

REEL TO REAL CINEMA

By Larry Caldwell

The soul can be stolen. It was my grandmother who taught me that, at every family gathering, whenever she refused to take a picture. Her own grandmother had been a Native American who, instead of relocating to some armpit of the American interior, had chosen to assimilate with the whitest white folks in the area (working-class Irish). Our family may have needed sunblock in abundance, but through Gram-Gram we inherited the many superstitions of a forgotten race.

She didn't believe the camera could steal your entire soul. Not all at once. She said it was more like robbing a building one brick at a time. With every photo, every video, a little more would get captured, and a little more, until all that was left were ruins. This explained why people were growing meaner and more self-absorbed by the year. Because we were all losing who we were.

I didn't have the heart to tell Gram-Gram that my favorite hobby was to shoot movies on my Canon Super 8. And it was plain mean, I admit, to smile and nod at her beliefs, then film her from an upstairs window, while she murmured to herself and plucked olives from the salad bowl in the yard.

Everyone who loves film is a natural voyeur. Hungry for what only the eyes can tell us.

In college, I landed a job at the university archives; less out of an interest in cataloging and restoring film prints than in the late-night screenings I was able to hold in their private screening room. It was there that I met Ashford Huckabee. We wanted to make the same kinds of movies. Big-audience movies. Blockbusters. While our classmates scrutinized Kubrick and Malick and Lynch, Huck and I worshipped at the altar of Spielberg and Marshall, and of course

Colson Von Kern. We were scowled at by our high-browed peers and that bonded us. “Any one of them would cry their eyes out watching *ET*,” Huck insisted. “Fuck ’em!” I said.

Sophomore year I met a tomboy French redhead named Cerise Charpentier, a worshipper of the type of film that could only be worshipped at experimental festivals and feminist rallies. Huck didn’t like her, but he didn’t like anyone intruding on our midnight screenings. After the three of us had watched *A Hole in the Head* one night, I convinced Huck to hit the campus road, intimating that next time Cerise might have a friend who liked overweight boys with leftover acne. Huck didn’t believe me, but he let us be.

Cerise and I settled into a middle row of the forty-seat screening room and watched Von Kern’s epic swashbuckler, *The Adventurer’s Club*, sharing ice-cold vodka through a straw. And Cerise lowered her head into my lap—and was soon using it as a pillow, snoring while I toasted the brash sword-fighting and drank myself into a stupor.

I woke to the pop of the audio as the last bit of film ran off the reel-to-reel projector above us. The screen was full of sharp white light. Cerise was gone, fled into the predawn, and I quickly replaced the film in its cans and locked up. On the way to my dorm, I slipped the archive keys under Huck’s door and hurried home to sleep off yet another go-nowhere date.

An hour later, my phone rang, and it was the gruff voice of Doc Shagnessy, the archive director—“D-Shag” to the students who worked for him—who woke me. “You lock up the vaults last night?”

“Yeah,” I told him, then catching myself, “wait, no. It was Huck’s shift.”

“Huck?” he barked. “He’s on desk Fridays?”

I figured that D-Shag had spied popcorn kernels or a slight aberration in the way I'd returned *Adventurer's Club* to the archive shelf. And lying when people were on to me was pure habit, so, while I felt bad about it, I said, "Yeah, I left long before Huck's shift was over. You'll have to check with him."

I buried my head in my pillows and was drifting off again when someone tapped on my door. It was Huck this time, and Huck was angry. Or as angry as he ever got. Any other guy would have pounded my door down, but Huck was as civil as an old British madam.

It turned out there were films missing. Rare films. Expensive films. The sort that Cerise and her friends adored. Evidently she'd snuck into the archive vaults and helped herself while I slept through *Adventure's* stormy third act. "I was set up," I mumbled lifelessly.

Huck gave no indication that he'd heard, only pleaded—in a calm, rational way that was only pleading for Ashford Huckabee—that I rise up and come clean to D-Shag.

It made sense. Cerise had used me. A blowjob would have won my silence, but I guess she didn't want that on her conscience. So it was only right to sell out the one who'd sold me out, not the lonely loser who'd trusted me. But it's well documented that our brains don't fully mature until well into our 20s, and for me it took even longer than that.

I waited till noon to call Cerise, leaving a breathless message on her machine about the theft, assuring her that it was *no problem*, really, that I could *protect her*, as long as our stories were in line. We should get together right away and come up with a *story*.

She never called back. Never talked to me again. D-Shag didn't have the heart to punish Huck, but the university considered the whole thing suspicious—clearly he was hiding something—and the dean put him on probation, which meant Huck could continue at the

archives, but his chances of being hired there after graduation were slim to none. “I was a shoe-in for the assistant job,” Huck said without looking at me. “Now what am I going to do?”

I shrugged, my feet up on the reception desk. There were all sorts of ways to make a buck in Los Angeles. What was the big deal? Cerise had stuck it to The Man and our punishment was a little guilt. A few weeks later, an internship opened in John Carpenter’s office and I left the archives, and Huck, behind.

