the eyes. As he falls away, Audrey snatches the knife and takes his place, forces Buddy down onto his knees, the knife to tight the skin starts to bleed.

‘He has been holding this under your nose all along. What did he tell you that first night. That you killed all these people? Yes? But he didn’t tell you that he stood by and let you. Didn’t tell you that’s exactly what he wanted.’

‘How can you know that? None of this makes sense.’

‘Of course it doesn’t make sense. It was not Mr. Kane’s job to deliver you to sense, it was to deliver you to...this. And you went along with it exactly as you were supposed to.’

‘Look around you.’ Spencer looks back at the glowing windows of house, forward at the dark cloud at Audrey’s heels. ‘If this is real then what the fuck is happening? What is all this?’

‘Nothing is happening, Mr. Dean. It is a perfectly normal day in a perfectly normal world, with the one exception that you are now a serial murderer.’

‘I’m not...I’m...It wasn’t...’

‘Look at that man there. Look hard through the damage you’ve done. Don’t you recognise him? Don’t you recognise your best—’

Spencer aims the gun.

Audrey digs the knife in. ‘Mr. Dean, I wouldn’t—’

He fires.

As she falls away the knife slices Buddy’s jugular. He falls forward onto his hands, spilling blood onto the path. Spencer runs to him, pushes him onto his back and hoists him onto his lap. He tries to stymie the blood flow with his hands but it gurgles through his fingers as Buddy gasps for air. He tries to speak, presses his lips together. ‘Bro,’ he mouths. ‘Bro...bro.’ But no words come out. Behind him, the windows glow stronger. The silhouette appears. Then another, and another, another. All misshapen, their heads warped and bulbous, their rake-like arms and legs, their large flat hands. They slide from window to window as though the house were just one giant room.

Buddy splutters, grips Spencer’s hand, eyes asking, pleading, begging. Spencer wipes a tear away onto his blood-stained face.

‘You were the best, bro.’

He puts the gun to Buddy’s head and pulls the trigger, blasting his brains into the gravel.

As Buddy dies, Spencer hears a latch click.

He turns toward the house.

The door opens, a bright light beyond it.

Spencer puts his hand in Buddy’s one last time, holds it to his body, then pushes him away and stands, blood and brains all over him. He drops the gun and it lands silently on the concrete. He stands up and stares into the doorway, bodies twisted at his feet. The fog moves closer. He takes a few steps. Closer still. Pushing him forward.

A three-fingered, white-gloved hand extends from the doorway.

He takes another step.

The hand beckons.

He goes into the light.

## Chapter Forty

No matter how many times I tell it, I can never get this part right. In my defence, I had just been hit-and-run and, if it wasn't for Marshall, would have likely died right there in a narrow alley full of upturned trash cans off the street behind the Palace. Not only did he pick me up from the bloody slump he found me in by the side of the road, he found the can, which had escaped my clutch as I hit the ground. I do have a vivid memory of clinging onto it as I soared through the air. Somehow the collision hadn't done that much damage, clipped me in such a way to send me flying without me taking the full mass of the vehicle. But I had hit the ground with such force I had broken my arm and the can had gone wheeling into the distance as I had scraped along the asphalt until I'd slammed into something hard, I don't know what. For a brief moment, I saw everything clearly. I knew what had happened, knew where I was. I tried to stand up. But I couldn't send the instruction to my muscles. A light tingle appeared at my fingertips, crept up over my knuckles, shot along my arms, and within a split second had engulfed my entire body. The next thing I knew everything around me was dancing before my eyes, tinged a bloody claret like a red gel across a camera lens. I could taste iron, or aluminium, sand and salt. As I found out a little later, Marshall had scooped me up from the ground and tried to lift me, but I'd moaned about the can again and again. He found it quickly, then lifted me onto his shoulder and started to run towards the Palace. The accident had attracted attention. A mob rounded the corner and saw us, and they chased us all the way to the back door of the theatre. After that, everything was a blur of blood and static, and then next thing I remember was lying on my back in the auditorium with everyone fussing at me. Something cool and damp passed over my face. It was like a hand that reached

into the pool of static and pulled me out, dropped me right there on the carpet. For a moment I felt almost as if I was floating, followed by more pain I'd ever felt in my short life.

The dress was as ragged as my skin. Asphalt burns had shredded the flesh away all along the left side of my body. My arm, my thigh, both shoulders, across my back, the whole left side of my face. Marshall might have found the can, but I'd definitely left something behind out there: a few yards of skin and at least a couple of teeth. They all dabbed at me with towels and sponges, each of them wearing the kind of expression that told me how bad it was. While Sherrilyn swabbed my face with some sort of antiseptic, and Marlon and Chloe picked slivers of grit out of my arms and legs, Belle stood behind them, glaring at me with her hands clamped over her mouth and tears falling from her eyes. Suddenly it stung so hard I bucked and squirmed and shrunk away from their hands and, then, as I thought I couldn't bear another second it dispersed into another wave of painless static and I fell back and gurgled with my head rolling from side to side on the carpet. The pain exploded and receded and exploded and receded. That went on however long until I passed out.

When I woke up again, the first thing I noticed was the pain, the second was the noise, a loud rumble that seemed to come from every direction. I was propped up on some blankets against the wall at the back of the auditorium. Marshall, Sherrilyn, Ivana, and Belle were all there with me. I padded at the floor around me with my right hand, trying to turn my stiff neck to look around.

“Got it here.” Marshall reached over the back of the seats and pulled the can out.

I held my working hand out and gestured for him to give it to me.

He passed it over and I held it to my broken body. I tried to say thank you but I couldn't get any words out. I touched my face and felt where my lip had been torn

away above my missing teeth. I clutched the can even harder.

The door to the auditorium opened and filled the room with muffled chants and jeers and rumbling doors.

“Gonna get bad soon. Any minute soon,” Marlon said with his head around the door.

Marshall smoothed his hand across his head and followed him out into the lobby.

I groaned at Sherrilyn and pointed at the seats.

“What’s she...is she...” Belle covered her mouth again

“What do you need?” Sherrilyn said.

I pointed at the seats again.

“What? What’s over there.”

“I think she wants to sit up,” Ivana said.

I nodded and dribbled blood and pointed at the seats again.

They helped me up off the floor and walked me slowly into the aisle. Sherrilyn one side, Ivana the other, my left foot dragging behind as I hopped forward on my right. Belle followed behind with the can. They tried to sit me down on the corner seat of the last row but I shook my head and tried to point where I wanted to go.

“She wants to sit in the middle.”

I gurgled to confirm.

“Damn.” Sherrilyn said. “Even when you are fucked-up you’re a pain in the ass.”

They helped to the edge of the row and I stumbled along it by myself, using the seats on each side to stop myself from falling over, with Ivana following in the row behind me. I reached my favourite seat but I couldn’t flip the cushion down. Ivana pushed it down and I fell into it. I took the can from Belle and looked up at the empty screen. I couldn’t even remember how long it’d been since that sixth screening of

*Pink Flamingos*. The night this all got started. What year was it now, even? '98? '99?

I didn't think to long on it. It didn't seem like it mattered all that much anymore.

"Sherrilyn."

The door was open again, that noise even louder than before.

"I think you better come and see this."

Sherrilyn went to the lobby.

I choked up a mouthful of blood. Belle swooped in and caught the messy globule in her bare hands. I coughed again, this time spraying the back of the seat in front with dark droplets. I thought of the night at the Cinematheque. Laughing, covered in gloop that tasted like candy, my body wound tight like a spring, ready to bounce from one movie to the next. Right then, all I wanted was one more movie, one last time in that ephemeral space before it snuffed out forever.

The noise got louder.

I turned to Ivana who was sitting on the other side of me. I forced the can into her hands, and turned my head to eyeball the projection booth. She shrugged at me and narrowed her eyes. I nodded at the can, back at the booth, back at the can.

"I think she wants you to run it," Belle said.

I nodded.

"Now," she said. "Is it really—"

"*Please*," I managed, drooling blood onto Belles hands again. I looked her as hard in the eye as I could.

"Okay," she said. "Come and help me. Lets get that blood off your hands."

"I shouldn't leave her." Belle wiped her hands on her clothes.

I gurgled and nodded.

"Sure?"

“Uh huh.”

They got up and left me. And I sat there in the half dark room. Stared at the screen and waited. A few minutes later the curtains drew apart. All the lights went down and the screen flickered for a moment. I heard the first notes of music and all the pain disappeared. Then the title card. *Molly*. The camera swooped down upon me and there I was, all of fourteen years, wide-eyed and wandering through the Magical Kingdom. The screen disappeared and I was right back there. I bathed in the colours, swayed to the sounds. Only then did I know I'd been there before, and before, and again and before. I found myself there a thousand times and no matter what I did I always ended up back there. Only then did I acknowledge what I'd always known. I didn't just *appear* at Disneyland that day, I emerged from her womb. So when they asked what my middle initial stood for, I could now tell them that it was my mother's name. And she is the most overbearing of mothers. She will not allow me to play outside, to know the Earth as I would know her. She will not allow any of us to play outside. *She* is our playground, our homestead, our funeral parlour, our graveyard, and our afterlife. We're all born from her, we all die in her arms. And we're never, ever, allowed to leave.



*The hem of her cornflower dress fluttered in the breeze beneath the warm California sun. She cast a neutral gaze ahead. The park stretched out before her, its sweet, clean sidewalks winding away into the distance, coiling around cotton candy stands and swerving between roller-coasters and carousels. Music drifted through the air from every direction. From thoroughfares and boulevards, bandstands and village squares and toffee shops. Animals cavorted on their hind legs. Mice with giant heads in buttoned slacks or gingham dresses; tall, toothy hounds, bow-legged in hats and waistcoats or long-eared and naked, panting, tongues dangling in the heat; bears dressed in red T-shirts and ducks in sailor's jackets; canaries; chipmunks; lions and tigers; and little bearded men who whistled as they went. They rollicked with the flocks of grinning children, no higher than their waists, bright eyes laughing up at them with love and terror. Far in the distance, behind rocket ships and pirates' sails, behind steam trains and clock towers and flying saucers, a purple spire rose to meet the sky. She gazed up towards it, and took her first step. Then another. And another until she was gently gliding through the throng of bodies. She slipped through Main Street as though sliding over ice and arrived at the foot of the castle. Other children pranced and capered all around her, hugging the legs of their parents, swirling with their arms out and squealing delight as fairy princesses blew them kisses from horse-drawn carriages. She made no effort to enter the castle, only stood there, beaming upwards, the spire hazing in her eyes before the glowering sun. She remained there for several minutes, warm and motionless, and, for a moment, she herself was little more than a blur of colour and light on the sidewalk, barely visible to all around her. Aside from the man who eyed her from behind. Broad and tall and the only man around without children at his side, stuffy in a three-piece suit, handkerchief and pocket watch. He sidled up and stood before her, casting her in shadow as he blocked*

*her view of the spire. What was her name? She didn't reply. Where were her parents, where was she from? She didn't reply. He asked again. She didn't reply.*

*He asked again.*

76,015 Words

## Post-Cinematic Anxiety

## Introduction & Overview

In 2023, prior to the release of his latest high-tech blockbuster, filmmaker Christopher Nolan could be found in the press proselytising about the benefits of IMAX 70mm film stock. “The sharpness and the clarity and the depth of the image is unparalleled,” he said in an interview with AP News. “You’re getting a feeling of 3D without the glasses. You’ve got a huge screen and you’re filling the peripheral vision of the audience.” This can be seen as being in the service of a particular objective, summed up by his statement that, when projected in the world’s most sophisticated theatres, “you’re really letting the screen disappear”.<sup>1</sup>

While Nolan’s experiments with disappearing screens may make use of the very latest technologies, the desired outcome is not a new one. He is pursuing an ideal that is as old (or older) as cinema itself: that cinema will one day arrive at its final form, an internal destiny built into the very concept of motion photography, that is best encapsulated by André Bazin’s term “Total Cinema”.<sup>2</sup>

Total cinema is just one of a number of myths, theories, speculations, or fears about the possibility of some kind of cinematic afterlife, destined to eventually supersede cinema as we have traditionally understood it. It is not, however, a simple case of a relatively young art form attempting to evolve and deepen in formal and technological sophistication. Each of the examples cited throughout this work in some way revolves around the potential consequences for human beings, should this total

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsey Bahr, “Christopher Nolan Breaks Down The Best Way to Watch a Movie, Ahead of ‘Oppenheimer’ Release”, *AP News*, Jun 4, 2023, para.8, accessed Jul 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/oppenheimer-christopher-nolan-0f8c1fdc4a358decee6105cac91a90ae>

<sup>2</sup> André Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema”, in *Film Theory & Criticism*, eighth edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, trans. Hugh Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 130.

cinema ever be realised. The assumed consequences range from cinema as witchcraft, to fascist domination, to the idea that human beings will be eventually usurped by “a total cinema that is to provide that complete illusion of life”.<sup>3</sup> These ideas are not solely the domain of theorists, and can be located across a wide range of media, from nineteenth-century short fiction, through twentieth-century film and media theory, up to twenty-first-century blockbuster movies. These discourses provide the landscape for this thesis. Within that landscape, this work seeks to define a brief genealogy of a particular line of thought, which I have termed “post-cinematic anxiety”.

The essay is split into five chapters. Chapter one, “Cinema, Post-Cinema, And Post-Cinematic Anxiety”, begins with brief definitions of “cinema” and “post-cinema”, before going on to define post-cinematic anxiety as it will be intended throughout this work.

Chapter two, “Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Short Fiction, Theory, And Criticism”, reviews a number of examples that support the existence of the concept, as it appears in a variety of writing on cinema. The texts range from short fiction, to film and media theory, to postmodern philosophy, and are dated from the end of the nineteenth century all the way into the twenty-first. Each of the texts displays or discusses one or more of the symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety. The material presented here provides a framework for the following chapters.

Chapter three, “Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Cinema”, begins with a brief overview of certain trends within mainstream American cinema that confront the subject matter outlined in the previous chapter. A number of mainstream films are then discussed in relation to the symptoms of post-cinematic. This chapter considers the films’ plots, their characters and dialogue, and their production values and places them within sub-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 132.

sections of the diagnosis.

Chapter four, “Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*”, offers an extensive reading off Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2007). I will argue for *Remainder* as a significant example of post-cinematic anxiety in the contemporary novel, within the framework proposed throughout the rest of the essay.

Chapter five, “Post-Cinematic Anxiety in *The Palace View*”, examines the novel presented at the beginning of this thesis. Here, I discuss the novel in both thematic and formal terms, situate it within the framework of post-cinematic anxiety, relating the concept to the body and the absurd. This is followed by a brief discussion of problems that arose during the composition process.

The thesis concludes with suggestions for further study and some final remarks on the phenomenological category of “post-cinema”.

## Chapter One: Cinema, Post-Cinema, and Post-Cinematic Anxiety

### 1.1: Cinema

Before attempting any kind of definition of post-cinematic anxiety, it's first necessary to define "cinema" as the term will be used throughout this work. In "Cinema and the Code", Gene Youngblood writes, "it is important to separate cinema from its medium, just as we separate music from particular instruments".<sup>4</sup> "Cinema", he writes, "is the art of organising a stream of audiovisual events in time" regardless of its medium.<sup>5</sup> For Youngblood and his colleagues "'the performance of the image on the surface of the screen'—remains historically continuous across all media", and while new mediums may have "radically altered the epistemology and ontology of the moving image", they have "not fundamentally changed its phenomenology".<sup>6</sup> "There are no new classes of images," he writes, and "in every case where we refer to the phenomenology of the moving image, we call it cinema".<sup>7</sup>

This definition of cinema will be adhered to throughout this work. And while most of the artefacts considered are direct examples of cinema or cinematic commentary, the framework considers all televisual media to be phenomenologically uniform. This is all the more necessary in the twenty-first century, where the production and dissemination of cinematic images refuses easily delineated categories and classifications. Streaming services disrupt the line between film and television, even more so than broadcast television before them. Studios now produce narratives

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<sup>4</sup> Gene Youngblood, "Cinema and the Code", *Leonardo* 22, supplement (1989): 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

that cross-pollinate over different media (coined “transmedia storytelling” by Henry Jenkins),<sup>8</sup> and the most prestigious television shows look, to all but industry professionals, identical to modern films. They draw from the same pool of well-known actors, follow the same narrative strategies, and employ similar aesthetics in cinematography, colour grading, and sound design. The most popular video games for adults also tend to aspire to the cinematic, in their aesthetic presentation and their narrative structure. And now we are seeing the most successful of these games adapted for film and television, where they are able to enjoy prestige and attention from the general public unavailable in their original format.

## 1.2: Post-Cinematic Theory & Criticism

Much of what is considered post-cinematic, whether by name or description, is often synonymous with what is deemed post-photographic or post-continuous.

