



**'A GLITTERING  
LITERARY GEM'  
NICOLA BARKER**

**CHILDREN**

**OF**

**PARADISE**

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## Children of Paradise

Also by Camilla Grudova

*The Doll's Alphabet*

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Camilla Grudova



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For Helen and Laurence

‘So I went from dark to darkness’

*La Chinoise*

Directed by Jean-Luc Godard

1967

‘Hope you don’t want no popcorn cause there ain’t none’

*The Last Picture Show*

Directed by Peter Bogdanovich

1971

# Midnight Cowboy

Directed by John Schlesinger

1969

The Paradise cinema had a gaudy interior and a pervasive smell of sweet popcorn and mildew. It was built on the ground floor of a block of flats around the time of the outbreak of the First World War, its entrance like the building's gaping mouth, a sparkling marquee teeth grin with the word PARADISE written in pale yellow neon. They tore down some of the flats to put the cinema in. I imagined someone with a giant cake knife cutting out whole living rooms and bedrooms with people in them, and throwing them away, replacing regular, mundane lives with glamorous Hollywood ones.

I would've passed the Paradise without looking if it weren't for the handwritten 'We're Hiring' sign on its big dusty glass doors. I had just arrived in the city, and in the country, by train, and needed a job.

I'll call myself Holly, like the girl from *Badlands*.

The current head manager of the Paradise was named Sally. She looked like she was in her late thirties, but later someone told me she was almost fifty. She wore rockabilly clothes: a vintage dress and a white fur coat with a Betty Boop badge on it. She told me that she had put herself through college by winning beauty contests. She had freckles all over her face, barely discernible under a layer of makeup. She wore a fifties style turban –

the only part of her hair that I could see was her red bangs, but I could still tell underneath that she had a face like Judy Garland's. She was a foreigner too, she had a midwestern American accent, she said she was from the same state *Wizard of Oz* was set in. Why she moved here didn't make sense to me. It only seemed natural that someone like her would've made her way to Hollywood with a suitcase full of vintage dresses and the last of her beauty queen money rather than a country like this one that seemed to have more graveyards than anything else. Perhaps she wondered why I moved here too.

During my interview with Sally, when she asked my favourite film genre, I said the first thing that popped into my head, as she was sat in front of me in her pale blue fifties taffeta dress. 'Clowns, anything with clowns,' I said. 'And Charlie Chaplin.' We were sitting at the one table in the tiny bar, attached to the cinema lobby, her coat thrown over the one empty chair. The white fur had yellowish tinges in it, the way popcorn does.

The bar was where customers could get drinks to take into films or drink at the one table or two rickety bar stools by the zinc countertop. Whenever I touched the table or moved my feet the entire bar seemed to rattle, the shelves of oddly shaped glasses for obscure cocktails, the dim-coloured liquors, the jar of pickled eggs, olives with tiny red tongues, cornichons and jalapeños floating in foggy water like dead slugs, Luxardo maraschino cherries and dusty peanuts. There was an Oscar statue standing guard between the jars. I wonder who he had belonged to. There were photographs of famous directors and actors, in gold frames covering the walls – Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Kim Novak, Errol Flynn, Uma Thurman, Anna May Wong, Clark Gable – and posters of films like *Pink Flamingos*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Heathers*. The bartender, a tall blond man with closely cropped hair, was playing Talking Heads, which he turned down when he saw that Sally was giving an interview. It was obvious that he was trying to listen. The Paradise barely got any sun, but the bartender was very tanned and well built like a soldier in a Technicolor film.

Sally told me that the bar had been put in in the late forties and hadn't been done up since, except for the addition of more posters, headshots and movie stills, which cluttered the walls. Looking at them all crowded there, they seemed ready to suddenly spring into action, hundreds of voices and movements.

'What do you know about the Paradise?' was one of her questions.

'It's really old,' I said, which I haphazardly and rightly guessed by quickly looking around me before drinking from the large glass of tepid Pepsi Sally had given me. She had one herself too, with a green and white straw, sipping carefully so as not to mess up her red lipstick.

'That's right,' she replied. 'The oldest running cinema here. The film festival was founded by one of our former owners. All the movies were shown here. We aren't currently one of the cinemas used by the city film festival, but I hope that will change soon. You can see he is a little worn.' It took me a moment to realize the '*he*' was the Paradise.

The apartment building I had grown up in had old, half-rotting numbered cinema seats in the yard that had been found in a dump. Children liked to play on them, pretending they were at the movies. I told Sally this, trying to impress her, but she just smiled sadly. She got up and told me to leave my drink at the table, saying that Otto – I assumed he was the bartender – would clean it up.

'The Paradise shows the latest films, the money makers, but also classic Hollywood ones like *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Great Escape*, *African Queen* or *Wizard of Oz*,' Sally said.

The kind of films in my mind you'd see snippets of as a kid when visiting your grandparents, the wood panelled television set tuned all day to a golden oldies rerun channel, the kind of films synonymous with shag carpets, porcelain figurines, stale indoor cigarette smoke and lukewarm cups of soda pop. I noticed that when Sally had mentioned *The African Queen*, her eyes lit up. She added that it was her favourite film.

'When the Paradise first opened, it showed silent films with Buster Keaton and Lon Chaney.' She went on to tell me about the elderly ladies who didn't know how to read, and how they would bring bags of sweets

and feed them to children they asked to sit beside them, whispering the titles into their ears.

She gave me a tour of the whole building, which I guessed meant that I had the job. I don't know why she hired me, but I later learned that Sally had mysterious ways of doing things. The Paradise was a Frankenstein's monster of a place. Over the years, rooms were added and rearranged but with all the same old rotting pieces, the same red, white and gold paint retouched, another layer put on.

There was a chandelier in the lobby, red carpeted floors, gold trim on the white walls, wide and narrow mirrors which gave it the feeling of a funhouse though they distracted from the oppression of the flats above – layer upon layer of furniture, crockery and lives. There was a ticket kiosk – a cavern built into the wall which also sold popcorn, sweets, and Pepsi on draught. The kiosk housed the big old-fashioned popcorn maker, like a glass cage, which staff had to heat up and fill with kernels every morning. It was very important it was done before the first film of the day, said Sally, because the sound of the kernels popping was like many miniature explosions. There were grand, dusty parlour palms in golden pots, living off the weak light of the chandelier, copper racks holding Paradise programmes which were made with a black and white photocopier.

The cash tills were so old they looked like Victorian churches perched on the countertops, and the tickets were small 'admit one' types, pale pink with black lettering like tiny, tattooed fingers, without the name of the movie on them. The usher had to rip them when a customer went in so that they couldn't be used again for a different movie. Sally showed me how, ripping one almost in half before throwing it into a nearby bin. 'Never rip it into tiny pieces,' she told me. 'Customers often like to keep them, as a memento.'

I noticed a framed newspaper article on the wall about Orson Welles attending a film festival at the Paradise which read: 'Orson Welles limped into Festival cinema yesterday and said, "The film industry is dying-dying-dying."'

A set of doors past the ticket kiosk led to the auditorium, an electric sign which said 'CINEMA THIS WAY' above the doors. Sally took me into the screen as it was between shows.

Sally continued her monologue. 'You've seen that famous French animation about the Paradise?' I nodded, hoping she wouldn't pick up on my ignorance. It didn't matter, she told me the story anyway. 'In it, a man comically runs into the cinema then out again when a Jacques Tati film is playing. Fans of the animation will sometimes come in and try to do the same. Though I don't think we ever showed a Jacques Tati film during my time here. Perhaps I ought to.'

She paused. 'Unlike chain cinemas, we only have the one screen. Imagine having several screens, it would be like having several brains,' she said with distaste.

The auditorium had Grecian columns with plaster torsos of beautiful nymph-like men with curly hair holding them up, their arms lifted. A young man with dark hair, dressed in black who looked exactly like the nymphs, was hurriedly sweeping the auditorium. He looked so tiny against the vast, temporarily empty room. His skin was whitish grey like he had just walked out of a silent film. Sally didn't say anything about him.

A mustard yellow curtain hid the screen until show time. The ceiling was curved and covered in cracks: water stains and plaster mouldings of couples kissing, perhaps not quite human, with long pointed ears and horns, along the edges. There must have been a dead crawl space, to fit the hump of the ceiling's curve, between it and the flat above. Part of the ceiling, near the front row seats, was patched up with what looked like tape and plastic bags. 'That will be fixed very soon, don't worry about it falling,' said Sally, noticing me gawking at it.

'Now look at this, stay here,' she said, disappearing. A moment later, all the lights were turned off. She came back in and said, 'Look at the ceiling.'

It was covered in faint twinkling stars – tiny lights, in astrological-looking positions but not ones I recognized. It took me a moment to realize it was because half the lights were broken.

‘Hardly anybody looks up at the ceiling during a movie, but when they do, there is a surprise.’ Sally’s teeth and eyes glowed white in the dark.

When she turned the lights back on the young man who had been sweeping had gone.

Hidden under the carpet of the screen were a few trap doors leading directly to a sewer tunnel. Sally lifted one up, showing a dark, fast flowing and smelly river. There was a metal ladder leading down into it. ‘Never let customers see this,’ she warned. The smell wafted upwards, and the dirty water looked like it was about to seep through.

Sally sprayed some fluorescent pink air freshener from a bottle she produced from the pocket of her dress and the smell of it made me choke. It was about as effective as applying more lead paint to the face of Queen Elizabeth I. I could still smell something decayed and musty under the air freshener but I didn’t mind it.

The screen sat six hundred people, each seat with a metal plaque with a number on it, each row named after a letter of the alphabet, twenty-six rows in total. I followed Sally back out into the lobby. There were customers standing everywhere, between the parlour palms and mirrors, waiting for the next show, eating popcorn and sipping drinks, blinking, dumb as fish bubbling on the surface of a pond, before returning to the dark depths where only a little amount of light trickled in.

There were a lot of secret doors in the Paradise hidden behind poster frames in the foyer that led to projection, storage, marketing and the office.

The projectionist, a man with long grey hair, grumbled as we went into the projection room, which was up a narrow staircase covered in metal film reel cases.

‘Normally front of house staff are not allowed in here,’ said Sally. The ancient film projector looked like a cross between a train and Mickey Mouse. There were other giant, puzzling machines that hummed, like Cold War computers or fridges, and emitted whispers of people speaking: the audio for the film currently playing. The room was extraordinarily hot.

Besides all the projection reels and suitcases full of more, there was a poster of Disney’s Pinocchio dancing while his father, Geppetto, played

accordion, and one of Groucho Marx that said, 'I've had a wonderful evening. This wasn't it.' The projectionist, Pete, wore jeans and a faded grey sweatshirt with Donald Duck on it. There were lots of empty Coca-Cola cans, though Pepsi was the soda served on draught at the Paradise. Pete had his own kettle, snacks, and a stool by a desk covered in tools for fixing reels. Or so he told me when he saw me staring at the collection of misshapen pliers, and metal clips. There was a tiny glass window looking out onto the auditorium.

Sally took me to the boiler and storage rooms underneath the foyer, which gave me a bad feeling – there were a lot of mirrors down there too, but they were too grimy to see in, and crusty cleaning supplies that looked like they would make whatever they touched dirtier, but it was where I would have to go to get soap for the bathrooms, and the mop, said Sally. In the storeroom, there was a box crusher and Sally taught me to use it right then and there. The box crusher was an ugly box made from dull metal and covered in pictures of horror film stars roughly cut from magazines: Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, Pennywise, Freddy Kruger and Nosferatu. I wondered if anyone had crushed a finger or a whole hand inside.

The rest of the storeroom was full of soda cans and beer, sweeties shaped like tiny fried eggs and crocodiles, the popcorn kernels like jars of yellow teeth. 'We don't make any money from movie tickets – that goes to the studios; we only make money from sweets and things,' said Sally.

We went back upstairs. Sally's tiny office was covered in posters, pictures of Patrick Swayze (one had the phrase 'Be nice until it's time not to be nice' written over him) and film schedules criss-crossed with red pen. In the office, there was a girl wearing a beret over short brown hair, eating pot noodles and reading *Godard on Godard*. She didn't look up from her book. Her nails were long and red, carefully done, and she had a mole on her jawline with enough dark blonde hairs sticking out of it to make it look like a paintbrush. Her hands were speckled with a bad fake tan and tobacco stains. She had large plastic glasses with greasy popcorn fingerprints on them, and behind them, eyes heavily lined with kohl. She wore a dirty black jumper and a short houndstooth pencil skirt. Her tights were full of runs.

‘That’s Patricia,’ said Sally. Patricia didn’t reply, just kept reading her book, clearing her throat as she turned a page, and putting more noodles into her mouth with a fork.

‘This is where I do all the background work to keep everything running,’ said Sally, ‘making film schedules and the rotas, ordering candy, things like that.’ There was a meaty smell in the office, like dried sausage.

My favourite room that Sally showed me was a big closet really, stuffed with fraying swathes of glittery fabric, masks, bags of limp plastic balloons with carousels on them, expired candy, hand puppets with cracked heads, plastic skulls, signs advertising extinct chocolate bars, peanuts and servings of Jell-O in cups with whipped cream on top, Hawaiian shirts, wigs, standees of long expired movie stars. Sally saw me eyeing a dented trombone, and told me that before the cinema had sound, there was a band called Madame Egger’s Ladies Costume Orchestra instead. One of them was so angry when they were let go, she threw her instrument at the screen, but it only hit the stage and had lived in the cupboard ever since.

Just as we finished our tour, a young man wearing a brown leather jacket and a cumbersome fur hat, with flaps over his ears, came in.

‘Flynn, once you’ve signed in, can you show her the ropes?’ Sally asked, jerking her head at me. I was surprised my shift was starting right away. Perhaps they were that desperate for people. She gave me a brokenlooking walkie-talkie and told me to use it if there were any problems.

Flynn didn’t say anything. Underneath the hat, he was quite handsome, with brown hair down to his neck, a wide-set face, and a little earring shaped like a Celtic cross in one ear. We checked tickets at the door and cleaned the screen between viewings.

The carpet of the screen after a show was dirtier than any restaurant floor. There was so much broken glass that everything looked covered in a fine layer of frost. I guess people found an animalistic pleasure in eating and drinking in the dark, in making a mess, leaving bags, boxes and cans behind. Spilled popcorn, contraband glass bottles of wine, champagne and beer that people snuck in, candy bar wrappings, banana peels, strangely

heavy Pepsi cups which turned out to be filled with vomit or shit, sunglasses, umbrellas and, occasionally, toenails and semen, feathers even, as if someone had brought a dead chicken to pluck. The floor sloped downwards towards the screen, and in front of it there was a flotsam of Maltesers, mints and gumballs that had rolled down out of people's hands during every screening.

Occasionally, Flynn would disappear for a while into the screen when a film was playing, leaving me standing awkwardly in the lobby. I thought he was watching the movies, but later learned it was one of our tasks to go in and make sure no one was secretly recording the films or causing trouble.

He shrugged and made a bored-looking face whenever I asked him anything. I didn't know what to do; he didn't show me. I picked up individual pieces of popcorn off the ground whenever I saw them and smiled at customers.

When my shift was almost over, a young woman came in from off the street with blonde hair and a bloody wound on her face and a torn-up *Bride of Frankenstein* t-shirt. I unconsciously reached for my walkie-talkie – but it wasn't working. The girl laughed at me and peeled the wound off her face – it was fake, made out of plastic. She walked into the staff room and came out wearing a staff badge. She had changed into pinstripe trousers and a faded black jumper.

I saw her whispering to Flynn and Patricia, perhaps about me, before disappearing into the bar.

By the time Sally said I could go home my nice interview outfit was covered in Pepsi, popcorn dust, hair, candy wrappers, and my feet, stuffed into a pair of black velvet court shoes, stung. Sally told me to come back the next morning.

# The Seven Samurai

Directed by Akira Kurosawa

1954

The rest of the staff – who I would meet gradually over my first week there – looked like they were in their twenties or maybe even thirties. When I applied for the job I was nervous everyone else there would be a pimply teenager, but I was desperate for work. There is truth to it, though: you don't see anyone over their thirties working in a cinema. Like starlets, they have to be young, or the movies will lose their glamour.

There was Patricia, who never took off her beret and didn't do any work from what I could see. She only read and filed her nails behind the ticket kiosk, ignoring customers as the day went on and never cleaning her glasses, which became increasingly dirty. I didn't understand how she could even watch a movie wearing them. She was often joined by Flynn, who left me to check tickets and stood behind the kiosk with her. His voice became normal and friendly when talking to customers but he never smiled at them. He only grunted at me. At various intervals, I heard the projectionist swear loudly from the projection room. Pete, I learned at lunchtime, was Flynn's dad. They went on their break together, Coca-Cola and egg salad sandwiches that Flynn went out to buy, eating in the projection room, where I could hear them laughing, the smell of boiled eggs wafting out.

The uniform was whatever black clothes we had. A few stripes or polka dots were fine. Sally gave me a little white badge with PARADISE written on it in red art deco letters to pin to my shirt. I scoured second-hand shops and cheap department stores, and bought black pencil skirts, stockings, jumpers, faded Fruit of the Loom sweatshirts, turtlenecks and boots.

The staff while working, all in black, looked like ants crawling over an abandoned wedding cake.

Those first few weeks, none of the staff members besides Sally spoke to me.

The assistant manager, Otto, who had been bartending on the day of my interview, didn't teach me anything either. He was aloof, walking around with his arms swinging at his sides, or carrying a clipboard, a pen behind one ear. He didn't talk to me but bowed whenever he saw me like a Hussar at a ball. He either wore faded button-up black oxford shirts or wool sweaters full of tiny moth holes, but he looked well put together compared to most of the others. He slicked his short hair back and folded the hem of his trousers over his boots. He always had immaculate white socks that made his ankles glow in the screen, though he didn't realize it. For lunch he liked to eat sweetcorn straight out of the can with a fork, the same with pineapple rings. He also ate bags and bags of pink and white gummies that looked like teeth still attached to gums. He'd smoke hand-rolled cigarettes under the canopy, as would Sally. I smoked too, but I didn't want Sally to know because I was still too new there. I only smoked on my lunch break, several cigarettes at once, and I must have smelled terribly like smoke. It didn't leave me much time to buy food; I consumed odd assemblages bought from the grocery store in a hurry: discounted ham sandwiches, bananas, crackers, packages of hotdogs which I liked cold, mint chocolate bars to hide the cigarette smell. I ate in a quick furtive way like a mouse.

Most of the others ate their lunch in the stuffy office, chatting with Sally. Sally got endless bags of hamburgers from a nearby fast-food place and snacked on pepperoni sticks, which gave the office its meaty smell.

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I continued on the usher shift for those silent, horrible weeks. After showing me around, Sally pretty much disappeared into the office, bar a few exceptions, and I only saw her as she arrived and left, wrapped in her great white coat with the Betty Boop badge pinned to it. I was abandoned to the mercy of the others.

My main tasks were to check tickets at the door and clean the screen out between showings. Between films, different music was played in the auditorium, which made me melancholic when it was empty, as if I was the last guest at a party. I wasn't allowed to Hoover until the end of the night when all the customers had left because of the noise (it was a congested pink and beige Hoover with a giant canvas sack that never quite got empty when I dumped it in the bin), so I had to sweep using brooms with caked bristles and a dustpan. It was surprisingly gruelling; the brooms were child sized and I had to crouch to use them, my neck bent like a broken mannequin. The brooms didn't work at all on the seats, and I had to reach my hands between the cushion and the arms to get the popcorn and sticky sweets out. I was often sweating when I was finished and on the point of tears. The auditorium felt as big and dirty as a deserted palace.

Anything customers left behind I had to put in the lost and found box, an Edwardian trunk in the office. If I found money or any small valuables, I just put it in the inner heel of my shoe. I rarely felt guilty about it, especially after I discovered someone had taken a shit on one of the cinema seats and I had to clean it with paper towel, soap and water. The smell stuck to me all day.

There was a lost and found journal log to keep all the dates of when things were found. If something wasn't claimed after three months, the staff could take the items. I saw all of them crowd around the book, looking for expired things, throwing berets and scarves and sweaters on themselves, grabbing umbrellas and purses, looks of childish delight in their eyes.

I quickly learned that one of the staff members, Paolo, who I thought I had seen cleaning on my first day, had a habit of keeping whatever

jewellery he found in the screen instead of putting it in the lost and found box and waiting for it to be unclaimed. Instead, he immediately wore all the jewellery on shift, and pretended not to hear Otto when he told him to take it off and put it in the box, indignantly claiming that whatever it was had belonged to his grandmother. Women's engagement rings, earrings, signet rings with indecipherable symbols on them, charm bracelets, even childish-looking heart necklaces that must have belonged to little girls or old ladies. He looked like a beautiful Roman soldier, covered in jewels he had plundered. I liked to watch him wander around the cinema, bracelets jangling, as he looked for his tattered copy of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* muttering under his breath in Italian, and pretending to shoot customers in the backs of their heads with a gun-shaped hand. There were certain photos of actors decorating the wall which he hated; whenever he walked by he turned the frames around so the pictures faced the wall. These included Laird Cregar, Elizabeth Taylor and Burt Reynolds. Sometimes Paolo's nails were painted dark too. I once saw Lydia painting his nails at the ticket kiosk, leaving black polish marks all over the countertop. When he didn't have a book he leaned against a wall like an indolent sculpture, or messed around with his hair while looking in one of the many gold-trimmed mirrors. I hated all the mirrors in the Paradise, and avoided looking at myself in them; I had a sick feeling my mirror self wouldn't follow my actions or expressions, that all the mirrors were screens playing a different version of myself.

I left my orange copy of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* – I had bought it just after getting the Paradise job, because one of the characters is a cinema usher – in conspicuous places for Paolo to see, and I caught him flipping through it a couple of times.

I had to check the bathrooms to make sure they had enough toilet paper and soap, and clean them – there were often people doing heroin in the stalls, they were quiet and didn't bother anybody, the leftover spoons, foil wrappers and needles like the contents of an old woman's purse that had been spilled. Once I found a ginger beer bottle full of piss beside one of the

toilets, the glass warm to the touch. Another time, I found a toilet seat shattered and covered in blood. More than half the toilets were never flushed, clogged with toilet paper, shit, tampons, even clumps of human hair. I didn't know if it was because the pipes were bad, or if people were closer to their animal selves in the Paradise, if a cinema was nothing more than a zoo. The urinals too were full of pubic hair and cloudy or crystallized piss. I had to pour hot kettles of water down them until they cleared.

I had to spray and scrub the dozens of mirrors and pictures of actors. One of the mirrors had a greasy outline of a hand on it I couldn't remove, no matter how many cleaners I tried. On my shifts, I kept finding a strange foul drink left in a highball glass: purple floral-smelling alcohol with a pickled egg and a maraschino cherry in it, a yellow cocktail umbrella stuck in the flesh of the egg. I would throw it out, and it would reappear again – resting on the kiosk counter or on a cinema seat, even in the women's bathroom, by the sinks. I thought the other staff members were trying to poison me with it.