Years later, after I’d produced several straight-to-video slasher movies and a wide-release scare-your-pants-off ghost trilogy, my office received a script with Huck’s name on it, unsolicited and unrepresented by any agency. Why I tossed it right out I can’t say. After all, Huck had been talented both on the page and behind a camera in college, and he’d taken the heat for my own sex-blinded lies. But that had been years ago. I couldn’t jumpstart the career of everyone who’d ever done me a favor, could I?

So it surprised me to walk into my office one day and find an invitation written on university stationery. The current archives director was cordially inviting me to screen a rare print of Colson Von Kern’s original cut of *Pioneer Years*, followed a Q&A with *the director himself*. As well as the picture’s leading lady, Margo Bellis.

My staff never heard me F-bomb with such feeling. It had been more than two decades since Von Kern had made a film. He’d grown disillusioned with “wealth and politics” and was reportedly in hiding deep in the Cascades. And Margo Bellis hadn’t appeared in a movie since the early 80s; she’d been married to Von Kern during his peak years and their divorce had been hard and bitter in a way I could relate to. They hadn’t spoken to each other in years, Von Kern in

seclusion, Bellis hawking anti-aging cream on a.m. infomercials. And yet somehow this archive director, this—

It took me a moment to process the signature on the invite. *Ashford Huckabee*. Huck to his friends. Apparently the university had overlooked his probation from years before. And apparently he had a knack for bucking the odds. Not only had he gotten a director-husband and actress-wife to reconcile, but they were going to do it in a public forum at my alma mater. And I was fucking invited.

Around this time, my second wife and I called it quits. Forever this time. Even I learn eventually. I was free to bring a date to the screening, but my options were not exciting. Perhaps one of the big-eyed, small-waisted actresses I was forever casting in my slasher films? But did I really want to waste a Q&A with Von Kern and Bellis on some twenty-two-year-old who thought *Speed* and *Speed 2: Cruise Control* were “tense”? No, I was learning it was best to steer clear. Unless you wanted to risk a lawsuit or, worse, a third wife every bit as shallow and greedy as the first two.

So I went alone, cabbing it from my office to the university because I drank a lot, but was responsible. Class was not in session and the campus was strangely empty, the buildings dark, the large lamps along the path illuminating empty benches and solitary statues. I half-expected the door to the concrete-and-glass film center to be locked, but it opened—and at the same time a young woman with a nose ring appeared from the opposite side of the building, cutting a fine figure in her flower-print dress. I held the door and smiled and she smiled back, but only in a courteous way, before her heels clacked quickly ahead of me.

A plain yellow sign read EVENT with an arrow pointing downward. And under that: ELEVATORS OUT OF SERVICE.

How bush-league, I thought, *making your honored speakers take the stairs*. Already I was tearing up my annual check to the school's diversity filmmaker fund.

As I followed Nose Ring into the stair well, I didn't fail to spot how her hand disappeared into her bag. Gripping pepper spray, or maybe a hand gun. I guess I've always looked like a bit of a creep. Maybe that was the real reason Gram-Gram didn't want me posing for pictures.

Thank God I had money.

The Archive department was just as I'd remembered it, bright and dusty and a little sad. Same smell of vinegar from the aging 16mm film and the same film posters still on the wall (*Singin' in the Rain*, for shit's sake!). Reception desk to the left, screening room to the right, and through the locked double doors before us, the archives—a giant temperature-controlled space that some clever undergrad had named the Shoebox.

Even the men's room was as small as it had ever been: single urinal, single stall. And some tubby dude in an acre of Hawaiian shirt was drowning the urinal. I didn't recognize him until I was most of the way into the stall. "Ashford *Joel* Huckabee?" I yelled.

"My middle name isn't Joel," Huck replied, devoid of humor or irony.

I chuckled. It was still so easy to get Huck's goat. "I'll tell you what I do know about you," I allowed. "Back in school, you said you were going to do something special, something more than just jockeying a desk down in this sorry basement."

My eyes wandered over the stall partition to gauge Huck's reaction, the frown spreading through his shaggy-dog beard. His mouth opened to retort and I cut him off, feeling good right

then—we were about to witness a terrific cinematic event and he'd been good enough to invite me. "And you did just that, my friend!" I yelled. "The *Pioneer Days* original cut would have been enough—but you get Von Kern and his ex-fucking-starlet wife?" I bent to flush the toilet. "A lot of people can make an okay film, *a lot*, trust me. But what you did, Huck—to reunite talent like that, to bring people together for the joy and love of cinema..."

I rose over the partition, fixing Huck with the biggest grin I'd put on in years, knowing he'd be flattered in his own awkward way. My words were genuine, and was there anything better in the world than a genuine compliment from an old friend?