Post-photographic criticism describes the aesthetic consequences of the move from analogue photography to digital image making and the production of images that are “no longer *indexical*—i.e. maintaining a physical tie to their referents”.<sup>9</sup> In this post-photographic media landscape, it is no longer possible for an untrained eye to parse images that accord themselves to some concrete reality from those “composed of thousands of still photos melded into a continuous surface”.<sup>10</sup> This “broke the special relationship between photography and the world”,<sup>11</sup> writes J. Hoberman in *Film After Film*. Paraphrasing André Bazin, Hoberman reminds us that photography’s

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”, *Pop Junctions*, May 10, 2007, accessed Aug 03, 2023, [https://www.henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](https://www.henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html)

<sup>9</sup> Evan Calder Williams, *Shard Cinema* (New York: Repeater Books, 2017), 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> J Hoberman, “The Myth of ‘The Myth of Total Cinema’”, *Film after Film: Or, What Became of 21st-Century Cinema* (London: Verso, 2012, London), Kindle Edition, 11.



“integral realism was predicated on the camera’s impartial gaze”.<sup>12</sup> And with the loss of that impartiality, motion pictures have “surrendered their privileged relationship with the real”.<sup>13</sup> This, he calls “post-photographic cinema”.<sup>14</sup>

Post-continuous critiques focus upon the twenty-first-century trend of filmmaking techniques that have abandoned the basic grammar of film, or “spatiotemporal continuity”.<sup>15</sup> Post-continuous images, Steven Shaviro writes, are “stitched together with rapid cuts, frequently involving deliberately mismatched shots” in which “physical lunges” and “violently accelerated motions” add up to a “jagged collage of fragments” whose only purpose is to issue a “continual series of shocks to the audience”.<sup>16</sup>

Post-continuity has also been applied to the narrative aspects of cinema, where “a preoccupation with immediate effects trumps any concern for broader continuity—whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative”.<sup>17</sup> Others have contested the claim that classical narrative forms of cinema have been displaced. David Bordwell summarises Peter Krämer’s argument that “conceptions of ‘postclassical’ cinema rested on intuitive comparisons rather than on thorough and systematic analyses of films”,<sup>18</sup> and concludes that, in spite of surface appearances, the films charged with the crime of postclassical narrative “display highly coherent storytelling”<sup>19</sup> that “remain committed to classical premises”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>13</sup> J Hoberman, “The New Realness”, *Film after Film*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Shaviro, “Post-Continuity: An Introduction”, in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016), ePUB, 51

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>18</sup> David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (London: University of California Press Ltd, 2006), 6.

<sup>19</sup> For analysis of narrative style see: Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

If we side with Bordwell regarding the narrative, the result is a contradiction: a mainstream cinema that is aggressively futurist and postmodern in its aesthetic presentation, while simultaneously classical in its narrative technique.

### 1.3: Post-Cinematic Anxiety

A similar contradiction lies at the centre of post-cinematic anxiety. Here, “post-cinematic” is not intended to describe the current period of post-photographic film (although post-photographic and post-continuous cinema are entirely relevant). Moreover, post-cinematic anxiety is a historical presence born alongside the invention of the moving image. Writing on Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety, Michael Watts notes that

a key feature of anxiety is symmetrical emotional ambivalence... characterised by a desire for what one fears, and a dread of what one desires—the possibilities of one’s freedom are experienced as attractive and desirable and also, at the same time, as undesirable and terrifying.<sup>21</sup>

The invention of technologies capable of recording, replicating, and projecting moving images gave rise to an immediate optimism and a countering pessimism about, not only what could be achieved with their current capabilities, but what might eventually supersede them. It is this “symmetrical emotional ambivalence” that produces post-cinematic anxiety: cinema’s “desire for” and “dread of” its own possible futures. Post-cinematic anxiety, then, is best considered not as a theory of

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<sup>20</sup> Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Watts, “The Concept of Anxiety”, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 159.

post-cinema, but as an affliction of cinema and cinematic culture. It is not interested in specifics about what post-cinema is (or will be), but functions as a description of the speculations about cinema's potential futures and its continuing role in our lives, be those speculations ontological, epistemological, teleological, or phenomenological. Its subject is cinema and cinematic discourse, and the anxieties that manifest within those disciplines about the possibilities of the post-cinematic. It describes, dramatises, or holds forth upon what is produced by the contradictions that occur between cinema's earliest promises to make "a total and complete representation of reality"<sup>22</sup> and the reality it hopes to duplicate.

Symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety fall into three broad categories: paranoia, desire, and denial, and any given artefact may display one or more of these.

Paranoia often manifests as a warning or as skepticism about cinematic influence in life, the artifice of cinematic form in relation to life, the loss of a clear distinction between cinema and life, and the progress of photographic technology, especially regarding the loss of the indexicality of photographic images.

Desire often reveals itself as sycophancy, and can be seen in the over-evaluation and fetishisation of corporate film aesthetics. It can be observed in over-zealous self-awareness of cinema, the uncritical celebration of, and pervasive nostalgia for, cinematic intellectual property, and in the attempts to remove the distinction between cinema and life to create a truer immersion.

And denial is often found in media that is irrefutably cinematic, yet refuses cinema, cinematic intention or cinematic form, or disregards and discredits the necessities of film production, from directors, writers, and actors, to the technology required to capture and process moving images.

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<sup>22</sup> Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema", 132.

These symptoms occur in film theory and criticism, fiction about cinema, mainstream film reviews, semiotics, structural and post-structural theory, the visual aesthetics of films and their modes of production, as well as the narratives of films and their modes of composition.

## Chapter 2: Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Short Fiction, Theory & Criticism

In the previous section, I have outlined definitions of cinema and post-cinematic anxiety, and noted where those definitions are situated in relation to other post-cinematic discourse. I have remarked upon a contradiction in the current conception of that which is considered post-cinematic, citing David Bordwell's evidence that while the aesthetic presentation of contemporary films may be considered "postclassical," its narrative structures remain committed to classical form. I have then made a comparison between that contradiction, and the contradictions found within the symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety, which are marked by a simultaneous attraction toward, and repulsion from, projected cinematic futures. Lastly, I outlined three broad categories within which symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety can be considered: paranoia, desire, and denial. I will now offer a brief survey of writing about cinema, in which these symptoms can be observed.

### 2.1: The Kinetoscope of Time

In 1895, one year before the world's first dedicated movie theatre was opened in New Orleans, *Scribner's Magazine* published James Brander Matthews's short story "The Kinetoscope of Time".<sup>23</sup> In the story, an unnamed man finds himself in a "large circular hall"<sup>24</sup> which is empty save for "four curiously shaped narrow stands".<sup>25</sup> He

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<sup>23</sup> Brander Matthews, "The Kinetoscope of Time", *Tales of Fantasy and Fact* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1896), accessed Apr 12, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/talesoffantasyfa00mattuoft/mode/2up>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

is invited to look into the “eye-pieces”<sup>26</sup> atop the first stand and promised “a succession of strange dances”.<sup>27</sup> Having no reason to abstain, the protagonist accepts and watches, rapt with attention. He is then invited to look into the second stand. He accepts, this time witnessing “combats as memorable as the delectable dances”.<sup>28</sup> Upon completion, he becomes aware that he is no longer alone. A man is now present. He welcomes the protagonist and says “I am glad always to show the visions I have under my control to those who will appreciate them...Did you recognize the strange scenes shown to you by these two instruments?”.<sup>29</sup> The protagonist concurs.

I...made bold to express to him the surprise I had felt, not only at the marvellous vividness with which the actions had been repeated before my eyes, like life itself in form and in color and in motion, but also at the startling fact that some of the things I had been shown were true and some were false. Some of them had happened actually to real men and women of flesh and blood, while others were but bits of vain imagining.<sup>30</sup>

The man “understand[s] [his] surprise that the facts and the fictions are mingled together in these visions”,<sup>31</sup> and suggests that “fact is often inferior to fiction, and that it is often also one and the same thing”.<sup>32</sup> The man then makes him an offer. The visions he has seen are “gratuitous”<sup>33</sup> and free of charge. But the last two contain both his past, and his future, and he can see them for a price: a year of his own life for each ten that sees. Initially, the protagonist is unsure, but quickly demurs, saying that he

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 49.

knows his own past, and that he will face his future “more bravely” if he knows not “what it holds in store”.<sup>34</sup> The proprietor tries to persuade him, assuring him that the “price is low”.<sup>35</sup> But the protagonist declines: “it might be nothing at all,” he says, “and I should still decline. I cannot afford to be impatient now and to borrow knowledge of the future. I shall know all in good time”.<sup>36</sup> The proprietor asks: “Would you not wish to know even the matter of your end?”.<sup>37</sup> Again, the protagonist declines, telling him that he will meet his future on his own terms.

The proprietor accepts his decision, and escorts him from the building. As he walks home, the protagonist passes “a shop, the windows of which were filled with framed engravings”.<sup>38</sup> Among them, is a portrait of the proprietor, identified as “Monsieur le Comte de Cagliostro”,<sup>39</sup> a renowned eighteenth century Italian occultist.

In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane writes that

The protagonist’s viewing of these filmed records of other times and other places occurs in a placeless and timeless space that resembles in many ways (its darkness and otherness to the world outside, its nonidentifiability) the cinema theatres of a much later period...The story conjoins many of the motifs associated with the emerging cinema and its technological promise to capture time: immortality, the denial of the radical finitude of the human body, access to other temporalities, and the issue of the archivability of time.<sup>40</sup>

She continues:

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “The Representability of Time”, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

[“The Kinetoscope of Time”] suggests that the mysterious proprietor of the kinetoscope is contaminated with by the attributes of his own machine—specifically its ability to access other times (the protagonist’s past, his future) and the denial of mortality (the proprietor does not know death). Its rhetoric echoes that which accompanied the reception of early cinema, with its hyperbolic recourse to the figures of life, death, immortality, and infinity. The cinema would be capable of recording permanently a fleeting moment, the duration of an ephemeral smile or glance. It would preserve the lifelike movements of loved ones after their death and constitute itself as a grand archive of time. As André Bazin would later point out, photographic technology “embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.” But because time’s corruption is “proper” to it, its fixed representation also poses a threat, produces aesthetic and epistemological anxiety. “The Kinetoscope of Time” registers this threat as the complicity of the machine with the demonic; hence the protagonist’s refusal to look.<sup>41</sup>

“The Kinetoscope of Time” pre-figures much of the material cited throughout this work. As Doane states, the story echoes suspicions and superstitions that have accompanied cinema since its inception. Few had first-hand experience of cinema in 1885. And yet, the very implications of cinema had already created a “hyperbolic recourse” to “life, death, immortality, and infinity”.

Where “The Kinetoscope of Time” deviates from our own reality is in its resolution. As soon as the protagonist is made aware of the price his resolve is immediate. He is never really tempted. And when he declines to view his own past and future, he says no to cinema, and returns immediately to the real world, where cinema is reduced to a manipulative trick of the occult, narrowly avoided. The history of post-cinematic anxiety, however, is the history of the protagonist who said yes to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3.



the proprietor's offer, and whose "reality" is now forever mediated by cinema.

## 2.2: The Myth of Total Cinema

Where "The Kinetoscope of Time" channels superstitions associated with the reception of cinema among the public, André Bazin's landmark essay "The Myth of Total Cinema" makes a mythology of the desires of its earliest pioneers. Essentially a review of Georges Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma*,<sup>42</sup> the essay argues that, counter to Sadoul's Marxism, the volume demonstrates that cinema was not a product of material causes. According to Bazin, cinema is best understood, not as a result of technological progress, but as the technological realisation of a pre-existing idea. "The cinema", he writes, "is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven".<sup>43</sup> These men imagined cinema as a "total and complete representation of reality...the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color and relief".<sup>44</sup>

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproductions of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. If cinema in its cradle lacked all the attributes of the cinema to come, it was with reluctance and because its fairy guardians were unable to provide them

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<sup>42</sup> Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma* (Paris: Danoel, 1946)

<sup>43</sup> Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema", 131.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

however much they would have liked to.<sup>45</sup>

In place of the paranoia of “The Kinetoscope of Time,” the myth of total cinema is fuelled by the longing to recreate the world “unburdened” by subjectivity and mortality: in other words, to provide a conduit through which humans can transcend themselves and time itself.<sup>46</sup> As Bazin states, “[t]here are numberless writings, all of them more or less wildly enthusiastic, in which inventors conjure up nothing less than a total cinema that is to provide that complete illusion of life”.<sup>47</sup> These enthusiasms were not a product of cinema’s actual capabilities, but a projection of its presumed potential, the final goal being “a faithful copy of nature”.<sup>48</sup> This leads us to the crux of Bazin’s essay, and to the most essential point for the purposes of this study. From this perspective,

one may legitimately consider the silent film and the sound film as stages of a technical development that little by little made a reality out of the original ‘myth’...Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!<sup>49</sup>

The examples of post-cinematic anxiety cited throughout this work are observations of the attempts to achieve or avoid the *invention* of cinema, in which totality is presumed not as an external imposition, but an internal destiny. Both the ideal of total cinema and the superstitions of “The Kinetoscope of Time” are caused by cinema’s inherent sense of possibility. And Bazin’s interpretation is not without its

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 133.

nod to the occult. His inventors “conjure” total cinema, much like it’s implied does the proprietor of the Kinetoscopes. This isn’t to suggest that Bazin is channeling some secret belief in cinema’s latent demonic qualities, moreover, that cinema, in both its ontology and its phenomenology, lends itself easily to the language and the prospects of the occult. As Doane claims, cinema denies the “finitude of the human body” and allows us to travel through time. Cinema produces doppelgängers. It deconstructs, reconstructs, and reinvents our temporal reality and produces realistic images where no indexical counterparts exist. In short, it allows us to see things and believe in things that aren’t there. And where the subjects of Bazin’s essay idealise this potential, the narrative perspective of “The Kinetoscope of Time” sees it as something akin to witchcraft. Cinema becomes an act less of art than of trickery and illusion, something that can be observed in one of its first true innovators, Georges Méliès, who came to cinema as an experienced illusionist and immediately saw its illusory potential. Cinema conjures and inhabits its own parallel territory, which continues to cause concern across a number of disciplines.

### 2.3: The Culture Industry

Theodore Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”,<sup>50</sup> can in some senses be seen as a synthesis of the previous two examples applied to a later period, but attributes its warning not to the motion picture technology so much as those who wield it: the media. The critique is general, covering broadcast and advertising, tabloid journalism, and other prominent media

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<sup>50</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1944/1997), 120-167.

apparatus. But within those elements, it is “the sound film” that is “most characteristic” of the mass deception of the subtitle.<sup>51</sup>

The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer’s guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. This purpose has been furthered by mechanical reproduction since the lightning takeover by the sound film.

Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusions, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence, the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality.<sup>52</sup>

For Adorno–Horkheimer, the cinema audience are not patrons of the popular arts, they are the “victims” of the sound film, which is intent on destroying the boundary between the outside world and its ongoing empirical duplication for the purposes of social control. Where “The Kinetoscope of Time” is rhetorical and “The Myth of Total Cinema” is hermeneutic, Adorno–Horkheimer’s essay is a diatribe. The sound film and its associated media don’t *pose* a threat; the threat has already been carried out. The result is the culture industry: a pernicious and insurmountable “illusion”, held together by “[a]utomobiles, bombs, and movies”,<sup>53</sup> within which “[s]omething is

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 121.

provided for all so none may escape”.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the mechanical reproduction of empirical objects, Adorno–Horkheimer’s critique extends to narrative content and its ability to stupefy the spectator, and the films under scrutiny are far removed from the minutes-long snippets of horses galloping and trains arriving that marked the period discussed by Bazin. “As soon as the [narrative] film begins”, they write, “it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten.”<sup>55</sup> This results in a “prearranged harmony” which is “a mockery of what had to be striven for in the great bourgeois works of art”.<sup>56</sup> Hollywood movies

are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts. Even though the effort required for his response is semi-automatic, no scope is left for the imagination. Those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie—by its images, gestures, and words—that they are unable to supply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell on particular points of its mechanics during a screening. All the other films and products of the entertainment industry have taught them what to expect; they react automatically.<sup>57</sup>

The purpose of “The Culture Industry” is not to call for reform of the aforementioned mechanisms, as the writers do not believe them possible from within an industry that occupies all areas of life and consciousness. They offer the example of Orson Welles, saying when he “offends against the tricks of the trade, he is

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system”.<sup>58</sup> All subversion will be in turn subverted. The culture industry is “the triumph of invested capital, whose title as absolute master is etched deep into the hearts of the dispossessed in the employment line”.<sup>59</sup>

The essay is best summarised by the following excerpt:

Today, tragedy has melted away into the nothingness of that false identity of society and individual, whose terror still shows for a moment in the empty semblance of the tragic. But the miracle of integration, the permanent act of grace by the authority who receives the defenceless person—once he has swallowed his rebelliousness—signifies Fascism.<sup>60</sup>

Due to the severity of the critique—fascist domination wrought not from military power but movies, soap operas, and pop songs—“Adorno’s stance on mass culture, in particular technologically produced and circulated media such as film, has often enough been dismissed as mandarin, conservative, and myopic”.<sup>61</sup> Writing in *Cinema and Experience*, Miriam Hansen goes on to explain that

the authors excoriated the culture industry as a system of secondary exploitation, domination, and integration by which advanced capitalism subordinates any cultural practice, low or high, to a single purpose: to reproduce the spectator/listener as consumer. If the culture industry voraciously commodified human experience and reduced all art to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>61</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, “A Question of Film Aesthetics”, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (University of California Press, Ltd, London), 207.

advertisement, any attempt to make a difference was doomed to be assimilated and to validate the system as a whole; no alternative practice of film... seemed conceivable.<sup>62</sup>

This insistence on the futility of art practices, and their arrival at a cultural impasse, saw Adorno come to “figure as a bad object in the theory canons”,<sup>63</sup> a reputation that has attached itself to the authors of subsequent iterations of the critique.