I had to take out the garbage, change the letters on the canopy, change all the posters inside and outside the cinema. The ones outside were the hardest because of the wind and rain, and more than once I had to chase a poster onto the road as the wind blew it away, hoping no one noticed it was damp and ripped when I put it up. There was a large cupboard with a wall of little drawers, each filled with black plastic letters and numbers. They got tangled when I put them in a bucket to bring outside, and there were always letters and numbers missing. An 8 could pass for a B, I realized, and a W for an M if you put it upside down. Paolo was the tallest person there, so I overheard the others asking him to change the canopy letters for them, though I never dared to ask him myself. If he was in a bad mood, he deliberately misspelt some of the film titles or added swear words. Standing on a ladder with my back turned on the street, sticking the letters into place, awoke a primal fear in me, like I was standing in front of a whale's mouth, desperately feeding it little black fish so it wouldn't swallow me.

I saw all the other staff members leave together if they ended a shift at the same time.

I wondered where they were going. Other times, I saw staff members who had the day off show up just before close and linger. Mostly, they were there all the time, drinking in the bar, seeing films, chatting in the foyer. Staff got discounts on everything so it was the cheapest place for them to drink, though the alcohol wasn't very good quality: cheap gins and lagers, dusty French liquors and American bourbons with wrinkled labels, one Bavarian beer on tap which seemed nothing but foam, a miniature bubble bath people liked to drink. I hurriedly left at the end of my shifts, not saying goodbye to anyone, as I knew they wouldn't respond.

I could feel their eyes on me as I took out the trash or when I had to change the poster frames on the outdoor wall of the bar. Paolo and Otto drank a lot together, red wine and beer, arguing about the merits of Al Pacino or the bad sound design in Christopher Nolan films from what I overheard. They were both tall and made a striking couple, one pale and dark, the other almost golden, like siblings in a fairy-tale.

Patricia and Lydia joined them a lot, flirting with them and each other; Patricia in a beige men's trench coat and her dirty glasses begging Otto for roll-ups, Lydia with a disgusting-looking fake wound on her cheek and green nails. Flynn leaned with his back against the bar. Sometimes he and Paolo threw air punches at each other.

Those first few weeks were unbearably lonely. I'd walk home, in the dark, listening to OMD, New Order or Duran Duran on full blast. I hardly saw any of the city beyond the Paradise and the walk to and from my apartment. It was nothing but a grey blur between the Paradise and my cold bedroom.

I was renting a furnished room in a big apartment. The flat was owned by the young cousin of an earl and had four extra bedrooms he rented out to an ever-changing rota of people. The flat was freezing: Edgar, the owner, had warned us that he didn't like to use central heating, preferring the fireplace. There were only two fireplaces, one in his bedroom, and one in the living room. After my shifts, I'd walk home from the Paradise through

the city and fall asleep wearing a heavy dark fisherman's sweater I bought at a charity shop to keep myself warm upon arrival, not wanting to join the almost musty living room scene, students and bartenders crowded around the fireplace with Edgar, smoking weed and wearing blankets, folk music emanating from somewhere, knobby feet in socks on moth-eaten cushions, Edgar telling stories about boarding school where all they seemed to have eaten was custard. The thing I liked was Edgar didn't notice when I smoked Marlboro Golds in my room. I kept the window open and sprayed a bottle of floral perfume whenever I did, and Edgar said he liked the smell of my perfume.

My room had uneven white wooden floors and a metal bedstead with little floral decorations on it that brought to mind a specifically turn-of-the-century cornucopia of intimate pain – cold children crowding together, heated bricks, sex without privacy. The mattress was covered with broken electric blankets. The white walls, even though stained a pale brown yellow here and there, were blinding after being in the Paradise's never-ending twilight. My bedroom had a wardrobe with brass plates saying where everything should go – little drawers for ties and socks. It was meant for a man from a previous century, and felt haunted by one. It had a funny sharp smell. I kept my clothes in a messy pile on the floor instead. This was matched with a vanity table instead of a desk, the mirror streaked and bent with age. For a reason Edgar wouldn't explain, there was a large terrestrial globe in the room that he wouldn't let me move. It sat on its own wooden stand, and in the dark looked like a hunchbacked, bulky man staring at me. I was scared of touching it on first sight, because it looked so old, but examining it further, I saw it was a fake: the brown was varnish rather than age, the countries were indecipherable splotches I had never heard of, written in Latin.

I had just moved to this country with hardly any things: a few Russian novels, a leopardskin patterned fur coat once belonging to my grandmother, a half-used bottle of perfume I had wrapped up in my underwear and stockings in my suitcase along with a Disney porcelain figurine of the Cinderella mice peeking out of a teacup (I wanted something from my

childhood but thought my stuffed bears too childish), an outdated guidebook to the city from a second-hand shop I had bought in preparation (later I realized it had an entry for the Paradise: ‘The city’s oldest cinema, needs a refurbishment but still has charm’), a journal with zebras on it, clothes I would end up never wearing because they weren’t black and not suitable for the Paradise: a blue and white striped dress, a long pink scarf, white tennis shoes.

I put the Cinderella mice figurine on the vanity table.

Despite the flat’s shabbiness, the carpets were real Persian ones, and all the cutlery was silver. In the kitchen there was a painting I was sure should have been in a museum.

There wasn’t any shower, only a claw foot bathtub, and I would spend hours in hot water until one of the other people living there told me they needed to use the bathroom. I could never get the smell of popcorn off my skin.

My bedroom looked out onto the communal backyard, shared with a few neighbours so elderly we rarely saw or heard them. There was an abandoned chicken coop in the yard – though I never heard any chickens. Perhaps it was full of chicken skeletons. I never seemed to have the time to go down and check if it did or not – I was always working or sleeping.

The cinema took over my life. The screen was a giant mouth, the curtains mustard yellow lips. My co-workers were colourful but stiff and silent, like characters projected on a magic lantern in a child’s bedroom, circling my head. After working the long, gruelling hours I’d collapse on my mattress unable to shake the Paradise from my mind. I imagined that I quickly had to write, direct and make the soundtrack for a film to be shown as all the films we had in the cinema had vanished and I would be fired if I didn’t. I would wake up in the night and close or open the bathroom and kitchen doors in my apartment, thinking they were the doors to the Paradise screen, people trapped inside, or furious because the light of everyday life was getting in.

I dreamt I saw Madame Egger’s band playing in the corner of my room; the musicians were all old, half rotting, and their instruments dented and

broken. The sound was horrible in the dream, but I could never remember afterwards.

Mostly, however, I didn't sleep. Our scheduled shifts migrated between night and day, beginning in the morning or evening, sometimes one following the other until it felt impossible to sleep at all.

We were allowed to go to films at the Paradise for free, but because I was embarrassed about the other staff members ignoring me, and because I didn't want them to know I didn't have any friends, that I didn't know anyone in the city yet besides them, I never did. They all came before and after their shifts; there was an unspoken obligation to see every film we played. I stared, blank faced, and stuttered whenever a customer asked me to recommend one of the films.

I got into the habit of watching movies at home, in my bedroom. If I closed my eyes, I liked how the film continued without me, unlike a book, that I could hear voices close to me, almost like a person.

I was trying to learn the language of my colleagues – I listened in on their conversations and looked up lists of 'great films' with no direction and read from the scraggly copy of David Thomson's *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* at the Paradise, though I couldn't imagine any of them liking me better if I knew who Bebe Daniels was or not. I watched a lot of spaghetti westerns and Bette Davis films from the thirties. The Paradise was doing a western season at that time, organized by Otto, things like *True Grit* with John Wayne, and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, so I thought westerns must be worth watching. I now felt that I had wasted half my life by not watching as many films as I could.

I masturbated a lot of the time while watching films, my hands under my covers, the sound of the movies drowning out my breath. Often the red velvet seats in the Paradise passed through my mind during those sessions, each one like a dark, bloody tongue.

I wrote down all the movies I watched in my zebra journal, the year they were made, the director, the main actors, and whatever I disliked or liked about them, making, I realize now, pretentious comments that I thought

were poetic. ('The scream of the bride of Frankenstein is an existential scream'; 'The incest in *Sleepwalkers* alludes to the ancient incest of the pharaohs but the film has an air of 19th-century decadence with the Beardsley reference at the beginning.')

In the back of the journal, I also made lists of the films I wanted to see, and tried to remember every film I had seen, scattered throughout my life, as if I could discover myself in them somehow, in *The Aristocats*, *Halloween*, *National Velvet*, *Scarface*, *Fantasia*, *The Cranes are Flying*.

I found a TV at a second-hand shop, so wide and heavy it could be a tiny house, and tons of dusty DVDs and video cassettes that nobody else wanted, like the first *Mission: Impossible*, *How to Marry a Millionaire*, or *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Sometimes the DVDS in the cases didn't match the covers, but I watched them anyway.

Despite all the movies I watched, overhearing the conversations of my colleagues, it all still sounded indecipherable to me. They talked about films I had never seen, and I felt there wasn't enough time in the world to watch them.

I was exhausting myself by trying to keep up; I watched rather than slept. Edgar would knock on my door because he thought I had guests over, but it was only ever the TV.

My almost absolute solitude was broken, briefly, one afternoon when Paolo came up to me in the foyer of the Paradise, put his hands around my neck and pretended to strangle me, though it still hurt. In one ear he had a small gold ring, the only hint of colour on him. Even his eyes, the pupils so dark, looked like beetles drowning in milk.

'Ludwig Wittgenstein is my favourite philosopher,' he said in a whisper. 'After giving his university lectures on philosophy, Wittgenstein was so disgusted with himself he would run to a cinema, and sit watching in the dark, trying to forget himself.' He let his hands drop and ran off, into the auditorium, a dark cave of loud sound as a movie was playing.

No matter how many films I watched, it made no difference to the others. No one else spoke to me. I wished my eyeballs were tiny screens,

replaying everything I had ever watched for them all to see.

The one staff member who scowled at me the most was a short young man named Cosmo, with golden hair with a slight curl that made me think of the boy on boxes of Tunnock's Tea Cakes, a cherubic face and very dirty teeth as if all he ate were those sickly, chocolate-covered marshmallows. He wore tweed suits or denim dungarees with flat caps. When working at the ticket kiosk he repeatedly wandered off to get himself cups of tea, which he carried around on a dented silver tray with little pots of sugar and milk and the biscuits Sally kept to give to the elderly people who came to see old movies during the daytime. Cosmo was the most diligent about screen checks, and a day didn't go by when he ran to get Sally, stating the format of a film was wrong, the sound was too loud, or someone needed to be kicked out for looking at their phone or coughing. He never let customers in after a film started, and he gave me a particularly nasty scowl when he saw me do it. Working a door shift with him, I learned to stay out of his way, reading a book beside the trash bins while he refused people entry because they were five minutes late (the trailers were still playing) or because they had hot food with them.

'Disrespectful philistines,' Cosmo said, loud enough for a couple with a pizza box to hear after he told them to leave.

When cleaning during one of my usher shifts, I found a cupboard empty except for a strange altar – pictures of the monster in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, Godzilla, Jaws, a cartoon Loch Ness monster, Ursula from the *Little Mermaid*. In front was a wooden shelf covered in candle stubs, pieces of popcorn and Maltesers, mingled with rat shit. I swept all the candles and food into a trash bag, but the next night fresh candles and offerings were there. I felt so bad I went and bought some blue lollipops to leave next time I passed it, but I never found it again.

As I said, I had no social interactions with the other Paradise workers, and avoided my flatmates, so my only social interactions were with the

Paradise customers. My co-workers were so untouchable, so unapproachable, they might well have been in a movie, and I was their audience they were oblivious to. They all seemed attached to each other by a thread I couldn't see. I could hear their echoing laughter and chatter all through the building.

Sally told me most of the customers were young people with interesting taste, but that wasn't true, it was just her fantasy. Most were elderly people with various degrading ailments and a strong sense of nostalgia. Perhaps Sally was delusional, and saw those customers for what they once were, wearing saddle shoes and dresses like her own back in the day.

There was a beautiful woman who wore a natty grey fur coat and carried a tennis racket who ordered glass after glass of rosé. The colour of it made me feel sick, as if she were drinking stale cream soda. She read the Paradise programmes intently, circling films with a fancy pen. There were bossy couples and others with early onset dementia who wandered in and out of the screen clutching film programmes, the seats of their trousers soaking with piss, and men who needed aisle seats because they had metal hips or enlarged prostates.

Some of them even remembered dancing around on the Edwardian tiles in the foyer when they were children, or seeing *Bambi* there when it was first released.

A lot of people having affairs came into the Paradise, to hide in the screen, or whisper in the bar where they would never run into anyone they knew. You could tell because they were so excited to kiss each other and most of the time had a huge age gap between them, seedy and vaguely intellectual men with grey ponytails necking twenty-year-old college students, buying them sweets and booze and asking if they liked the films of Agnès Varda.

I started a game where I tried to steal something from as many customers as possible, hankies, plastic brooches, their ticket stubs, lighters and occasionally keys.

On one of my days off, after seeing a bunch of silent films in a grey daze at home, I went to a pharmacy and bought a box of black hair dye. I had fair hair, worn in a ponytail most of the time. I looked too dull to work in the cinema. Everyone there was old-fashioned in some manner, like they had been working there for eighty years. I dyed my hair before cutting it like Louise Brook's hairstyle which I had seen in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, leaving unfamiliar black locks on the bathroom floor, and black stains all over the tub I had to scrub off with steel wool. I didn't cut my bangs evenly. I put a smear of red lipstick on too.

# What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?

Directed by Robert Aldrich

1960

It was on my first morning shift, following the night I dyed my hair, that I met Iris. I heard a childish voice behind me say:

‘Helloo, I used to work in a cinema once.’

I turned around to see an older woman dragging a shopping cart, and with a large, open Mary Poppins style carpet bag hanging off her arm. I could see that it was full of useless treasures like receipts and candy. She was holding a cigarette without smoking it, just letting the smoke drift towards the ceiling from her hand, towards the fire alarms, which resembled red metal breasts.

‘Oh, you’re new, what’s your name?’ she said to me. Her top set of teeth were grey and thin, the bottom ones loose and artificially white. They were dentures, made from two different sets, the bottom ones larger than the top ones. She twisted them around her mouth; mesmerizingly they spun like an old reel of black and white film.

To my horror, she had similar hair to mine, a black bob with bangs, though hers was white along her scalp: she dyed it too. She had the dirty ruined smile of a former child star, lipstick childishly drawn on, and was wearing an odd assemblage of clothes: a dirty black coat, with a t-shirt

underneath, a long floral skirt that ended somewhere around her mid-calf and looked heavy with filth, bare legs, frilly socks on swollen feet stuffed into slippers. Before I could tell her to put her cigarette out, she told me her name was Iris and ‘I don’t drink, I don’t gamble, I don’t have any bad habits, I come to the cinema, it reminds me of when I worked in one,’ she told me. ‘What have you got for me today?’

I was standing by the main doors to the screen. Cosmo, at the ticket kiosk, slowly crouched down until he disappeared, not helping me. I recited the films for her, and her eyes lit up when I said John Wayne’s name, but as I spoke she walked up to the kiosk where Cosmo was hiding. ‘Do you have a girlfriend yet, Cosmo?’ she asked, his face visible behind the popcorn maker. ‘No, never, you know I’m gay,’ he growled, then cleared his throat and said in a sweet voice, ‘Lovely to see you, Iris.’

‘I’ll just go to the bar and get my nachos then come get a ticket, thanks very much,’ Iris said, not listening to him.

She gave me a crumpled and torn picture of the Beatles and a chocolate bar from inside her purse before walking up to the bar with all her bags, her cigarette still lit. No one in the bar told her to put out her cigarette either.

I had learned, seeing the faces of the other staff members while making it, not to order the bar nachos for lunch, the only food the Paradise had besides bags of potato chips, little packets of peanuts, popcorn and sweets. The nachos were made with canned chilli in a microwave underneath the bar, jalapeños from a cloudy jar and cheap pre-shredded cheese, all kept in a dirty mini fridge which was often accidentally left open for the rats and mice to raid. If, at the end of the week, there was chilli left over, we had to flush it down the toilets, which usually clogged it, bits of corn and beef, oily red streaks of sauce. I heard Lydia say of it, ‘We should skip the middleman and just put it in the toilet first thing in the morning,’ as she came back from the bathroom, holding the empty chilli pot and retching. The thought of Iris eating it, her cigarette ash falling into the dish, made me sick.

The chocolate bar Iris had given me was expired. Otto walked by just as I was examining it and gave me a stern look and sighed. ‘Found it in the

auditorium,' I said, throwing it in one of the nearest trash bins, not knowing why he was so angry at me.

Iris saw films again and again even if there was nothing new playing, even if she said she had hated the film. She disliked any film that had anything to do with Italians, gay people or gambling, I soon learned from her incessant chatter. She came to every one of Otto's curation of western films (even the ones with Italian directors). Day in and day out she was the only one I talked to, besides single words from Sally, and very occasionally one of my flatmates.

She used to have a cat called Minstrel, she told me, because it was black and white, and always told the story again whenever she bought a bag of Minstrel chocolates – her favourite – from the kiosk. She only ate food from the cinema it seemed, and she hardly ever paid for it. None of the staff stopped her from stealing, so I didn't either. She either ate the nachos or popcorn, bags of sweets and little containers of ice creams that came with tiny spoons. She'd take several of the ice creams, and after the film she was seeing finished, she'd come out with ice cream and mascara all over her face. After the expired chocolate bar and Beatles photo, she offered me cheap lead pencils, rotting bananas and DVDs from charity shops – the last being the only thing I was tempted to take. I noticed that Paolo always took her gifts and put them in his pockets, though he grimaced when she turned away. Iris seemed to like him the most, perhaps even had a crush on him even though she said she didn't like Italians. She fixed her hair with her hands when she saw him and asked where he was when he wasn't there. She even had a keychain with a toy Pinocchio on it she named Paolo.

Even Cosmo was polite to her face, though she broke so many of his cinema rules: she wandered in and out of film screenings, brought in full plates of nachos though they were strictly to eat at the one bar table. So were Lydia, Flynn, Patricia and Otto. I once saw Otto make Iris laugh by sipping a cappuccino so that it left a moustache of foam above his lip, which he pretended not to notice until she left happy and blushing. The only staff member I didn't see her saying hello to or trying to offer gifts to was

Sally, perhaps because Sally was the boss. Sally was always kind to Iris. I even saw her give Iris one of her greasy hamburgers, which Iris, rather than eating, put in her handbag, walking away from her without saying thank you.

Iris put foundation on her hands, which left marks everywhere, from the velvet cinema seats to the bathroom taps.

Iris was harmless, compared to some of the others. When I was cleaning the bathroom one shift, a very tall fat man with a curly grey beard like a Greek bust of a philosopher came in and asked me if I wanted to go watch a movie at his place after my shift. I ignored him but he followed me around the cinema, asking over and over again, saying he had an amazing collection of DVDs and a filmstrip from Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* from Bergman's personal collection, information which meant nothing to me at the time. At the end of the night, he stood outside the grate after I closed it, smoking and peering in. I had to run home, not looking behind me. In the kitchen of my flat, I found a big jagged knife which I brought to bed with me, and to work the next morning, stuffing it between my jumper and my skirt, where I could feel it press against my skin, but whenever I saw him there was always someone else around so I couldn't use it to threaten him without losing my job.

It continued for a few days, then he disappeared. When sweeping in the cinema bar, I overheard two customers say a film professor who frequented the Paradise had recently cut his own throat; maybe that was him, who knows.

But Iris came every morning, no matter the weather outside, no matter the film playing, and stayed the entire afternoon. One morning as I was sweeping the foyer, she came in and tried to walk directly through the projectionist's door. I blocked her way.

'You can't smoke in here either,' I said.

She emitted a girlish whine and pulled a large birthday card, still wrapped in plastic, with a sports car on it, out of her bag and said, 'I want to give this to Pete.'

From the ticket kiosk, Flynn gave me a dreadful stare but didn't intervene.

Sally came back through the main entrance doors carrying a greasy paper bag full of hamburgers.

Sally took me into the office and explained that Iris owned the Paradise. She gave me one of her cheeseburgers, but it was early and I was too nervous to eat it. She ate hers and told me that Iris had let the managers run everything.

'As a member of staff, you have to politely tell her to put out her cigarettes if someone else complains, otherwise don't say anything.'

I nodded.

'If no one else is there, which is often the case with the first movie of the day on a Sunday morning, she is allowed her cigarettes, but generally smoking isn't allowed in the cinema.'

My hair and shirt must have reeked of my Marlboros, but I nodded again. As she finished her cheeseburger and chased it with a large cup of draught Pepsi, Sally told me that the son of the original owner of the Paradise was a young man who developed a taste for French films while serving abroad in the Second World War, and who had brought his continental taste home. He was the one who built the bar, and imported champagne and French wine and brandy to fill it. He killed himself, the same year *Au hasard Balthazar* came out, shooting himself in the projection room using a rifle from the war. Sally told me that the projectionist who found him was in such a state of shock, he just sat down and projected the next film, the dead owner lying on the floor beside him, the room splattered in blood. It wasn't till the evening of that day that he came to and called the police. 'All very tragic,' Sally said, without emotion. She had a bit of ketchup on her cheek.

The cinema briefly became a Baptist church, after that. 'Occasionally you'll find the odd bible or religious pamphlet still tucked away in some cupboard – just throw it in the garbage, sweetheart,' Sally said.

She told me Iris's husband bought it next, the former manager of another cinema. 'Iris was one of his cigarette girls at a cinema called the Regal. By

the time he bought the Paradise, they had married and had children.’ She paused, crumbling up the tin foil and paper from her burger. ‘Well, and he’s dead, of lung cancer, it belongs to Iris now, she was on the will. She doesn’t interfere in the running of it, I communicate with her children about the business.’ Sally dismissed me. I peeked in the screen on my way back, and saw Iris sitting there in the dark, a cloud of cigarette smoke around her like a poisonous gas from deep within her body.

# The Spirit of the Beehive

Directed by Victor Erice

1973

Because I had noticed my co-workers gathering together at the end of their shifts I chose a night when Otto was the closing manager, and I took my time doing my usher duties. When I was done, I went and sat in the women's bathroom, hiding in one of the stalls instead of hurrying home like I usually did, despite Iris loudly having digestive troubles in one of the stalls near mine, her shopping cart parked near the sinks. I covered my nose and mouth with my hands, and waited for her to leave. I heard Otto closing the grate, and I heard talking. The bathroom lights were turned off. I waited a bit longer.

When I came back up, I saw not just the staff who closed up in the foyer, but almost everyone else, except for Sally and Cosmo. Patricia, Paolo and Lydia were huddled close together, all eating from the same box of popcorn like a group of timid mice, afraid someone would steal their food. Patricia's glasses were so grimy from a day of work, I didn't think she could see through them at all.

Lydia had a creepy knapsack, shaped like an evil eye, high platform combat boots and a piercing on her chin like a silver pimple which I hadn't

noticed before. She had very dark red lipstick and glittery eye shadow, as if she had got dressed up to come back into the Paradise.

‘I was checking the bathroom,’ I said, as I came up the stairs and walked towards them, as casually as I could. ‘I thought there was a customer hiding in there.’

‘We are going to watch a film if you’d like to join,’ said Otto. ‘We aren’t supposed to do it, but Sally turns a blind eye. Cosmo didn’t want to come because it was a digital edition of *The Spirit of the Beehive*.’

‘All right,’ I replied.