Except the only reply came from the pneumatic hiss of the door. Huck was already gone.

So the point of Huck's invitation wasn't to repay my ignoring him with kindness. He wanted to show me the big film-world dick he could swing from his lowly university basement. Fine. I hadn't produced a decent movie in years—some critics would tell you I never have—and this was Huck's way of rubbing my nose in it. Good for him. Tonight I was going to hear Colson Von Kern, my idol from age 14, speak in person, and afterward I would make sure I got one-on-one time with him and his leading lady. If I had to bump others aside, ask my questions louder than the person elbowing up next to me, introduce myself as "Huck's best friend," so be it.

Still, Huck's bathroom snub put me in a combative mood. And as my employees and close friends—well, colleagues, who has time for friends in the adult world?—might have told you, my moods were about as pleasant as shattered glass in your ice water.

The screening room was nicer than I remembered it, but still no larger than your average Starbucks. The seats had been modernized, but the capacity was the same—so that thirty people

could make the place feel crowded. And that was about how many were here now. The only aisle seat was beside the nose-ringed girl I'd followed into the building, and I took it without asking if she was expecting anyone. If she didn't like it, *she* could move deeper into the row. Or just pepper-spray me and get it over with.

Maybe it was the brightness of the room or the safety of the crowd or the fact that I was obviously stag and dressed expensively, but Nose Ring finally asked: "How do you know Ashford?"

"College buddies," I explained. "I used to work in the archives with him. *Y tu?*"

Nose Ring shrugged. "We're friends."

"Ah." I studied her face a moment, playfully. "Has anyone told *him* that."

Nose Ring feigned laughter. She wasn't beautiful, not in the traditional sense; but there was an appeal to a woman with crooked teeth and a little bit of hair visible on her arms—what people like to call "non-Hollywood" or "real." Though what hairy arms have to do with reality is beyond me. "We were actually in a writing group," she said.

"Ah, you're a writer," I fake-gasped.

"Yes," she confessed. It's always a goddamn confession with writers. "I optioned my first screenplay a few months ago."

"Congratulations. What's it about?"

"It's a sort of... sci-fi parallel-universe thing, where these giant rats are trying to trap and exterminate tiny humans in their modern homes."

She looked at me hopefully, with the desire every screenwriter has in trying to get non-creative business-types amped about their stories. Except the rat-tale wasn't hers. I hadn't read

the script Huck sent to me, true—I'd, in fact, not even tossed the pages in recycling but the landfill basket to let it rot—but before that I'd at least read the logline. And Huck's screenplay bore a remarkable similarity to this woman's pitch. His might have had to do with cows and chickens raising humans for food, or some such nonsense, but the concept was the same.

“Hmmm,” I replied, and crossed my arms and shifted myself away from Nose Ring.

Women are remarkably adept at reading body language and Nose Ring quickly fell silent and left me to my thoughts, which mostly dwelled on the fact that I was creeping in on forty and liking people less every day.

I scanned around for another seat and came up empty, unless I wanted to squeeze into the middle or the very front. Two rows back, I spotted Raul Rogers, who'd turned a few award-winning music videos into a solid career directing action thrillers. In school, Huck had always busted his ass working on Raul's shorts, often to the detriment of his own projects. And for what kind of thanks? Raul couldn't have introduced Huck to a few shakers? Showed his script around to get the chicken/cow thing repped?

I wondered how many of us sitting here had used Huck up and tossed him away. Some people were just born victims. But then, what did that make the rest of us?

Eventually our master of ceremonies appeared before the large screen, unkempt and caffeinated. I'd forgotten what a nervous wreck he'd been about public speaking, but now he managed a fairly informative introduction to *Pioneer Days*. How it was shot in the Nebraskan farm country it was set on. How Von Kern made his actors live by the rural standards of the 1880s, secluded from all modern comforts. By the time he'd shot the film in 1968, Von Kern had made a number

of box-office smashes, but had been largely dismissed as a watered-down studio director. In *Pioneer Days*, he set out to deliver a sprawling opus that was not only gritty and gut-wrenchingly real, but full of pathos and heart.

Huck also added that *Pioneer* was based on a true story of hardship and suffering, that the Crow family had actually existed and that Von Kern had felt such a kinship to Emily Crow, Margo Bellis's character, that he referred to Bellis as "Emily" long after photography wrapped.

I had never seen the film's original cut, very few Americans had—it had been deemed "too much" by the studio heads—and I was thrilled at the prospect. Except I was in the minority, apparently, as most of Huck's audience wanted to skip right to dessert. "When will Von Kern and Bellis be here?" someone in back shouted. "Will they be watching the movie with us?" asked a big-haired woman blocking everyone's view. "Can we ask our own questions in the Q&A?"

Huck tried to hold the barbarians back. Von Kern wasn't in the building yet. Huck had been informed that his jet had landed at LAX and he was being driven over.

"What about Margo Bellis?" Big Hair went on.