#### 2.4: Simulacra and Simulation

Jean Baudrillard opens *Simulacra and Simulation* with a brief retelling of Jorge Luis Borges’s “On Exactitude in Science”. In Borges’s parable, cartographers draw a map that “coincide[s] point for point” with its territory.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent generations come to acknowledge the uselessness of such a map and it falls to ruin, leaving behind “no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography”.<sup>65</sup> “[T]his fable”, Baudrillard writes, “has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra”.<sup>66</sup>

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>64</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science”, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Group, 1946/2000), 181.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>66</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981/1994), 1.

is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory. And if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*.<sup>67</sup>

“The desert of the real” is a phrase and a concept that has long since been subsumed into popular culture, but in its most prominent cases, media that depicts this idea tend to present the map and the territory as discrete locations: the territory is real and the map is unreal; plots are propelled by the desire to escape the latter and return to the former.<sup>68</sup> But for Baudrillard, “even inverted, Borges’s fable is unusable”.<sup>69</sup>

[I]t is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other...It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.<sup>70</sup>

Disneyland most exemplifies his thesis. He calls it “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra...presented to us imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of America] is real”.<sup>71</sup> “Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it” are themselves “no longer real” and now “belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation”.<sup>72</sup> “The imaginary of Disneyland”, he writes, acts as a “deterrence

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter two for a full discussion of “prominent cases”.

<sup>69</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 12.



machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp”.<sup>73</sup> He calls Los Angeles a “city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation—a city of incredible proportions but without space”.<sup>74</sup>

Here we see Baudrillard continuing in the tradition that saw Adorno’s critiques received so poorly. These denunciations are significant because they are themselves symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety. And for those writing in this vein of criticism, an omnipresent hopelessness pervades the critiques. Like “The Culture Industry” before it, *Simulacra and Simulation* is not reformist: neither recommends improvements nor suggests them to be possible. And, especially in the case of Baudrillard, to do so would be to undermine the core of the thesis.

Objections to this critique ensue from all sides of the political spectrum. On the right and at the centre, the media under scrutiny are an important part of the neoliberal project: both in terms of the profit and their role in normalising desired neoliberal attitudes. And on the left, as previously noted, these critiques seem to deny some of the core materialist tenets of Marxism and their prescriptions appear nihilistic in such a way as to prevent any positive or worthwhile left activism. Baudrillard goes further, claiming that nihilism is no longer even possible, as it still constitutes “a desperate but determined theory, an imaginary of the end,” where, for us, “[t]he dialectical stage, the critical stage is empty. There is no more stage”.<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard invokes the “tonality” of the writings of Adorno and Walter Benjamin, “that of a melancholy attached to the system itself, one that is incurable and beyond any dialectic”.<sup>76</sup> “Melancholia”, he writes, is “the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 162.

meaning,” and, as such, “is becoming our fundamental passion”<sup>77</sup> in a system where “death only shines by virtue of its absence”.<sup>78</sup> Where Adorno–Horkheimer’s image of the culture industry leads to the removal of individual agency under fascist domination, Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra ultimately leads to the removal of death as our last inevitable guide and destination, without which “[t]here is no more hope for meaning”.<sup>79</sup> Nothing that exists can escape being “annihilated on the television screen. We are in the era of events without consequences (and of theories without consequences)”.<sup>80</sup> For the purposes of this work, *Simulation and Simulacra* can be thought of as a record of the perceptual vicissitudes of the protagonist who said yes to cinema almost a century after the “Faustian contract” was signed.<sup>81</sup>

## 2.5: Haunted Media

A more detached survey can be found in Jeffrey Sconce’s *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Drawing from a familiar pool of speculations, Sconce’s project is to chart the superstitions that have attached themselves to electronic media: “from a fascination with the boundaries of space and time to a more generalised anxiety over the seeming sovereignty of technology”, resulting in associations with “paranormal or spiritual phenomena”.<sup>82</sup>

Referring to what he calls the “Baudrillardian strain of post modernity”,<sup>83</sup> Sconce writes that the idea that we “might one day inhabit a media mirage” has become “so

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>81</sup> Doane, “The Representability of Time”, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “Simulation and Psychosis”, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), back cover.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 169.

commonplace that this once scandalous intervention in media criticism serves now as a stock plot of the entertainment industry”.<sup>84</sup> Although Sconce is sceptical of the trajectory of the Baudrillardian strain, stating that it

has created a strange situation in media theory, where many of Baudrillard’s acolytes and interpreters have taken the author’s hyperbolic polemics and tried to apply them to cultural analysis as if they were, ironically enough, “true” in some scientific sense.<sup>85</sup>

“To believe it as literally true”, he writes, “demonstrates nothing less than faith in the supernatural”.<sup>86</sup> However, the veracity of claim, Sconce concedes, is secondary to the fact that “an ever encroaching ‘hyperreality’ unarguably resonates at many levels of contemporary cultural commentary about the media”.<sup>87</sup> He then considers a new way of thinking about the relationship between this “scandalous intervention” and the many films, television shows, and books that explore the themes, which is worth quoting at length. These similarities, Sconce writes,

suggest, not a process of “popularization,” but that postmodern theory is in itself simply another in a long series of occult fantasies inspired by electronic media. Considered in this respect, film, television, and mainstream fiction have not popularized postmodern theory so much as postmodern theory has rarefied a series of long circulating suspicions bound to the historical imagination of electronic presence. Within the mythos of postmodernity, television often appears as a mysterious box somehow capable of exorcising human subjectivity and conjuring a hallucinatory realm that hovers above the referential rubble of contemporary culture. Where there was once the “real”

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 169.

there is now only electronic generation and circulation of almost supernatural simulations. Where there was once stable human consciousness, there are now only the ghosts of fragmented, decentered, and increasingly schizophrenic subjectivities. Where there was once “depth” and “affect,” there is now only “surface.” Where there was once “meaning,” “history,” and a solid realm of “signifieds,” there is now only a haunted landscape of vacant and shifting signifiers.<sup>88</sup>

The idea that the Baudrillardian strain has “rarefied” these “long circulating suspicions” is central to the claim of post-cinematic anxiety, and all previous examples in this essay can all be seen as sequential entries in the “long series of occult fantasies” mentioned above.

## 2.6: Language or Language System

One way of rationalising cinema’s tendency to produce “occult fantasies” can be found in the semiotic film theory of Christian Metz. Metz’s project was to determine film’s status as a language or a language system. Contrary to the Soviet montage theorists, who believed that juxtaposition of specific images produced “*unequivocal*” meanings (as a language system would).<sup>89</sup> Metz concludes otherwise:

There is indeed language system, but neither the image discourse nor filmic discourse are language systems. Whether language or art, the image discourse is an open system, and it is not easily codified, with its nondiscrete basic units (the images), its intelligibility (which is too natural), its lack of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 170-171.

<sup>89</sup> Christian Metz, “The Cinema: Language or Language System”, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968/1974), 37.

distance between the significante and the signifier.<sup>90</sup>

By “nondiscrete basic units”, Metz is saying that the image (shot) in the language of film, does not equate to the word in a language system. The film shot is too contextually dependent, and often makes a complex statement highly reliant on its position within a sequence and other varying factors of its composition. Any sequence of edited film is constantly producing ambiguities in a way that, comparatively (within the bounds of the structuralist framework), a spoken or written language would not. This doesn’t render film language unintelligible, quite the opposite. And what Metz means when he writes that film’s “intelligibility” is “too natural” is qualified when he writes that “[f]ilm is difficult to explain because it’s so easy to understand”.<sup>91</sup> This ease of understanding attests to the popularity of cinema: no formal induction into its language is required to apprehend it. It also explains the ease with which it is misapprehended. Its commentators aren’t limited to a small number of specialists who can approach its nuances with a degree of rigour. Under these circumstances, film discourse is subject to a far broader spectrum of speculation than are other narrative or visual arts. And those speculations, untethered to any formal knowledge, and taking into consideration the inherent spectral qualities of film we’ve so far discussed, are far more likely to progress from speculation to superstition. Widespread as they are, those superstitions ultimately find their way into the DNA of film criticism, and into the narratives of films themselves, which is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 69.

### Chapter Three: Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Cinema

So far I have outlined the parameters of post-cinematic anxiety and reviewed a small number of significant texts that observe, exemplify, or comment upon its symptoms. We have seen recurring concerns about cinema's presumed manipulative powers, regarding both its technological ability to duplicate the world, and its narrative content. And language and prospects associated with the occult are often present, at the centre or on the periphery of the critiques. The commentaries increase in polemic intensity as cinema expands its boundaries, culminating in the apocalyptic prescriptions of Baudrillard. Some objections to these theories and the tendency of their subscribers to interpret them as "true" have been noted. And we have also considered the possibility that the Baudrillardian strain of postmodern theory is a late entry in a history of superstitions about cinema and similar media forms. Finally, we considered one possibility for the causes and origins of such superstitions from a semiotic perspective, which, in part, can be seen as accounting for the popularity of cinema and the undisciplined nature of much of its commentary.

It is within cinema itself that post-cinematic anxiety finds its most comprehensive expression. Sconce's "stock plot" can be observed in action blockbusters, art-house cinema, horror films, children's films and mainstream drama, with subjects that tap into a wide variety of emotions and perspectives, from pessimism to wish fulfilment to artistic angst. These expressions might channel public concerns or speculate about our relationship to cinematic tropes or cinematic form, where others seem to address the audience directly: sometimes to sooth and placate, others to warn, punish, or reprimand.

Earlier examples wore this plot lightly. Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), for example, can be viewed as a simple, albeit exquisitely crafted, film noir typical of its era. But beneath the basic intrigue of the murder mystery plot is an ongoing commentary about the destructive nature of Hollywood cinema and the hubris of those who work within it. Its main character, Norma Desmond, is trapped in a dream-cum-nightmare of her former glories as a silent film star. She wants nothing more than to return to the industry that rejected her—all the more poignant due to the significant parallels between Norma and the actor who portrayed her, Gloria Swanson. This anxiety has seen Norma live as a recluse for several years prior to the film's start, and eventually leads her to murdering Joe Gillis, *Sunset Boulevard's* point of view character. And when she is finally arrested, everyone allows her to believe that she is actually performing a starring role in a new film for Cecil B. DeMille. Norma is a victim of both the business of cinema, and its illusory qualities. She watches films at home several times a week, but only her own old movies, which, on one hand, seem to be the only thing that brings her any comfort, and on the other, send her into a rage about her treatment and the ignorance of producers. And, in spite of her wealth, she lives the life of a retired movie star less so than the life of movie monster akin to those of Universal horror, sequestered in a old, crumbling mansion, into which she lures unsuspecting passers-by and subjects them to psychological torment with the help of her grave and devoted butler.

Where Norma represents the psychic damage inflicted by cinema, hack screenwriter Joe Gillis represents a kind of cinematic illiteracy that reflects Hollywood's lack of interest in its own history. During a game of bridge with her friends, Joe expresses his annoyance at having to spend time with Norma's "would-be

actor friends” whom he refers to as “waxworks”,<sup>92</sup> seemingly ignorant of the fact that he’s sitting with Anna Q. Nilsson, H. B. Warner, and Buster Keaton. Robert Altman includes a callback to this scene in *The Player* (1992), when studio executive Griffin Mill receives a phone call from someone claiming to be called Joe Gillis. Mill has never heard the name so enquires with his colleagues, before suffering noticeable embarrassment once told of its origins.<sup>93</sup>

At the other end of the subtlety scale, the years around the turn of the millennium saw a glut of films that all attempted to take the Baudrillardian strain head-on. Not all of these films pertain to cinema directly, but all share a concern about some kind of simulation or parallel reality. And whether the narrative justification for the simulation be televisual—*Pleasantville* (1998); *The Truman Show* (1998)—computer generated—*The Matrix* (1999); *eXistenZ* (1999); *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999)—some form of psychosis—*Fight Club* (1999)—or even aliens—*Dark City* (1998)—the results are remarkably similar. The films’ protagonists are all trapped in a simulation, for which they must learn the rules if they wish to free themselves. And in each case, the simulation is discrete from our own supposedly concrete reality.

### 3.1: Televisionland

As Sconce writes in *Haunted Media*, “castigating the ‘unreality’ of television has been a favourite (and some might say hypocritical) theme in Hollywood for many years”.<sup>94</sup> Critiques vary from those directed at reality television, network broadcasting, soap operas, and more, but all find common ground in their

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 00:33:25.

<sup>93</sup> *The Player*, directed by Robert Altman (Addis Wechsler Pictures, Avenue Pictures, Spelling Entertainment, 1992), film, 1:00:10.

<sup>94</sup> Sconce, “Simulation and Psychosis”, 168.



“concern[s]” about “the electronic mediation of subjectivity and society”.<sup>95</sup> These critiques originate in a wide variety of genres, from the polemical body horrors of *Videodrome* (1983) and *Robocop* (1987), to the middlebrow comedy of *The Truman Show* and the gentle melodrama of *Pleasantville*.

The “hallucinatory realm” referred to earlier by Sconce is the result of “[t]elevision’s incredible success at colonizing both public and private life”, and “has enabled this once limbo-like elsewhere to grow and thrive as a wholly autonomous and ever expanding electronic universe”.<sup>96</sup> This is broadly understood as “[t]elevisionland...that rarest of principalities, an empire forged through a dissolution rather than a delineation of boundaries”.<sup>97</sup>

Of the films in this category, *Pleasantville* most illuminates the conception of televisionland and produces the most obvious ironies as the result of its critique. The other films mentioned above all pertain in some way to society. *Pleasantville*, however, explores televisionland as it pertains to a single person: a teenager named David who is unhealthily obsessed with an antiquated soap opera at the expense of his own real life. At the beginning of the film, David and his sister are transported from their own world into the world of “Pleasantville”. But the world is diegetic: nothing exists beyond the borders of the show, neither in physical space nor in the depth of its characters. The film presents as an analogy: David must cure himself of his addiction to such a shallow televisual fiction by teaching the residents of Pleasantville about depth and all the things that exist beyond their diegetic world. At first many are resistant, wishing not for the disruption that David’s presence seems to cause. But certain individuals acquiesce quickly, expressing that they’ve always known there

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 178.

was something missing in their lives, and they go on to help David and his sister teach the residents of Pleasantville about everything from sex to art to the importance of feeling and expressing strong emotions. This is represented on screen by a slow transition from black and white photography into colour, and by the end of the film, Pleasantville has expanded into a fully realised world in full colour. At this stage the siblings are able to return to their own reality with David cured of his addiction.

Due to the gentle style of *Pleasantville*, its tendencies towards sentimental epiphanies; romantic cinematography and music; and the tidiness of its resolution, an ongoing irony is continually produced and re-produced throughout the film. *Pleasantville* the film is no less diminished by its own mimetic limitations than is “Pleasantville” the TV show. Its ability to be frank about art or sex or any facet of life is dictated by its own marginally-less limited diegesis. And the final result is a movie that doesn’t know it’s a movie about a TV show that doesn’t know it’s a TV show.

Away from these more genre-based offerings the Baudrillardian strain can be picked up on in drama and mainstream art-house films of a comparable era. Films such as *Wag the Dog* (1998), Spike Jonze’s and Charlie Kaufman’s *Being John Malkovich* (2000) and *Adaptation.* (2002), David Lynch’s Hollywood nightmares *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Inland Empire* (2006), and both versions of *Funny Games* (1997/2007), Michael Haneke’s notorious cinematic reprimand to the film-going public.<sup>98</sup> *Funny Games* chastises its audience for their desire to see onscreen ultra-violence, and employs a number of formal choices throughout the film to enable the accusation, including a scene in which one of the perpetrators produces a remote control and rewinds the film to alter the course of events in his favour. Unlike the genre films previously mentioned, the border between the real and the unreal is

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<sup>98</sup> Janna Houwen, “This Is NOT Funny: How Michael Haneke’s Film *Funny Games* Corrects Its Audience”, *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 29, no. 1 (2013): 53-62.

porous in these films, and the results less comparable.