I noticed Paolo held an open bottle of wine, the same brand of red served in the bar.

‘Wastage, they’ve gone off,’ explained Otto.

‘None of us have been very welcoming,’ Otto said to me, under his voice, as we went into the screen. ‘We didn’t know how long you would be here,’ he added. ‘The person before you didn’t last a week.’

Lydia handed Otto a plastic bag full of cheap American lager tins. It was one they sold in the cinema. ‘They’re expired, but still good,’ Otto said and handed me one. He opened a can of sweetcorn that was in the bag too and took a fork out of his coat and ate.

I sat down beside him, but everyone moved to different, spaced-out parts of the screen.

‘The film, Otto,’ Lydia said and jumped out of her seat and ran, to the projection room I suppose, dimming the lights on her way back. She crawled over the seats. Otto handed me beer after beer.

I think of that moment a lot, my first after-shift screening, the rest of the cinema dark, shut down, no one else allowed in. It was forbidden to watch movies that way by film distributors, a magic only cinema workers would ever experience.

*The Spirit of the Beehive* begins with two little girls going to see Boris Karloff’s *Frankenstein* (1953) in a shed in a small Spanish village. I had seen that *Frankenstein* not long before. In it, the monster tries to play with a little girl and accidentally kills her by throwing her into a pond. The little girl was the only one who didn’t see him as a monster. Soon, I felt

immersed, no longer aware of my co-workers except as travellers floating in the same film.

‘You know,’ Otto whispered to me during the credits, ‘we call you Chaplin because you never speak, and I heard you tell Sally you liked his films during your interview.’

By the time we got out, it must have been 2 or 3 a.m. There weren’t any buses, so I walked home. Paolo and Otto had left together with Lydia.

The next morning I had to work – Sally didn’t seem to care about having someone close and then open the next day. I thought everything would be different, but no one was any more talkative with me. I felt like I had overstepped, invited myself where I didn’t belong. I hadn’t actually had much conversation with any of them; I had just sat in the dark and watched a film at the same time as them.

I waited anxiously all day for one of them to tell me what film they were watching that night. It wasn’t till my shift was almost over that Otto wrote his address down on a customer receipt and said, ‘Come over around 12.30 a.m. We’re watching something at my house tonight for a change after shift. Don’t eat, I’ll cook something.’

After my shift I didn’t feel like going home, so I sat in a pub nearby the Paradise and drank for hour after hour, pint after pint of dark and bitter stout. The pub was covered in stained glass; the windows, the booths, around the bar, depicting Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, a version more wicked and old than the Disney one. The dwarfs seemed to move in the shadow and light of the customers.

Otto lived on the top floor of a tenement with no elevator. None of the city’s buildings had elevators. It was an elegant stone building with a blue tiled and spiked roof. I was breathless by the time I got to his door, the only light from a large and dirty skylight shaped like an egg on the top floor. Paolo opened the door. He wore a baggy grandma wool sweater and black jeans and held a red drink with a green olive floating in it. The flat behind him was blindingly white.

‘Chaplin,’ he said.

Otto, behind him, did one of his strange bows.

The flat had high ceilings, beautiful tiles and mouldings everywhere, like a miniature version of the Paradise, but bleached out, its bare chalky skeleton, stripped of all velvet and paint. The white walls had a few film posters: *The Servant*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Elephant Man*.

The toilet didn't work (I had to pee as soon as I got there, and saw a speck of turd in the bowl) and there were mice, the dark minuscule evidence all over the floor. There were rat poison traps from work placed around the hall, plastic white coffins with the words *Rent-To-Kill* on them. I assumed they had stolen them. The place was sparsely furnished: tattered white furniture covered in wine stains, a large porcelain Staffordshire dog missing one ear, and gloomy Victorian-looking plants and cacti (the Paradise had a few parlour palms which were able to survive in the dark – these I had seen Otto water and care for with a tender seriousness, trimming away dead leaves, checking for bugs). There were books, great piles of them. Hollywood biographies, the poems of Frank O'Hara, some in Italian, which made me sure that Paolo lived with Otto.

In the living room, Lydia, Flynn and Patricia lay on one of the couches, Lydia in her gold pinstripe trousers paired with a white blouse that had plaid edges, and decals of Scottish terriers on it. The front was splattered in fake blood. Patricia wore a ratty black cashmere sweater with black beads on – half of the beads missing. She also had pearls around her neck. She was sitting on Flynn's lap.

'Cosmo never comes, my projector isn't up to his standard,' said Otto.

He took out his projector box and put it on a bookshelf behind the couch, fiddling with it until a bright blue square took over the wall opposite.

Paolo poured me a drink like the one he had. It was vermouth, which I had never tasted but knew by name from Jean Rhys novels.

I sat down next to Lydia.

We watched *Badlands*. The screen was almost as big as in a cinema; I thought they must never watch movies on small screens, that they preferred the characters to be like giants, ten times their own size.

I got up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the film and snooped around, *Gassenhauer* by Carl Orff playing in the background of the movie. There were three bedrooms. One had a saxophone lying on the floor, lots of records, VHS tapes, and more cacti.

The second bedroom had hardly anything in it, though there was an *Akira* poster on the door and a half-eaten bag of cookies on the nightstand, apple and pear cores like freshly gnawed bones. The third clearly belonged to Patricia. There was a werewolf mask hung on the wall and bits of black lingerie, like scattered ink from a broken pen, all over the floor and bed.

As soon as the credits finished, Otto started talking, explaining that *Badlands* was the first film to use natural morning and dusk and that the westerns he had been showing at the Paradise were a good example of fake, studio-made nights and mornings. He wasn't looking at any of us, just the now empty square on the wall, as if he was thinking out loud. I stopped paying attention to what he was saying and noticed that a series of black and white photographs of a dead man, his head caved in and the texture of raw meat, was taped to the wall opposite the one that had been projected on. In some of them the dead man was surrounded by ponderous-looking men in suits.

I got up to look at them more closely.

'Pasolini,' said Lydia, interrupting Otto's monologue. 'Photos of his murder. We found the envelope of photos in the screen after a Pasolini film. They're original.'

I was very drunk by the time I left, so drunk I mistook the clock on the tower of a fancy hotel on my walk home for a full moon, until I saw its thin black hands.

After that night, that second night, I was suddenly accepted into confidences, long conversations, intimacies, even by the staff members who hadn't been at Otto and Paolo's screening but who had known I was there. It felt as if a spell had been broken, I had passed a test.

The next day at work, Lydia came up to me and spread out her home-made deck of tarot cards on the kiosk desk. They were made using film

magazines – Joan Crawford as the Devil, Bonnie and Clyde as the lovers. She wanted me to pull a card after shuffling – I got the Fool, which was a photo of Charlie Chaplin playing the violin in *The Vagabond*, and Lydia said, ‘Ohhhhh,’ though I felt she had somehow set it up.

All of them made me drink what they termed the ‘Paradise Cocktail’ the next night during an after-closing film, which they told me they had been trying to give me for weeks, an initiation into working at the Paradise. Crème de Violette with lemonade, a pickled egg and a maraschino cherry floating inside. I swallowed and ate all of it, even the old egg, acetic and sweet.

The shift rotas were released weekly for morning shifts or shifts late into the night, so we couldn’t make plans more than a week ahead. Otto organized the film nights around who he wanted to come, studying the rota, and from then on, I was almost always chosen. Sally never came of course, but there was an unspoken agreement that she turned a blind eye to it. The work rotas made it impossible to socialize with anyone else outside of the Paradise.

Sometimes we stayed overnight, falling asleep in the seats as film after film played, and one of us, by chance, discovered it was morning on a trip to the bathroom. When this happened, we made a giant pot of coffee, ate handfuls of popcorn and started another shift.

The outside world, all of its news, faded away, and the movies became my main mirror of the world.

When we watched films at Otto, Paolo and Lydia’s, Otto cooked us lots of food: lemon meringue pies, pineapple upside down cakes, macaroni casseroles, roast potatoes, cornbread, hamburgers from scratch. None of us would’ve eaten more than popcorn and alcohol if it weren’t for him. We always ate on their couches while movies played, never around a table, having a conversation. I was self-conscious about making too much noise while eating, as they seemed to do it perfectly, not spilling anything, or scraping cutlery, as if they had spent their whole lives eating in the dark. I didn’t get any sense of the awkwardness of desire either, when we were

watching films with sex scenes, as if each of them were creatures purely made of eyes and ears; that underneath their clothes were simply more eyes, blinking and cold.

Everyone had their type of film. Paolo liked Quentin Tarantino – he was obsessed with Tarantino, which explained why he wore Hawaiian shirts, sometimes even at the end of the shift changing into one in front of all of us, exposing his skinny, almost hairless chest, the dangling gold chains around his neck. He also liked cyberpunk anime like *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, and sinister films like *Nosferatu* and *The Lodger*, ones without sound.

Otto liked Terrence Malick, Stanley Kubrick, Paul Thomas Anderson – older American films and especially westerns – though I was surprised to learn he hated John Wayne.

Cosmo liked Laurel and Hardy, Chaplin, Buster Keaton and other early slapsticks, granted he could watch them on *actual* film. He had a hand-cranked projector and invited us all over to his flat, which he and Patricia shared, where we crowded on his bed like children, the room filled with smoke as Cosmo left a cigarette in his mouth until it almost burnt his lips while he worked his beloved projector. Their flat was dark, dank, haphazard and childish. There were banana peels, half-drunk bottles of Disaronno taken from the Paradise and umbrellas everywhere. Neither used ashtrays and the grey powder of cigarettes was settled over every surface.

Patricia loved Godard, Truffaut, Melville and other French directors; she was the only one of us who was a student, doing a part-time degree in film studies (she was six years into it, though it should have taken three).

Flynn liked action films, gangster films, *Top Gun*, *King of New York*. He lived with his father still, and on very rare occasions he and Pete invited us all over for a movie. Their whole house was crammed with VHS tapes, film reels, DVDs, actor autographs and movie posters. They even had a talking Pee-wee Herman doll which laughed when you pulled a string on its back and a framed letter Stanley Kubrick had sent to Pete.

Flynn had a child though he was only twenty-three, and he'd occasionally bring it to a movie – it carried around a plastic Spider-Man doll missing an arm. Otto or Sally always gave the kid free popcorn and

sweets, and Pete babysat it on shift sometimes. It made Cosmo furious that the child was allowed in the projection room, but he wasn't. Flynn didn't like the mom, who was dull and had already grown out of the soft baby face which had probably appealed to him in the first place. Oddly, she never came into the Paradise, but always waited outside to pick up or drop the kid off for Flynn or Pete. I had seen her loitering, child in hand, a bland sort of girl out in the rain, not passing the old tiles on the threshold.

Lydia liked garish historical and fantasy films like *Interview with a Vampire*, *Barry Lyndon*, *Farinelli* and B horror movies, grindhouse and *The Lost Boys*. I didn't know what my favourite movies were, it felt like I wasn't a fully formed person yet.

Everyone had their place where they liked to sit in the screen. Cosmo liked to sit in the back row, where now and then he could look up at the projection window. Otto sat in the middle of the middle row, his feet up on the chair in front of him if it was just us, Lydia third from the back. Patricia liked an aisle seat, which everyone else thought was sort of philistine, Flynn two thirds into the third back row which he had learned from his dad to be the perfect spot. Paolo hated to sit alone; he waited anxiously till everyone was seated. Whoever he sat beside had to tolerate his constant movement – readjusting his arms, his legs. He often laid his head on the shoulder of whoever was there.

Paolo would also bring a jar of green olives stuffed with pimentos, a soundless snack, and by the end of films his mouth smelled briny and there was nothing left in the jar but cloudy water. On the way home he would empty the jar into a gutter so it wouldn't spill inside his coat.

Before shifts and after shifts we went to see the current films playing, in pairs of twos and threes, not ruining the plot for the other staff members who hadn't seen it yet by discussing it in the bar. Though we sat stretched in our own special seats when no one but us was in the auditorium, we clustered together when it was full of strangers. My nights watching films alone in my room were abandoned, and I became another eye in the creature we made.

# Taxi Driver

Directed by Martin Scorsese

1976

I learned that they had hid a lot from me because they didn't know how trustworthy I was. I wasn't supposed to keep the money I found on the floor when cleaning. It was pooled communally and used to buy alcohol and snacks for movie watching when there was nothing expired to eat from the cinema itself. They must have hated me swallowing up so many of the door usher shifts, and the money that went with them. I had already used all the money I found to buy myself Marlboro Golds, and a second-hand television. I felt terrible about it and added the change from my lunch into the communal pot for a few weeks.

I had swept up a lot of drugs and thrown them away too. These they called scraps. They sorted through them and took dares to take various pills in little plastic bags. Coke was usually wrapped in balls of tin foil. Otto would pass it around on the silver tea tray from the bar. Weed would set off the fire alarms if we smoked it, so Otto took it home and made brownies or cookies for us all with it.

I learned to check behind the diaper changing tables, or behind the toilets where they were often taped to the base. I saw dealers, or rich students from the nearby university, going in and out of the bathroom,

looking for their lost hit. They never suspected us because we were nothing more than shadows to them. Most of the drugs that we found were accidentally dropped by old people. Everyone's favourite shows to clean up after were the ones that attracted old people – the Bolshoi ballets and opera screenings – as there were not just prescription-only painkiller opioids, but also cash and jewellery all over the floors. Though they also left used hankies and a smell of bad breath and cabbage, boiled sweets and illness.

The collected cash and drugs were kept in a bucket in a cupboard of the boiler room, under a pile of unused mop heads. I hid the money in my shoes and the drugs in the waist of my tights until I could give them to someone else or go down to the boiler room. It felt like a dangerous game, but looking back I'm not sure who we were hiding from. Sally probably knew anyway.

Flynn never took any of the drugs; instead he had a pack of beers in the seat next to him. The drugs seemed to have no effect on Otto, he was cool and sober as ice no matter what he took. Lydia, Paolo and Patricia took the most and did crazy things, like try to climb the columns to kiss the nymphs at the top and Otto had to stop them. I took everything too, even though I was afraid the drugs would make cracks in myself, unpleasant stuff leaking out.

We played a game that I imagine is played by cinema workers around the world, a version of hurdles where everyone has to jump over the seat rows, a race to the front of the screen. Otto or Paolo always won because of their long legs, the losers laughing after falling on the floor, high and drunk. If anyone hurt themselves, Otto bandaged them, gave them more alcohol to soothe a bruise. Once, he had to pick up Patricia and rush her to the toilet when she looked like she was going to throw up. She did, down his back. Her beret fell off, and tumbled into the sick on the floor as she said 'sorry' in French over and over again, *désolée, désolée*. We found them both *Gremlins* promotional t-shirts in the marketing storage room to wear. Patricia didn't clean the vomit from her glasses. It hardened and crusted off after a few days.

Otto liked to ask everyone to agree on a film, usually giving such a convincing argument for the one he suggested we all chose it, with the exception of Cosmo who left in a huff when we decided to watch *Raging Bull* on digital.

Whatever we watched was dependent on what was available – sometimes films would be available somewhere to download then suddenly disappear, DVDs impossible to find. Otto said it was rather beautiful – it reminded him of the days before VHS and DVDs, when if you missed a film on the big screen it was pretty much lost forever, and because of that people would go see the same film over and over until it ran no more, reel after reel reused or rotting in studio archives. He did that sometimes at the Paradise; if there was a new release, he came and saw it several times then vowed never to see it again.

We watched unpopular films, tacky films, forgotten films on the screen: *Road House*, *The Lawnmower Man*, *Trancers*, *Beetlejuice*, *Return to Oz*, anything with River Phoenix in it (who they all seemed to worship and who Flynn resembled), shorts from Cosmo's collection, *Alien*, which looked wonderfully visceral on actual film, like a fresh tattoo. Cosmo only agreed to come to the screenings if he had total control over projection and lighting (in actuality, Pete wouldn't let anyone besides Otto use his projectors – not even Flynn – so Otto was breaking the rules by letting Cosmo do it). Anything that was made on film Cosmo refused to watch digitally. He had actually seen very few films because of this. He was only twenty-one.

He did have a point – watching celluloid was like watching moving skin. It even decomposed like skin, it wrinkled and darkened, oozing liquid and eventually turning to dust. He projected *Amarcord* for us on 35mm, and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, because he loved the colours.

It was hard, getting all the customers out at the end of the night.

We had showdowns when we wanted to close. Sometimes Otto would put on some loud music in the bar, death metal or the 1977 *Suspiria* soundtrack, loud enough to almost break the windows, and the customers would stomp out huffing. They were a necessary evil, customers, so that

we, the true devotees, could have access to the screen, our giant godlike monument.

I was taught that if people idled in the screen after a movie, chatting, to clean uncomfortably close to them, or jangle keys for those in the foyer trying to stay inside the Paradise until their bus came because it was raining. Sometimes we frightened customers by pulling down the impossibly noisy metal grate, so they thought they were trapped. When we led them through the bar exit, they practically ran when they reached the door, terrified. We could turn the Paradise, in a moment, from a sweet oldtimey place into a haunted house with a mere flicker of the lights. Lydia and I had to fight a mad drunk girl holding a can of alcoholic cider who slipped under the grate as we were putting it down and threw her cider at my chest and Otto had to pull me off her.

Sometimes after a film, to Otto's chagrin as he just wanted to talk about it in a serious manner for endless hours, we would turn music up really loud on the cinema sound system and dance, through the chairs and onto the stage, a narrow strip of hollow wood where the orchestra pit used to be. On one such night, Otto must have gone into the bar to read and drink whiskey, when he heard someone banging on the bar door. It was the woman who lived upstairs, threatening to call the police because of the noise. Otto sweet-talked her, mentioning the gravity of the situation if she called the police (the Paradise losing its licence, and closing, a noisy bar instead of a generally quiet cinema), while the rest of us, oblivious, drunkenly tried to do the famous dance scenes from *Pulp Fiction*.

The shift after one particularly wild night, Flynn and I were slouched against the shut auditorium doors, hungover as hell, our hands covering our ears to drown out the headache-inducing sounds of the playing movie. We looked up to find Iris standing over us. For a moment I thought she was going to discipline us, but instead she cried, 'I can't find my insulin pen.' There was sweat pouring down her face.

'Did you look in your bag, Iris?' asked Flynn.

She took everything out of her purse and put it on the kiosk counter: her keys, empty yogurt containers and dozens of Paradise cinema tickets, stretching back to before my time, candy, and her pen, which she picked up with a smile.

‘There it is! Now what have you got for me today?’

Cosmo suggested a new film she hadn’t seen yet and which had an R rating, which was playing next. We didn’t want her hanging around in the foyer or the bar for hours.

She nearly lasted till the end of the movie, then came out wiping her eyes with a dirty tissue, almost knocking Flynn and me over as we had resumed our places in front of the auditorium door.

‘I married my cinema manager but he left me for a girl at a department store,’ she moaned, looking at me. She wept into one of her small hands. The film, though she hated it, had put her in a confessional mood. Flynn told me, after Iris left, it had happened many times before: if a film upset her in any way, it brought up the story of her husband, and she once told Lydia that after she discovered her husband was cheating, she closed all the windows and locked all the doors of their house and turned the gas on in the oven with the door open, when her children were home, and was going to light a match if the neighbour hadn’t shown up to bring her some food after hearing about her husband, had smelled the gas and turned it off.

During those otherwise slow hours between films, going in and out, herding the flocks of audiences in and out in great waves, tucking them away in the dark, when the foyer and bar were nearly empty, I became a part of the Paradise. I learned through long, meandering conversations that we had to kill the hours on shift. I learned all of their first crushes, and lost loves, movie stars none of them had met. Anna May Wong, Ivor Novello, Keanu Reeves.

I took certain liberties with my own stories too because no one there had been to the town where I was from or where I had studied. I made up stories about going to the drive-in as a child – my neighbour, who owned a pickup truck, had taken me and my brother to some. Tuning the radio, buying

slushies and popcorn from a van, how the dashboard, wheels, car seats and other vehicles didn't take away from being enraptured. These stories enthralled everyone, especially Otto and Paolo. No one else, besides Sally, had been to the drive-in before because this country was just too rainy for them. In truth, I had seen very few films or TV as a young child, and what I had seemed too sad and obscure to tell everyone about: frightened animated hedgehogs, anthropomorphic crocodiles and insects, cartoons which looked scrappily drawn with dry markers, sentimental Pierrots played by child actors.

Patricia went on and on about the few months she lived in Paris going to cinemas there, and how she once wrote a letter to Jean-Luc Godard asking him to take her virginity, which he hadn't replied to yet, though I doubted she was still a virgin. When not watching movies, she stole impractical, luxurious things: dresses she ruined by wearing on shift, delicate French bras, containers of mascarpone and brie, bottles of lemon Perrier and champagne, Criterion Collection DVD sets. These bad habits soon wore off on me: I stole a black sequin dress which bled all over the Paradise, a box set of Tarkovsky for the group to watch.

Paolo told me he used to work at a cinema called the Nuovo Olimpia in Italy which was a puppet theatre hundreds of years ago before evolving into a cinema and even had an ancient Roman burial ground underneath the floors.

My favourite person to talk to was Lydia, though she blamed a lot of things on mystical occurrences or astrological signs, tied to her belief there was 'bad chakra' under the screen floor. She also loved weird Hollywood stories – the alleged cults in the thirties where participants, many famous actors, would sacrifice lambs, the feud between Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, and cursed films in which actors and crew members died.

After Sally and Flynn, Lydia had worked there the longest, starting part-time when she was in high school. She didn't want to be a manager ever, she said, or get a better job at a different cinema. The job was so easy at this point for her, she barely had to think while working, 'And I like the people.'

\*

It was Flynn who told me the dark mark on the ceiling in the screen was from a fire – a comedy starring Stan Laurel called *Get 'Em Young*. It was a matinee, full of kids, and Flynn said, ‘Little kids smoked in those days, one of them must have let one fall on the floor. Most of them got out, but three died from asphyxiation, all seven years old, and dozens were injured. It was a silent film and some of the orchestra members quit after being shamed in the papers for carrying their instruments out but not kids. The cinema was almost shut down, but the owner managed to shift the mood to anger at cigarettes instead of movies.’

It was Lydia who told me there used to be a balcony in the screen, but they removed it, around sixty years ago, after a girl jumped off it and broke her neck. Lydia drew me in close, saying, ‘The girl was obsessed with the projectionist at the time and would sit as close to the projection booth as possible. She must have only seen him a couple of times, coming and going – but was still madly in love with him. The girl must have been someone important – well, had important parents – because removing thirty seats because of one death isn’t something a cinema would do. Her ghost must still be in the screen. I tried to have a séance in there one night after work, but everyone else was, like, annoyed because they just wanted to watch a movie.’

‘Hellooooo.’

Our conversation was interrupted by Iris, who said she couldn’t remember where the bathroom was – an obvious lie to get attention. After Lydia led her there practically by the hand, Lydia told me that everyone went through a phase of treating Iris nicely because ‘We thought she must one of those rich people who hoards money under their bed and perhaps she’d leave it all to us when she died,’ but Patricia and Lydia, out of curiosity, had been to look around the place she lived, which was named on her membership card, and learned that it wasn’t a mansion in a nice part of town, but a pebbledash complex near an underpass – probably a

government-owned building with dirty-looking toy poodles staring out of grimy windows.