Huck explained that she was upstairs, but didn't wish to be disturbed until the Q&A. She would only appear when Von Kern did.

"I thought they hated each other," Raul called. He had a big grin on his face and was enjoying himself. "You didn't neglect to tell them their ex was going to be here too, did you?"

Huck took a breath. You could see he was really spitballing up there. "Look, this is an extremely rare print and I promise it will be an evening you will never forget. Leave the rest to me."



The murmuring and skepticism went on until Huck, looking more frazzled and frustrated than ever, headed up the aisle to hide in the projection booth. I thought of going after him, I did. Throwing an arm around his shoulders and thanking him again for the invite, no bullshit, no humor. He'd done real good. But I didn't want to lose my seat.

A few moments later the studio emblem came up on the screen with its usual symphonic jingle and the house lights drew down.

Pioneer Years begins with a wagon traversing a monsoon-swept countryside. The wagon wheels sink deeper and deeper into the muck until they can go no further. Horses have coronaries, drop dead; lightning sparks across the sky as patriarch Charles Crow announces this is as far as they can go. They claim the ground they've fallen on and vow to rise from it.

So begins the epic of Charles, his buxom wife, Emily, and their family. Scene after scene describes the hardship of plowing the land, building a house from scratch, and raising a large family of children in a time of typhus. But every time a victory is had (a good yield of crops), there is misfortune fast on its heels (a drought, a wild fire). For every new baby brought into their world, there is a fever that strikes another down. For every kindly, wandering Pawnee they encounter, there is an evil, displaced savage with designs on ruining what the Crows built.

At some point, I glanced up to the projection port and noticed Huck looming beside the two-reel projector, watching the film and weeping openly.

I knew how he felt. The archive print looked spectacular, the color vivid and alive and yet aged enough for us to know it had been filmed on 35mm stock in the 60s. Each scene was

brilliantly shot and performed, as we got a small taste of what it might have been like to live as a pioneer with nothing but your determination and will to survive to keep you going.

The only problem was the audience around me. It was what I hated most about going to the theater. It only took a few jackoffs to ruin the whole experience.

Most of what the studio had cut from Von Kern's masterpiece was its unflinching look at pain. Hollywood liked its epics to run the gamut of emotion, but not to a degree that it become a buzzkill. In the cut that most of the world had scene, the Crows would cry in anguish or scream in rage or simply watch the sun set in abject misery for a few seconds, 120 quick frames, then we'd cut to the next day and a more optimistic future. But in the version that Von Kern had shot and cut, the camera held on the characters as they bawled over a locust-gutted crop or a motionless child for a full minute or longer. An excruciating length of time to endure. And that had been Von Kern's point. The life the Crow family had was as hellish and unrelenting as ours were pampered and boring. Without films like *Pioneer Years*, we would have no concept how these people had suffered just to live.

Still, it was uncomfortable to watch, each tragedy teetering on melodrama, and with an audience of jaded Hollywood cocksuckers, you might guess what happened next. The giggling was muffled at first, as Charles Crow's tree-chopping rage over losing livestock to an unknown malady reached its third minute. But the giggling let others know it was okay to react how they wanted to react. Monkey see, monkey do louder. Until most of the screening room was laughing outright at the agony onscreen.

Predictably Nose Ring joined their ranks, her laughter high-throated and cruel, the sound of a woman who has never given birth enjoying the sight of a young mother struggling to control her spastic toddler.

“Shut the fuck up,” I mumbled.

Her laughter halted. “What did you say?”

And when I ignored her, “*Hey*, what did you say to me?”

“No one’s talking to you.”

Again I glanced back toward the projection port, thinking about Huck, his crestfallen reaction to the heathens below. Except Huck was nowhere to be found.

By the time we reached the film’s ninety-minute mark, you might have thought we were watching Mel Brooks’ finest. The Crow family was huddled together in their front yard after a tornado had shredded their home and now they were going to have to abandon the land they had fought so hard for and depart for God knew where (well, God and the audience, of course— in twenty minutes they would be on the Oregon coast). But for now Charles and Emily and their four surviving children were slouched on the muddy ground among the ruins of their home, holding each other and crying honest tears. And if Von Kern walked in on us at that moment, heard the mocking whistles and adolescent comments about Emily’s deep cleavage, he’d have returned to the Cascades never to emerge.

It was disrespectful, beyond disrespectful, and I might have stood up to remind the empty souls around me why we were here—but I began to notice something happening to the print. The image blurred and shook onscreen, twelve brief frames of corrupted film, there and gone as

quickly as a projectionist's cue signal. Then the projector grew brighter, sending the screen—for a split second—into an atomic white-wash that had us shielding our eyes.

And I feared the worst—that a frame had gotten caught in the projector gate and would soon cause a burn-out. Except that wasn't the worst.

Because when the image righted itself, the youngest Crow child was staring back at us. His beady eyes suddenly grew wide and he sniffed back his tears. "Papa... there's somethin' in the cellar."