### 3.2: Testing The Simulacrum

Baudrillard writes that to “test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum” is impossible.<sup>99</sup> He gives the example of a simulated bank robbery and claims that

the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight; a client of the bank will faint and die of a heart attack; one will actually pay you the phony ransom), in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real—that is, to establish order itself, well before institutions and justice come into play.<sup>100</sup>

The protagonists of *Wag the Dog* put this to the test and confirm the predicted outcome. The film tells the story of spin-doctor Conrad Brean, a Washington insider hired to distract the public’s attention from a presidential sex scandal during an election. Brean’s solution is to stage a war with Albania. He enlists the services of Stanley Motss, a Hollywood producer with a mild inferiority complex owing to the generational lessening of the acknowledgment of the producer’s role in show business. They invent a terrorist organisation who are trying to smuggle a bomb onto American soil. Upon considering how this will work without the chosen enemy’s cooperation in the ruse, Motss announces: “Act 1: Albania Denies Everything”.<sup>101</sup> They

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<sup>99</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 20.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> *Wag the Dog*, directed by Barry Levinson (Baltimore Pictures, New Line Cinema, Punch Productions, 1998), film, 00:20:07.

assemble a large crew of industry professionals to create and disseminate fake war footage, assisted by a blue-screen sound stage and the arsenal of CGI available in the late nineties, tapping into a gathering public concern of the era: that the popular maxim, *the camera never lies*, could no longer be relied upon.

The true antagonist, and ultimate champion, of *Wag the Dog* is the real. In spite of their formidable resources, they are constantly assaulted by elements beyond their control, requiring them to re-write their narrative in real-time. When a news report announces that the war is over, Brean acquiesces without hesitation, saying “the war’s over, guys. It’s over, I saw it on television”.<sup>102</sup>

From here, they construct “Act 2”, including something they’ve been missing: “a hero”.<sup>103</sup> They concoct a story about an American soldier kidnapped by Albanian terrorists and search for an available serviceman to play the role. When they collect him, however, he turns out to be a maniacal convict who requires constant medicating. He causes their plane to crash en route to Washington, and is shot minutes later while making unwanted sexual advances toward the daughter of a gas-station owner. Brean adjusts the narrative again, and the serviceman’s safe return becomes his patriotic funeral.

At the end of the film, Brean and Motss watch the ceremony, having succeeded with the president’s re-election. But Motss, who believes that it’s “the best work [he’s] every done in [his] life, because it’s so honest”,<sup>104</sup> is unable to agree to anonymity. He rants about the unfair invisibility of the producer, and refuses to keep quiet about his role in the “media mirage” he created. So Brean has him intercepted on the way out and killed.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 00:48:35.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 00:49:31.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 01:30:22.

As the film ends, Brean has been successful in his charge. But we see one last news report: a bomb has exploded and an Albanian terrorist organisation has taken credit. The real overturns the imaginary in the final seconds of the film.

The film's characters are apolitical. They never question the ethics of their actions but neither are they ideological supporters of the president, who is absent, as are any political distinctions between him and his opponent. And Motss and his collaborators all admit they don't vote for petty reasons.<sup>105</sup> This suggests that, unlike many other industries that go to extensive efforts to affect political outcomes, Hollywood is transcendent of political processes and political interference. The only concern of all involved is their narrative's verisimilitude.

While every character in the film adheres to this basic sensibility, in Brean we find its purest expression. He understands that the "precession of simulacra" is all that matters, not because the real doesn't exist, but because it can no longer be meaningfully identified by voters, which is tantamount to non-existence. On several occasions he corrects someone's lack of confidence in their simulation by insinuating responsibility for earlier, iconic war images. However, as noted by Eleftheria Thanouli in her book-length analysis of the film

[e]ven though the President's advisor convinces his team that what they are doing is nothing new, in fact, it definitely is. Surely, propaganda and media manipulation have been part and parcel of all modern warfare but the complete fabrication of a war is something new.<sup>106</sup>

If Baudrillard's version of Borges's map had a populace, Brean would be its ideal

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 00:27:45.

<sup>106</sup> Eleftheria Thanouli, "Wag the Dog and the Digital", *Wag the Dog: A Study on Film and Reality in the Digital Age* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 59.

citizen. He knows the map to be false but chooses to believe it as true. The belief has no ideological origins, and is simply the result of Brean's observations of the media landscape. He knows that he shares the map with the larger percentage of American voters, and those are the only people who matter for his objectives. Throughout the film, Brean concocts his narrative as though it were already real. He doesn't say: we need to create a story about a B-3 bomber and subsequently deny its existence to cause a distraction. He says "there is no B-3 bomber",<sup>107</sup> and repeats it in earnest until his underlings incorporate it into their own vocabulary. As Sconce writes, "*Wag the Dog* provides the type of serpentine anecdote" that "revels in compiling evidence of an impending and irreversible collapse of the real".<sup>108</sup> And Brean is its guide and instructor. He teaches everyone around him how to live in the collapsed map in which they now find themselves sudden residents.

### 3.3 A Complete Illusion of the Movies

*Pleasantville* and *Wag the Dog* both warn their audiences about cinematic intrusion into life, the former addressing itself to individuals, the latter to society at large. *Adaptation.* begins with similar concerns but its final motives are less clear-cut. It is an existential film about artistic authenticity; a meditation on evolution; an erotic thriller; an action blockbuster; and a surrealist melodrama in the vein of *Being John Malkovich*. The film pursues these disparate features through the use of a formal structure that provides a diegetic rationale for the film's vacillating narrative values, informing the trajectory of the plot and the characters' personal desires and conflicts.

This is voiced by its two main characters, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, and his

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 00:07:23

<sup>108</sup> Sconce, "Simulation and Psychosis", 179.

fictional twin, Donald, both played by Nicolas Cage. Charlie has accepted an offer to adapt *The Orchid Thief* (1998), a book about flowers, into a film. He wants to describe the beauty of orchids, and doesn't want to "ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing".<sup>109</sup> However, Charlie, who at this stage is suggested to be entirely synonymous with his real-life counterpart: the widely lauded screenwriter of *Being John Malkovich*, has no idea how to do this. Donald is also a screenwriter, but a rank amateur who is uncritical in his acceptance of the rules of the conventional screenplay. Charlie considers Donald to be a hack and freely tells him so. But Donald is unperturbed. Where Charlie cannot parlay his previous success into any stable belief in his own abilities, Donald is brimming with confidence. Here, we see one set of narrative values pitted firmly against another. And Charlie is a lone voice in the film, whereas Charlie's agent and the studio executive who hired him support Donald's perspective.

At Donald's suggestion, Charlie attends a seminar by screenwriting guru Robert McKee. After the seminar, McKee invites Charlie for a drink to discuss his manuscript. McKee's previously abrasive persona softens, mirroring Charlie's softening toward commercial form. McKee reiterates some screenplay guidelines: characters must change, no *deus ex machina*, etcetera. Upon hearing these most basic narratological truisms, Charlie is so moved he engages McKee in a tearful embrace, acceding to everything he previously tried to avoid, and with genuine gratitude for his perceived former enemy.

The book's author, Susan Orlean, now becomes involved in an adulterous affair with the titular orchid thief. Charlie is caught spying on them during sex. They decide to murder Charlie, and take him out into the swampland. Donald rescues Charlie.

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<sup>109</sup> *Adaptation.*, directed by Spike Jonze (Columbia Pictures, Intermedia, Magnet Productions, 2003), film, 00:05:17.

They then share a heart-to-heart in which Charlie accepts Donald's superior, albeit ignorant attitude towards life. They find their car and for a moment it appears they will escape together. Donald, however, has outlived his purpose. The car collides with oncoming traffic, and Donald crashes through the window screen and dies on the road, his values fully absorbed by Charlie, now a changed man.

The central point of J. Hoberman's "The Myth of 'The Myth of Total Cinema'", is that the myth relied upon the camera as an instrument that could report objectively upon the world. "[D]igital image-making", however, "precludes the necessity of having the world, or even a really existing subject, before the camera".<sup>110</sup> The same position can also be applied to *Adaptation.*'s script. Charlie creates dramatic conflict where none exists. In doing so, he too dismisses the necessity of a "really existing subject before the camera". *Adaptation.* is based upon a non-fiction book with a real author and human subject, both of whom share their real names with their on-screen counterparts. And Kaufman turns them into adulterers and murderers for the purpose of his own success, while building the narrative around his reluctance to do so.

In an article in the *LA Review of Books* entitled "The Customer is Wrong: The Commodity and the Work of Art", Adam Rensch writes that

[t]here are two ways of reading *Adaptation.*. The first is that the real Charlie Kaufman...gets to have it both ways. By writing himself into his script and inventing a fictional twin brother who represents the market's demand for "the Hollywood thing," he can announce his aversion to cliché and wash his hands clean when "Donald," credited as co-author, gives the audience what it wants. But ironically distancing yourself from a problem isn't exactly solving it, so in this account *Adaptation.* falls short of the authentic story Kaufman wants it to be; it's just a smarter version of the "Hollywood thing."

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<sup>110</sup> J Hoberman, "The Myth of 'The Myth of Total Cinema'", 12.



The second version is that *Adaptation.* is a work of art that succeeds by brilliantly making the problem of the market its own solution: Donald's contribution is more form than content, because only with his presence can the film stage its central conflict in a way that frames its embrace of the genre. Here, *Adaptation.* audaciously asserts its autonomy from a market it knows it must nevertheless court to exist.<sup>111</sup>

This is a good-faith reading of a twenty-first-century film doing whatever it can to simply be able to exist. However, it only makes sense *within* the Hollywood paradigm. With his previous success, Kaufman could likely make any type of film he wanted. Films that are slow, meditative, and ambiguous are produced all the time around the world. But Kaufman *wants* to be a part of the “Hollywood thing”. He wants to adapt a best-selling book of “sprawling *New Yorker* shit”<sup>112</sup> and agrees to do so with no imperative. The claim that “*Adaptation.* audaciously asserts its autonomy from a market it knows it must nevertheless court to exist”, may be true of that particular book, but it is in no way true of Kaufman, who needn't be subject to such a market at all.

Paraphrasing Adorno, here we see not just the movie-goer but the movie-writer, whose world is a seamless extension of cinema. This is total cinema inverted. And while Hoberman and others may lament the loss of photographic indexicality as a turning point, severing us from the original myth, narrative indexicality was never present to begin with. And total cinema, far removed from its origins, no longer imagines movies that are a “complete Illusion of life”, so much as a life that is a complete illusion of the movies.

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<sup>111</sup> Adam Theron-Lee Rensch, “The Customer is Wrong: The Commodity and the Work of Art”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Jun 5, 2019, para. 2, accessed Jul 31, 2023, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-customer-is-wrong-the-commodity-and-the-work-of-art/>

<sup>112</sup> *Adaptation*, 00:49:17.

### 3.4: The IP Film

The intellectual property (IP) film is a relatively new cinematic phenomena, and an example of the desire of post-cinematic anxiety wholly free from the doubt that creates the dramatic tension of *Adaptation*.. The IP film gathers signifiers from a canon of pre-existing intellectual property and constructs a cursory narrative around their worship. The most significant example is Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018).

The world of *Ready Player One* is built around, and written in support of, one idea: the unassailable supremacy of the corporate intellectual property of the late-twentieth century. The conceit that allows for the interaction of the assembled signifiers is a virtual reality environment called the OASIS. The film opens with protagonist, Wade descending a kind of vertical slum in which everyone lives in abject poverty, aside from their access to virtual reality technology. Wade then climbs into a grimy van at the end of a junkyard and straps on his own virtual reality gear. We learn that the year is 2045, and we are introduced to the OASIS and its creator with this voiceover:

These days, reality is such a bummer. Everyone is looking for a way to escape, and that's why...Halliday was such a hero to us. He showed us we could go somewhere without going anywhere at all. You don't need a destination when you're running on an omnidirectional treadmill with quadraphonic pressure-sensitive underlay. James Halliday saw the future. And then he built it. He gave us a place to go. A place called the OASIS...a

place where the limits of reality are your own imagination.<sup>113</sup>

Gregarious Games is the world's most profitable corporation, and James Halliday "wasn't just the owner of the world's biggest company. He was like a God. People loved him. They worshipped him as much as his creation".<sup>114</sup> But Halliday died in 2040. Upon his death a message was released to the denizens of the OASIS: he has hidden an "Easter egg" somewhere within the game.<sup>115</sup> Whoever finds it will inherit the company and the OASIS itself. In the five years since Halliday's death, however, no one has made any headway.

The plot of *Ready Player One* is inconsequential. The characters must follow a video-game type quest, finding keys and clues that allow them to progress. What is of interest, is the manner in which the game's players must find the keys and decipher the clues. Wade's main rivals are a team of individuals who work for the world's second largest corporation, "IOI",<sup>116</sup> who are determined to win the game to achieve global domination. It is during a description of their superior resources, that the real purpose of the structure of the game becomes clear. IOI "have a support team made up of Halliday scholars. Like me, they spend all the time studying pop-culture that Halliday was obsessed with".<sup>117</sup> Halliday's entire life is a matter of public record, and can be replayed in a holographic video by the game's players to decipher clues. What this means in practice, is the endless "examination" of Halliday's favourite media.

Every aspect of *Ready Player One* is fused with references to other media. Said media is discussed throughout the film. Characters and props from films, shows,

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<sup>113</sup> *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Amblin Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, Warner Bros, 2018), film, 00:02:57.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:07:39.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:08:35.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:10:43.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:11:05.

games, and music videos appear upfront in the *mise-en-scene* and hidden in the background. It is in the overall selection of what is included that we can start to see what the “future” Halliday built is really composed of. The film does pay lip service to a few properties from the early 2000s and gives the occasional, conspicuous nod to Golden Age Hollywood—*Citizen Kane’s* (1941) Rosebud is treated as a fetish object in much the same way as *Back to the Future’s* (1985) hover-board and the murdered twins from *The Shining* (1980). But, consulting an article that attempts to list as many references from the film as possible, it is clear that digressions from the popular media of the eighties and nineties are anomalous.<sup>118</sup> The implications are a virtual world that almost everyone inhabits, entirely composed of the most popular, male-coded, corporate media properties of just two decades, that just so happen to be the favourite movies and cartoons of, in the world of *Ready Player One*, God. And where the film presents its setting as a dystopia, “myopia” might be a more accurate term—seemingly, the “limits of the imagination” barely extend beyond a handful of years that coincidentally align with the average Gen-X adolescence. Halliday’s limited imagination also extends to other features of the game. He replicates the meritocratic lie of the American Dream—“Halliday made sure the OASIS was littered with enough randomly powerful stuff that anyone could win if they had the skills”<sup>119</sup>—and he includes a cruel parody of the American healthcare system: if a player is killed just one time, they lose all of their money, property, and status, which is no less a consequence as it would be in the real world.

While the characters may oppose one another in the competition, the supremacy

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<sup>118</sup> Abraham Josephine Riesman, “Here Are All the References in *Ready Player One*”, Vulture, Mar 28, 2018, accessed Jan 12, 2023, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/here-are-all-the-references-in-ready-player-one.html#:~:text=Bigfoot%3A%20The%20famous%20monster%20truck,seen%20in%20a%20virtual%20race>.

<sup>119</sup> *Ready Player One*, 00:06:15.

of the selected IP goes unquestioned within the film. Even in its abject destitution, the global population have seemingly found one thing all can agree upon: that *Ghostbusters* and similar properties are not only the crowning achievements of Western (now global) art and culture, but have attained the level of scripture, over which the characters pour like Umberto Eco's semiotician friar in *The Name of the Rose*.<sup>120</sup> Its tone is sycophantic, with the characters endlessly reinforcing the film's position on its fetishes. And by disallowing for the possibility that this IP might fail to be universal in its appeal, *Ready Player One* betrays its own lack of confidence in the material. This hits upon an important point. *Ready Player One* doesn't actually attempt to replicate any of the real material from its IP. The signifiers are completely divorced from anything that may have previously signified. The IP's original themes are absent, reduced to plot points, scenery, and lists of facts for the characters to recite to one another.

The world of *Ready Player One* is truly a post-cinema world in one sense, seemingly nothing of note has been produced in 40 years. But as a future composed entirely of the past, while its setting may be Columbus in the mid-twenty-first century, its true location is Hollywood in the late twentieth. And due to its disregarding of the substance of its referents, *Ready Player One* is less a continuation of any tradition of cinema, so much as a mutation of a certain type of cinematic exploitation. *Ready Player One*'s closest cinematic analogues aren't films, they're film-related theme parks and merchandise.

### 3.5: Found-Footage Horror

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<sup>120</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1980)

Horror cinema has always tapped into techno-paranoia: malignant television sets and broadcasts—*Poltergeist* (1982), *Videodrome*—cursed videotapes—*Ringu* (1998)—possessed automobiles—*Christine* (1983), *Maximum Overdrive* (1986)—and now computers and social media—*Pulse* (2001), *Unfriended* (2014), *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021). Of special interest to the diagnosis of post-cinematic anxiety are found-footage horror films, especially their digital variant, typified by *Paranormal Activity* (2007).