‘Besides owning the Paradise, she’s penniless. I don’t think her children give her much of the cinema income,’ Lydia said to me.

Iris sometimes slept at a hotel a few blocks away from the Paradise, so she didn’t have to make the trip in the morning.

It was one of the most expensive hotels in the city and was a splurge using the allowance from her children. By the end of the month, she had no more presents to give us. She’d look through her purse, making pathetic mewling sounds, ‘I have some pennies in here somewhere,’ and piling receipts, banana yogurt drink mixes (these she liked to put in her tea and stir around to make a nasty curdled stew) and chocolate bar wrappers on the bar or kiosk counter saying she had no cab or bus money. Someone at the Paradise would always end up lending her a few bills.

It was during one such encounter with Iris, while I was on shift with Cosmo – he on ticket and kiosk, and me as usher – that Sally came through from the office to give me some new posters to put up (an upcoming noir season). As she tried to talk to Iris, I saw her peel a sticker off the popcorn maker. After she left, Cosmo said the popcorn machine had failed a safety test a few weeks ago, and that sticker said so and that she didn’t care if it electrocuted us all.

# Teorema

Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini

1968

Sally and Otto had a particular game they liked to play involving film titles, which went something like this:

*'Rosemary's Baby.'*

*'Three Men and a Baby.'*

*'Three Men in a Boat.'*

*'Showboat.'*

They would do it for hours on end, in the office. Otto was Sally's favourite staff member, that was obvious. She kept her distance from the rest of us, as much as she could in such a small place. She bought Otto cheeseburgers and Cajun fries on her lunch break and pulled him into the office for his opinion on film schedules or soda orders. Otto – the only person who had been in her house out of all of us – told us that she had a white plastic Christmas tree up all year, dozens of taxidermy mice and rats from the Paradise in bell jars, a walk-in closet full of clothes, and portraits of all the previous Paradise owners which she'd removed because Iris would always weep when she saw the photo of her dead husband.

Some of Otto's habits seemed adopted from Sally – when Otto talked, he stared off into the distance, chewing a toothpick from the bar, barely

glancing at the person he was speaking to. He was almost always composed.

One of my usher chores was to take all the garbage through the fire exit off the screen which led into a cold hall where the bins were, and a cupboard, which led to a long dark room where out of date posters were stored – it was so full, and so disorganized, you could fall in and sink in a sea of plastic tubes and drown.

As I carried through the heavy bag of garbage, I looked back into the screen while hooking the door open with a chain, and saw, in the third row, a person still sitting there, their neck collapsed against their shoulder. I didn't even think to use my walkie-talkie – that's when I realized how useless they really were in emergencies, how one couldn't describe the indescribable in codified words, hear the ridiculousness of their own scared voice projected into every room. I stood there for I don't know how long, before I ran back through into the main foyer of the cinema until I found Otto, and said, in a hoarse voice, 'The screen, I don't know if dead or sleeping—'

'Right,' he said, and followed me in. I stood near the exit doors as he approached the person. He touched them and they moved.

It ended up being a woman who had fallen asleep after drinking too much. She was fine, and followed him out, groggy eyed and yawning. Otto was carrying a glass wine bottle she had left on the floor.

'It's your responsibility to make sure no one brings glass into the screen,' he said, handing it to me. I didn't know what to say. I felt sour and green inside, and spent the rest of my shift cleaning as carefully as I had on my first day.

We didn't stay in to watch a film that night, though we always had on the nights Otto was manager. Everyone dispersed. I could see Flynn and Lydia and Patricia whispering among each other.

Cosmo told me we might as well go for a drink, just the two of us. 'There are things you need to know about working here,' he said grimly.

He took me to a bar across the street from the Paradise, the one with a green façade and Snow White stained-glass windows that I had been in once before by myself. It was raining outside, so we ran in. There was no music, no television inside, just dark wooden booths full of men with red hairy faces drinking dark beer. Despite his childish face, Cosmo didn't look out of place among them, with his tweed cap and his pea coat. We both ordered a Guinness, Cosmo with a shot of whiskey on the side of his.

'I wasn't working the day shift when it happened, but a few months ago a man died in the screen and Otto had to perform CPR on him. Patricia overheard one of the paramedics say all of the man's ribs were cracked – that Otto had accidentally done it when trying to save the man's life though it was probably too late, there was nothing he could've done. Sally wouldn't let them close the cinema or let Otto have the rest of the day off. She made sure the ambulance carted off the body as quickly as possible so the next round of films could run smoothly, even made them take the body through the fire exit instead of the main door so all the customers in the bar and foyer wouldn't see.'

He paused, and took a slightly dramatic sip of his drink.

'I remember the film, though I wasn't there. It was the Sunday vintage special, sadly on digital, *Accattone* by Pasolini – his first film actually, we were doing a Pasolini season – we had a lot of complaints about it. Sally wasn't happy with it, but Otto and Paolo had organized it.

'There is a lot of nudity and orgies in his films,' he said in response to my confused face. 'We even showed *120 Days of Sodom*. Pasolini was murdered just after he made it, still unsolved. There are worse ways to die than watching a Pasolini film – when I go that would be the perfect way – a good film, a comfortable seat.'

He shifted slightly in his chair, and took out a kit to roll cigarettes with from his pockets. His fingers, pink and yellow, looked too delicate to make cigarettes with the skill he did.

'Now, what I really wanted to talk to you about is joining the union. Sally doesn't think we should unionize because it would be disloyal to the Paradise somehow. Of course, not all staff members at the Paradise agree

with unionization, I will tell you that now, but we are underpaid and no one admits it.'

It was true, I thought, as Cosmo droned on, most of my paycheque was eaten up paying for my cold room, the floorboards and furniture gnawing away at me like a scrap. Everyone's black uniforms were faded, ripped, resewn, stolen, heels were worn and full of holes; we all ate grim lunches: half-price ham sandwiches from the supermarket, wrinkly apples, cheap sweets and chocolate, burnt coffee and tea stolen from the kiosk where the hot water canister, a dented metal thing with a 'hot apple cider' sticker on it, was full of flies and dust and never cleaned.

'... The cracks in the screen ceiling, the bad ventilation... once a drunk male customer broke one of Lydia's wrists... expected to clean up shit and blood in the toilet with nothing but a piss-covered mop...' Cosmo continued as we drank pint after pint, as if he was slowly pulling back a curtain to reveal a film I had heard but didn't admit was playing behind it.

'Sally thinks we are all charity cases she took under her wing, basically unemployable freaks, and so she doesn't have to treat us properly.'

'What do you mean?'

'Did she ask to see your CV when you had your interview?'

'No,' I admitted.

'No one would hire Paolo here with his English – he was half starving and sleeping in hostels when Sally found him lurking in the lobby. He told me in Italy he has a criminal record, he assaulted someone with a knife, I think. This was the first job Flynn has ever had – he got it right after being kicked out of drama school – and Lydia looks like she sacrifices lambs to Satan in her spare time. Patricia is lazy, and god knows where Otto comes from.'

'What about you?' I asked.

Cosmo chuckled. 'I suppose I am an exception – I've been working at cinemas since I was sixteen,' he said proudly, though of course it was a stupid question to ask. Cosmo was fussy about movies, difficult and lazy when he wanted to be. He smoked and drank a lot; I couldn't exactly imagine him working in a supermarket or post office.

‘I could tell you had never worked in a cinema before as soon as you started, but you’ve picked up the trade, kid,’ he said, though I was several years older than him.

‘I didn’t think you would last a week – the girl before you, she lasted five days then was put in hospital for a mental breakdown. That “We’re Hiring” sign is put up a lot, I don’t even know why Sally bothers to take it down.’

I swallowed the rest of my beer.

The next day Otto acted like nothing had happened. I asked Paolo about the story, as we were on shift together again. I kept having to repeat myself because *Navajo Joe* was playing in the screen.

‘I love Pasolini, Otto and I pushed Sally into showing those films,’ he said. ‘But then I couldn’t see most of the films here because I was on shift and they were one-offs. I think Sally did that on purpose.’ He kicked one of the parlour palms, sending dust and spiders everywhere.

I couldn’t ask him any more because at that point, Iris came out of *Navajo Joe*, obviously bored and looking for conversation. Paolo immediately fled into the men’s bathroom where he spent a good hour, leaving me to entertain Iris.

I decided to watch *Accattone* on my own. I didn’t want to miss the movie nights with the others, so I watched it on a rare day off in the morning. I kept trying to guess the scene the man at the Paradise had died in, and how he had died. The film ends with someone dying in an accident, and maybe it happened just like that, an accident at the same time as it happened on screen.

I watched Pasolini’s *Mamma Rosa*, *Teorema*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Arabian Nights*, *Decameron*, *Medea*, *120 Days of Sodom*, always on my days off so that I got behind on doing laundry, all my black clothes smelled like sweat and had beer spilt on them. I liked the ones about urchins, about beautiful and violent men, but his historical films like *Medea*, taking place in treeless

deserts, shadowless bright places where bloodshed was vivid, gave me an unsettling feeling. Those environments were the last place I wanted to end up; I much preferred the damp gloom of a movie theatre, like a cool, peaceful pond to watch the world from.

I got some books on Pasolini from the library, to read more about his death. I found a lot of photos of his murder. He was brutally beaten to death, a gay hustler he had picked up was accused but there were theories it was actually the police, the government, the CIA, or a fascist political party, that one hustler couldn't do so much damage to another person. Pasolini wrote novels and poems along with making films. I liked his poetry, and copied a few lines into my film journal.

*Every real act of the world, of history,  
coagulated in the stream of light,  
in the atrocious distrust of your flame:  
and it was wholly verified within it,  
losing its life in order to regain it:  
and life was real only if beautiful...*

# The Ghoul

Directed by T. Hayes Hunter

1933

There was a Paradise legend that the original owner had built a second screen, a small one, somewhere hidden where he and his friends would watch more risqué films, often in the company of prostitutes.

It wasn't long after I started watching all of Pasolini's films that Lydia suggested we should all do another search for 'The Second Screen'.

It was past 2 a.m., and we were slouched in the cinema seats. We had found a whole unopened packet of prescription codeine on the floor that day, and turned it into a powder we poured into water, and drank it while watching *Night of the Hunter*.

Otto said, 'I know every inch of this building,' and that it was a ridiculous idea.

'I heard the original owner used it to show porno films – silent ones with groups of friends,' said Flynn. 'If we find it, we should have an orgy there.'

'It would have its own projection room attached too, with antique equipment,' Cosmo almost shouted.

Lydia went to the ushers' cupboard and brought back an usher flashlight for each of us. Mine didn't work, but I shrugged.

We split up. I went into the foyer, where all the lights were off so nobody knew we were inside from looking through the windows. I looked behind the kiosk, opening the storage cupboards as if they might contain tiny tunnels inside. I thought I heard people fucking, I probably did, and turned to go back into the screen, kicking the doors open with my foot. Someone had turned off the lights and it took my eyes a moment to adjust. I wasn't in the same screen, it was circular like a medical school auditorium but with the same velvet seats as the regular Paradise screen. At first, I couldn't see a projection screen, but then I saw it high above the seats, where it was impossible to see from some of the angles, and full of holes. Lying on the circular floor, at a distance from me, was a naked man, pallid and bright. His face looked sunken in. I had an awful sense that someone was in the rows of seats, watching me, and ran out.

Everyone else was already in the foyer.

Flynn's boots and jeans were soaked – he had climbed down the trap door into the sewer tunnel, he said, like a ninja turtle (he was bare chested, his shirt wrapped around his head like a bandana, he smelled like muck and was flecked with it), and everyone else looked similarly ruffled. Cosmo was red faced, and chuckling. Paolo went behind the kiosk, grabbed a bag of Maltesers and dumped it into his mouth.

'I found it, just through there,' I said, pointing to the screen doors. 'All the chairs are round and there is a dead naked man lying on the floor.' No one said anything and it took me a moment, in my drunkenness, to realize why.

Lydia opened the doors and looked in. I looked in behind her. The screen appeared as it had before, normal.

The next morning there was a ballet broadcast live from the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, and before we had finished cleaning and unlocked the front doors, there were elderly people waiting on the street and in the foyer.

The customers who came to the ballet broadcasts wore enormous jewels, tweed suits and pashmina shawls. They were silver and hairless with glassy eyes like sardines with gaping, toothless mouths, holding programmes and

sipping flat-looking beer and Pernod from dirty glassware, the occasional one accompanied by a young man in a bomber jacket shifting nervously on his feet, a grandson or a hustler, I couldn't tell.

I liked to sneak into the ballet broadcasts and watch from the back, but never when Paolo was on shift because he hated the ballets and the ballet watchers. I liked the symmetry, the costumes and the weird snake-like faces of the dancers, though I found their tightly pulled-back, thinning hair disconcerting.

Some of the customers who came to see the ballet brought real champagne glasses and silverware – they left a bigger mess than anyone else, but there were always expensive-looking spoons and bits of change on the floors so we didn't mind.

Just as it was starting, Iris came in, wheeling her cart. 'What have you got for me today?' she said.

She was wearing pink trousers, slippers with no socks and a pink scarf wrapped around her head.

'I don't like that, seen that, don't like that either,' she mused, pointing at our list of daily films. One of her hands was stuffed into a small plastic blue glove which could have been a condom. The other hand was caked with makeup and half-sunken in the flesh rings. I wondered if the rings had any value.

'There is always the ballet,' I said.

'Oh, I love the ballet,' she said.

Iris stayed for about twenty minutes of the ballet then wandered out, ice cream on her face, to come talk to the staff members, between the kiosk, where I was sat reading, and the bar. You could hear her voice from most parts of the cinema, besides the screen; it echoed, though it was so childish – like Shirley Temple's voice. Paolo bolted out of the bar, saying he was going to have his lunch break. He was monastic in what he ate in contrast to all the drink and drugs, mashed potatoes with green beans, and other plain vegetables. He was a vegetarian and refused to prepare the nachos in the bar because they contained beef.

I managed to zone Iris out for a while, and she went back into the screen, but then she came back to the kiosk.

‘I’ve clogged the toilet,’ she said in a pleading voice – as she said it, I became aware of the smell.

Iris said she was going to go buy some ginger ale and baking powder from the shop to pour into the toilet and I tried to convince her that she shouldn’t.

Iris rummaged through her carpet bag and took out an open package of liquorice allsorts. ‘It was these that did it. Do you want the rest of them?’

She left them on the kiosk countertop. They looked like miniature plumbing scraps: tiny pipes, valves and funnels darkened by filth.

She returned from the grocery store with a plastic bag full of ginger ale, bleach, boxes of baking powder and containers of plain yogurt. I told her we would have to throw the products out. To get away from her I went up to the bar, though I was supposed to be watching the doors. She could swallow the bleach herself for all I cared, but Otto was at the bar and told me to get back to the door as a film was coming out soon. I said I was just looking for a glass of water, and after pouring myself some, wandered back, full of dread. Iris was excitedly talking to someone who had just come out of a film. Her face was sweating. They looked to me for help, but I ignored them, glad someone else was taking Iris’s attention. Another customer took me by the arm and said there was ‘an incident’ in the accessible bathroom and that his wife (he pointed to a woman with a walker) needed to use it.

Inside, there was a massive shit that took up the whole bowl, like a well-done steak, the water around it stained brown.

The smell was so strong, I threw up in the toilet, right on top of her shit. I flushed it, but the water just rose and spilled onto the floor.

I called Otto on my radio, and he cleaned up the whole mess with a calm efficiency as I looked on, wiping my mouth.

We talked about that shit of Iris’s for days, I don’t know why, I suppose boredom, or that we couldn’t always talk about movies. Like doctors, we knew the intimate details of every customer’s bathroom habits. Patricia

showed me a slyly taken photo of a man who came in once a month and took a shit the size and shape of a small watermelon which clogged the toilet for days. Patricia had chased him down the street to photograph him with her sixties Fujifilm camera so they could ban him entry. He never went to movies, just got the occasional coffee, probably to help his bowel movements, but he always snuck in. ‘We should just turn this into a freak-sized shit museum,’ Lydia said. ‘Cinema is dying anyway.’

‘Popcorn lung,’ said Lydia to me, later that shift. She was cleaning out the popcorn maker with a handkerchief around her mouth, which she took down when she saw me. I had been on a double shift, as Paolo had to call in sick (he was the only one I ever knew to call in sick) and my feet were so sore they felt like rotting pieces of fruit in my Doc Martens. ‘A lot of workers in microwave popcorn factories suffer from it. The chemical in the fake butter flavour puts holes in your lungs. This place is full of poison.’

It was one of the end of the night jobs. I hated doing it – the grates the popcorn sat on were always saturated with a gross gelatinous dust – but all of us snacked on the popcorn anyway.

Lydia was using the popcorn scoop to put the leftover popcorn into a garbage bag – we kept it in a locked cupboard so the rats couldn’t get at it, but they did anyway, the plastic bags almost always had bite tears in them. We had to add yesterday’s popcorn to the fresh popcorn the next day, to save money. I thought I saw something pink among the yellowish and black bits of popcorn, but it disappeared as Lydia inserted the scoop again, upsetting the popcorn. I looked closely at the glass window of the popcorn machine. I saw it again, the pink, a handless little finger with an ugly grey nail. Lydia continued to scoop.

‘There is a finger in there,’ I said. She made stabbing motions with the scoop, sorting through it. ‘No, there isn’t, you probably just saw my hand,’ she said, passing me the trash bag full of popcorn.

As I helped her put things at the kiosk away and turning things off – the tills, the draught Pepsi machine – Lydia told me how, for a while, almost everyone at the Paradise was a water symbol, trying to change the topic, I

suppose. ‘I think we’re drawn to the water underneath the screen. Was it you who destroyed my altar? Paolo gave me the idea – he said in ancient Rome they had a god of the sewers – you know, the pipes always overflowing and the water levels rising, I thought it would help – it seems to. We sometimes have communal dreams about the Paradise being flooded with water, or the screen was turned into a giant fish tank filled with assorted fish... For a while everyone besides me and Sally were Scorpios – it was like a pit full of snakes or ten Norma Desmonds. You haven’t seen *Sunset Boulevard*, have you?’ she said. ‘I will make sure we watch it at the next staff screening. Anyway, everyone fucked each other then left or was fired.’

‘Someone would have to do something real bad to get fired from the Paradise, wouldn’t they?’ I asked.

She shrugged. ‘Luckily there is only one Scorpio left; they are sort of evil, one is enough.’

I had forgotten to ask her who the Scorpio was that day, and never did. It was important to me at the time, but now and then I wonder who it was, and if it was significant at all. It was to her.

My next shift, Cosmo greeted me, a tea towel over his shoulder as always – when on the bar he liked to play the role of bartender: cigarette behind the ear, towel ready to polish glasses, almost in mockery of Otto, who did the same thing with grave seriousness.

‘You wouldn’t believe,’ he said. ‘We had to give Iris another fucking Paradise membership today because she lost hers. She said something about throwing her purse in the bin. She wanted *Sally* to write her up a new membership, and in the manic state Sally is in she made her twenty copies. Iris doesn’t even *need* her membership. She owns the goddamn place.’

He went on to tell me that it happened about once a month to Sally, a sort of mania; sometimes it had good long-lasting effects – she made the beautiful, detailed kiosk and bar menus with all the prices on them, though didn’t do anything else for a whole week, but she also changed all the current Now Playing cinema posters to old films from the forties, some of

which didn't even exist anymore, the reels lost in some Hollywood fire. 'Sally only lets Otto help her on the vintage programming,' he said, rolling his eyes.

# La Bête Humaine

Directed by Jean Renoir

1938

The western season ended, followed by a silent film one, in which Sally hired an accompanying pianist, one of the last ones in the country who knew the jolly sort of ditties suitable to the films and the pace to play them at. He travelled the country, following silent film festivals and seasons. He was a sad-faced man, bags under his eyes and large heavy-looking hands. He wore a grey suit a few sizes too big. Cosmo kept trying to befriend him (taking his hand and saying things like ‘I respect what you do, sir’ and ‘Shame the direction the whole industry is going in, ain’t like it used to be’), though the pianist kept to himself, besides solemn quiet conversations and lunches with Pete, who he had met before somewhere along the line.

The films, a few comedies and romances, weren’t well attended, other than Cosmo, and of course Iris (whose sentiments – ‘They don’t make films that nice these days’ – mirrored Cosmo’s, much to his discomfort).

When the series ended, the noir season began (*In a Lonely Place*, *Angel Face*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Big Sleep* and so forth). I could hardly remember a time when I didn’t work at the Paradise, and I could only count a few times when I did something with people from the Paradise other than watch films in our free time, though I do think that by watching their choice

of movie, I got to know them in a deep intimate way, like sleeping beside each other and having the same dream.

Otto didn't have that particular loyalty to the Paradise that Sally had; he said there were certain films that were just not good to see there.

There was a large Cineplex the size of a skyscraper in the same city as us that he liked to go to, mostly to see action and 3D films, and one day he got the idea that we should go and see as many films as we could in one go, to see how long we could last. It had thirty screens on several levels. It had been built on the site of a twenties theatre called the Apollo which was torn down.

It had no analogue projectors so of course Cosmo didn't come. Otto wore a long dark pea coat, jeans, a baggy cardigan, a red beanie, combat boots. Paolo wore a brown bomber jacket and a black Velvet Underground t-shirt with a banana on, black jeans and trainers. Lydia had dressed up, a dark purple dress, fishnet stockings and a black leather jacket. She was wearing blue lipstick and plastic earrings shaped like red lips. I was just wearing the same clothes I wore to work, a faded black sweatshirt, a black pencil skirt, a pair of tights with a run in them and Doc Martens.

It was morning, the Cineplex had just opened. We had coffee and bags of supermarket donuts we had picked up along the way. We also brought knapsacks full of beer and food and smoked a few joints before we went inside.

We would pay for one film then slip in and out of others all day, as all the screens were past the ticket barrier.

It was grim, I thought, everything a dark shade of blue or grey with fluorescent lights, signs advertising blockbusters and meal deals. The staff wore purple baseball caps, polo shirts, headsets and nametags. They all looked about sixteen years old. I didn't know how old Otto or Lydia or Paolo or anyone was, besides Cosmo because he told me his age proudly. We were all still kids if you judged us by our job description.

There was a Baskin-Robbins ice cream stall, and kiosks selling hotdogs, French fries and popcorn that came in dozens of flavours and colours. Paolo bought a large draught Coke and Otto one of the hotdogs. 'We used to have

hotdogs at the Paradise, but the heater was fucked and the dogs would explode all the time,' he said.

'They looked like dicks, all purple, grey and nasty,' said Lydia.

Otto grinned and ate his.

We watched an action movie, part of a series – I hadn't seen the first two but Otto said it didn't matter – then some romantic comedies, and a First World War film which just felt like a videogame. My whole body was sore by the third film. Otto gave each film equal weight, discussing its merits and failures, films I would have just dismissed.

I was horribly thirsty and drunk and got up to get a drink during the trailers of the fourth film. I bought a large draught orange soda with ice, and chewed the ice cubes.

I couldn't remember what screen we were all in and if the movie had started, whatever it was – none of us knew until the feature began because we didn't have tickets. I vainly searched for their silhouettes – Paolo the tallest.