Charles looked at the boy and followed his stare. The whole family quit crying and started looking our way—presumably at the open mouth of the storm cellar that had saved them from the tornado's relocating wind. "Pa, what is it?" Emily asked fearfully.

Charles stood, crept forward a few paces. "Eyes," he realized. "*People*. Watchin' us down there."

Nose Ring and the other catcallers quit laughing. We waited for the camera to reverse its angle, to show the people watching the Crows from the cellar. Only there had been nothing like that in the original film and the camera didn't reveal what they were looking at now.

"Are they *friendly*?" little Molly Crow asked.

"No," Emily decided. "They's been watchin' us fer some time, I fear. Been watchin' and doin' nuthin' to help."

"They's seen our hardship," Charles agreed. "Losin' Mary Beth and Davy and all dem cattle. Rather than lend a hand, they only went on watchin'."

"And chucklin'," Molly added.

Now the screening room was silent. Was *this* some kind of joke? Charles Crow's voice overdubbed with Huck's own?

No, I thought with rising dread. The intensity of their expressions. The way they were looking hatefully back at us. Somehow the Crow family was seeing us... *through the screen!* And it made me think of Gram-Gram for the first time in years.

So maybe it was because of her, or maybe it was my career as a horror producer—the general dark imagination gleaned from hours of watching visual nightmare—but I was the first on my feet, intuiting what would happen next.

“Boys, come,” Charles Crow ordered, and he hurried away into the half-collapsed barn, while his sons rushed to the hay bail and wood block to grab the pitch fork and ax respectively. Betty, the oldest surviving daughter, hoofed it into the ruins of the house, while little Molly lifted up a rock and Emily—screwing up her fury—started forward, armed only with the scorn in her eyes.

It occurred to me, even in the surreal terror of that moment, that I would never meet Colson Von Kern. He was a thousand miles away and had never heard the name Ashton Huckabee in his life. But here was Margot Bellis, or her celluloid likeness of three decades past, coming right for us.

Her two boys fell in to flank her.

Betty reappeared, handing her mother the longest carving knife I'd ever seen.

And then Charles was hurrying up, loading his shotgun like a vengeful marshal.

Confusion followed. Some others were getting to their feet now. Someone screamed, while someone else, perfectly calm, shouted, “Down in front!”

And Charles answered right back. “What’re you? Sittin’ there watchin’ us bleed? Laughin’ as we sit ruined upon this ground?” He turned to his family. “Don’t truss ’em, they ain’t human!”

“They’s devils!” Emily cried. Because at this point in the film, she had come to believe that evil forces were conspiring to ruin her family, and that only faith alone could save them.

It was her faith, no doubt, that gave her courage enough to set foot in the cellar first. Emily stepped down into the darkness, her foot tentative at first, searching for the step, and suddenly—like *that*—she was there, in the screening room with us.

Charles followed with their children, each dropping from the screen into reality like flesh borne out of light. The director chairs set up for a Q&A that would never happen were tossed aside by these new three-dimensional figures. They weren’t as large as they’d been onscreen, but still significantly larger than life; lithe figures looming over us like angry giants—Molly, the smallest among them, was close to six feet tall—and all of them still glowing with the film’s duller color palate.

They were gaunt and grimy and weathered. Their eyes were as wide and wild as horses in a thunderstorm.

And that was all I cared to know of them. Because before Emily Crow claimed her first victim, I was already in the aisle, making for the exit. Goodnight and good luck!

The last thing I saw before I turned tail was the big-haired woman in the first row seat, lumbering to her feet as passively as if Margo Bellis herself had walked in to shake hands and

sign autographs. I didn't dare watch what happened next, but it must have been terrible because at once the whole room was gasping and cursing and leaping up.

Ten feet from the doors, several people launched themselves into the aisle, cutting off my exit. The first jerkoff hit the door and bounced right back. A second punched at the handle and recoiled. It was locked. Not just locked either—our collective force might have torn it right off the hinges, if that was the case—but locked and *reinforced*.

Behind us there was an awful, soul-shaking explosion. Charles Crow's shotgun cut through the confusion in the room. Several people dropped. One fell. You could smell the gunsmoke from the old weapon.

Panic. People body-checked the doors, even if it was a hopeless gesture, and the crush of bodies started to press down on us as more people ran our way. I fought sideways—throwing my heel into someone's shin, pinching an ass, to get people to move—and went sprawling into the last row.

Near the front Emily Crow's glowing fingers were clutched in an old man's hair. Her free hand positioned the carving knife and slit the man's throat as easily as a pig for Thanksgiving supper. I heard the stitching of her threadbare dress rip with the violence of the action, the blood fountaining up. "Devils!" she screeched. "Devils!"