The term “found-footage” was taken from the title cards of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), but its earliest example in horror cinema is widely considered to be *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). The makers of both films went to great lengths to obscure the inauthenticity of their productions for as long as possible, which, in the case of *Cannibal Holocaust*, saw its director briefly arrested for the murder of his cast. *Man Bites Dog* (1992) is also relevant, and on its surface it appears to be the documentary-gone-wrong that it purports to be, in which the documentarian crew are eventually implicated in the crimes of their serial killer subject. Each of these films has a Baudrillardian logic that informs their disastrous outcomes. Their crews are subverted, corrupted, or murdered as the films they’re making collapse into the real. None of these, however, constitute a denial of cinema, as each justifies the existence of its footage around the same conceit: the making of a documentary film.

*Paranormal Activity* abandons any such conceit and denies all charges of cinematic intention. The justification here is the personal survival of its main characters, Katie and her partner, Micah. Katie is haunted by a malign presence; Micah attempts to catch it on video in the hopes of discovering what it is and how to get rid of it. The first entry in the *Paranormal Activity* series has two types of footage: handheld, with the camera operated by Micah; and static shots with the camera

affixed to a tripod. Handheld footage is the most common type used in found-footage horror, with the inclusion of a small diegetic film crew, or, in this case an individual recording on consumer-grade technology. This provides something absent from almost all of mainstream film history: a *persistent* first-person viewpoint.<sup>121</sup> In *Paranormal Activity*, this goes a significant way to aligning the viewer with Micah.

Of the found-footage horror film [*\*REC*] (2007), Xavier Aldana Reyes writes that the “connection between image and viewer” is “built around the vulnerability of the camera, which is seen reacting to a host of external attacks, from intentional blows to accidental falls, and portrays images accordingly”.<sup>122</sup> This vulnerability, however, is fostered not only by having the camera operator take a diegetic position for the viewer in perilous situations. An accumulation of familiarity builds throughout *Paranormal Activity*, as Katie directs questions, statements, and expressions of fear and exasperation directly to the camera’s lens. And as the film progresses, Katie increasingly blames Micah, subjecting the viewer not to external attacks but explicit accusations.

The escalation of events also often attributed directly to the camera and other recording devices. Katie repeatedly tells Micah that he is aggravating the situation by recording everything. Here, we see a deep paranoia about the act of filming, which always causes a feedback loop that exacerbates the events that ultimately lead to violence, death, and other unforeseeable, uncontrollable, and unknowable consequences. As Nicholas Rombes, author of *Cinema in the Digital Age* said in

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<sup>121</sup> Only one prior notable example exists, Robert Montgomery’s *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), considered an experimental failure that disoriented the audience and made for a discomfiting viewing experience.

<sup>122</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, “The [*REC*] Films: Affective Possibilities and Stylistic Limitations of Found Footage Horror”, in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon*, ed. Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes (London and New York: Tauris, 2015), 153.

conversation with the editors of *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, “[i]n the *Paranormal* films, it’s not the house or the characters who are haunted, but the cameras”.<sup>123</sup> These consequences align with the price of the deal offered to the protagonist of “The Kinetoscope of Time”: you may see yourself through the eyes of cinema—which is inherently demonic—and you will pay for the experience with your life. And through the alignment between the camera and the viewer, the viewer is also implicated: your desire to see this horror is the cause of the horror you see.

Interestingly, this is the same message imparted in Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games*. The “uncomfortable position of accomplice”, Janna Houwen writes, is achieved “through a combination of the perpetrator’s ironic stance toward violence and the fact that the two criminals repeatedly address the viewer”.<sup>124</sup> The significant difference here is that the viewer is addressed by the perpetrator on ironic terms. And that *Funny Games* is not found-footage, so requires the perpetrator’s to break the fourth-wall. Without the irony, nor a visible perpetrator to make the accusation, *Paranormal Activity* sees that blame issued in earnest by the victims of the violence. Yet the result is the same, in which the viewer is “indicated by the protagonists as the reason that the violence is carried out in the first place”.<sup>125</sup> And due to found-footage’s ability to address the viewer without breaking the fourth wall, in this case the low-budget horror film makes its accusation with more subtlety than does its art-house equivalent.

In addition to aligning the viewer with one of more of a film’s protagonists via a first-person viewpoint that allows characters to address them, a staple scene of post-

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<sup>123</sup> Nicholas Rombes, “The Post-Cinematic in *Paranormal Activity* and *Paranormal Activity 2*”, in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016), ePUB, 842.

<sup>124</sup> Janna Houwen, “This Is NOT Funny: How Michael Haneke’s Film *Funny Games* Corrects Its Audience”, *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 29, no. 1 (2013): 56.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.



digital found-footage horror involves characters reviewing footage that the viewer has just witnessed. This happens again and again throughout the *Paranormal Activity* series. These scenes don't just align the viewer, they mimic the viewer's own previous reaction to the scene in question. It's worth considering these alongside a different type of mimicry seen in self-aware horror like Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996). Throughout *Scream*, the characters foretell almost every event verbally. They know every trope and cliché of the type of film they're in—the slasher—and are steeped in its lore. They contextualise their own character traits and circumstances against those found in the canon of slashers for a multitude of reasons: ascertaining which “type” they play in the film, evaluating their chances of survival, and narrowing their likelihood of being the killer based on a range of potential motives common to the genre.

Where *Scream* anticipates audience responses by discussing the genre expectations of similar films in relation to what's yet to occur, *Paranormal Activity* shows us characters watching scenes that have already passed. Both of these techniques attempt to collapse the distinction between cinema and spectator. Self-aware horror, however, must rely on an idealised viewer—the knowledgeable horror fan—to affect this collapse. The found-footage film provides all the context required and produces its own idealised viewer within the text, with no need for prior cultural knowledge: in the scenes where characters review their footage, the person we see doing so often directs their responses to the camera. Not only do they impersonate you, they look you directly in the eye while they do it.

*Paranormal Activity* eschews almost every mainstream cinematic convention in pursuit of its horror. There is no recognisable cinematography, no artificial lighting, and no music. Across the series are dozens of minutes-long shots of empty rooms and

corridors and swimming pools in which nothing happens and no characters appear. Dialogue is stilted, repetitive, and inelegant. Characters aren't developed in any meaningful way. And, as quickly becomes apparent, there is no narrative logic to which they can adhere to illuminate their options or ensure any kind of survival. They never make any real progress, and the only outcomes are mysterious disappearance, brutal death, or demonic possession.

*Paranormal Activity* and other similar found-footage horror constitute a significant denial of cinema and cinematic intention in their rhetorical strategies. For all their adamance, however, the deliberate artlessness of the largely improvised script and filming technique is undermined in the film's editing. As David Bordwell writes in "Return to Paranormalcy",

sometimes the series of shots is deliberately misleading, dwelling on vacant spaces and failing us to show the characters doing crucial things. Some agent who wanted to convey basic information would provide a more concise set of extracts. This assembler wants to build suspense.<sup>126</sup>

Additionally, it's also possible to see cinematic intention within the very aspects of the film that deny cinema. French New Wave and Italian Neo-realist directors employed non-actors, improvised dialogue, natural lighting, and rough-cut editing. And many American exploitation films, from the earliest medical and sex hygiene films like *Mom & Dad* (1945), up to pseudo-snuff films like *Mondo Cane* (1962), or *Faces of Death* (1978), often claimed some version of found-footage as their source material. Bordwell prefers the term "discovered footage", as "'found-footage' has

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<sup>126</sup> David Bordwell, "Return to Paranormalcy", *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, Nov 13, 2012, para. 73, accessed Aug 2, 2023, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/11/13/return-to-paranormalcy/>

referred to film's like Bruce Conner's *A Movie* or Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, assembled out of existing footage scavenged from different sources".<sup>127</sup> He also notes that, often, "the static framings yield deep, dense compositions reminiscent of 1910s [*sic*] tableau cinema".<sup>128</sup> Bordwell isn't the only person to make such a comparison. *Paranormal Activity* has been praised for its aesthetic minimalism.<sup>129</sup> And Rombes opens his article "Six Asides on *Paranormal Activity 2*" with "*Paranormal Activity 2* is not an avant-garde film, but only because no one has argued that it is",<sup>130</sup> before going on to describe six different ways in which the film qualifies. *Paranormal Activity* and similar films, for most, sit firmly in the category of "post-cinema". Through the lens of post-cinematic anxiety, however, and in line with the phenomenological definition of cinema set out at the beginning of this work, digital found-footage horror is too indebted to both the suspense forms of genre cinema and the distancing techniques of the avant-garde to qualify. If a post-cinematic form can only achieve its goals through use of previously formalised twentieth-century techniques, is it post-cinema? Or simply an attempt by cinema to escape its own origins that only digs deeper in?

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., para.16.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., para.50.

<sup>129</sup> Leslie A. Hahner, Scott J Varda, and Nathan A. Wilson, "Paranormal Activity and the Horror of Abject Consumption", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 5 (2013): 367-376.

<sup>130</sup> Nicholas Rombes, "Six Asides on *Paranormal Activity*", *Filmmaker Magazine*, May 10, 2011, para. 1, accessed Aug 2, 2023, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/23766-six-asides-on-paranormal-activity-2/>

## Chapter four: Post-Cinematic Anxiety in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*

In this last chapter we have reviewed a number of films that all display symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety. Each of the sub-sections of the diagnosis have been observed, with some examples leaning very heavily towards one category, and others displaying contradictions or vacillating from one set of values to another. In most cases, this potential of cinema is viewed with fear and suspicion, while in others, such as the IP film, the worship of cinema appears to override all other concerns. We have seen Jeffrey Sconce's Baudrillardian "stock plot" as it appears across a range of genres. And where the plot itself is absent, as in found-footage horror, we have seen that the Baudrillardian strain makes itself known within the conceits of the productions themselves.

Cinema's ability to depict vivid environments and a complex choreography of movement saw "the scenic and descriptive character of the novel [decline]" as film exceeded fiction as the most popular of narrative arts among the masses.<sup>131</sup> In order to compete with the immediacy and spectacle of cinema, novelists were forced to "narrate their stories in the smaller units common to film".<sup>132</sup> With this in mind, any kind of survey of novels about, or influenced by, cinema is far beyond the scope of this work. A handful suggest themselves as novels of post-cinematic anxiety: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), a postmodern horror novel about a documentary film that may or may not exist; Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* (1998), in which the novel's protagonist makes opaque references to a spectral "director"

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<sup>131</sup> James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond*, 4th ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

throughout the book; Theodore Roszak's *Flicker* (1991), the story of a clandestine religious sect intent on using the film technology to implant subliminal messages in the public and bring about the end of the human race; and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*.

The most common of interpretation of *Remainder* sees it as a stern critique of literary realism and the possibility of an "authentic" literature. This reading was popularised by Zadie Smith in her article "Two Paths for the Novel",<sup>133</sup> but finds its roots in McCarthy's well-known stance on the subject. This interpretation is also present within the academic scholarship on the novel, alongside readings that focus on trauma, liminality, and death and the afterlife. And literary linguist Joanna Gavins has claimed it on the behalf of the absurd.<sup>134</sup> Here, I will argue for *Remainder* as a distillation of the "symmetrical emotional ambivalence... characterised by a desire for what one fears, and a dread of what one desires" about cinema that defines post-cinematic anxiety.<sup>135</sup>

*Remainder* tells the story of an unnamed man who becomes obsessed with the repetitious re-enactment of particular events after a severe head injury that sees him temporarily lose his memory and basic motor functions. These are funded by a large corporate payout resulting from the accident, and require the narrator to employ a large team of professionals to facilitate the project. His reasons stem from his perceptions of himself since the accident as inauthentic, telling us that his

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<sup>133</sup> Zadie Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel", *The New York Review of Books*, Nov 20, 2008, accessed Feb 15, 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>

<sup>134</sup> Joanna Gavins, *Reading the Absurd* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2013), 87-95.

<sup>135</sup> Watts, "The Concept of Anxiety", 159.

“movements are all fake. Second-hand”.<sup>136</sup> It is from this persistent state of mind that the plot progresses.

The novel proper starts around fifty pages in. In the bathroom at a party, he finds himself mesmerised by a long crack in the plaster. He experiences a strong sense of déjà vu, which quickly leads to a belief that, at some point in his past, he had been “in a place just like this”.<sup>137</sup> The déjà vu blooms into a hyper-specific scenario replete with pedantic details. In spite of his certainty, he cannot locate the memory. This does nothing to shake his conviction. He recalls the minutiae of his own movements and their effects, from the sound of his footsteps on the marble floors to the way his shirt brushes against a countertop as he moves through the kitchen. What strikes him as so significant about these details is that, in contrast to his recent feelings of inauthenticity,

in these spaces, all my movements had been fluent and unforced. Not awkward, acquired, second-hand, but natural...I'd merged with them, run through them and let them run through me until there'd been no space between us. They'd been *real*; I'd been real—*been* without first understanding how to try to be: cut out the detour. I remembered with all the force of an epiphany, a revelation.<sup>138</sup>

The epiphany reveals what he must do with his settlement funds. “I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so I could feel real again...I had to...Nothing else mattered.”<sup>139</sup> Reconstructing this space becomes the first in a series of scenarios, “re-enactments”, in the narrator’s parlance, that make up the novel. He purchases a

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<sup>136</sup> Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Surrey: Alma Books LTD, 2007), 22.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

building and has it converted to his exact specifications at great expense. Once the building is running around the clock with the narrator's scenario, he moves onto a new re-enactment. This involves building a scale replica of a local tyre shop in an air hangar to re-enact a minor mishap during which the narrator's clothes got covered in washer fluid. After this, he re-enacts a local gangland shooting. Each new scenario increases in both difficulty and granularity, leading up to the novel's climax: a simulated bank heist that takes place in the real world with disastrous results.<sup>140</sup>

#### 4.1: Cinema

Cinema itself enters the narrative in the early pages of the novel, during a screening of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973). The film reminds the narrator of the manner in which his memory had returned during his rehabilitation, saying that it had "come back to [him] in moving images...like a film run in instalments".<sup>141</sup> More telling are his observations of the film itself, and especially its central star, Robert De Niro.

The other thing that struck me as we watched the film was how perfect De Niro was. Every move he made, each gesture was perfect, seamless. Whether it was lighting up a cigarette or opening a fridge door or just walking down the street: he seemed to execute the action perfectly, to live it, to merge with it until he was it and it was him and there was nothing in between.<sup>142</sup>

He tells his friend Greg about this, who responds by pointing out that "the

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<sup>140</sup> Both the simulated heist and the title of the novel are lifted from the pages of *Simulacra and Simulation*.

<sup>141</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 21.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

character's a loser...he messes everything up for all the other characters".<sup>143</sup> But the narrator remains unconvinced, saying "[t]hat doesn't matter...He's natural when he does things. Not artificial like me. He's flaccid. I'm plastic".<sup>144</sup> The flaccid/plastic dichotomy is a callback to an earlier scene. While struggling to regain the ability to walk, the narrator's physiotherapist consoles him:

"You're learning," my physio said; "and besides, your muscles are still plastic."

"Plastic?"