I finally saw Otto's head; he was sitting alone in the centre of a screen where the feature had started. Lydia and Paolo weren't beside him and I felt a tight confusion. His head was moving in an odd way. He suddenly threw it back, as if he had been hit in the chest with something. There was no one else in the screen, it took me a moment to realize. I couldn't remember if it was the film we had been sitting in and if anyone else had been there too. Something told me not to go sit down beside him.

The Cineplex had multiple escalators and elevators. I thought about leaving, as I passed a giant window one of the escalators looked out on, but I had to pee.

I found Paolo alone in a women's bathroom on the third floor, standing against the wall, his hands behind his back, his gaze lingering on his own reflection in the mirror.

When he saw me behind him in the mirror, he turned around, like sudden daylight in a movie scene that passes over an auditorium and catches the viewer, almost blinding them. His face looked flushed and messy, though he wasn't wearing any makeup. I found it difficult to breathe

or blink, looking directly at him. His arms outstretched and imitating a monstrous sound, he lurched towards me. He put his hands on my neck and said, in a mock bogeyman voice, 'I am sick of watching movies.' He pressed my throat hard with his fingers.

I moved into him, entranced; he was a whole reality in that moment, a beautiful, moving image made of flesh. Looking back, I think maybe if I had walked into that screen the same thing would have happened with Otto, another shadow dressed in black. I like to tell myself that.

I don't know how long we were in that bathroom. We had sex on the sink counter, and again on one of the toilets and against the walls, holding each other quietly in a tight bathroom stall embrace whenever someone else came in. Kissing him, I thought of the plaster heads along the Paradise ceilings, couples caught in an eternal kiss.

'Hello?' Lydia called my name. 'Are you in here? We've been looking all over for you.' Paolo pushed me out of the stall we were in. His face was swollen looking, mine must have been too.

Lydia's blue lipstick was smeared and she smelled like she had spilt beer all over her dress. 'I've been looking everywhere for you, Otto and Paolo,' she said. 'I've been in and out of dozens of films. The staff are starting to stare at me.'

'I don't remember what movie we were watching,' I said.

'It's only 4 p.m. and I already feel crazy,' she said.

I followed her into an auditorium with a blank screen and the lights on. Otto wasn't there. Halfway through the trailers, Otto and Paolo sat down beside us. Paolo took my hand and played with it.

It was the same movie as the first we saw that morning but we stayed and watched it anyway.

It was empty this time, except for the four of us, so we felt free to talk. Otto said he preferred it this way, or even watching movies at home because it always took him about fifteen minutes into the film to adjust to the other people there, their presence, sounds and smells, so he could never remember the first fifteen minutes of any film he saw in public.

‘Don’t you think it’s amazing,’ Otto said, ‘that customers, despite the disdain and general disrespect they have for us, trust us when they are so vulnerable? I mean, sitting in the dark, their backs turned to the door.’

‘No phone reception,’ Lydia said. ‘At least not in the Paradise.’

‘I sometimes put the bins out in front of the fire exit before everyone has left the screen – I don’t care if they burn,’ laughed Paolo.

‘It would be so easy to bolt the entrance doors and the fire exits, and shoot everyone,’ I said.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, before Paolo said, ‘Yes, like in *Inglourious Basterds*. An explosion too. I would like to shoot everyone from the front.’ He pointed with his Nosferatu hands towards the screen and made childish shooting sounds before returning them to the folds of my hands and thighs.

At 10 p.m., Otto suggested we all go to theirs, for a nightcap. ‘No more movies,’ said Lydia, yawning. Before we left the Cineplex, she put on a fresh coating of blue lipstick, which with the circles under her strained eyes from so many films made her look dead.

The Paradise was a place built for lovers. Cupboards, forgotten rooms, corners, rooms enrobed in dark the majority of the day. Customers never noticed Paolo and me in the back of the screen, we blended in more than them because of our black clothes.

Sometimes I felt like he was one of the plaster male nymphs, who had fallen off the ceiling, into my arms, beautiful and bloodless looking.

Turning my head towards the light of the screen, I often thought I saw Paolo and me up there, magnified, like a star couple – Maverick and Charlotte in *Top Gun*, Jim and Catherine in *Jules and Jim*, Daisy and the mysterious young man in Hitchcock’s *The Lodger*, though we were nothing more than rats fucking in the dark and gathering crumbs to eat.

Paolo went down on me in the back row while a matinee of the live action *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was playing, and I ate a bag of Minstrels I had stolen from the kiosk. Now and then I stuck one of the Minstrels in my vagina for Paolo to eat out. I came all over the seat, a damp

indecipherable puddle warm like used dishwater, and when we left the screen, both our faces were covered in brown, sweet chocolate stains. Minstrels were my favourite type of candy.

I snuck him through the window of my bedroom – I liked how in the light I could see the tattoo of a fat angel on his arm, and his oddly shaped rib, like the corner of a table.

I didn't think Paolo and I were too obvious – though now and then I called someone else to clean the screen just in case, though if Paolo heard my voice, he usually came. That was my favourite time to make love, when the credits were rolling; we had to finish before the lights came up, the intermission music started – usually the *Paris, Texas* soundtrack – and Pete could see from his projectionist's window.

I remember the first time we had sex in the auditorium, Paolo coming in carrying a broomstick, and wearing too large yellow plastic gloves as he always did when cleaning the screen as he didn't like germs, which was hypocritical of him because he put earrings off the floor straight in his ears.

'You start at the bottom, I'll start at the top,' he said.

When we met in the middle, with full garbage bags, he placed his on a chair and took off his gloves. He told me to sit down. I did, and leaning over me he tried to choke me again. This time, his hands really squeezed and I passed out.

I came to on the floor. I had slipped off the chair.

The intermission song hadn't progressed that much, some cheery number by the Specials, so I hadn't been out for long. I felt my throat. Paolo was hurriedly finishing sweeping up all the popcorn. I got up, and began haphazardly gathering used soda cups while trying to stop myself from coughing. 'Why the hell did you do that?' I said in a choked voice. Only when we had picked up all the trash, and he dropped the full garbage bag, did he kiss me, and pull me down onto a chair. He lifted my skirt up and my tights down, and I felt around for his odd rib before undoing his black trousers.

'I'm going to cum,' he said, trying to shove me off.

I grabbed a half-empty cardboard popcorn box out of the trash bag at our feet to catch his semen as I pulled myself away, and held it over his dick. The semen would've been obvious on the chairs, the floor and our black clothes – I had found it plenty of times from customers. I threw the sticky popcorn into the trash bin on our way out.

Once we were messy cleaning up after ourselves (it had been in the middle of a film, in the back seats, we were interrupted by a customer getting up to go to the bathroom), and Cosmo who was usher that evening complained that 'someone jizzed all over the back seats', and wouldn't let it go for weeks, complaining that we weren't a porno theatre and customers had an odd choice of films to get off to, repeating again the story of how he once had to tell a woman to leave a screening of *Strangers on a Train* because she was masturbating loudly and because he had to use an usher's flashlight he had seen things he had never hoped to see, 'worse than the bathtub scene in *The Shining*'.

From then on I always grabbed a box of popcorn to catch Paolo's semen as I pulled myself away, and held it over his dick.

We never had sex in a screen if Iris was in there, as she was the type of viewer who looked at the other customers as much as the film, smiling stupidly. Her presence was something curdled and ugly.

Sometimes Iris would just stand in the foyer or the bar, staring at one of us blankly, giving a little wave if we looked in her direction. When she wasn't talking her face had a strange, doll-like emptiness to it and I imagined her filled with nothing but fluff and maggots.

# A Matter of Life and Death

Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger,  
aka 'The Archers'

1946

Sally told us that we had been chosen to premiere a new film. It was historical, some sort of thing in the style of *Braveheart*, about Mary Queen of Scots, but Sally was very excited. She thought it would make us important enough to be part of the film festival again. We were the cinema where the festival had first started but somewhere along the line we stopped being used in favour of other, bigger ones. Iris's children, Sally said, had been listening to her idea to get a new screen for the cinema, as the one we had was very old – if you jumped up on the stage and looked closely there were scratches and tiny holes all over it.

The film had some big-name actors, none of whom were from this country, but had been trained to do the accent, according to media reports which Cosmo complained about.

'Plenty of good actors here, like our poor old Flynn.'

Sally ordered us special uniforms: white button-down shirts, black trousers or skirts (she was insistent on all the girls wearing skirts), plaid bowties and waistcoats like high-end hotel staff.

The cinema was still open that morning for a couple of matinee shows before we closed to prepare for the premiere. The cinema was always open – every day, even Christmas, for the lonely people who wanted to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* and had nowhere else to go.

I was on a kiosk shift that morning, leaning on the popcorn maker, reading, when Iris came in. She told me to get her an ambulance because she didn't feel well. I called one just so they'd take her away, but she was off-put that I actually did, all she wanted was attention. She went into the bar and ordered a glass of pineapple juice and a bag of peanuts.

The ambulance came for Iris, but they didn't take her with them after checking her blood pressure, and the paramedics shrugged, leaving her there for us to deal with, whimpering and trying to look sweet.

After we pulled down the grate, at 3 p.m. more staff members showed up and we had to clean from top to bottom, scrubbing the walls, vacuuming every crevice, dusting light fixtures.

Sally turned up wearing a tartan dress with a fifties prom cut, a black cardigan, and her hair was without her turban. It was shaped like a small beehive and dyed the colour of cherry flavoured candy. She had clearly spent all morning getting ready. To my surprise, she had a cane with her, which Lydia whispered to me was because Sally suffered from gout in one leg, and it flared up when she was under stress. 'Sally eats many pepperoni sticks and too much pâté.'

After cleaning the nymphs in the screen, standing on a ladder as Paolo held it, I was asked to make the women's bathroom 'sparkle', as Sally put it. She gave me a pair of scissors to cut any ripped ends of toilet paper. I looked at myself in the mirrors as I sprayed them with bright blue glass cleaner. I was puffy-looking, fat, pasty. A life of booze, popcorn, hotdogs, and sitting still in the dark. Cleaning the cinema wasn't enough to work it all off. I had a big boil on one cheek. My black bob was frizzy – Sally would probably put product in it when I went upstairs. I opened my eyelids of one eye with my fingers like in *Un Chien Andalou*. I held the scissors against my eyeball, feeling the cold metal, for a moment, before I saw

Paolo in the mirror behind me. I dropped the scissors and we went into one of the stalls, taking off each other's clothes.

We were stopped by a moan that wasn't ours. There was a puddle of pee on the ground, coming from the next stall. It was dark pee, the colour of tea.

Paolo and I let go of each other and banged on the next stall. The door was locked but the locks were made to be easy for staff to pick with their fingernails. I often just locked the doors from the outside if they had a shitty mess in them, rather than clean it.

Iris was inside, slumped against the toilet, still as a toad. Her shopping cart was beside her. I didn't know how to check a pulse: something about the neck, the wrist? I touched my own wrist and felt nothing. She moaned more and moved one of her hands. She said something about calling her an ambulance, help. We stared at her. Neither of us touched her, but we watched as her life ended, the credits rolled on her existence, leaving behind her now unseeing eyes, two blue and white blobs of flesh in a mound of hair, fabric and chewed-up cinema food. Paolo fled, running back up the bathroom stairs.

I stood there a while longer, doing nothing – Paolo didn't return – until I finally reached for my walkie-talkie which hung loosely off my unbuttoned skirt.

'Ladies' bathroom to manager,' I said into my radio, sitting on the bathroom stairs for reception.

Otto came down, whistling.

I pointed dumbly towards the stall.

He crouched down and felt around her neck.

'Dead,' he said. 'But we still need to get an ambulance.'

He didn't have a phone on him: only Sally was allowed to have a phone on her while on shift, so he called Sally with his own radio.

I had already felt high from all the chemicals and bleach that I had to use, and thought with panic that I might have killed her with the fumes. Sally appeared behind us, gently pushed past me and leaned down and checked Iris too.

She spoke at last. 'If we call an ambulance and the police, they'll be here for hours, we'll have to cancel the premiere.'

She paused. 'Let's put her in the boiler room, and call the police when the movie is over, after everyone has left.'

I don't remember either Otto or I saying yes or no. I shifted around all the premiere standees in the foyer to block us from being seen carrying Iris's body the six feet between the women's bathroom and the boiler room steps parallel to them, while Sally told the rest of the staff to go clean the screen though they already had. 'Give it a second scrub,' she said. 'Make her sparkle.'

The only face who saw was the actress on the standee, surrounded by fake red hair.

'I can handle it,' said Sally, dragging Iris by the arms.

Otto didn't listen and took one side of Iris. As they were carrying her, her false teeth fell out. I picked them up; they were wet. They looked like they had never been cleaned. Just as dirty and rotten as real teeth.

I handed them to Sally once they got the body in the boiler room, carefully carrying it down the stairs, Otto holding her arms and walking backwards, Sally her legs. They lay her on the boiler room floor. Following them down, I suddenly thought of the drug bucket, not three feet away from where they put her. Otto gave me a look that said he'd take care of it.

Sally put Iris's teeth back in. Otto leaned over Iris and closed her eyes with his fingertips.

'You shouldn't do that,' said Sally. Otto stood back, as Sally made a fuss over Iris's face, and her dead eyes were revealed again.

Sally wiped off her dress, put a few stray hairs from her beehive back into place.

They debated whether to lock the boiler room door, and ended up not, because Iris needed a way to have gotten in there, even though there was a risk someone at the premiere would wander in, mistaking it for a bathroom. She told me to go clean the bathroom again.

I was sick in one of the toilets. Iris had had a little bit of dried soup on her face. I cleaned up my own mess. The toilet in the stall Iris had died in

was unflushed, full of piss, and I flushed it in a panic, thinking of the police finding her piss and being able to gather all sorts of information from it. I finished scrubbing the rest of the stalls.

Paolo was upstairs, changing all the light bulbs in the bar, even the ones that worked, under Sally's instructions. He kept dropping them; the floor was covered in broken glass. Dazed, I went to get dressed in one of the white shirts and plaid bowties Sally bought all of us to wear. I was put on the door for the premiere. Paolo was sent home, much to his relief, though I think Sally did it because she thought his Italian accent was too thick to speak to celebrity customers. Sally gathered us all in the foyer and told us how to curtsy and stand, lessons from her beauty queen days. Sally worked with me on the door – I don't know why she chose me for the door when I was the newest, maybe to keep an eye on me – nodding for me not to check the tickets of celebrities she recognized and I didn't. It passed in a daze, Sally fluttering between the projection room and the screen, quietly going through the doors to make sure it was running smoothly. Lydia was made to hand out tiny glass bottles of French sparkling water to everyone attending; Flynn, Otto and Cosmo had to hand out popcorn at the kiosk. I kept trying to catch Otto's eye, but he avoided mine.

I could barely tell who was a celebrity and who wasn't, but I didn't care anymore. I recognized the actress from the giant standee we used to cover carrying Iris. She was wearing a pink gown, but her hair was blonde now. She clung to the arm of a friend and was loudly singing a New Kids on the Block song ('Popsicle'). Lydia, Cosmo and I all stood in the hall, near the men's bathroom where Sally told us to. Flynn and Patricia were on the bar, which had been turned into a VIP area the rest of us weren't allowed into. When the film was halfway through, one of the actors – I didn't know who was who but he made sure to tell us over and over which part of the film he was in – came out, red wine all down his shirt, and tried to chat up Lydia and kept grabbing her elbow. All I could think of was the hideous chore that awaited us.

After we had let everyone out and congregated in the office, Sally said, 'You can all go home, thank you very much for making it a magical night.'

She smiled.

Otto sat in the chair at the next desk, legs stretched out, chewing on a toothpick.

‘You sure? What—’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Sally said firmly, cutting me off. ‘Otto and I will close up.’

The rest of us went to the stained-glass pub, for whiskey. We all took off our plaid bowties and laid them in a pile on the table.

‘You look like you’ve had the worst night of your life,’ Cosmo said to me. ‘Me fucking too,’ he added, downing his whiskey then getting up to order another. Flynn and Patricia were so drunk they couldn’t even make it to the bar to order anything. They had been drinking throughout his shift on the Paradise bar, I could tell. I wonder if Paolo had told him. We all went to Lydia, Paolo and Otto’s after the bar closed. Paolo was watching a movie by himself in the living room.

I joined him, but didn’t say anything. We clutched each other like orphans. The others poured more drinks. Paolo and I were waiting for Otto to come home. I didn’t see the movie, I don’t remember which one it was, I only saw Otto confronting Paolo and me, projected onto the wall, asking us why we didn’t call an ambulance, or try to save Iris. I could tell Paolo could see what I was watching too.

When Otto did return, long after the movie had finished, he looked tired and sober, hair covered with a black beanie, a striped grey, yellow and blue wool scarf around his neck, one of those scarves from a fancy college. It was from a women’s college in fact. He had found the scarf in the Paradise lost and found box. He told us Iris was dead but didn’t say how or where.

‘Her family doesn’t like the Paradise, thinks it’s like chucking money into a pit, we might all lose our jobs,’ said Lydia, throwing back her drink.

‘For shame,’ Cosmo said in an old-fashioned voice to her, but I knew he was thinking that too, we all were.

We decided to have a wake of sorts, that night. We drank ourselves stupid. Paolo officiously placed and lit candles all over the living room. His hands shook while he did it. We were even joined by Pete who brought an

old bottle of whiskey after Flynn called him and told him what happened, everyone except Sally. I had always been a little afraid of Pete – he was like a troll under a bridge when it came to his projection room, but he was fatherly and nostalgic that night, pouring us whiskey and patting us on the back, saying it wasn't the end of the world. He told us Iris's favourite film was *The Red Shoes* – he had packed up his personal projection equipment and brought it to her house to play it for her a few times on her birthday over the years, along with a white bedsheet because the wallpaper and bedspreads in her house were too floral to see a film clearly, though once he had forgotten it and she said go ahead and project it on the wall, and so he did, among the paper cabbage-sized roses and thin, insect-like ferns, stained with damp. Iris had studied ballet too, Pete said, while working at the Regal Cinema.

'That was my first projectionist's job, at the Regal. Iris used to take off her cigarette and snack case and do pirouettes down the aisles at the Regal, before she was married. Her husband fell in love with her in the cinema aisles.'

I looked over at Paolo, whose face was twisted in devilish terror, like Conrad Veidt's.

'He brought me over to the Paradise when he bought it, an ambitious immigrant, he brought the Paradise back to life,' Pete continued. 'We outta have a Powell and Pressburger season to remember them. They both loved Powell and Pressburger films.' He looked at Otto. 'Let's order the reels tomorrow,' he said. Cosmo cleared his throat. I thought he would say 'for shame' again.

'Flynn was conceived in the Paradise, in the cellar – those days were wild,' Pete later said after a few more drinks. 'When he was born Iris gave him a bottle of sherry to drink when he was of age. Have you drunk it yet, Flynn?'

Flynn shook his head and replied that he didn't know where the bottle was – he had never seen it. 'Iris gave me a large tin of apple juice and a packet of chewing gum when Pete jr was born.'

We walked around the subject of what would happen to the Paradise, too afraid to touch it. We had realized it was made out of glass and paper.

I woke up on the couch with a blanket tossed over me. The floor was littered with bottles and cigarette butts on tea plates. I had had a weird dream where I was dancing dressed as Charlie Chaplin in front of a bored Paolo.

Paolo was asleep on the other couch, topless, I could see his odd rib move up and down as he breathed in his sleep. He had purple blotches all over his neck. I wasn't sure if they were from me or not. I went into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water. I was supposed to work that morning. I grabbed a black fuzzy sweater I saw on one of the kitchen chairs, put it on and ran out. It smelled like Lydia.

\*

Everything opened as usual. Sally was in the office. Cosmo said he overheard her talking to Iris's children on the phone but she wouldn't tell us anything.

'What if this place is turned into a restaurant? There is a chain that's already done that to two cinemas here,' Cosmo said, then shook himself, as if to kill the thought.

Iris kept appearing in my dreams. Her body expanded out from the boiler room like dough until it filled every seat and crevice in the Paradise. Every person who went in to see a film came out with her face when the film was finished.

Paolo told me that all the Paradise toilet seats turned into her face and talked whenever he tried to sit down on them.

He also had a recurring fear that if he rewatched all the films he knew like the back of his hand, all the actors would be turned into her, as if Iris was the only plot, the only person, in the entire world. We spent all of our free time watching his favourite films over and over on Otto's projector to

dispel his nightmares, but she reappeared, sometimes with the blonde hair of Greta Garbo, sometimes in black and white. I started to see her in the films too.

Paolo and I kept waiting for Sally to tell us that the police were going to interview us, but it seemed as if she and Otto had dealt with it, swept Iris under the carpet, so to say.

‘Should we put her picture up in the death frame?’ asked Patricia. It was a black frame where we put a picture of a famous actor or director whenever they died. But of course, we didn’t have a picture of Iris. No one did. Instead, Cosmo put a picture of John Wayne, her favourite actor, with her name written over him, a question mark to denote her year of birth, and our current year. At some point during the day, someone took it down. Nobody saw who.

I was desperate for my moments in the dark with Paolo on shift, but he was like a papier mâché sculpture turning to paste in the rain in my arms. I thought we could cover the sound of Iris’s deathful moans but my kisses brought them back to him. I followed him down the aisle of the screen during a show after he fled from me in the back seats where I found him. We both crawled on our hands and knees passing the front seats. When I caught up to him and grabbed his face with my hands, they were sticky from melted candies on the carpet.

We still slept with each other in our apartments, but he wouldn’t touch me in the Paradise anymore. Iris was nowhere now, but she was everywhere, the red walls, the mirrors, the projector, the uneaten pots of chilli.

It was a few days before we knew what was going on with the Paradise ownership.

The children of Iris, with Sally’s help, organized selling the Paradise to a big cinema chain called CinemaTown. Cosmo was livid because the company had been in the papers for treating its staff badly and not

recognizing their unions, but everyone else was glad the Paradise wasn't closing, or being turned into a pub like so many other cinemas.

Before Sally told us, Cosmo found out from a local newspaper article and confronted her in the bar when she came through to pour herself a glass of water.

'When were you going to tell us?'

Sally replied that CinemaTown would let her keep the personality of the Paradise as it was, 'as it is an institution, the oldest running cinema in the city', but the financial influx 'would be helpful to maintain the cinema. They are going to fix the hole in the screen ceiling, and finally replace the screen with a new one, which means we will be eligible to join the film festival again.'

'Fat chance some of that money will end up in our paycheques,' muttered Cosmo.

'You don't know how close we were to becoming a restaurant, Cosmo,' Sally said, marching back to the office.

'Have you made out yet that Sally isn't American?' he said loudly to me. 'Bet she wasn't born two streets from here, she used to work in the shoe section of a department store before she was given the job here, she had a *special* relationship to the old owner.' Though still on shift, he poured himself a pint of beer from the one beer tap, which had a cheerful Alpine scene on the handle.

The new bosses paid us a visit from out of town and Sally made us scrub the Paradise till it almost fell apart. The bosses were an older bespectacled woman with nasty teeth, like a random assortment of popcorn and candy found on a cinema floor – I didn't understand why a CEO had such nasty teeth if they made so much money – and an angry-looking bald muscly man with round spectacles who kept interrupting Sally with gruff comments as she tried to explain the history of the Paradise. Going into the bar, he said, 'A little UB40,' referencing what was playing on the sound system, and did a stupid dance with his muscly arms.