In the far aisle, Betty the girl giant had dragged a full-grown man to the floor, and a moment later adorable Molly drove her hunk of rock through his skull like a mallet through an eggshell. They were stronger than us. They'd lived hard lives, full of physical demands, and they had hunted and killed to survive. And they didn't like us.

Yet most of us hadn't accepted our fates yet. Several people were racing toward the fire exit that led to a corridor behind the screen. Or it would have, if Huck hadn't blocked it off, of course, and I tried telling the people warning young Davy Crow's ax, shouted something quick like "Don't bother!" that likely went unheard and certainly wasn't followed as the exodus kept advancing.

To my surprise, the fire door opened.

On the flickering of another projector. Huck had turned something in the corridor as well. A second film. There was a monstrous roar, and the first sorry bastard through was scrambling back dramatically against the ten others pushing him forward. A massive tentacle came for him and lifted him away. A second tentacle emerged, gathering several victims at once, and now the gurgling growl on the far side of the door sounded more pleased than angry.

"Son of a bitch," I said, astonished at my own calm voice. Huck was playing Von Kern's directorial debut, a 50s B-monster flick called *Krakken of the Deep!* And if empathetic pioneer folk were stabbing people to death, how did a pissed-off sea creature feel, being brought to life in the middle of draught-happy L.A.?

I stood there, feeling the shock sinking into me. Some guys settled a grudge by getting your car towed or pissing in your pool; others got an easy-access AR-15 and killed you and everyone in your office; but Ashford-fucking-Huckabee? He locked you in a screening room with cinematic apparitions and you died confounded and terrified.

I found Raul, standing two rows in front of me, and a mutual understanding passed between us. We were men used to being in control and now we were completely out of it.

Next moment, Charles' shotgun exploded and Raul was struck where his neck met his shoulders. There was an awful splatting *contact* sound and his head bucked. The force carried his body over the seats and his legs kicked at me, his foot striking me in the chest.

I snatched his loafer off and the legs fell away. The shoe was designer, expensive and soft, but the heel was solid, and my shock left me as fast as it'd come. I leapt onto the nearest chair, reached up, and began beating on the projector port with the heel of the shoe.

The pane of glass separating film from filmgoer is preciously fragile. Three or four direct whacks was all it took to knock it from its frame. "Huck!" I yelled up. "Huck, you made your point. I'm sorry. *We're* sorry. Just—make this stop!"

No response. There was no one up there anymore.

At least six people were dead in the screening room, with plenty of others bleeding or howling with injury. If we only met our attackers en masse, we might have subdued them and put a stop to it. But we were a pack of hysterical zebra, scattering and yelping while the big cats had their way.

Front and center I could see Charles, a glowing figure almost seven feet tall, reloading his proportionally large Winchester. The window to escape was literally and figuratively open.

Nose Ring crossed my vision, her face disbelieving. She pulled up short in the exact spot that Raul had been standing seconds before and I yelled to her, "Climb on the seat, I'll boost you!"

Her eyes rose to the projection room, considering it a moment, half a moment, before she glared at me and ran off again. "You pierced fucking idiot!" I screamed in her wake.

My head was dizzy. I hopped back on the chair myself, wobbling, Roberto Benigni winning an Oscar. Without help, there wasn't a chance I could gain the port.

Except, as Charles Crow was fond of saying to his kids, "there's hope, my potatoes, always hope." Nearby stood a man, much larger than me, a gym rat—who'd perhaps failed to deliver Huck the eight-pack abs he'd been promising him? He was watching as one of the Crow boys drove his pitchfork through a college girl's gaping mouth, like it was only happening in his eyes, his mind, his imagination. And I dove onto his back and began squirming upward, first getting a knee on his wide shoulder, then a foot, and with a brief lift from his cursing, twisting head, I caught the sides of the port frame in both hands and scrambled up the half-wall beneath.

It didn't occur to me until much later how conspicuous I was. My movements, stumbling on the precipice of disaster, were telegraphed in shadow against the motionless farm yard onscreen. I couldn't fit through the port with the projector right there. The whole machine was bolted to the floor, but a two-reel is delicate, especially against a man clambering for his life. I yanked and I shoved till something cracked inside the projector. It gave an inch, two, three, and I squeezed in past the lens, wriggling my body before Charles could draw a bead on my ass.

Then I was on my feet again, pulling at the reel running around the spool, seeing frame after frame of the empty Crow farm, the endless yards of it, even as I tore at the film and the audio shrieked and the blank screen fell mute with an all-consuming alien glow.

Any notion that I'd saved the day, sending our phantoms up in smoke, was short-lived. The Crows were still there. Nose Ring had caught the attention of ax-wielding Davy. Turned out, she had pepper spray in her purse after all, and she gave the farm boy a face full. The spray struck him (part of me thought it would only fly through his ghostly projection) and his eyes

blinked rapidly, uncomfortably, and his lips grimaced and said, “Ughhhh!” but it didn’t stop his other hand from swinging and burying the ax into Nose Ring’s torso at the hip.