"Plastic. Rigid. It's the opposite of flaccid. With time they'll go flaccid: malleable, relaxed. Flaccid, good; plastic, bad."<sup>145</sup>

This quickly becomes the manifesto for the entire novel, only the narrator mistakes each pole for its opposite. Greg notices this mistake and points out the obvious, saying that "[h]e's the plastic one...being stamped onto a piece of film and that".<sup>146</sup> But the narrator waves off the comment, verbalising his original observation in further detail:

"I mean that he's relaxed, malleable. He flows into his movements, even the most basic ones. Opening fridge doors, lighting cigarettes. He doesn't have to think about them, or understand them first. He doesn't have to think about them because he and they are one. Perfect. Real. My movements are all fake. Second-hand."<sup>147</sup>

Once again, Greg states the common-sense objection: "You mean he's cool. All

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 22.



film stars are cool”.<sup>148</sup> The narrator dismisses him, saying “It’s not about being cool...It’s just about being. De Niro was just being”.<sup>149</sup> Greg’s presence in this scene is significant, as it presents the narrator with two clear-cut, unambiguous rebuttals. And the complete refusal to even consider them, indicates that the narrator is, in Baudrillardian terms, beginning to “substitut[e] the signs of the real for the real”.<sup>150</sup> Additional support for this conclusion can be found in the narrator’s speech. If he were to refer to the actor by his character name within the movie, it would be plausible to suggest that he’s simply considering the character within the realm of the film. But he refers to him only as “De Niro”, demonstrating that he is aware that what he’s just seen was a movie. Yet, he concludes that this fixed representation of a human being is the one that qualifies as flaccid, in contrast to the apparent plasticity of live human beings. He is incapable of parsing the actor Robert De Niro with the character he portrays in *Mean Streets*, leaving De Niro to occupy both the real and the imaginary simultaneously. As Baudrillard writes, this is the “absorption of one pole into another...the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and the real”.<sup>151</sup>

#### 4.2: Production & Vernacular

An industrial effort is required to achieve the authentic state of being the narrator desires. Quickly realising that he cannot possibly launch such a large-scale project without professional assistance, he hires Nazrul Ram Vyas, a logistics specialist for a

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>150</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 83.

company called “Time Control UK”.<sup>152</sup> During their first phone call, the narrator outlines his requirements:

“I want to buy a building, a particular type of building, and decorate and furnish it in a particular way. I have precise requirements, right down to the smallest detail. I want to hire people to live in it, and perform tasks that I will designate. They need to perform these tasks exactly as I say, and when I ask them to. I shall probably require the building opposite as well, and most probably need it to be modified. Certain actions must take place at that location too, exactly as and when I shall require them to take place. I need the project to be set up, staffed and coordinated, and I’d like to start as soon as possible.”<sup>153</sup>

After a brief search they acquire a suitable building, “Madlyn Mansions”,<sup>154</sup> and we begin to see the full scale of the project:

We hired an architect. We hired an interior designer. We hired a landscape gardener for the courtyard. We hired contractors, who hired builders, electricians and plumbers. There were site managers and sub-site managers, delivery coordinators and coordination supervisors. We took on performers, props and wardrobe people, hair and make-up artists. We hired security guards. We fired the interior designer and hired another one. We hired people to liaise between Naz and the builders and managers and supervisors, and people to run errands for the liaisers so they could liaise better.<sup>155</sup>

While all of these professions exist independently, taken together they clearly resemble an on-location film crew. “Feeling real is,” as Nicola Glaubitz writes,

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<sup>152</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 72.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

“paradoxically, the result of long periods of strenuous rehearsal, endless repetition, and a concerted team effort”.<sup>156</sup> The narrator takes the role of the writer/director with Naz as his counterpart producer, both of whom delegate specialised responsibilities to the rest of the crew. Aside from Naz, the narrator’s most trusted collaborators are Frank, who “designed sets for movies”,<sup>157</sup> and Annie, a movie-prop specialist. As the narrator’s re-enactments grow in ambition, his staff grow to include on-site caterers, weapons specialists, and, for the final act, Edward Samuels, a retired thief who now works as an advisor and heist choreographer on film productions.

In addition to the large crew, the vernacular of cinema is also a requirement throughout the book. The narrator is adamant that they are not making a film and objects on numerous occasions to the use of cinematic language. However, his project so closely resembles film production, that in order to make himself understood he has no choice but to accept the usage. This issue is present throughout the entire plot, but is best exemplified during the shooting re-enactment, which the narrator insists take place on-location on a public street, thus requiring a license. Naz tells him that the council are happy to grant permissions if they can be properly qualified. The following is an exchange between Naz and the narrator:

“Lambeth Council are happy to give permission for the re-enactment to proceed, but there’s confusion about what type of license they need to give us,” he said. “It’s not a demonstration and it’s not a street party. The activity it most closely resembles is filming.”

“No,” I said. “No cameras. No filming. You know that.”

“Yes,” said Naz. “But we should *apply* for it under filming. We need to

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<sup>156</sup> Nicola Glaubitz, “Cultural Techniques and the Politics of Detail: Tom McCarty’s Remainder and/as Media Theory”, *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik: A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 66, no. 2 (2018): 250.

<sup>157</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 107.

designate it as a recognized type of event so they can grant us permission to do it. Filming's the easiest route. We apply to use the area for a film shoot and then just don't have any cameras."

"I suppose so," I said. "As long as we don't actually film..."<sup>158</sup>

It is absolutely necessary for the narrator to acquiesce to cinematic vocabulary and admit to cinematic intentions, to ensure the successful realisation of his project.

#### 4.3: Scripts & Foreshadowing

Scripts of some description are used in each of the narrator's re-enactments, whether they are generated from his own supposed memories or, as in the shooting scenario, from a forensics report acquired by Naz. But he also expresses a preference for social exchanges that are mediated by some kind of script. While waiting at the airport for his casual love interest, Catherine, the narrator visits a "themed Seattle coffee bar" where he receives a loyalty card.<sup>159</sup> He describes it as a place

where you buy caps, lattes and mochas, not coffees. When you order they say *Heyy!* to you, then they repeat your order aloud, correcting the word *large* into *tall*, *small* into *short*. I ordered a small cappuccino.

"Heyy! Short cap," the man said.<sup>160</sup>

The narrator's second visit to branch of the coffee bar in Soho's Old Compton Street, is one of the first moments during the novel when he appears both outwardly

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 26.

and inwardly positive. “The idea excited me”,<sup>161</sup> he says, upon noticing the establishment and realising he can get his card stamped. He then demonstrates this excitement during his interaction with the barista, so eager to show that he knows the script and what his role is within it, that he cuts her off mid-sentence:

“Heyy! Short cap,” the girl said. It was a girl this time. “Coming up. You have a...”

“Right here,” I said, sliding it across the counter.<sup>162</sup>

As Smith notes in her essay regarding the scene, the only thing the narrator is good at is “completing cycles and series, reenacting actions”.<sup>163</sup> An earlier scene supports this reading. The narrator stands outside Victoria Station during rush hour. Overwhelmed by the heavy foot traffic, he closes his eyes and “turn[s] the palms of [his] hands outwards”,<sup>164</sup> an action he has tentatively tested once before. Only this time he develops it into a character that fits within the context of the scene:

I opened my eyes again but kept my palms turned outward. It struck me that my posture was like the posture of a beggar, holding his hands out, asking passers-by for change.

The feeling of intensity was growing. It felt very good. I stood there static with my hands out, palms turned upwards, while commuters streamed past me. After a while I decided that I *would* ask them for change. I started murmuring:

“Spare change...spare change...spare change.”

I continued this for several minutes. I didn’t follow anyone or make eye contact with them—just stood there gazing vaguely ahead murmuring *spare*

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>163</sup> Zadie Smith, “Two Paths for the Novel”, para. 60.

<sup>164</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 39.

*change* again and again and again...It made me feel so serene and intense that I almost felt real.<sup>165</sup>

As in the coffee bar scene, it is in the presence and participation of a script that the narrator finds his excitement. He is no more interested in receiving spare change than he is in receiving coffee. “Nobody gave me any,” he tells us, “which was fine. I didn’t need or want their change...I just wanted to be in that particular space, right then, doing that particular action”.<sup>166</sup>

The narrator also seems to harbour a delusion that the real world can provide a type of foreshadowing common of a scripted narrative. In the shootout re-enactment, the narrator takes the role of the man who was killed, acting out each of his actions as detailed in the forensics report. After several attempts at the scenario, he retakes his starting position in a phone booth:

Inside the phone box this time I examined every surface it had to present. My man, the victim, would have taken all these in—but then his brain would have edited most of them back out again, dismissed them as mundane, irrelevant. A mistake: perhaps if he’d paid more attention to the environment around him some association might have warned him about what was about to happen, even save his life.<sup>167</sup>

Not only does the narrator forgo the simple idea of *forgetting* in favour of attributing an editing process to the function of the brain, he again confuses reality for the artifice of cinema. When he says that if the victim had “paid more attention to the environment” in the hope that “some association might have warned him”, he

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 190.

insinuates that real life should yield signs of “what is about to happen”, as would a scene in a film where prior foreshadowing and carefully arranged *mise-en-scene* would lay a symbolic groundwork for events yet to occur.

#### 4.4: Performance

This isn't a simple claim that the narrator has entirely mistaken authentic being for scripted performance, as his view of what constitutes a performance is deeply paradoxical. At various times, he passes judgment on others for being as inauthentic as he, often charging them with the crime of “performance”. He casts a wide net. Childhood is “the worst time” to be authentic, when “[y]ou're always performing, copying other people...and copying them badly too”.<sup>168</sup> Adulthood doesn't fair much better in his estimation. As he sits in the coffee bar, he watches affluent “media types” as they interact in the street.<sup>169</sup>

They reminded me of an ad—not a particular one, but just some ad with beautiful young people in it having fun. The [media types] now had the same ad in mind as me. I could tell. In their gestures and their movements they acted out the roles of the ad's characters: the way they turned around and walked in one direction while still talking in another, how they threw their heads back when they laughed, the way they let their mobiles casually slip back back into their low-slung trouser pockets.<sup>170</sup>

He fixates on inconsequential physical gestures in much the same way as he does watching *Mean Streets*, only in this case appraising them in the negative, all the while

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 48.

attributing them to the re-enactment of an advert that doesn't exist. As noted by Glaubitz, "For the narrator, media images function as essential scripts for body techniques, which are not, however, depicted as 'natural'".<sup>171</sup> In spite of the ad's non-existence, he psychologises the people he watches with a declarative claim that they have "the same ad in mind". From these impositions he arrives at his conclusion: "[j]ust like me: completely second-hand".<sup>172</sup>

He then makes the same claim about almost everyone within his field of vision: "tourists", "clubbers", "scene gay[s]", and the customers of other coffee bars are all written off as "interlopers" and "[t]heatrical, made up, the lot of them".<sup>173</sup>

Where his judgement knows no age, neither does it care for class distinctions. After six cappuccinos—implying six opportunities to re-enact the card-stamping script—he turns his attention to some homeless people he previously failed to notice. Given their misfortune and relative lack of affect, the narrator entertains the possibility that maybe they are the only people who are authentic.

After a while I started thinking that *these* people, finally, were genuine. That they weren't interlopers. That they really did possess the street, themselves, the moment they were in. I watched them with amazement. I wanted to make contact with them. I decided I *would* make contact with them.<sup>174</sup>

The narrator approaches one of the homeless men and offers buy him a meal in exchange for being able to ask him some questions. The man agrees and they go to a nearby restaurant. What follows is a brief scene that goes badly wrong and turns out to be a figment of the narrator's imagination—he never does approach the homeless

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<sup>171</sup> Glaubitz, "Cultural Techniques and the Politics of Detail", 249.

<sup>172</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 48.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



man. After the episode, he invalidates his initial position on their authenticity, based upon a disappointing encounter that didn't actually happen.

They had a point to prove: that they were one with the street; that they and only they spoke its true language; that they really *owned* the space around them. Crap: total crap. They didn't even come from London. Luton, Glasgow, anywhere, but somewhere else, far away, irrelevant. And then their swaggering, their arrogance: a cover. Usurpers. Frauds.<sup>175</sup>

The narrator is caught between two opposing notions. That performance is both a requirement *and* an obstacle in the pursuit of being real. Robert De Niro's performance in *Mean Streets* forms such an important reference point for the entirety of the plot, yet everywhere he sees people performing and concludes them to be frauds. In this exchange with Naz, he deflects the term:

[Naz would] contact architects designers and, of course, potential performers.  
"Performers isn't the right word," I said. "Staff. Participants. Re-enactors."  
"Re-enactors,?" he asked.  
"Yes," I told him. "Re-enactors."<sup>176</sup>

The distinction between performer and re-enactor has no practical value to the project, and changes nothing about his requests. Its only purpose is to allow the narrator to distance himself from the idea that the people he wishes to hire are performers who will be required to perform.

It's also necessary for the narrator to distinguish his re-enactments from the "performances" he so derides among others. From this, we can assume that he sees

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 81.

his future re-enactments as somehow on par with cinematic performances such as De Niro's in *Mean Streets*, both of which he sees as elevated from the inauthenticity of ordinary people. Yet, when required to acknowledge that parallel at various moments throughout the novel, he always bristles against it. He is simultaneously drawn towards, and repelled from, cinema as a benchmark for his own desired authenticity. And he feels it necessary to make sure we know how unpleasant he finds them, telling us that the actors are one of "the thickest groups by far".<sup>177</sup>

#### 4.5: Genre

The trajectory of genre influences in *Remainder* shares a lot in common with *Adaptation*.. In the early chapters of the novel, the narrator's projects revolve around seemingly insignificant, and, in some cases, barely perceptible, moments, ostensibly born of his own experiences and memories. And his depiction of these could reasonably be called avant-garde: fragmented experiences with no obvious larger meaning or developing narrative. Like the character of Kaufman in the film, the narrator's chief concerns are those of achieving some sense of "real" life. For the narrator of *Remainder*, the possibility of achieving authenticity is prevented by the fraudulent tendencies of human beings, where for Kaufman it's the fraudulent requirements of the Hollywood screenplay.

Neither protagonist abandons their search for authenticity so much as they augment their expectations of what can provide it. The first sign we see in *Remainder* is when the narrator visits the tyre shop and the boys who work there check the boot of his car.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 101.

The two boys peered inside, like gangsters in movies—in those scenes where the gangsters open up a car boot in which they’ve stashed a body or a cache of guns. These boys were thinking of those scenes too as I opened up the boot for them: I could tell.<sup>178</sup>

He immediately interprets the experience as a cinematic image, this time assigning a genre, and imposes this interpretation onto the intentions of the boys. Taken alongside the earlier scene where he watches the media types, we start to see a habit forming around the narrator’s belief that all anyone is doing is trying to marry their momentary actions to a cinematic trope or archetype. This sets the narrator on a trajectory toward something all the more sensational and far closer to the domain of mainstream cinema which begins when he discovers the shooting that he goes on to re-enact. While researching the re-enactment, he becomes obsessed with guns. His admiration stems from what he perceives as a gun’s inherent authenticity, not just being “props”—as are many of his own current instruments—and for their ability to disrupt time.

These remarks signify a notable re-direction in the narrator’s interests and directorial intentions which culminate in the novel’s bank-heist finale, during which one of the guns goes off and kills someone, leading to a car chase and the hijacking of an aeroplane. Like *Adaptation.*, the lure of a sensational climax proves too much and “by the end of the novel, we’ve moved from a first-person novel of existential crisis into the narrative terrain of the action thriller”.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>179</sup> Jonathan Eburne, Matthew Hart, Aaron Jaffe, and Tom McCarthy, “An Interview with Tom McCarthy”, *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 4 (2013): 662.

#### 4.6: Space & Time

In multiple instances, the narrator expresses frustration with his inability to manipulate space and time as it appears in edited film. During an early scene, he recalls being transferred to another hospital. He remembers seeing “a glimpse of sky” whilst laid out on his back in the ambulance, then follows the observation by saying “I’d felt that I was missing the entire experience: the sight of the ambulance weaving through traffic, cutting onto the wrong side of the road, shooting past lights and islands, that kind of thing”.<sup>180</sup> The “kind of thing” the narrator expresses a longing for here is comparable to a reasonably standard aerial camera shot, the kind of which shows a transition from one location to another. His feeling that he is somehow “missing the entire experience” is ironic, being in fact the central figure in the experience he’s describing. Yet he believes that the experience would be richer if he was able to observe it from a distance.

Later, he tells us about “various fantasy scenarios” he’s been entertaining about Catherine, his casual love interest, “which [he’d] play, refine, edit and play again”.<sup>181</sup> One of these scenarios takes place at home, in his flat. But the narrator can’t resist a distant eye, saying “flashes of Paris and a Chicago which I’d never seen broke in, brasserie windows flanked with skyscrapers and windy canals”.<sup>182</sup> This is what Jeffrey Sconce would call “an utterly fantastic [narrative] of disembodied liberation and emancipatory transcendence” which “recall[s] the fantastic worlds imagined by the Spiritualists of the nineteenth century”,<sup>183</sup> bringing *Remainder* into conversation with the occultist speculations seen earlier.

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<sup>180</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 15.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>183</sup> Sconce, “Simulation and Psychosis”, 172.

These tendencies are in their infancy at this stage in the novel. However, as the narrator's re-enactments increase in grandeur, so do his expectations. During the tyre shop re-enactment, he attempts to fulfill this urge to view himself from afar by replacing himself with a masked re-enactor, and having "a raised viewing platform built, a little like an opera box" from where he can watch.<sup>184</sup>

His frustrations regarding space are matched by a comparable difficulty in accepting linear time. During the shooting re-enactment, once the narrator is satisfied with everyone's contributions, he tells us that "Now we could begin working on what lay beneath the surfaces of these—on what was inside, intimate".<sup>185</sup> His method to achieve this is to have all the re-enactors to "do it at half speed".<sup>186</sup> One of the shooters asks him to elaborate:

"Everything. The same as before, but at half speed."

"Like in an action replay on TV?" he asked.

"Well," I said. "Sort of. Only don't do all of the movements in slow motion. Do them normally, but at half the normal speed. Or at the normal speed, but take twice as long doing them."<sup>187</sup>

While this type of exchange is typical of the narrator's instruction throughout the novel, it only scratches the surface of his complicated relationship to time. Once the Madlyn Mansions re-enactment has been running for several months, the narrator suffers an embarrassing moment when he complains to Frank and Annie that the "sunlight's not doing it right".<sup>188</sup> When they fail to understand, he tells them that he

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<sup>184</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 158.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

measured a shaft of sunlight as it fell through the window during the first days of the re-enactment, but that now “it’s running over the floor too quickly”.<sup>189</sup> Then the following exchange:

“It’s later in the year.”

“What’s later in the year?” I asked.