Cosmo ignored them and refused to shake their hands, Sally making excuses as she finished the tour with them and brought them into the office for a long meeting.

The first thing the new bosses did was make Pete redundant. With digital, projectionists are no longer necessary, they said, and all cinemas need to cut costs, 'digital projectors just took a button or two to work'. Of course, they just told that to Sally and made her do the dirty work of firing him.

'Forty years, that's how long Pete has worked here, forty years,' said Cosmo. To him, older projectionists were gods, and he didn't see Pete's firing as an opportunity to get into the projection room more often. It spelled a dark future for Cosmo. 'I heard, through union contacts, they've fired projectionists up and down the country at cinemas they bought up,' he said.

It was awful to see Pete clean out the projection room of the things accumulated over the four decades he had sat in there. Flynn, on usher that day, helped him pack it up, and watched his father leave, taking his cardboard box with his kettle and posters, and a few odd film reels, home on a bus. Pete was lost in the outgoing crowd, as a film ended in the screen. Flynn said, in a dead voice, that he was going to clean it. It was five minutes till the next film and Flynn wasn't back from cleaning the screening. I radioed him and he responded by singing 'Blue Velvet' into his walkie-talkie in a slurred voice.

He was lying down on the floor between two rows of seats. He was surrounded by cups and bottles. He had drunk the dregs of all the leftover drinks from audience members.

I went to the bar and filled a container with ice and a cup with coffee quickly, with shaky hands, ignoring customers who kept trying to give me orders. Otto, who was working on the bar, asked what I needed the ice for and I said nothing as I took them into the screen. I made Flynn stick his face in the ice, and while he drank the coffee, I cleaned up the rest of the bottles and popcorn boxes.

Throughout the night, until close, I kept bringing him cups of water and coffee. His drunkenness wasn't as noticeable on the door as it would have been if he was working at the kiosk, or worse, the bar.

From then on, either Sally or Otto did the projection, but they had to do it on top of everything else. Sometimes it felt like no one was running the films, and watching one felt unpredictable, like sitting on a train with no driver.

They fell behind on orders and we ran out of popcorn kernels and had to run to various supermarkets and buy twenty small bags of pre-made popcorn, dumping them into the popcorn machine.

Otto said it was awful weird being in the projection room with all of Pete's stuff gone. He still ran films for us at shut-ins and, more often, let Cosmo do it.

Cosmo refused to acknowledge Sally in any way on shift after Pete's firing, and there was a tension of who would be next. I thought it would be me, because I was the newest, but then Pete had been there longer than all of us combined.

'Sally had all these stupid ideas which have cost more than it probably would have to keep a projectionist,' Cosmo told me. 'The massive chandelier in the foyer – that isn't original. Same with the wallpaper in the bar – Sally ordered it specially from some antique store. I remember when she thought we should serve hotdogs at the ticket kiosk – the hotdogs in this glass box full of tepid water all day – Iris was the only one who'd buy them and the foyer smelled like hotdogs for months after Sally gave up on the idea. For a while she also had us bring the ice cream through into the cinema on little trays while wearing gold braid hats like monkeys, and peanuts too. Patricia tripped after the screen lights went down while she was serving someone. The ice cream stains are still there. I'm sure the hats are still there in the marketing room with all the other rubbish Sally bought.'

# Nights of Cabiria

Directed by Federico Fellini

1957

We had an idea to campaign for Pete to get his job back, but Sally told us the Paradise was closing for a month to be renovated. It was exactly what she had wanted – the screen needed a desperate makeover, and the premiere had convinced the new owners it was necessary, that the Paradise was still an important cinema.

We didn't know what would happen to us all, with no hours to work.

'They'll just hire a bunch of new people if we quit, and like we are going to find other jobs in six weeks?' said Cosmo.

'But it will take weeks to train them – they wouldn't have our expertise, wouldn't know the building like we do,' Lydia said.

Cosmo finally managed to get everyone to sign a 'Paradise Cinema Union' card, a mini branch of the largest TV and Film Union in the nation, with the exception of Otto, and Sally of course. Patricia helped him make them; after him she was the keenest, probably because she felt like a character in *La Chinoise*. She started to wear a hammer and sickle pin to work on her jumper.

'I'm not surprised Otto doesn't want a union card,' Cosmo said. And he whispered *scab* under his breath when he walked past him.

In the days before the closing, Otto ignored all of our efforts to speak to him and went about his tasks mechanically.

Paolo kept saying he didn't want to work in a cinema anymore anyway, he'd rather be a waiter or a hustler, but he didn't make any effort to apply for any new jobs. He feigned half-heartedness, while I put as much work as I could into the campaign to keep our jobs. We had sex with an angry desperation in my bedroom or his, drinking cans of stout and smoking, until we both felt red and raw, as if we had been scrubbed clean.

Pete said he didn't want to fight for his job, he was too old and wanted to spend more time with his grandson.

Cosmo and Patricia turned Cosmo's bedroom into an office, and we typed out letters to newspapers and government officials on Patricia's half-broken typewriter, painting signs to stick outside the Paradise and on the surrounding streets. We all, with the exception of Otto, spent a lot of time in Cosmo's bedroom (Patricia's room was unimaginably filthy too – the walls were painted black), which had stripped wallpaper and a single postcard of Jean Cocteau tacked to one wall; a perfectly ironed sheet was taped to another for a screen (he was saving up to buy a good one). On those days, Harold Lloyd was silently dangling from clocks watching over us all while we painted and wrote, smoking cigarette after cigarette and drinking expired beer. Cosmo even had a wooden harmonium to play – he had bought it at a junkshop – during silent films, though he wasn't satisfied when any of us tried under his instruction.

'Half the keys are fucking broken on it anyway,' Lydia said, trying to bang out 'Tea for Two'.

It was Lydia's idea that we write to different directors and actors, including ones famous for leftist political associations, and ask them to make a public outcry. Quite a few did.

Sally, like Otto, ignored our signs, our anger, and went about her day as if she was blind to them. 'She thinks we should sacrifice ourselves to the cinema like lambs,' said Cosmo. She came out of the office less and less, as did Otto. Whenever any of us entered, they stopped talking, quietly typing away or sorting through papers.

A newspaper ran an article: 'PARADISE CINEMA LETS STAFF GO AT BEGINNING OF RENOVATIONS'.

The article embarrassed CinemaTown enough that the company agreed to pay us at eighty per cent of our wages for the months of renovation.

After the Paradise closed and the renovations started, we wandered like orphans from cinema to cinema in the city, watching movies, but soon enough none of us could afford it anymore as the eighty per cent of a minimum wage didn't go far.

Review cinema, our main competitor, gave all the Paradise staff free entry to films (I think because they wanted some attention), but cut us off as we went almost every day and Cosmo kept complaining to the manager whenever they let in other customers late. Otto had stopped inviting us over to his place for films, and Paolo and Lydia grumbled whenever I mentioned it. Otto had taken his projector into his bedroom, put away in its box, shut away like a glass eyeball a blind man no longer wanted to use.

We all squished ourselves into Cosmo's tiny, smokefilled bedroom for movies. During that period, I don't think any of us watched a film made after the sixties because of Cosmo. *La Grande Illusion*, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, *Pandora's Box*, *M*, Mayakovsky's *Fettered by Film* in which a man falls in love with a ballerina on a film poster and she comes to life, but she isn't happy without a screen to live on. He pins tablecloths, napkins and bedsheets all over the rooms of their apartment for her to exist on. He breaks into cinemas and cuts the screens off with a knife and steals them.

We became afraid the Paradise would never reopen at all. It was my idea that we go at night, to see the progress of construction.

It was raining outside, so we cowered under Patricia and Cosmo's collection of shabby umbrellas, Flynn, Paolo, Lydia, Patricia, Cosmo and I. The main entrance of the Paradise was boarded up with wood and metal, and the marquee sign was turned off, not even with a message saying it was temporarily closed.

Cosmo rattled the wooden boards, trying to get in.

‘There is noise in there, they can’t be doing construction at night, that’s not legal,’ he said.

We all pressed our ears against the boards. It was music, not the sound of drills.

‘It’s from a film, I don’t remember which,’ Flynn said. He slurred; drunk.

The song sounded familiar to all of us, but no one could name the film. ‘Otto would know,’ said Cosmo, a tone of respect in his voice, and we all felt his absence. He said he was too tired to come on our escapade.

We stood there for a long time, listening. There was a foul smell emanating from inside too, as if carried by the song.

# Return to Oz

Directed by Walter Murch

1985

On the day before the Paradise officially reopened, we all showed up in the morning, except for Otto.

Lydia called him from the office phone but there was no answer. 'He had breakfast with Paolo and me as normal, and he said he would meet us here,' she said.

The foyer looked exactly the same, but the back of the screen had been cut into two more screens and a hall between them, named Screen 2 and Screen 3. Just having one screen wasn't profitable, Sally told us as an explanation. It was like seeing a favourite animal butchered and quartered.

The seats in the old screen, now named Screen 1, were down from six hundred to two hundred and fifty. The whole room had shrunk. There was no longer an aisle going down the middle of the seats, only at the sides, though the chairs were the same, only fewer. The same ratty chairs that had been taken out of the main screen were put into the two small ones.

The columns with nymphs still held up the ceilings, but I counted and half of them were missing, the ones at the back.

The hole in the ceiling of 'Screen 1' hadn't been fixed, just covered with more cardboard and plastic and plaster.

The screen hadn't been replaced with a better one. Cosmo noticed first, peeling back the new blue curtain.

'It's the same projection screen,' he said, peering. He walked up to the front, up onto the stage, examining the screen closely. 'Still scratches on her.' It was like a wizened, injured eye that had seen too much.

Cosmo vowed never to go into Screens 2 and 3 because they didn't have proper projection rooms, just closets with digital equipment inside. They were both box rooms, painted blue. The old screen seats looked vividly dirty and beaten in there. Neither could show 35mm films of course. Screen 3 was an awkward narrow space with three wide rows. You couldn't see the screen properly from the aisle seats without hurting your neck. It was like someone had taken a regular screen and stretched it out like a nasty piece of chewing gum. Lydia couldn't stay inside for a full film, and the rest of us came out with achy bodies and upset stomachs after the first film we saw in it.

'This place gives me the creeps now,' said Patricia. We all had almost full containers of popcorn we couldn't eat during the film and just tossed them away.

It seemed unnatural having three screens, being able to move from one world to the next so quickly, to hear the mixes of various films in the hall like a purgatory.

Otto refused to tell us if he was fired, or had handed in his notice, but Paolo showed up alone for work again the next morning and said Otto just told him the night before he wasn't working at the Paradise anymore in a calm voice while eating a tin of corn. Paolo was agitated the whole shift.

It was like an essential organ had been removed from the Paradise, a golden kidney.

# Fanny and Alexander

Directed by Ingmar Bergman

1982

The new assistant manager who CinemaTown sent was named Andrew. CinemaTown had gotten Sally to get rid of Otto, like Pete.

Andrew's hair was dyed the sickening blue of raspberry flavoured slushies, candy and freezies, which brought sticky, bored summer childhood days back into my mind. The pale mouse-brown roots were visible. On his first day he wore a Superman t-shirt, a bowtie with comic 'whams' and 'bams' on it and cargo shorts full of pockets. His clothes from then on would always feature Marvel or DC paraphernalia, the stupidly enigmatic symbols of heroes and heroines most of us at the Paradise didn't know about. Even his mugs for tea had pictures of Iron Man and the Incredible Hulk on them.

There was no more Otto opening the grate, keys jangling, we would never see him walking around with a clipboard, a pencil behind his ear, doing inventory and orders. There would be no more night screenings. Otto was the only one of us who had keys to the building allowing us to stay as long as we liked. The set of assistant manager's keys, like a thin metal hand with dozens of fingers, now belonged to Andrew.

Andrew didn't know how to use the espresso machine and beer tap in the bar, or how to mix a gin and tonic, and, worst of all, had never seen a Renoir or Fellini film.

He didn't like the way things were run. He didn't like us to be idle.

If he saw us talking or reading, he invented some task for us to do: walk around the building to make sure all the posters were in place, check the dates on teabags, fold more popcorn boxes, dust things that had never in the history of the Paradise been dusted before. He grabbed Patricia's copy of *Godard on Godard* and took it to the office. He didn't return it to her after her shift was finished.

One morning, Andrew asked me to go down to the cellar to show him how to change the keg of foamy Bavarian beer. He went down before me. I usually went down front first, but he yelled at me from below, telling me to turn around. I was very conscious of my behind on view.

I had to bend over to change the keg, and I was so aware of his eyes on me that I kept fucking up changing the tube. He said, 'Do it slow, don't panic,' which made it worse, and it took me about ten minutes. I accidentally sprayed foam all over myself and Andrew, who didn't drink and was fussy about it getting in his mouth. I licked the foam off my own face when he wasn't looking.

Otto started to come in to see movies, as a customer. Even Cosmo, who'd got over his anger about Otto not joining our union as he knew the truth now, treated him like royalty when he came in. We poured him triple whiskeys and made sure no one else sat in the seats he wanted to sit in. He would be cheered soon enough to start having film nights with his projector again. We scoured newspapers, looking for jobs in different cinemas around the city for him.

There was a morning Andrew made us all come in for a fire drill. As the cinema was only closed to customers from midnight till 11 a.m. the next day, we had to come in at 9 a.m.

Most of us were yawning. 'Don't yawn,' Andrew said, his childish face turning into a frightening scowl. He held a clipboard and a can of grape

soda, and made each of us repeat what we would do in a fire, and walk through the building to look at the fire exits. The work of a fire drill was doubled by the extra two screens.

After we were finished, he went into the office and came out with a large cardboard box.

‘Gather round, don’t get too excited.’

He ceremoniously placed it on the floor and opened it. He pulled out an orange polo shirt with ‘CinemaTown’ written on it.

‘Our new shirts! And if it gets cold...’ He reached into the box and took out an orange polar fleece with ‘CinemaTown’ written on it too before brandishing it at us all, his face set in a toothy grin. ‘The Paradise’ was nowhere to be seen on either ghastly shirt.

We all turned our heads to Sally, who smiled and said, ‘They look great. You’re expected to wear them from today’s shift.’

I could tell from Cosmo’s face that he was already composing a letter to the union.

‘The orange is too bright – audience members will see us doing screen checks – it might *ruin* the film – we wear black for a reason,’ he said.

‘All other CinemaTown team members have them, Cosmo, and there haven’t been any complaints from customers. You are all part of the CinemaTown family now. Your uniforms aren’t obvious enough. How can our guests tell if you actually work here?’

Andrew had an insistence on calling customers guests, which was in the new staff manual he gave us the same day. It also said no piercings or makeup while on shift, or jewellery (off went Lydia’s blue lipstick and plastic wounds, Paolo’s jewels and earrings). There was even a whole section on why we shouldn’t have negative thoughts about the customers while serving them. ‘Do they think they can control our minds?’ Lydia had said, flipping through the manual.

Those of us who didn’t have a shift that day went straight to a bar, though it was barely 11 a.m.

On the way there Cosmo asked me for a cigarette as he had run out already. ‘We look like we work at a supermarket in those shirts. Nothing

wrong with working at a supermarket of course – the workers are treated horribly, they need a good union – but you know. We are a cinema, the city’s longest running cinema.’

I was glad I didn’t have to work that day.

The next day Andrew introduced us to the new membership cards.

We had hokey ones, made out of cardboard which quickly became crumpled. The new ones were supposed to last two years and give the holder discounts and free loyalty coffees, but we never checked the dates on them if they were still legible, and gave discounts regardless.

The new ones were made out of plastic. Like our shirts they just said ‘CinemaTown’ on them. ‘All the old ones are nil as of today,’ said Andrew. He put up a chart in the office to show how many memberships each staff member sold. ‘Whoever sells the most will get a prize,’ he said. The prize, which Patricia won, was a mixed bag of candy and a badge that said ‘CinemaTown Number 1 Worker’, like a child’s goody bag from a birthday party.

The bags of candy, peanuts and drinks we sold were replaced with more expensive, upscale versions. The one flat bottle of champagne which had been open forever in the bar was replaced with tiny bottles of prosecco. We got in small bags of flavoured popcorn (‘chocolate and orange’, ‘parmesan’, ‘cinnamon apple’, ‘lime’) which all tasted the same, like cardboard sprayed with perfume, though Andrew let us keep the popcorn machine too.

Along with having to go in early for a fire drill, we had to go in early one morning for a ‘Team Member Movie Quiz’.

‘Are we getting paid for this?’ Cosmo asked, and Andrew shook his head, saying it was a ‘recreational day’.

He had big bottles of soda laid out, with plastic cups, potato chips and cupcakes. The questions were dull, and mostly to do with Marvel and Pixar films. After the first couple of questions, Cosmo and I got up to go out for a cigarette.

‘Smoking is not good for your health, you know it can kill you?’ Andrew said, grinning for some reason as Cosmo took his lighter out of his

pocket.

‘You don’t say,’ Cosmo replied, slamming the bar door as he left. I quickly followed him. He scowled as he smoked. Patricia got up to join us. When we rejoined the others, I said Otto had been really good at movie quizzes, even when the movies were stupid.

‘Nothing is stupid,’ Andrew said. ‘A positive attitude helps.’

After the quiz, when our shift started, Andrew told us to throw out all the liquors: violet flavoured purple alcohol from France, crème de menthe, Pernod and absinthe, various vermouths, dusty doll-sized bottles of bitters and strange European alcohols I had never heard of which smelled like pepper and raspberries when I opened them to pour them down the drain. Andrew came by every few minutes to make sure we were destroying them instead of taking sips or smuggling them into our bags. Blue, green, purple, dark red liquids created a noxious blend in the sink which smelled like medicine. We had to smash the beautiful bottles which belonged to a lost world where even the smallest things were covered in decorations. He also made us throw out all the bourbon Otto had ordered to go with the western season, the smell sharp, sweet and sad.

It was an irritating day. A group of elderly aristocrats wouldn’t leave the one table in the bar. The table was littered with half-eaten pickled eggs, and lemon slices from multiple glasses of gin. I had a horrible feeling they were somehow Iris’s children, though the ages didn’t add up.

One had fake flowers tangled in her hair and wore lots of random bits of fur, another a club foot like a giant cauliflower wrapped in fabric and plastic in lieu of a shoe, and a loud, echoing voice, the third was a man in a tweed suit with a pointy nose, his chubby fingers covered in signet rings, who sang a song in an eerie, high child-like voice to himself. They kept asking when they would be allowed in the screen to take their seats for *Du Barry Was a Lady*, though we weren’t playing it. They insisted they had tickets but wouldn’t show us. Paolo loitered around them like a hungry pigeon, for dropped coins and rings, until Andrew told him to go clean something. They went into whatever film was playing, another Marvel-like film, and when they came out they said *Du Barry Was a Lady* was just wonderful.

‘The lobby of the Paradise has always been red and gold, the screen changes were enough for customers—’ I overheard Sally say to Andrew later in the lobby.

‘The colour scheme of CinemaTown is blue, grey and orange, it’s more inoffensive and looks more modern, clean,’ he said.

‘The Paradise is a historical protected building. No more of the decoration can be changed, it says in the contract.’

Andrew touched one of the red walls then drew back his hand, wiping it on his trousers, as if the walls were painted with wet blood and bile.

Andrew had grand, CinemaTown plans for the bar, that it should become more of ‘a family place’, with games and arcades, and vending machines, but the bar was the only place where money came in. He did manage to remove all the photos of stars and films, saying it looked too crowded and dirty. Lydia and I rescued the pictures from the trash. I took Humphrey Bogart, Buster Keaton and Marlon Brando home, putting them on my vanity table. I didn’t particularly like Humphrey Bogart, but I felt sorry for him all the same.

Until then, for signing in, we just had a sheet of paper taped to the office wall where we wrote our names and the times we came in, usually fleeced if we were late or wanted some extra money. Andrew had an electronic sign-in machine installed, and gave us all staff numbers instead of names. ‘Some big CinemaTowns are experimenting with sign-in machines that use fingerprints, so you can’t tell other staff members your sign-in number – remember, don’t tell them to anyone,’ he wagged, though a week after it was installed I had already signed in for Paolo several times and vice versa when we were not on shift, to get extra money.

Much worse, Andrew was allowed to install several security cameras connected to a cluster of small screens in the office.

‘Have any of you noticed the cameras look at us, not the customers?’ pointed out Cosmo. It was true – you couldn’t even see the customers from the one in the bar, just their hands in fuzzy black and white. There was another one looking down at the candy and ticket kiosk, one in the Screen 1

fire exit door where most of us smoked because it had a bit of shelter from the rain, and a fourth in the hall between screens, by the cupboard full of usher brooms, and finally one in the boiler room. Lydia had the sense to remove our mop bucket for drugs from it when she saw Andrew assisting the security company putting the cameras up in the bar, and it was agreed among us that whoever was cleaning a screen would just take the drugs there and then, or pass them to another in the bathroom. A few times I unwrapped a tin foil ball full of coke and snorted it off my usher dustpan, crouched on the floor. Lydia, Paolo and Patricia would take whatever I gave them, immediately swallow or snort it without asking what I thought it was and sometimes end up real sick, puking in the usher cupboard. Lydia got very bad diarrhoea from one kind, which wasn't helped by the fact that if any of us spent too long in a bathroom stall Andrew would come rattle the door, even the women's. Unknown to everyone else, I was keeping some drugs back, and taping them under the creaky metal sanitary napkin disposal bins in the bathroom because I knew they were the one place Andrew would never look.

At the kiosk, Paolo took something that made him hallucinate, and he imagined Iris was on the other side, asking what films were playing. When Andrew walked by I stood where the imaginary Iris was and told Andrew that Paolo and I were practising our customer service skills. Another time I had to stop him from masturbating in the foyer when too high; he had pulled his dick out and I had to shove it back in his trousers. Luckily there was only one customer in the foyer at that time, their back turned. Flynn continued to drink the dregs of leftover drinks, but he could get away with it because he had basically stopped speaking to anyone, so you couldn't smell it on his breath.

Once, when I was chewing gum, Andrew stuck his hand under my mouth and told me to spit it out. 'Customers don't like to look at a gum chewer,' he said with his stupid grin, and confiscated Cosmo's tin of breath mints, so we knew he would smell alcohol on our mouths, especially since Andrew always got a little too close to comfort. We were confident Andrew had never tried drugs, and he didn't drink – he liked hot chocolate and

grape soda – so he wasn't able to tell when we were high off our minds. Andrew drank hot chocolate or strawberry Nesquik mixed with soya milk out of his Incredible Hulk mug, and I had the idea to put a whole bunch of crushed drugs in it from the sanitary disposal bin stash, though the cup was either in his hand, or left for us to clean at the bar under the glare of the security cameras he watched with devotion.

Because of the security cameras, Cosmo got in trouble for pouring himself a cup of the old, burnt kiosk filter coffee which no one ever bought. 'It had been sitting there for five hours. It was going to be thrown out anyway. Andrew said he is going to take the price of it off my next paycheque.'

The music playing in the screen, carefully curated by Otto, was replaced with the *Amélie* soundtrack.