That was enough, even for my ever-curious eyes. I had to get the fuck out, sneak away before any of them noticed.

Too late. Emily Crow’s head lifted and she noticed me. A look of honest hatred darkened her face, and she jumped onto a seat and began leapfrogging across the rows toward me. Looking more like a gymnast than a heartbroken pioneer woman. Like me, she used the gym-rat’s broad shoulder for a boost; then, on her way up she made a grand bowling gesture and planted her carving knife into one of his stare-blind eyes.

And like that, her glowing face appeared in the port window, the projector light flickering on her face. I howled in a way that would have pleased anyone I’d ever treated badly, then I was retreating through the low, tight projection room, running—for my life, my sanity, and whatever else was left.

She was after me, and me alone. By the time I reached the bottom of the projection room stairs, Emily Crow was at the top of them. They led down into the archives themselves. I’d been through the Shoebox a dozen times, more, but not in years and never in the dark, and as I stumbled down the nearest aisle, several film cans went spilling from the shelves like so many pie tins in a baker shop, rattling and echoing and spinning coin-like on the floor behind me.

I fled without direction, zigging, zagging, hands out to avoid a head-on with a wall or shelf. All was dark except my frosty plumes of breath, the air chilled in here to preserve the film.

For a while Emily's antique shoes were clomping along right after me. But when I actually looked, there was no one there.

And that was worse.

Thirty thousand square feet of vaults, but my chest was tight with claustrophobia, like being trapped in a phone booth with a wolverine. I could still hear Charles' shotgun and the screams and desperate banging on the door from the screening room—as though I were in an old theater where the walls weren't thick enough to mute one movie from the next.

Next moment I heard, or thought I did, the faint *whish* of Emily's clothing as she stalked me. *She took her shoes off!* I realized. And if she cornered me I'd likely be beaten with one of them.

The main door was somewhere across the room, on the far side of those phantom whispers of cloth. The vault shelves were too high to see the exit signs.

So I climbed, stepping up on the corrugated metal shelves near where they were bolted into the vertical unit, pushing film cans gently back with my toes. I was in the '50s television section, where the shelves rose twelve feet high. As a student archivist I'd zipped around the room with a rolling ladder, but now, after a fall rock-climbing in Joshua Tree, I'd developed a healthy fear of heights. One exceeded only by my fear of being beaten to death with antique shoes.

Somehow I gained the top without a groan of metal or an episode of *The Cisco Kid* plummeting to the floor and rested a knee on the top partition, which was barely three feet from the ceiling. And I saw her, three aisles away. Not *her*, mind you, but the cinematic glow that

encapsulated her. What was she? Simultaneously a ghost and material monster. *Cinéma vérité* at its worst.

The glow moved steadily down the aisle, then halted. As if sensing my eyes on her. After all, what would something borne out of the screen know better than that?

When Emily spoke up, she had Margot Bellis's voice and Margot Bellis's theatre-trained delivery: "You watched my heart break. You watched my dreams die. You laughed when my child breathed his last!" She exhaled in horror and unbridled rage. "You was the one callin' the storms and the fevers and the crop-eaters down upon us. You and those other watchers. You devils, hidin' in the dark!"

It loosened my bowels to be spoken about with such truculence. I wanted to tell her I'd witnessed her onscreen hardship many times, that I'd never taken joy in her misery, had never cracked a smile at the expense of it, that I'd been moved to tears more than once by it. True, her and her family would have to endure another bone-weary journey on the Oregon Trail, learn another far-fetched skill in fur trapping, but none of her other children would die in her time, and by the time she and her husband lay on their pneumonia death beds in the 1940s, there was a doctor in their family, an airplane maker, a teacher and mother of five, and more than a glimmer of hope for their future generations. But of course, speaking is exactly what this creature wanted me to do.

So I sat there, shivering in the chill, but feeling hot all over.

"God as my witness, my kin'll survive," Emily vowed, closer, and I started retracing my steps down. "*God help me*, I will be rid of all the devils in my life! Wherever you's hide, however long it takes, I will find you. I will be *rid of you!*"

Her bare feet pounded as she ran, as if all along she'd known where I was.

I jumped the last eight feet to the floor.

And it took all of my will power to keep where I was, to wait until Emily Crow appeared at one end of the aisle before I fled toward the other.

She gave a shriek like a war cry and came for me, her dress torn and flapping open, her phantom glow giving her the light I didn't have.

I ran, moaning in terror, my hand whacking cans off the shelves, spewing film to slow her down. I reached the Shoebox's main artery, saw the soft glow of the exit sign—and then it was an all-out sprint, prey and predator, life or death, a tale older than cinema. It seemed to go on forever. Somewhere beneath fear and adrenaline, my lungs screamed for oxygen. I hit the far wall hands-first, and my fists came back at me, knuckles striking both eyes.