“It’s later now than it was when you first measured it,” Annie explained. “Later in the year, further from midsummer. The sun’s at a different angle to us than it was.”

I thought about that for a while until I understood it.<sup>190</sup>

This is just one of several examples of the narrator losing his grip on a fixed temporal reality in favour of “cinematic time”.<sup>191</sup> He can’t understand why the light won’t replay itself each day as though it were a recording, because “the house is not meant to present or to represent reality but to convert life itself into a film-like perfection”.<sup>192</sup> The significance is highlighted by the narrator’s reaction: “Right,” I said. “Of course. I mean... of course. I mean, I knew that, but I hadn’t... I hadn’t, I mean... Thank you. You may go now, both”.<sup>193</sup> This is the only time throughout the novel when the narrator becomes this flustered in front of his staff. In line with post-cinematic anxiety, he exists simultaneously in two zones: our temporal reality and the atemporal plane of cinema. When confronted, he is unable to comfortably confirm what he’s being told. He still exists enough in the real world (and with enough of a real world ego) for his failure to remember that the sun changes position in the sky throughout the year to cause embarrassment. But cinematic time is crucial to his sense

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>191</sup> Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*.

<sup>192</sup> Glaubitz, “Cultural Techniques and the Politics of Detail”, 250.

<sup>193</sup> McCarthy, *Remainder*, 204.

of possibility about achieving “realness”, so it causes him palpable discomfort.

#### 4.7: Motion Photography

While the presence of all these features describe *Remainder* as a novel heavily influenced by cinema, what truly defines *Remainder* as a novel of post-cinematic anxiety are not these presences but one extremely significant absence: the camera. Of all the cinematic concessions the narrator is required to make as he implements his re-enactments, he refuses outright the presence of any camera capable of motion photography. It is within this insistence that we find a truly stubborn denial of cinematic intention—not a single second of any of the re-enactments are ever filmed—while simultaneously desiring almost every other feature of cinema. At this point then, we have to ask the question, what is it, exactly, that the narrator wants? In an interview in *Contemporary Literature*, McCarthy himself states that his “hero wants to ‘be’ in some kind of movie *without there being a movie*”.<sup>194</sup> But even with the emphasis on “be” this doesn’t go far enough. At times he may appear to want exist *in* a film, and at others to be a writer, a director, a movie star, a passive spectator, or even the eye of the camera itself. But taken together, and combined with his desire to manipulate linear time and to traverse great distances of space in an instant, the only conclusion to be drawn is that, as Glaubitz states, the “narrator sets out to transform himself and his world into film”.<sup>195</sup> He doesn’t want to be in a film, nor “be” in a film he wants to “become film”.<sup>196</sup> In other words, his idea of what it is to be “real” is to *be* edited film. For the narrator, authenticity exists after a version of total cinema has

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<sup>194</sup> Tom McCarthy, “An Interview with Tom McCarthy”, 668.

<sup>195</sup> Glaubitz, “Cultural Techniques and the Politics of Detail”, 250.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

been achieved, within an “image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist”—he refutes the charge of being an artist when accused—“or the irreversibility of time”<sup>197</sup> in which he is able to defy “finitude of the human body”.<sup>198</sup> This is why his denial of cinema is so vehement, and his idealisation of De Niro so paradoxical. For total cinema to be achieved, cinema must necessarily disappear. He can’t be a movie, or “‘be’ in some kind of movie *without there being a movie*” until the entire concept of a movie has been abandoned, which is not possible of a consciousness that that views authenticity and cinematic form as synonymous.

Of all the narrative media cited throughout this work, no other example so thoroughly describes the condition of post-cinematic anxiety as it pertains to the individual. *Remainder* is the story of a man whose entire mind is caught in the tension between denying and worshipping cinema simultaneously. His concept of authenticity is nothing short of cinematic omniscience, which allows for travelling great distances in an instant, manipulating linear time, and zooming into any given moment on a microscopic level in order to divine some kind of universal truth and to discover what is truly real. And there is nothing in the novel to suggest that the narrator had any prior interest in cinema. In this, he stands in for not the cinephile, the frustrated cinematic wannabe, or even the regular film fan, but for the ordinary resident of a society ruled by the aesthetic demands of cinema. The common interpretation of *Remainder* as a critique of literary realism requires knowledge of Tom McCarthy the flesh-and-blood author and his philosophical outlook. On the page, however, *Remainder*’s critique is squarely aimed at a pernicious cinematic influence, whose seductive ubiquity stands as a serious threat to human consciousness.

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<sup>197</sup> Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema”, 133.

<sup>198</sup> Doane, “The Representability of Time”, 2.



## Chapter Five: Post-Cinematic Anxiety in *The Palace View*

We have now reviewed a variety of scholarship, a number of films, and related the symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety found within them to an extended reading of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. We have seen repeated instances of each of the subcategories of symptoms, culminating in *Remainder*'s persistent display of contradictory attitudes about cinema. And we have suggested that the narrator's true desire is to in some way to become total film. We have also suggested that texts that deny cinema, such as can be found in *Remainder* and found-footage horror, are too indebted to cinema as an aesthetic benchmark to qualify as true denials.

*The Palace View* is not a rigorous philosophical exercise so much as a lively exploration of a number of interrelated possibilities suggested by the symptoms of post-cinematic anxiety. As such, there are instances throughout the novel that do not entirely conform to a theoretical counterpart. The novel aims to explore the subject in an accessible and amusing fashion, and on occasion these concerns override a strict adherence to critical influences. That being said, the novel is informed by many of the concerns discussed throughout this work, most notably, Baudrillard's description of Disneyland as "a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra",<sup>199</sup> extending this, and his description of Los Angeles as a "city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation"<sup>200</sup> beyond the United States into the rest of the Western world.

Before moving onto a detailed discussion of the novel, it's important to ask, why

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<sup>199</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

cinema? We are now two decades into the twenty-first century, and for many media theorists, it's a given that "[f]ilm gave way to television as a 'cultural dominant' ... in the mid-twentieth century" which "in turn has given way in recent years to computer- and network-based, and digitally generated, 'new media'".<sup>201</sup> Working from the phenomenological definition of cinema given in chapter one, however, neither television nor new media have displaced cinema so much as they have forged new ground for cinema to occupy. And much of the content found upon this new ground still very much aspires to the "cinematic" as a high water mark of quality and depth. Viewed on these terms, cinema forms the glue that holds these disparate media together. It connects the narrative film to television shows, broadcast news, game shows and other non-narrative televisual media, as well as video games, streaming media, and video-hosting networks, all of which "[organise] a stream of audiovisual events in time".<sup>202</sup> And while *The Palace View* takes the traditional narrative film as its main subject, cinema is used to exemplify all instances of the "performance of the image on the surface of the screen".<sup>203</sup>

The novel is comprised of two narrative threads. The first begins in London in the current day. It is loosely organised around a detective story, beginning with a man who takes on a mysterious job that requires him to watch an empty house for signs of a missing person about whom no details exist. The protagonist of this thread is named Travis during the first half of the novel, and Spencer Dean during the second. The second thread concerns a young woman who appears one day at Disneyland with no name or memory of herself prior to her arrival. We catch up with her several years later in the 1990s. She is living an aimless life in the Hollywood Hills, in which she

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<sup>201</sup> Shaviro, "Post-Cinematic Affect", 130.

<sup>202</sup> Youngblood, "Cinema and the Code", 27.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

does nothing but watch movies. The protagonist of this narrative is named Ella D. Valentine. Both of these narrative threads are composed of cinema: Ella's from the outside, in which cinema is the subject of all of her interactions and discussions, and Spencer's from the inside, in which he is subjected to cinematic form within a world in which cinema itself has been reduced to little more than a vague idea. In the following two sections I will explore the novel in its current form, before moving onto a brief discussion of earlier versions while noting a number of reasons for changes that were made throughout the composition process.

### 5.1: Paracinema: The Improperly Involved Body

If Baudrillard's hyperreality is the arena within which much of the narrative exists, then it is an idea related to Bazin's total cinema that is its cause: that cinema was an "idealistic phenomenon" that "existed...fully armed" before cinema had even been invented.<sup>204</sup> The population of Los Angeles depicted in the novel can be considered a population who are subconsciously frustrated that total cinema has not come to pass, but who are no less idealistic in their desire than were the subjects of Bazin's critique, and eventually take the matter into their own hands.

To understand the causes of this transformation, it is important to look first at Ella's taste in cinema, which is a direct response to the preferences of her adoptive father, Elmore Valentine. Both characters want to act as censors, only for opposing ideas. Valentine wishes to rid cinema of anything but the most timid, moralising, middle-brow fare. And Ella has a strong antipathy toward the middle-brow in favour what's best thought of as "paracinema", a term coined by Sconce in "'Trashing' the

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<sup>204</sup> Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema", 131.

Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” to describe “a most elastic textual category” that

would include entries from such disparate subgenres as “badfilm,” splatterpunk, “mondo” films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography.<sup>205</sup>

Paracinema is better thought of as a “particular reading protocol” than “a distinct group of films...a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all matter of cultural detritus”.<sup>206</sup> “In short”, Sconce continues,

the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorise all forms of cinematic “trash,” whether such films have been explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. In doing so, paracinema represents the most developed and dedicated of cinephilic subcultures ever to worship at the “temple of schlock”.<sup>207</sup>

This manifesto may appear to subscribe to the idea of a high versus low culture, however, as Sconce notes, “taste in paracinema is more complex than a simple high-brow/low-brow split”.<sup>208</sup> Writing about the mail-order video catalogues of the VHS era, a staple of paracinematic culture, Joan Hawkins writes that paracinema listings

challenge many of our continuing assumptions about the binary opposition of

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<sup>205</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style”, *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 372.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>207</sup> *Temple of Schlock* was a popular paracinema fanzine.

<sup>208</sup> Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy”, 372.

prestige cinema (European art and avant-garde/experimental films) and popular culture. Certainly, they highlight an aspect of art cinema generally overlooked or repressed in cultural analysis; namely, the degree to which high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture.<sup>209</sup>

Paracinema catalogues challenge these assumptions, Hawkins claims, not only by incorporating prestige cinema, but by often making “no attempt to differentiate between genres or subgenres, high or low art”.<sup>210</sup> “Where art films are bracketed off,” she writes,

they are often described in terms that most film historians would take pains to avoid. Instead of presenting Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* (1975) as a work that explicitly links “fascism and sadism, sexual licence and oppression,” as the *Encyclopedia of European Cinema* does, [one catalogue] simply notes that the film “left audiences gagging”.<sup>211</sup>

In “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”, Linda Williams considers “body genres” and their relation to legitimate film culture.<sup>212</sup> These genres fall into in three broad categories: pornography, horror, and melodrama. And a body genre film’s success “is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen”.<sup>213</sup> She calls these reactions the “ecstatic excesses...of the

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<sup>209</sup> Joan Hawkins, “Sleaze-Mania, Euro-trash, and High Art: The Place of European Art Films in American Low Culture”, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>212</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”, *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4, Summer (1991): 3.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness”.<sup>214</sup> However, where Williams writes that “[w]hat seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance”,<sup>215</sup> Hawkins argues that Williams falls short when she “characterizes body genres as degraded cultural forms”,<sup>216</sup> as it reinforces the high/low binary that paracinema seeks to subvert. For Hawkins, “the distinction between high and low, properly distanced and improperly involved”, while not entirely improper as an interesting way to think of paracinema, is “not as neat as Williams suggests”, citing films that contradict the theory.<sup>217</sup> One example being Stan Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1972), a high-art film that documents a real-life autopsy. Described by art critic Amos Vogel (as Hawkins notes) as a “haunting work of great purity and truth”,<sup>218</sup> *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes*, is nonetheless, “[c]learly designed to break the audience’s aesthetic distance” and “encourage[s] the kind of excessive physical response that we would generally attribute to horror.”<sup>219</sup> “Paracinema consumption” Hawkins writes, “can be understood, then, as American art cinema consumption has often been understood, as a reaction against hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant Hollywood production”.<sup>220</sup>

Ella is the ideal paracinema consumer, and her desire for “audience sensation” to “[mimic] what is seen on the screen” incites the entire narrative. She is not simply a devoted cinephile, however, and her personality is the result of a tension between her addiction to films and a deep suspicion of cinema’s presence in the world. In this

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>216</sup> Hawkins, “Sleaze-Mania, Euro-trash, and High Art”, 5.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>218</sup> Amos Vogel, *Film as Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 267.

<sup>219</sup> Hawkins, “Sleaze-Mania, Euro-trash, and High Art”, 6.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 7.

sense, she is post-cinematic anxiety personified. She longs to enter the space that viewing films allows for, while insisting throughout the novel that “movies are dumb”, and that to take them too seriously amounts to allowing them some power over the individual, which must be resisted at all costs. Ella’s way of subverting this power, lies within her pronounced refusal of passive spectatorship. She wants to see others engage with cinema with their “improperly involved” bodies, believing that this physical interaction, in conjunction with the screening of a film, creates something collaborative that movies alone cannot offer, and over which flesh-and-blood-humans can claim a shared ownership.

The rest of the population of Los Angeles, however, are not content with shared ownership. As with *Remainder*, *Adaptation*. and other examples cited throughout this discussion, total cinema has been inverted. It is no longer a matter of cinema becoming a complete illusion of life, so much as life becoming a complete illusion of cinema. And while Ella pulls away from her own overt forays into living in that illusion, it is too late to prevent everyone else from doing the same. In spite of her protests, however, all the evidence from her life and her thoughts suggests that she does believe cinema to be real. Ella’s world is entirely made of cinema. Her relationships all revolve around it, as does her sense of self, the details of her “birth”, and her sense of mortality. She cannot imagine herself existing outside of the movies. So, reluctant though she may be, she is still the ideal figurehead for a growing movement of individuals who want to live in that illusion. This can be thought of as an entire population attempting to live as does the narrator of *Remainder*, searching for themselves within prescribed cinematic limits. Only where the narrator of *Remainder* is content to deny cinema verbally, the population of Ella’s Los Angeles deny it violently, marauding through the city destroying any physical evidence of

cinema's existence. In this, Ella fulfills the role set out for her by Valentine in his film *Molly*: she changes movie history, destroying it not through artistic puritanism but by being the cause of a violent revolution that destroys it physically.

By the end of her story, Ella has concluded that she herself is a creation of cinema, believing her mother to be a cinema-inspired theme park, and that her consciousness only exists on the reels of film shot by Valentine. She is allowed one brief moment to consider otherwise, while looking up at the sky and considering the possibility of a world outside of cinema, and is immediately hit by a car to correct her deviation. Finally, we see her, barely alive in her seat at the Palace View, watching Valentine's cinematic interpretation of what she believes to be her birth, into which she travels only to begin the narrative all over again.

## 5.2: Post-Cinematic Anxiety and the Absurd

Spencer's narrative attempts to situate its main character in a world organised around various malfunctioning features of cinema, and fits Sconce's description of a "haunted landscape of vacant shifting signifiers".<sup>221</sup> Like the narrator of *Remainder*, Spencer can only attempt to navigate the terrain via cinematic logic, only in this case narratological rather than aesthetic. As with *Remainder's* protagonist, it is not a conscious effort. He has no particular knowledge or interest in cinema—which in Spencer's world is little more than an impression—but tries to navigate cinematically due to a deep cultural programming inherited from simply being a resident of cinematic society.

It's possible to think about this fictional landscape in two ways. One

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<sup>221</sup> Sconce, "Simulation and Psychosis", 171.



interpretation, is that he now lives in a world that has been entirely subsumed by a population determined to live as though life were film. This interpretation, however, raises a lot of unanswerable questions about Spencer's sense of perception, as there is nothing in Ella's narrative to suggest that human perception has been, or can be, altered. The second interpretation is that Spencer's narrative is simply a dramatisation of the impossibility of "living in a movie", as discussed by the characters of Ella's narrative. He is subjected to an instability of time and space, and a kind of psychological entropy as the result of encountering so many incompatible genres and incomplete plot devices. As he tells us during his prologue, "[s]ometimes, I'm still myself. Other times, I don't know what I'm thinking but I can watch my own face as though it belongs to someone else". This is represented in the text by alternating parts. In the first-person, past-tense sections, Spencer has access to his thoughts and some level of normal reasoning. And in the third-person, present-tense sections, he is completely deprived of any interior responses or reflections, which he can only summarise after the event in question. In many cases, the choice to render any given section in one POV or another were made on a scene-by-scene basis of whichever seemed most suitable. There are, however, instances where the POV was used to imbue the scene with inherent contradiction. For example, when Buddy tells Spencer that there is an objective threat that they must contend with, the scene is presented in a subjective first-person viewpoint; and when Audrey tells him that he has undergone a subjective change, the scene is presented in an objective third.