We all had trouble getting used to two extra screens. Cosmo didn't see them as real screens as they didn't have real projectors. They were such small, cramped rooms, customers complained a lot and we had to process multiple refunds, especially for Screen 3, as many people found it unbearable a few moments into a show, though Andrew kept saying how 'great' it was.

Of course, we were aware that 'Screen 2' made us think of the Second Screen, but it certainly wasn't it, and we wondered endlessly if the construction workers had come across it and destroyed it, caved it in, threw out all its old seats. 'I have a sense it isn't here anymore,' Lydia said darkly. 'Not that they found and destroyed it, but it disappeared, it was swallowed.'

I disagreed with her, because I sometimes thought I saw it in my peripheral vision when cleaning the two new small screens. I would turn and a chair would be covered in cobwebs then in a blink of an eye it wasn't. Going into Screen 3 for a screen check was difficult: the audience could see you as soon as you opened the door, as it was to the side of the screen, not the back, but from a side angle you couldn't tell if everything was working properly or was in the right frame – as much as it could be with such an odd, long screen. A few times I opened the door and the film playing wasn't

the one that was supposed to – it was a black and white, fuzzy and silent film instead, one that I had never seen and didn't look familiar in any way, but the audience members didn't notice or complain. They watched, in a trance, and I left them.

We started to show fewer odd European and Asian films and had the new superhero American films all the big cinemas were playing.

The CinemaTown head office sent us a cake with the superheroes airbrushed in icing on it as a reward for 'such a busy important week', though on the whole we probably only had about ten people in to see it at different times. Paolo told us not to touch the cake as it was probably full of CIA brainwashing pills because the film was funded by the American military. The film swallowed all three screens, the same sounds playing over and over again. The titles went on forever because there were so many special effects, and the ending music was deafening like Wagner.

For a few days there was just a neat slice taken out of a corner of the cake by Andrew not to ruin the image. He made a show of carrying it around on a paper plate, saying how kind head office was, but eventually someone put their fist in the middle of the cake, taking out a scoop, leaving crumbs all over the office floor. Andrew was disappointed none of us went to see the movie. When Lydia said she wasn't interested, Andrew replied, 'The movie has such strong female characters, superheroines,' and licked his lips.

The odd thing was I am sure we all would've gone to see it together if Otto still worked there – he actually did come in to see it at the Paradise. I gave him a free Pepsi and popcorn and a free ticket too. He was the only person in the screen. Midway through the film, I went to look at him, but couldn't find the shadow of his head behind a seat. I turned on my usher flashlight and moved it across the screen. I saw no one. I switched it off and ran into the lobby.

As I did, I saw Otto coming out of the bathroom to go back into the screen.

# Ms. 45

Directed by Abel Ferrara

1985

Every year, the Paradise held an event called All Night Horror Madness, a screening of several horror films, on 35mm, starting at 11 p.m. and going on until 9 in the morning. It was run by Lydia, who chose the films with Sally. It was a shift everyone dreaded getting. Some people had tried to book the day off citing doctor's appointments, family issues, birthdays and other excuses; Sally and Lydia ignored them. Sally put all of our names into a hat and pulled them out, although I didn't think any of us believed her methods were fair. It ended up being Flynn, Cosmo, Andrew and me who were chosen. It was the first All Night Horror Madness without Pete there to put the films through.

The play list was:

*Cannibal Holocaust*

*Ms. 45*

*Death Spa*

*From Beyond*

## *Xtro*

‘Sally must have chosen me because I know how to use a projector,’ Cosmo said as we signed in, but Andrew didn’t let any of us near the projection room. In fact, there was a new ‘no front of house staff’ sign on the projection room door that Andrew had made. Andrew had probably removed everything interesting from inside the projection booth too. I suppose he thought Cosmo would steal the reels, or Flynn would wreak havoc in his father’s name. They probably would have. Lydia, who did the introduction to the shows, wore a long vampire cape and a rubber zombie mask, but Andrew told her to take the mask off, stating, ‘The most important thing we give customers are smiles.’

After the audience members filed into the cinema (carrying sleeping bags, energy drinks, bags of candy, and dressed as mummies, werewolves, zombies or simply wearing their pyjamas under trench coats. Most of them seemed like creeps to me.), Flynn, Cosmo and I sat ourselves down on the steps between the lobby and the bar, now closed, while Lydia was in the screen watching with the audience. Andrew came by with a stack of games, UNO, Dungeons and Dragons, some Marvel, DC and *Harry Potter* tie-in board games, but we all said, in one way or another, that we hated games. Every half hour or so, Andrew walked between the office and the projection room which was above the sweet kiosk, directly across from where we sat, and each time he invented a useless chore for us to do: wipe the metal stands of the stanchions, try and clean off the remnants of what he said were Halloween decals on the mirrors from ten years ago: the hands that could never be removed. Eventually, after several of these tasks, Cosmo found an old feather duster in the usher cupboard and idly began to brush the steps where we sat whenever he heard Andrew coming, while Flynn and I busied ourselves studying the skirting boards. We made pots of tea in the bar and put rum in them from a small bottle I’d brought, knowing it was too risky to steal the bottle from the bar with Andrew there. Flynn told us how sometimes on the weekend, when he was a child and his dad had forgot his lunch, Flynn would run from their house to the cinema, and bring it up to

the projection room, a room he now wasn't allowed to enter. It was the first time I had heard him speak in weeks. Flynn and Cosmo kept looking at the door marked Projection, as if it might explode.

I got up, bored, my legs heavy with tiredness, and decided to go watch part of the film.

The room already smelled overpoweringly like sweat, sweet energy drinks and feet, even though it was just one and a half films in.

On the screen, a young woman was chopping up a dead person, and stuffing him down her toilet and bathtub. She had to use a plunger to stuff all the bits down. The scene became dark brown and black, and it took me a moment to realize the film was burning, as it curled into crisp pastrylike flakes. I watched fascinated, until I took in the audience members getting up, turning their heads, making sounds of dismay. I ran out before they noticed and confronted me.

Cosmo and Flynn stood agitated by the projection door, which was locked, though they were knocking on it.

Customers started to swarm out saying the film had stopped. Andrew ran out from the office with his keys and went into the projection room. He wasn't swearing, but using what he thought were appropriate stand-ins for swear words ('Fudge', 'Darn it'), which just sounded like them anyway.

'He wasn't even watching the projector, for god's sake,' muttered Cosmo.

The film was destroyed, and the projector was shot. Flynn, Cosmo and I had to give refunds to over a hundred irritated customers. Lydia disappeared into the boiler room, I think to cry.

'I have nowhere to go, I obviously didn't book a hotel or anything, because this was supposed to go on till 9 a.m. I came all the way from out of town,' said one pimply young man, still wrapped in a sleeping bag. Cosmo shrugged and in a tired voice called Andrew on his walkie-talkie.

Andrew didn't let us go home after we pushed all the customers into the night, but made us clean the screen and the rest of the cinema, 'since we were scheduled and should stick to it'.

The whole cinema smelled like the burnt corpse of the old projector, and we had to spray bottle after bottle of fluorescent pink air freshener until our heads were numb and it was dawn.

I kept finding little burnt pieces of meat everywhere; it resembled chicken, not just in the auditorium, but the bathroom, the halls, even the bar, as if it had fallen from the ceiling.

Disasters continued to happen.

A live broadcast interview with the director of that year's Academy award for best picture cut off ten minutes in, turning to grey fuzz and Andrew couldn't get it back on.

Another night, we had a 3D action film – Andrew was very excited about it, as it was the first 3D film plated at the Paradise – and after handing out hundreds of 3D glasses which we had to charge customers extra for, we had to give them all refunds because the 3D projection didn't work. The glasses ended up in a box in the boiler room.

Cosmo twisted his ankle coming back up from the stock room with a box of crocodile gummies. He took Sally's cane for gout flare-ups without asking and walked around with wincing moans. One half of the marquee collapsed and was put up again badly, giving the Paradise's face the sunken and mutilated look of a First World War veteran. Andrew discovered a bottle of vodka under the ice cream in the freezer. 'It's Sally's, I think she drinks it with Pepsi like Joan Crawford,' said Lydia. None of us told on her.

Customers complained about the screens being too cold or too hot, the volume too loud or too quiet. The tills broke down: we had to accept cash manually and hand-write out tickets for almost a week. Andrew was on the telephone to the head office of the new owners constantly. Sally pretended like there was nothing going on. She never lost her cool, her old-fashioned manners.

Andrew got rid of our pink 'admit one' tickets too, and customers were just to use their receipts as tickets.

After that I found tiny tickets in various pastel colours all over the floor in the bar, kiosk, bathrooms and auditoriums. They all said 'Drop This

'Ticket in Proper Place' on them. I didn't know what that meant, I just put them in my pockets. They didn't seem to be coming from anywhere. I found a giant pile of them on one of the seats in Screen 3. I swept them all into a plastic bag and brought them home.

# Popcorn

Directed by Mark Herrier

1991

One night, when we had quite a busy screening of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, one of the hidden trap doors in the hall between the screens, which were actually just potholes leading to the sewers, burst open. A spray of sewage water reached the ceiling, leaving conspicuous mud-coloured spots, and warping the carpet. We put a few standees around it to hide it and sprayed as much air freshener as we could around the area, after wiping off the ceiling with a mop.

It was worse the next morning: Screen 1 was completely flooded, waves of dark sewage water almost reaching the chairs.

Andrew made us empty it, bucket by bucket, carrying it to the men's toilets and flushing it down as he chanted, 'Team work, good job!', tapping the shorter staff members such as myself on the head. There was a lot of water but we still had to open that morning, a few hours late. We could see customers peering in through the grate, or rapping it with their knuckles like zombies, waiting. Lydia shouted at them to come back later.

The carpet in the screen and foyer squished under our feet like a waterbed; we all had damp feet. I touched a plaster moulding on the wall at my height. It was soft as icing. The entire building felt like a bloated

sponge, too full to suck in any more dirty water. Lydia was behind the kiosk, frantically filling the popcorn machine with kernels as I was changing the foyer posters.

I turned towards it when I heard it make a sound that was much louder than usual, a bomb rather than a pellet gun. Lydia was screaming. The glass of the machine was smashed and black.

The skin all up Lydia's right arm to her neck was red and crusty brown, stuck with half-popped kernels, some of them black. The floor around her was piled with burnt clusters of popcorn. The noise brought everyone in.

'Calm down, calm down,' said Andrew to Lydia, standing over her and throwing a silver fire blanket over her shirt.

Andrew wouldn't let any of us go to the hospital with Lydia, as we were 'already one staff member down'.

He tried to remove the popcorn maker, but it was too heavy.

I had the idea, which I still regret telling him, to cover it with a long stretch of old red velvet curtain we found, which we did for a week until the glass panel siding was replaced. I felt like I was helping to hide a dirty secret.

We were not to turn the popcorn machine on anymore. Instead, we had pre-made popcorn delivered; it came in bags that were as tall and large as people but weighed nothing.

It was important that the customers never saw the popcorn bags, both Sally and Andrew told us.

Lydia came back to work, her arm stiff and covered in bandages, her neck too. She kept lifting up the bandages, peeling the crusty yellow skin off her neck and dropping it around the cinema. I found scraps of it everywhere, translucent and mottled like tiny windows. I found real whole fingernails everywhere, all of them painted the same cherry red. I wasn't sure who they had belonged to.

Andrew told Lydia she should wear long sleeves and turtlenecks to hide the marks, but Lydia said, half-truthfully, she had none, and no money to buy new clothes. All the same, Andrew charged her for the burnt

CinemaTown t-shirt. When Lydia could finally remove the bandages, she had red welted scars, some of them popcorn shaped.

\*

Paolo and I had begun to be put on opposite shifts, so that when I was working days, he was nights. I felt like it was intentional, a scheme between Sally and Andrew.

On each other's days off we'd come in to see movies, and meet up in the screen, though Andrew, seeing me come in a lot when I was not on duty, told me that though we had unlimited free tickets 'we really shouldn't use more than two per month, as there are many customers who wanted to see those films and you are costing the cinema money by taking seats'.

It began as Paolo's idea, but we all started to use a method of dealing with difficult customers by calling Andrew as much as we could on the radio to deal with them instead. While he talked to an irritable customer, we could sneakily make ourselves cups of tea, or eat oranges meant for drinks in the bar. These were our only moments to do so, as the rest of the time he would be following us around telling us what to do or was sitting in the office watching us on the CCTV.

Though Andrew made us clean more, we stopped putting any effort into anything. The popcorn machine became filled with mice and rat shit we passed off as burnt pieces of popcorn though it was no longer cooked on site. The popcorn bags, kept in the cellar, were filled with rat holes. We didn't clean properly, just shoving garbage down the sides of seats in the screen and not washing beer glasses between customers.

The new, overpriced candy all expired because no one bought it, sneaking in sweets from the grocery shops instead which we turned a blind eye to, even Cosmo. Andrew stood over us, watching us put the expired sweets in the garbage to make sure we didn't snack on them, citing all sorts of complex legal and moral reasons why we shouldn't. After having to throw out fifteen bags of candied almonds, Lydia went on the rest of the day about how expensive and un-environmental almonds were to produce.

Andrew changed policies with the lost and found box – we had to throw the clothes and other items in the trash if not claimed. He sometimes – especially with Paolo – patted staff down when they were leaving just in case they'd found anything. He pulled a nice silk scarf out from Paolo's sweatshirt. Jewellery, money and drugs we learned to hide in our underwear.

I hated the customers more and more. I bumped into them, making them spill their popcorn, accidentally hit them with my flashlight when doing screen checks. I spat in their beers. I no longer thought that they loved the movies – they just wanted somewhere to fart, eat or cut their toenails in the dark. I sometimes daydreamed about throwing them out with the trash, suffocating them and their smells in a plastic bag, or squishing them in the box crusher, that terrible contraption with a lever and a large iron weight.

# Babes in Toyland

Directed by Jack Donohue

1961

The Christmas season started in earnest. It was the busiest time of year as everyone was cold and wanted to go to the movies. We showed *Miracle on 34th Street*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Meet Me in St Louis* and, of course, *It's a Wonderful Life*, the last so many times that I felt driven mad by the child's voice at the end going on about angels' wings, though everyone else was used to it from years of the same. Sally ordered a huge Christmas tree for the foyer, and took out some creepy plastic and cloth Santas with sunken-in faces from the storage room and placed them around the Paradise, like dead and forgotten elderly customers. I could feel them staring at me wherever I went into the cinema.

The bar made a giant cauldron of mulled wine which sat there all week, full of cloves to hide that it was made with the cheapest wine possible.

Only Andrew had managed to book off the days around Christmas – everyone else had to work. Flynn was angry because he had a kid, and therefore thought he deserved the time off more than anyone else, which was true.

We had queues out the door – irritable families with screaming hyper children. As soon as I got home at the end of a shift, I passed out, unable to

speaking, and smelling like sweat, mulled wine and popcorn.

After a sold-out screening of *Meet Me in St Louis* I was cleaning Screen 1 by myself – everyone else was working at the kiosk or bar, pouring drink after drink – and I noticed a short, white-suited man with a porkpie hat near one of the fire exits. ‘The screen isn’t open for the next film,’ I said irritably. He smiled, his teeth were all dark yellow.

‘Do you want to see another film, on the house?’ he said. His voice was damn funny and shaky.

‘I work here,’ I said.

He opened the fire exit door and beckoned. I put down my broom. I noticed he was wearing black and white platform brogues. His hair was sandy red and gelled back. There were yellow stains all over his white suit. In the fire exit, there was a big door I hadn’t noticed before.

Inside was a tiny cinema, a red curtain over the screen.

There was a giant organ in one corner – big as one in a church, but weirdly painted with faces.

There were only two seats, red velvet but cleaner-looking than the ones in Screens 1, 2 and 3. The rest of the floor was covered with a very dirty Persian carpet, empty peanut bags and cigarette butts.

I sat down, thinking I was going to see what would be my favourite film ever, or a very important film, when I heard Paolo calling my name. I got up, though the man, now sitting down beside me, kept asking me to stay. He smelled like crème de menthe and dust.

I ran back through the doors, into the fire exit, where I collapsed, all clammy as if I had been drenched in lukewarm water. I thought I heard the organ when I woke up. I felt like I was going to puke, my head was spinning, and all my limbs were shaking, I was a cartoon in someone else’s control. I pushed open the door into Screen 1. Paolo looked angry. He had picked up the broom I had dropped and was sweeping manically. ‘There is a line of people waiting to come in,’ he said before I could explain where I had been. I mechanically helped him, quickly grabbing popcorn boxes and half-empty drinks. I was so thirsty, I chugged down the dregs of someone’s watery Pepsi, the ice cubes all melted. At the end of our shift, I bought a six

pack of Guinness, and Paolo and I drank them while walking home. It was Christmas Day, and we hardly realized or cared.

\*

Otto still came to see movies, a few times a week. We still gave him free staff tickets, popcorn, drinks, insisted on him taking ice cream home to eat because he was broke and jobs were hard to come by. He hadn't found another cinema job. I saw him eye Andrew, but he never asked about him, or how he was doing at the job. I'm not sure how Andrew figured out who Otto was and none of us freely talked to Andrew. Maybe Sally told Andrew.

Otto came to see a matinee film that was otherwise practically empty. I gave him his free ticket, and thought nothing of it, until later that afternoon Andrew said he wanted to see me in the office.

Andrew shut the office door, putting up a do not disturb sign he must have just printed that day. Before he spoke, he placed a tape recorder on his desk. I noticed, above his computer, he had a glamour photo of himself taken in another CinemaTown, soft red strobe lights behind him. In it, his arms were crossed, and he wore a CinemaTown polo shirt. Near the computer keyboard were large-headed hero figurines from Japan. Above his desk were anti-drug and anti-film piracy posters ('You wouldn't steal a car, why would you steal a movie?') where the Patrick Swayze picture collection used to be. Sally was in the office too, sitting in a chair beside him. Her face was expressionless.

'Do you know why you are here?'

'No.'

'Do you know what the privileges given to staff members are?'

'Discounts and things.'

'And free tickets?'

'Yeh.'

'Do you remember any staff members coming to the showing at noon today?'

'Not that I recall. Dunno. Maybe Patricia?' I hazarded.

‘I have a CCTV recording of you interacting with Otto at the kiosk. Did you give him a free staff ticket though he no longer works here?’

‘I don’t think so.’

There was a long silence. Sally didn’t say anything.

‘Yes, you did, I have proof on the CCTV,’ said Andrew, though you couldn’t tell what ticket he was getting from the CCTV and the staff tickets didn’t have anyone’s names on them.

‘Is it because you still see him as an authority figure, or as a friend?’

‘I guess so.’

‘You are prohibited from sharing the details of this meeting with any other staff members, but you will face disciplinary action or perhaps worse once I have done my investigation,’ said Andrew.

He made me sign a paper, then let me leave. I saw Lydia going into the office after me to face the same interrogation as she was usher that day.

Lydia was waiting outside for me after our shift was over. We walked as we talked. Lydia’s disciplinary had been the same as mine.

‘I can’t afford to lose this job right now. Fuck Sally, this is all her fault,’ Lydia said. She burst out crying. I couldn’t look at her. All I could see was Iris, dying, the unstoppable trickle of her dark urine across the bathroom floor.

Sally came up to me, just as I was going for my lunch break, and walked with me outside. She asked for one of my cigarettes. ‘This is off the record, but nothing will happen to you, sweetheart. Otto is to blame, not you,’ she said, and smiled her unreadable smile. I noticed on one of her hands all the fingernails were missing, patches of crusty skin where they used to be.

I was unsure of what to say and went off to get my lunch, which I no longer wanted, thinking about her fingernails.

Otto was banned from entering the Paradise, and Andrew went so far as to put up a photo of Otto in the office, with the word ‘banned’ under it. I wasn’t sure where he had got the photo, even I didn’t have one, and my memory of his face is so vague now, I always picture the Man with No Name from all those Sergio Leone films instead because of their resemblance to each other.

# Don't Look Now

Directed by Nicolas Roeg

1973

No one wanted to stick around after shift anymore and everyone tried to leave the Paradise at the end of the night as soon as possible. Someone always had to stay to help the manager count the money and close up and it created an awful tension between everyone, especially when Andrew was closing, because no one wanted to and we had to draw straws. Andrew was an exceedingly slow counter (he counted out loud like a child, then made one of us recount as he looked on) and obsessive about checking every inch of the cinema – for homeless sleepers, for bits of trash – before pulling down the grate and leaving. He'd read out every item from the task sheets he created and we had to reply yes, we did it, as he ticked them off, one by one like Von Trapp children.

Cosmo stayed drinking in the bar one night after his day shift, and wouldn't leave as Lydia and Patricia were cleaning up, saying he had a right to finish his drink as he took baby sips of a pint. Lydia knocked it over and he stormed out, though I suspected Cosmo was trying to sneakily stay in the building to fiddle around with the projector or watch something by himself.

Paolo refused to do shifts on the bar with Flynn or Cosmo anymore as he said they were too lazy and Flynn too drunk and he didn't want to do it all

by himself. Paolo would sit in the cellar with a book until Andrew noticed on the CCTV and came to drag him out.

Patricia ruthlessly imitated everyone else when they weren't on shift (I am unsure what she said about me), doing Paolo's thick Italian accent, and the nervous way he'd run around the cinema trying to avoid customers, and Cosmo's voice ('I saw *Spice World* in 35mm!'). Much worse, she'd repeat Iris's catchphrases ('Hiya, do you have nachos today?' 'What have you got for me today?' 'Oh I didn't like that') in such a perfect imitation, it rose the sweat from my body like the dirty sewer water under the Paradise. Patricia stopped doing it when Andrew responded to her question about nachos.

Just before close another night, a drunk jumped behind the kiosk and cornered me, my back pressing against the hot, burnt coffee pots.

Flynn, who was on the usher shift, jumped in between us, shoving the man away, who yelled, 'Get out of my way, pretty boy,' or something, and Flynn punched him in the stomach and threw him out.

Flynn got a disciplinary from Andrew for touching a customer and was put through a whole meeting like Lydia and I were. Patricia listened at the door and told us Flynn struggled to give one-word answers, but Andrew kept pressing him and asking him to repeat himself.

On my next shift, doing screen checks, my flashlight stopped on a patch of flesh: Patricia and Paolo in an embrace. They didn't notice the light shining on them, their eyes were closed. It was Patricia's day off; Paolo was supposed to be on the kiosk. I ran out of the screen and into the bar, where Flynn was working alone, disgruntled. There was no one behind the kiosk and a queue of angry customers in the lobby. I started to sing the old song 'Let's All Go to the Lobby, *'let's all go to the lobby let's all go to the lobby to get ourselves a treat, delicious things to eat, the popcorn can't be beat!'*

The customers morphed into dancing hotdogs, candy bars and containers of popcorn with cheery faces as I sang. I danced with them until the stench of them became unbearable to me: the human-sized popcorn containers smelled like feet, the hotdogs like dirty boiled flesh with wide grins and puckered bald heads, the chocolate bars nauseatingly waxy. I ran into the

women's bathroom and threw up. My vomit smelled like popcorn and cigarettes. I stayed there until Lydia came and got me at the beginning of her shift and the end of mine. She said I looked ill and tried to make me eat a chocolate bar she stole from the kiosk, but I shoved it away.

When I got home, Paolo was lying in my bed having climbed in the window. His *Akira* poster was stuck crookedly to my wall. He was underneath a pile of sweaters and skirts for warmth.

'I can't stay with Otto anymore. He *hates* me, it's my fault he lost his job. He sits around the apartment all day, doing nothing but smoking. He doesn't eat though we buy him food. He *stares* at me when I am there.'

It was an exaggeration. Otto was as kind to Paolo as ever, but Paolo was filled with guilt, as was I. If Iris was alive, Otto would still have his job. 'She was dead when we found her, there was nothing we could do,' I said, lying too and we both knew it.

I put my hands around his throat. He pushed me off him and told me it wasn't funny. I said I had seen him with Patricia. He laughed and asked if I had slept with anyone else at the Paradise except for him. When I said no he said he assumed I had slept with all the other staff members too. 'Everyone is sleeping with each other.'

I hid my face in one of my pillows and saw a reel of Paradise staff members in various positions: Patricia and Paolo, Paolo and Otto, Cosmo and Flynn, Flynn and Lydia, Otto and Cosmo, Lydia and Otto. I was a clown. I was every character by Lon Chaney, Chaplin and Buster Keaton rolled into one. A film had been playing on repeat, since before I began at the Paradise, and I hadn't seen it.

I reached for Paolo's shoulder but he just laughed again like a satyr.

Paolo didn't want to go back to his own apartment. He sat in my room when I was at work, eating sugary biscuits and watching movies with the sound off – he pissed in jars so Edgar didn't know he was there, and came and went through the window, like a spider.

When I came home from the Paradise, I could smell him on my blankets, and occasionally there was an apple core or a half-eaten box of cookies on my vanity table. I always seemed to be on nights and him days or vice versa, to the point we couldn't even meet in the screen, just wave to each other under the marquee as we went in opposite directions. When he was going into the Paradise and I was leaving, I imagined him sleeping with every other staff member, in the dark of the screen. Sometimes I stayed, even though I was desperate to go home and sleep, or even go to the bathroom, so Paolo would come into the screen to see me instead of someone else. A few times I fell asleep in my seat, and when I woke up, he was gone or hadn't shown up at all.

For the first time since I'd sat with them all in the screen watching our first film together, I began to feel alone.

# Phantom of the Paradise

Directed by Brian De Palma

1974

We were scheduled to show *Phantom of the Paradise*, which now had to be done on digital since the projector was dead and Sally and Andrew had made no move to replace it. Perhaps there wasn't money. Like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it was a film customers dressed up for. Andrew wasn't working that evening; Sally was the manager on shift. Usually staff members dressed up too, but Andrew said it would confuse customers. Lydia and Paolo on kiosk and door, Patricia and me on bar. The bar quickly became rammed with customers wearing black feathers, masks, greaser outfits and bikinis, but Patricia disappeared, I assumed to meet Paolo in one of the screens. I could barely breathe, the air around the bar swallowed by customers, their breath a maelstrom of food, alcohol, rotten teeth and stomach acid. I mixed cocktail after cocktail, on my own, desperately calling Sally on my radio, though she didn't appear to help me, as customers complained ('C'mon, man, I don't wanna miss the beginning of the movie'). I started to take shots of gin to keep myself going. Patricia came back through towards the bar when *Phantom of the Paradise* had gone in, and the bar was littered with bottles and feathers. Her beret was crooked on her head, and her glasses looked smeared with a wet substance,

spit or semen. She looked stoned. I could hear the audience singing along to the opening song of the film when Patricia came back behind the bar. She suddenly disappeared, almost in thin air. I looked down. All I could see was a gigantic pile of green champagne bottles with yellow labels and dented CO2 canisters. I blinked. Patricia was lying on the floor of the cellar. The trap door must have been left open by one of us earlier in the night, running down to get more ice or gin. Patricia had fallen down the stairs. She twitched, like a doll being played with by an invisible person, blood forming in a pool around her head, then was still. Knowing no one would answer my radio, I jumped over the hole and ran into the kiosk. Lydia and Paolo ran back with me, and Paolo went down to pick Patricia up. Her head had hit a full keg on her fall, and there was blood all over it and the floor. Her hairy mole was drenched in her own blood. Her neck was at a funny angle, and her beret had fallen off. Lydia called an ambulance from the office. Sally came back with her, carrying a first aid kit and checked Patricia, but there was nothing band aids and hydrogen peroxide could do for her. By the time the film was over, Patricia's body had been taken away by an ambulance. I threw up all the gin I had drunk on the lobby carpet and Paolo called me disgusting. Lydia, Paolo and I had to clean up, in addition to the screen which was almost knee deep in filth, while Sally closed up and counted the money, before Paolo walked me home. He didn't say anything on the walk back that I could remember. Whenever I tried to grab his hand and hold it, he pulled it away, as if my hand was sticky and smelly with blood.

# Heathers

Directed by Michael Lehmann

1988

The next day, Paolo handed in his notice. The 'We're Hiring' sign was put back up on the door, two more people needed now. Patricia's family came from out of town to take her body back for a funeral. None of us were invited, though maybe an invitation was sent to the Paradise and none of us saw it but Sally or Andrew. Patricia's parents hadn't cleaned out her bedroom, that was left to Cosmo, who just shut the door, though food half eaten by Patricia had started to rot. When not at the Paradise, he sat in his room watching *Band of Outsiders* over and over again, which he had bought for Patricia on film. Of course, he couldn't afford to live in the apartment alone – he was terrified he would be slapped with an eviction notice. Whenever I found money on the floor I gave it to him; we no longer had our secret money pool anymore.

After he handed in his notice, Paolo came to my room and kicked things around on my floor, looking for his shirts and trousers, and tore his *Akira* poster off the wall, stuffing them all into a big red suitcase. He left, though I tried to block his way out of my window, and I wasn't sure where he went. He flew away on his red suitcase like a flying carpet. I didn't know where else he would sleep.

I didn't tell anyone but I had taken Patricia's glasses because they had fallen off her when the ambulance took her away. I cleaned them until they sparkled. I felt like they were her eyeballs, and if you could see you were somehow still living. I placed them on my bed, facing the TV, and left movies playing when I went in for my shifts, thinking by the time I finished I would find the whole Patricia on my bed, grown out of her glasses.

Paolo and I had a few last shifts together. He ignored me, he ignored everyone: he was already gone. He sat around idly, reading a collection of Pasolini's poems in Italian, taking long breaks, rolling his eyes at Andrew who kept threatening not to give him any sort of reference letter. I noticed his red suitcase hidden in the boiler room and apple cores everywhere.

On his last shift, we were on the door together because it was so busy. He left me, going into the accessible bathroom with his book and a few joints.

I was alone with a queue of hundreds of people, shoving their tickets in my face, knocking over each other's drinks and popcorn. I heard the emergency sound in the accessible bathroom go off, and thought Paolo must have left and went off somewhere else, an old person must be struggling with the door, but I had too many other customers to deal with.

I forgot about it until a few more old people, and a woman with a walker, complained to Andrew who tried unsuccessfully to open the door. He wasn't strong enough, even with my help and a few tools. He yelled through the door in a loud slow voice, 'Sir, Ma'am, we'll get you out of there.'

He had to get Flynn who was working on the bar to do it. Flynn muttered something about Andrew drinking too much soya milk and being weak as he wrenched open the door, his voice scratchy from lack of use. It smelled strongly like beer.

Paolo was still inside. His book was in the sink, water running on it and onto the floor, mixing with blood. The red emergency string was wound

multiple times around Paolo's neck, the flesh bulging out, purple. The string was still attached to the ceiling, Paolo was hanging from it, his knees dragging on the floor. The siren was still ringing. His face looked like it had been brutally beaten, stripped and raw. His hands were torn and covered in blood too.

I hadn't heard a thing.

Andrew shoved Flynn and me in with him and closed the door so customers couldn't see and told us to stay in there until the police came. It smelled like weed and blood. Gagging, Flynn pulled me out, and the two of us slumped down on the other side of the door.

An old man in a wheelchair kept ramming our feet with his wheels and telling us to move, that he really had to go, but neither of us budged or said a thing.

The police said it was death by suicide, motivated by Patricia's accidental death, that they had been lovers, and Andrew used that as an excuse to hug us all compulsively and asked us if we wanted to talk.

The Paradise continued to be open of course, and none of us got time off after either death. I spent most of those shifts crying in Screen 1 when movies were playing. I sometimes kicked the walls or stomped the floors until one of the audience members turned their heads, noticing. The actors on the screen seemed like gigantic vampires, bloated on my own blood. They would continue to grow and grow, as I shrank, nestled on the floor crying, a shrivelled, bloodless corpse. I was terrified they would come off the screen, twenty feet high, and rip me to pieces with their enormous, immaculate hands.

I saw mice and rats everywhere, in every cupboard I opened, sitting in all the seats instead of customers, in great big scurrying balls, floating dead in bottles of gin, climbing up and down the screen curtains. The beautiful woman who drank rosé in the bar now wore a coat made out of live mice. If one jumped onto the table or floor, she plucked it up and put it back on her coat. I felt mice all deep inside of me, my throat, stomach, bladder.

# Rosemary's Baby

Directed by Roman Polanski

1968

I was pregnant by Paolo, I was sure. His ghost had crawled up into me. I was tired and sick all the time, though maybe I would have been those things anyway working at the Paradise. It didn't feel like Paolo's baby, but rather a weird child of the Paradise, broken plaster mouldings lodged in my stomach, a zygote the size of a popcorn kernel, a pile of cinema garbage, used wrappers, dust.

I couldn't have a baby on a zero-hours contract, I didn't even have a Paradise contract, and I was full of poison anyway – cigarettes, chemical cleaners, the BPA from receipts, though I thought a baby would be fun to watch old Disney movies with, or *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

I thought of the baby as the large-headed handicapped child that Gelsomina the female clown stumbles upon in *La Strada* and tries to entertain before being chased away, that it would be stuck in the film, bedridden, forever.

I got an abortion kit from a pharmacy; it came in a giant paper bag like takeout Chinese food, a selection of pills in various plastic bags. The instructions said it would be just like a period so I swallowed them with Guinness and headed to the Paradise for my shift.

The cramps started when I was cleaning the main screen. Soon, I was vomiting all over, the seats and floors brown from the Guinness, shaking and breathing heavily. I left the mess and ran to the bathroom. There was a lot of blood, a year's worth of periods rolled into one, all chunky, spewed-up meat. I sat on the toilet and filled my bloody underwear with toilet paper. I felt dizzy on the toilet and lay down on the floor. It was so painful, I fantasized about a cowboy, straight from a western movie, coming into the bathroom and shooting me in the face. I tried to focus on his beautiful form, but he kept changing into Iris, giggling, Paolo cowering, Patricia staring blankly at me in her glasses like an idiot.

It felt what I imagined labour to be like, but the result was half-formed, insubstantial, a red disc, like a DVD, with a yellowish blob on it, not unlike an eye or a fried egg, which made me scream out loud.

I didn't know what to do with it. Without looking directly at it, I threw toilet paper on it. I didn't want to throw it in the garbage, in case someone found it and thought I was a criminal. I had to flush it in the toilet but it was too big to go down, so I just threw more and more toilet paper on it. I felt a brief euphoria, a release from the pain before it came back, and I huddled, feeling like nothing more than a bent piece of wire.

My clothes were covered in brown vomit and blood. I tried to clean them off by the taps. When I came out I told them a customer left a mess in the bathroom and I needed to change. I found some clothes in the marketing room, a very baggy promotional shirt for a Batman film. I stuffed my dirty CinemaTown shirt in a cardboard box full of bits and bobs; moth-eaten ropes for stanchions, corkscrews, broken calculators. My stockings were so stuffed with toilet paper, I had a bulge on both the back and front, like a haphazard diaper which made me walk stiffly and slowly like a Boris Karloff character. When Andrew saw me in it he told me he loved Batman but I needed to wear a CinemaTown shirt. I asked if I could go home sick and he said yes, but I wouldn't be paid and I was letting everyone down. I did anyway.

I woke up sometime in the evening, my teeth chattering. I had left the window open for Paolo, forgetting that he was gone forever.

I went into the kitchen to get water to take more painkillers. Edgar was there, making macaroni and cheese from a box. 'Do you have the flu?' he asked. I took him in, red beard, standing in a bathrobe, and realized I had hardly looked at anyone at all in focus besides my coworkers and actors in films. I don't think I had exchanged more than a sentence or two with him in nearly a year by that point.

'I guess so,' I said.

'Your friend left these here for you,' he said. I thought he meant Paolo.

He pointed to a pile of DVDs. Some Buster Keaton skits, Disney's animated *Robin Hood*, *My Own Private Idaho* and *Moonstruck*. It must have been Otto.

Otto returned the next day with brandy, a very old bottle he had taken from the Paradise after Sally had fired him, he told me. We ate a tin of Heinz soup together, and drank most of the brandy though it was barely noon. We watched *Heathers* and then *Top Gun*, on my bed, my head leaning on his shoulder. Otto told me that a man died during the filming of *Top Gun*, one of the pilots. His plane crashed into the ocean and he was never found.

'There are plenty of other, better jobs out there, you know,' he said, as the credits to *Top Gun* ran.

I had heard from Lydia he was working at a chain sandwich shop now where you had to wear a yellow shirt and visor.

That was the last time I saw Otto.

I subsidized my prescription painkillers with off the shelf ones – ibuprofen, paracetamol and alcohol. No one noticed my strange, doozy behaviour because everyone was high. The antibiotics I had to take after the abortion to avoid infection made me temporarily allergic to the sun, so the Paradise was a good place to be, hidden in the dark.

I spent all of my spare time watching silly, childish movies – *Peter Pan*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Sandlot*, a live action *Beauty and the Beast* and a funny film with bright colours about a family who lived in a hot air balloon.

I thought of all sorts of ways to sneak Otto into the Paradise – hats, beards, sunglasses – as if everything would revert to the way it was before if he did, but he never came in again.

Lydia called me one evening to tell me Otto had left their flat, quit his job, to travel around a bit, she didn't know where, but he was going to the airport, or maybe a bus station, that seemed the more likely option because he didn't have any money.

In my mind, I saw him projecting films on pale cliffs, crumbling Greek columns, vast patches of snow, whitewashed cottages, anonymous hotel walls.

# The Last Picture Show

Directed by Peter Bogdanovich

1971

Living in the past in the same place I have to be in the present, my mind often feels like a double exposed photograph, and the cinema like an ancient artefact I tread lightly around, to not displace any memory, though sometimes I am unsure where I am, whether a moment from the past will mistakenly come next, and time is just a mixed up jewellery box I grab helplessly from, wearing mismatched, tangled earrings and necklaces, some gaudy and fake, others real and precious, old and brand new.

I worry irrationally that the CCTV screen by the ticket kiosk showing the front doors and bathroom entrances would, by some fluke, play a video from the past, showing Paolo walking in, or carrying a box of letters to change the canopy, and I would for a brief moment believe they were actually there. Someone told me the CCTV footage was destroyed after a few weeks, and they had been gone for months, but I couldn't believe it, I could barely look at the screen.

More and more, I think of the Paradise as a wound, a red and white gash in the building it is part of, and the screens inefficient, ungainly archaic prosthetics attempting to replace or cover something real.

I found more and more screens – ones in cubicles, off fire exits, in the bar cellar – but there was nothing playing in any of them, the screen curtains were closed and I knew if I pulled them back I would see horrible things: Patricia broken on the floor, her dirty glasses like blank insect eyes, Paolo strangled in the bathroom, Iris with her damp, recently dead face.

Occasionally, in the cellar or cleaning cupboards, I find Paolo's handwriting, scratchy and thin, on the back of a used ticket, either a stock list or something vague and poetic in Italian, which I fold up and take home. I couldn't remember the specific movies Paolo and I had made love in, it didn't seem to matter at the time, but now it did. I obsessively gathered Paradise film programmes from months and weeks before, trying to decipher which ones. I desperately searched for copies of those films, though most of them had already been sent back to the distributors. When I did find the right ones, the smell and sound of Paolo was brought back with such force by that film's particular sounds and images I could almost see Paolo and me on the screen rather than any actors.

Sometimes I want to take my knife and a ladder and cut the giant chandelier in the foyer, letting it spill onto the floor like a burst of tears, but I don't. I continue to sweep up popcorn, clean toilets, sell tickets. Everyone else worked in the same subdued manner. Lydia hardly spoke at all, though I saw her making out with Flynn under the marquee, his face and neck covered in blue lipstick marks. Cosmo was lachrymose and bitter like a passé cocktail, still using Sally's old cane.

Andrew was watching us, especially since Patricia's accident. I was sure I would be in jail or without a job if Andrew had been the one managing the night of *Phantom of the Paradise*. It was perhaps my fault the trap door was left open; Sally had saved me by leaving me out of the incident report.

I tried to attract their notice as little as possible. Sometimes I thought I turned into a mouse, one of the Paradise's vermin who eluded traps, that Andrew was setting the traps and poison just for me. My hair was fading back to its natural colour. I was in league with the inevitable forest of an old

building: the mice along with the rats, spiders, fleas, rather than the husks of my colleagues that remained.

We were penalized if we didn't wear our orange CinemaTown shirts. Even Sally had to wear it when doing her manager rounds on the floor and she looked pathetic and diminished, an extra-large polo pulled over her beautiful vintage dresses. The nails had fallen off both hands, and I found clumps of her hair around too – white mixed with artificial cherry red.

# The Red Shoes

Directed by Michael Powell  
and Emeric Pressburger

1948

I remember my final shift with Sally.

‘You guys go on ahead, I’ll be right behind you,’ she had said, though it was the rule for someone to always wait with the manager while they closed. If Otto still worked at the Paradise, I am sure he would’ve insisted on staying. But those of us closing – Lydia, Cosmo and me – just wanted to go home.

Her saddle shoes were found in Screen 1, filled with blood, they must have been dyed red and all sticky. The seat the shoes were under was all wet with blood too.

Andrew, who found the shoes the next morning, followed the rules: called the police right away, and hired professional cleaners afterwards. He had arrived at 9 a.m., and the first film wasn’t till noon. The seat where her shoes were found had yellow tape on it because it was still wet with blood, put there by Andrew and the police, though it wasn’t visible on the red chairs.

If any film was found in the reel of the projection room, if she had been watching anything while she disappeared, or just staring at the blank screen, or even the closed curtains, ripples of velvety blue, we would never know. None of us would ask Andrew, who would probably just say something about corporate confidentiality or not understand the question and the importance of it at all.

DNA tests were done on the blood, and it was Sally's, though the rest of her was never found. I knew, though I didn't explain to anyone else, that the little man I had met must have brought her into the second, hidden screen, that they were there together, watching film after film after film.

The film *Fitzcarraldo* by Werner Herzog glamorizes a lot of things: labour, art, sex, men, and I suppose I have too. People see it as some kind of metaphor for hard work and going against the odds. The scene where a man is crushed by the boat they are dragging up the hill always haunts me, the show must go on attitude, death is just another mess to sweep up. I wasn't any better, I just watched like I watched *Fitzcarraldo*. The cinema was open as usual the day when Sally died. Was her reaction to Iris's death, to Patricia's, to Paolo's, a sign that she wanted the same thing?

It's astonishing that newsreels used to be shown in picture houses. Picture houses are built for dreams, lies and fantasies. The plaster creatures clinging to the walls and ceilings, the fairground effect of all those lights and mirrors can only be accessory to the wildest illusions, the grandest, most unrealistic seductions.

I planned to quit and stole what I could from the poster room, a long messy cavern near the boilers, a jumble of unmarked poster tubes I opened, finding whole flat worlds; gigantic women, spaceships, castles, guns, skulls, pirate ships. Some were so damp I couldn't get them out of their tubes, they had warped into shapes resembling wasp nests. I sold the posters online – original *Pulp Fiction*, *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Labyrinth*

posters among others. For my last few weeks, I gave hand jobs in the men's bathroom for money, crouching on the toilets in the stalls, the men in front of me, so if Andrew came in he couldn't see my shoes. He just thought the men were having trouble taking a piss.

I saw Cosmo leave his shifts with odd shapes under his suits – equipment – and Flynn charging for full pints but only putting half pints through on the bar till, putting the rest in his pockets.

# Death in Venice

Directed by Luchino Visconti

1971

The day I quit, I went to see *The Edge of the World* (1937) by Michael Powell at another cinema. The film is about a community on a remote Scottish island debating whether to evacuate and move somewhere else, where life is less harsh and vulnerable to the elements, where modern conveniences would be more available. To solve the argument, two young men climb up a wet cliff, one who wants to stay and one who wants to leave. Whoever will reach the summit first wins and decides the fate of the island. The one who wanted to leave falls to his death in the sea below. The other young man, who wanted to stay on the island and continue life as the community had done for centuries, is so disturbed that he in fact leaves, but not before impregnating the dead young man's twin sister. After the baby becomes gravely ill, and needs to be taken to the mainland to see a doctor, the rest of the islanders see the futility and danger of living such isolated, impractical lives in the modern world, and everyone abandons the island, their huts becoming ruins, seagulls and other birds becoming the only living inhabitants.

I'd had a fingernail stuck between two of my teeth from biting my nails too much, and it made it hard to concentrate when watching *The Edge of the World*. I had tried to remove the nail with my tongue, but the sharpness of the nail only cut it, making my mouth taste like blood. I had swallowed it down with a can of gin I'd brought and chocolate candy and popcorn. I didn't feel like eating but had to force myself to eat something.

Again and again, I found myself drifting into cinemas, cushioned by soft, dirty chairs in the dark, letting everything else disappear except for the screen. I was wandering between heavy, visual dreams and my waking hours were reduced to tiny slivers of time spent going from one cinema to the next.

I went to chain cinemas the size of cruise ships, familyowned matchbox cinemas where they gave the customers free snacks, the few art deco ones not turned into pubs or abandoned and covered in peeling concert posters, basement porno cinemas where I was the only girl and the floors were sticky, and the same orgies played over and over again, the same women tied to beds fucked in both holes by two different men until it seemed like they would split in two. No matter where I went, I snuck in small bottles of red wine, cans of beer and gin, drinking myself into a deeper state of inertness than I already was in, wasting the last of my money. I carried around a giant purse I had found in a second-hand shop which had cartoon images of the Romanovs on it, stuffed with all that booze. I didn't look for a new job, didn't bring my CV along to any of the cinemas. I didn't let them know that I used to be a cinema usher too.

When watching foreign films, I was convinced that the words the actors were saying didn't match the subtitles and that the characters had a direct message to me I couldn't understand.

It was inevitable the Paradise would close down. The new company put no money into fixing it, didn't maintain the projector, and the cancelled screenings and floodings continued from what I heard, until people stopped coming in.

Everyone else found other jobs: Lydia at a Wiccan shop, Cosmo at an independent cinema in a very small town very far up north, Flynn as a kitchen porter – a silent ghost, sad and beautiful as Buster Keaton.

I liked to think of it, the Paradise hidden in pitch black, like a human organ, everything still and abandoned, but one night I walked by, and though the grates were down and all the lights were off, the chandelier was on. It must have been left on by mistake. I didn't like it. It was like a skeleton hanging there, brightly pale in the dark.

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