Buddy and Audrey both take the place of a kind of information resource character, the kinds of which are common to the simulation thriller and other similar, heavily plotted narratives. Their purpose is to guide the protagonist forwards, furnishing them with the "rules" via expositional dialogue sequences. Buddy wants to

apply something like a high-concept genre plot to their circumstances, which he posits as a way to contend with an objective reality that can be navigated only with a narrative logic common to that format. Noting the “irreconcilable differences” between neoformalist and poststructuralist narrative theories, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener write that

[n]eoformalist...theories of narration tend to emphasise rational choice scenarios and logical information processing, while poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches focus on the instability of meaning and the non-identity of the perceiving subject, and thus also the spectator.<sup>222</sup>

Within the neoformalist framework, “a film consists mainly of audio-visual ‘cues,’ which the spectator perceives and processes accordingly” which “lead to the creation of hypotheses and schemata”.<sup>223</sup> These are “especially important for the comprehension of narratives” and “assume that the spectator compiles and assembles the experienced film...in a process of active construction...From the raw material of the “plot” (or the *syuzhet*, as the Russian Formalists originally called it) spectators derive the ‘story’ (or *fabula*)”.<sup>224</sup>

Buddy and Spencer attempt to adhere to this basic sensibility. Like the characters of the simulation thriller, their first step is identification of the reality within which they find themselves in the hopes of learning its rules so they may escape. But the narrative landscape they are required to navigate does not conform to formalist rules of narrative: no matter what they do, they never get beyond the identification process. Spencer is both subject and spectator simultaneously. He is not being watched by a

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<sup>222</sup> Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, “Cinema as Door—Screen and Threshold”, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Routledge, 2015), 47.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

disembodied audience, he is his own audience. As such, he and Buddy are able to witness the absence of their *fabula* from the perspective of their *syuzhet*, observing the missing elements the way a spectator would but a subject wouldn't.

However, like the characters of many of the texts considered throughout this work, his ignorance of the real does not render it absent. Left unattended in the narrative ellipses, the “real world” leaves him behind. Whenever he does try to return people have vanished or died, and his own connections to that world dwindle as time races forward. He is not able to eat or sleep or take care of his health within the *syuzhet*, and increasingly catches glimpses of himself as an emaciated, almost corpse-like figure who haunts his reflection dependent on his state of mind. The further he travels from the house on the monitors, the less able he is to perceive himself as a healthy and functional human being. Additionally, almost all of the other characters simply fall out of the plot at various points (or are never able to properly enter to begin with). These characters too are attempting to play out a formalist structure, and they follow Spencer at a distance throughout the novel looking for a way to re-enter the plot.

This is not pitched in overt cinematic terms. They are aware of cinema as a concept, but a film cannot be experienced in its entirety in their diegesis. This doesn't demote its importance—at one point Spencer cites the MGM production logo alongside the Swastika and the Crucifixion as significant historical symbols—but it obscures the actuality of cinema into snippets caught on passing television sets and only a vague impression of something called a “movie”.

This is post-cinematic anxiety in pursuit of the absurd. Neil Cornwell writes that the “clinching element” of the absurd “may be seen to lie in the controversy aroused

by the assertion of a condition of being ‘nothing’<sup>225</sup>. He further describes this condition as “the negation, or at least the indignant questioning, of a claim for negative ontology in the implicit light, or reflected glory, of a metaphysical cosmology, with associated ritual, that may itself be illusory”.<sup>226</sup>

The word “controversy” suggests that the absurd is not exactly an expression of our inability to find meaning, but an ongoing quarrel with the very assertion of meaninglessness, or nihilism. This quarrel with a “negation...of a claim for negative ontology”, is further problematised by our own *suspensions* that the means by which we mount our protests against nihilism are likely futile. Considering Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God, Martin Esslin writes we now live in “a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle”: a world in which the illusory rituals of our metaphysical cosmology are no longer fit for purpose, and are doomed to the endless, circular, meaningless repetitions of the absurd.<sup>227</sup> Formulating this into a simple statement, we could say that, by these criteria, the essential component of the absurd is the *sceptical* denial of nihilism. Sceptical, due to our apparent lack of faith in our own lines of enquiry—in this case, traditional artistic forms—which have become what Esslin calls “cheap and vulgar substitutes” for the presence of the divine.<sup>228</sup>

Spencer’s story is composed of such substitutes within a world deprived of an integrating principle. Plot threads that lead nowhere. Circular dialogue exchanges that create an abundance of questions that go unanswered. And a protagonist who is himself left to quarrel with a “claim for negative ontology”, the “condition of being

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<sup>225</sup> Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>227</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 337.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

nothing” looming over the narrative at every turn.

Once it becomes clear that Buddy’s formula is not producing results, another character, Audrey Lee, enters to address the failure. Audrey describes a subjectivity more closely associated with an episodic structure native to art-house cinema, in which logic is instinctive or dream-like, and far more relatable to theme and character rather than high-concept plot structure. Each take a side of the paracinematic scale, with Buddy representing the logic of genre movies and Audrey the logic of art-house and the avant-garde. Neither of these explanations, however, are actionable in any meaningful way, leaving Spencer with no logic to follow to find his way out of the chaotic reality in which he finds himself.

Neither can he rely upon his own temperament, which, from the moment he finally names himself as Spencer Dean, is subject to constant flux depending on what occurs around him. He may respond to some kind of cinematic set-up in the affirmative, as in the scene where he suddenly believes himself to be a jilted lover. Or he might rebel against its absurdity, as in the scene where he refuses to take Dix’s character seriously.

Time and space are also unstable. Characters frequently claim time to have moved forwards at a far faster rate than Spencer has noticed, yet whenever they encounter a written date, it appears they are moving backwards in time towards the end of the twentieth century. Throughout the novel, features from Disneyland appear, from the carousel erected on the green and the occasion hints of nursery rhymes, to the silhouettes of Disney characters that Spencer sees in the windows of the house and the fairground they suddenly find themselves in while being staked through the streets. And by the final scenes, the palm tree lined boulevards of Los Angeles are appearing in the centre of London. It is only during these chapters where there is any

implication of a physical crossover between the two narratives. At the end of chapter thirty-seven, Spencer drives away in a car, hitting anyone who gets in his way. Chapter thirty-eight sees Ella hit by a speeding car. And chapter thirty-nine begins with Spencer crashing his car into a tree. This is neither true nor untrue, but has been arranged in such a way to make the suggestion.

Spencer's sudden turn towards violence and loss of rational decision making comes as he is finally deprived of all inner thought. Once Spencer's first-person narrative has ceased, during the scene where he realises he can't answer any of Buddy's questions, he is left entirely at the mercy of the plot. Once a gun is produced in the narrative, he seizes a chance for an action finale, but having no moral nor narrative logic to follow, abdicates the role of "hero" and ends the story as a mass murderer. As Baudrillard writes, "[t]heoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left".<sup>229</sup> From the moment he picks up the gun, Spencer kills absolutely everyone he sees. Spencer, however, is deprived of death. His "death itself shines by virtue of its absence".<sup>230</sup> When he finally opens the door to the house, and enters with the clichéd "He goes into the light", all he finds on the other side is Disneyland, and a future that is entirely comprised of movies.

### 5.3: Addressing Compositional Issues

The original intention was to compose a novel that explored a cinematic hyperreality. One of the narrative threads would describe its origins, while the other described a fully realised result. This created a number of problems throughout the composition, especially regarding Ella's narrative. The version of that narrative presented in this

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<sup>229</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 163.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

thesis is far removed from its original—and recent—form. For most of the composition process, Ella did not appear as she does now. She had no physical appearance, no companions or direct dialogue, and spent the entirety of the novel describing her situation whilst sitting in front of a cinema screen watching movies, using the content of those movies to illuminate her circumstances and outlook via monologue. Additionally, the monologues were supported by a number of interview transcripts, conducted by an unknown interlocutor, set in a distant future in which Ella was a kind of hyperreal movie mogul. In this previous form, she was not the reluctant instigator of events, but an active ideologue determined to see the realisation of something akin to total cinema.

These monologues and interview transcripts formed the core of the voice of the novel, and significant time was spent crafting their tone. In their own right, these chapters were successful. They illuminated the circumstances in a humorous way and provided an interesting tonal counterpoint to Spencer's chapters, which are heavy on physical action and dialogue. Unfortunately, however, as became apparent quite late in the composition process, the lack of plot made it very difficult to bring the novel to a coherent conclusion. To address that problem, various additional methods were attempted to support this aspect of the narrative. Multiple new characters and perspectives were invented and interleaved within the existing voice-led chapters, each of which attempted to dramatise an encounter with Ella's project from the outside as it occurred. However, due to the limited word count available for these chapters—Ella's monologues ran to around 20,000 words of the 40,000 allocated for that narrative—there was not enough space to complete this extra plot in any of the variations that were attempted. It also had a significant impact on the overall feel of the novel, having a fragmenting effect that destabilised readability.

Ella's presentation as a kind of future movie mogul also presented problems. It became clear that some kind of overt explanation of her relationship to Spencer's narrative was required. This is at odds, however, with the very idea of hyperreality. That there should be a particular entity to point towards as responsible for the "simulation" would put the novel back in the arena of the simulation thriller, which the project sought to avoid.

Another issue arose from Ella's methods. In previous versions, she was very much focused solely on the body and the screen as the sites of entry for the realisation of total cinema. In "Cinema as Door—Screen and Threshold", Elsaesser–Hagener write that "[a] threshold always has two sides, as it simultaneously connects and separates—a border can be crossed precisely because a division always implies spatial proximity".<sup>231</sup> Ella took this statement literally and found much of her frustration in her inability to cross into the world implied by the screen. She forced herself and others into extreme proximities with on-screen sex and violence, hoping to "endow films with a 'body' and open it up to the 'senses,' with many different portals and passages".<sup>232</sup> While it was never intended, this focus on sex, violence and other extreme physical interactions with cinema developed into a reactionary streak, which undermined the spirit of the novel and the original intentions for the project. Of course, the novel still features a fair amount of cartoon violence by its conclusion. Its emphasis, however, has been shifted from the influence of actual violence in cinema, and onto the idea that cinema in its current form must be destroyed to allow for the illusion of total cinema to be maintained, or, as in Spencer's case, in order to find some way to end the narrative.

In addition to these factors, the previous version of the narrative was very much

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<sup>231</sup> Elsaesser–Hagener, "Cinema as Door—Screen and Threshold", 41.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 54



focused on the contents of the screen overwhelming the real world. This also created a number of problems, as it was difficult to actually make that happen in real time without resorting to some kind of fantasy element, making it very difficult to actualise within the narrative. While this difficulty created a number of compositional problems it does speak to something present within the various critiques presented throughout this work. Namely, that total cinema, hyperreality, the culture industry, and other similar narratives, all lie purely within the domain of metaphorical theory. As Sconce writes, “[t]o believe [them] as literally true, demonstrates nothing less than faith in the supernatural”.<sup>233</sup> And overt supernatural occurrences did not seem to fit with the overall tendencies of the novel.

With all of these concerns in mind, a decision was made at a very late stage to re-write the entirety of Ella’s narrative to address the accumulating problems. This required the construction of a very specific plot: one which would allow for a justification for Spencer’s narrative, without offering a direct explanation of exactly who or what was responsible for its existence or its logic, nor exactly how it was administered. And, as evidenced by the novel submitted, the plot and its main character are now almost a contradiction of the earlier versions described here. Ella is now consciously opposed to the idea of total cinema—even if her actions suggest otherwise—and it is now a matter of the “real” world assimilating cinema. These changes also meant furnishing Ella with companions and a home, as well as creating a number of other locations and characters, and reckoning with the geography of Los Angeles, none of which featured in the earlier versions. To this end, these elements of the novel presented here cannot be considered fully developed at this stage, and require more work before the novel will be ready to be send out to agents or

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<sup>233</sup> Sconce, “Simulation and Psychosis”, 182.

publishers.

It was not an easy decision to sacrifice the elements of the novel upon which so much time had been spent, and around which the project revolved for so much of the composition period. Upon assessment of the two versions of the novel, however, and for the purposes of this thesis, narrative intelligibility seemed preferable to voice and more thoroughly crafted prose.

## Conclusion

This study has focused upon film discourse within a relatively narrow range of media, considering just a handful of sources, most of which originate within some area of the film industry or from its most scholarly commentators. Cinema being the most popular art form of the last century among the masses, a more comprehensive exploration of the concept of post-cinematic anxiety would include a far greater range of critical and creative material; a broader global net beyond American and European cinema; and, crucially, a far wider account of commercial reviews and public responses and attitudes to cinematic presence.

Since the inclusion of the internet in our daily lives, film discourse has become an extremely popular entertainment in its own right. The democratised media of the twenty-first-century—social media, video hosting sites, podcasting—have removed professional barriers and allowed almost anyone to participate. Two styles of commentary spring to mind as relevant to post-cinematic anxiety, which I'll touch upon briefly here before concluding.

The first approaches a film as merely a vehicle for its politics, leaving it to live or die on that criteria. This harks back to a kind of pragmatic criticism which, to paraphrase M. H. Abrams from his "Orientation of Critical Theories", would see a film judged not on what it *is* but on what it *should* be "to guarantee the moral purpose" and persuade its "auditors more forcefully to virtue".<sup>234</sup> This is by no means a province of any one section of the political spectrum; there are as many articles deriding films because of their complicity in the "woke agenda" as there are *Jacobin*-style reviews which assess a film's credibility entirely around its ability to be

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<sup>234</sup> M. H. Abrams, "Orientation of Critical Theories", *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 15.

sufficiently socialist.

Another interesting quirk of modern film discourse is a form of video essay, typified by the popular website and YouTube channel “CinemaSins”,<sup>235</sup> whose entire purpose is to assess a film solely upon flaws in its production. The channel, which has nearly ten-million subscribers, has produced over a thousand video essays over the last decade whose most commonly used title takes the form of “Everything wrong with [movie name] in [x] minutes or less”. These videos focus entirely on plot holes, continuity errors, misuse of tropes, and other perceived accidents of production in an attempt to throw a film’s narrative plausibility and verisimilitude into question. And it’s fair to say that this style of movie “content” is among the most popular of all video-based reviews.

For a number of justifiable reasons, these types of content are not popular in serious film circles, in which they are considered facile, censorious, and puritanical, reducing all of the aesthetic wonders of cinema to ideological messaging or joyless mechanical objectification. Granted, if we accept these commentaries as “film criticism”, it’s hard to argue against it—a 2023 essay in *The Atlantic* makes a strong case comparing some of *Jacobin*’s critical output to the tactics of “the evangelical right”.<sup>236</sup> In the spirit of good faith, however, on the assumption that the millions who enjoy such commentaries aren’t simply cultural heathens who just don’t “understand” art, it’s possible to speculate they are responding to something else: the impulse to unpick, disprove, debunk, disrobe and otherwise delegitimise cinema in a subconscious effort to contend with its overbearing cultural ubiquity. This frees them from their critics not by avoiding the charge of puritanism but the charge of “film

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<sup>235</sup> *CinemaSins*, accessed Jun 4, 2023, <https://cinemasins.com/>

<sup>236</sup> Adam Kotsko, “Moralism is Ruining Cultural Criticism”, *The Atlantic*, Jul 26, 2023, accessed Aug 4, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/oppenheimer-movie-moralizing-reviews-social-media/674823/>

criticism”. Like Spencer in *The Palace View*, they can be thought of as engaged in an effort to free themselves from cinema, with only cinematic tools at their disposal, which only leads them back to cinema. That might look a lot like (bad) film criticism to many critics. Within the diagnosis of post-cinematic anxiety, however, it resonates with the denial of cinema found in *Remainder* and found-footage horror, the paranoia of *Wag the Dog* and *Pleasantville*, the historical superstitions described by Jeffrey Sconce, and the threat of total cinema, all of which lead back to the protagonist who said yes to cinema at the end of “The Kinetoscope of Time”.

Of the material that does comprise this essay, the final condition of post-cinematic anxiety is the absurd. Whichever name our post-cinematic future goes by: “total cinema”, “hyperreality”, “televisionland”, it is a threat (or a promise) that is always approaching but never arrives. It may impossible to argue with the status of the current moment as post-cinematic on epistemological and ontological terms. In phenomenological terms, however, and within diagnostic criteria of post-cinematic anxiety, it seems reasonable to suggest that “post-cinema” is as elusive a phenomenological state as any of these other notions. Regular movie-goers, after all, meet cinema on phenomenological ground. Its epistemologies and ontologies are obscure in any meaningful way to anyone who isn’t a theorist. Even for serious film critics, neither an ontological nor an epistemological view needs to be addressed to conduct serious criticism. It is perfectly possible to explore a film, on both aesthetic and narratological grounds without once acknowledging its state of being or the knowledge that explains its existence. To take a structuralist view, we can only locate cinema’s cultural stability in what the higher percentage of those who engage with it consider it to be: the “organis[ed] stream of audiovisual events in time”, which, in most cases, still organises those events around the formal logic of “[c]lassical theories

of drama” that “[date] back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*”.<sup>237</sup> In short, to paraphrase Bazin, “post-cinema” has not yet been invented.

23,761 Words

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<sup>237</sup> Elsaesser and Hagener, “Cinema as Door—Screen and Threshold”, 49.

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