Blurred with tears I pushed out into the basement's central hall. Ten yards to the left was the screening room, chained tight, and with two heavy filing cabinets braced against it. Without bolt cutters and a second pair of hands, there was nothing I could do. Maybe it didn't matter. No one was screaming anymore.

But as I watched, the double doors bent outward with a groan of hinges and clank of chain, as if someone—Charles, one of the Crow girls, the entire family—had wordlessly put their weight into the door.

And I bolted off again, past the disabled elevators. The stairwell brought me to the first floor and it was purely random that I cut to the right at the top. A left turn would have taken me through the dark lobby to the main doors, an easy exit, but I realized my mistake too late and there was no time to backtrack.

Only through luck, or perhaps muscle memory, did I find the rear doors of the film center.

Finally, bursting out into the cool of the night and the dark expanse of the campus—to find a compact car idling beside the rear door. Ashford Huckabee was sitting at the wheel.

“Huck?” I groaned, filling his window. “Huck, what the fuck is happening?”

He gasped at the sight of me. Though it didn’t take him long to piece it together: “The projection port,” he said. “Only a former projectionist would think to—”

“What are they?” I shouted, unable to calm my voice, hating how it carried into the night. “And how?”

He smiled vaguely and lifted the gun that was in his lap, a black snub revolver that might have been a film noir prop. Still, I quit my fidgeting. “Damaged prints,” Huck replied. “The archive inherits a lot of them. Ones with frames from different films spliced into them. Grainy ones with weird silhouettes burned across a reel.” He cocked his head back toward the film center. “The Von Kerns came from an estate sale in Prague. I watched *Krakken* and was almost eaten alive.”

“How? *How?*”

“I think it’s something in the film base itself. Not acetate, not nitrate. The composition, the *feel* of it was different, and that allowed the monster to... transcend the screen. Reel to real.” His fingers snuck under his glasses to wipe the sweat dribbling into his eyes. “It was the same with Reel 5 of *Pioneer Years* and—well, I don’t have to explain to you the desire to meet characters from your favorite movies. But they weren’t the Crows, those things. They looked like them, sounded like them, but what stepped off the screen was something else. They blamed me

for their troubles. Sitting there like a useless god to be entertained. I convinced them it wasn't me, that there were worse devils out there. I could gather them up, all at once."

"Then you reached out to everyone who ever pissed you off."

"You all made selfish, mean, vile decisions," Huck said. "In cinema, that gets you killed."

"Life isn't the cinema, you demented prick!" I shouted back. Had I not been a recent witness to horrific violence, I might have done some to Huck, gun be damned.

Far off in the bowels, the shotgun went off against the trigger-finger of an unlikely shooter. "Jesus," I moaned. "I lied to D-Shag and got you put on probation *years ago*. That girl with the nose ring—she, what, stole your idea and wouldn't sleep with you? So you *slaughtered her?*"

Behind his revolver, Huck shook his head. "You don't know me. You never bothered."

"I know this is killing you," I tried. "You should be halfway to Yuma by now and here you are."

Huck hesitated. His Hawaiian shirt was soaked like he'd run through the sprinklers in the Quad. Time was slipping away, as was my chance to survive. "I had these fantasies about you people for so long," he allowed. "It never felt real enough though. Still doesn't."

"Go down and see what happened then. Unchain the door and talk sense into those... projections."

I gauged his indecisiveness. "You're different from most people, Huck. Generous, honest—and what did we give you in return but a poison heart?" I listened a moment—for the oncoming clomp of Emily's shoes, for anything. "The thing is, we may have more money, we may have sold scripts and made movies and dated attractive people, but did any of us seem happy to

you? You don't want to be like us. But if you don't help whoever's left down there, you will be—you'll be the worst of us."

Quietly Huck began to cry.

"It's not what you thought, is it? Lowering yourself to the level of people who screwed you over? It's only made you feel worse."

Huck punched the revolver against his steering wheel, at war with interior voices. "Fuck you," he told me, and pushed me back as he shouldered his door open. "You're always the victim, aren't you?"

"I just ran for my life after watching Raul Rogers' head explode. All I want is to walk away, man."

"No." Huck climbed out, panting, his gun pointing vaguely at me. "You want to cast a hero, cast yourself. *You* go back and save everyone."

"I'll help you," I told him, "but we have to hurry."

"The chains bolting the door—I left the key in the lock. All you have to do is sneak down and shove the file cabinets clear."

"You can't shoot me. Otherwise you wouldn't have needed *them*. So, just, come on." I placed a hand on his shoulder, his redeemer. "For what it's worth, I'm truly sorry for what I did to you. It's well documented that the human brain needs twenty-five years to fully develop and I think, for me, personally, I was well into my thirties and on my second wife, Lexi Ann, before I could even think to—"

"Stop it," Huck told me. "Stop monologuing." His face grew dark. "You either get back in that building or I swear to fucking God, I'll put one in your leg and drag you there."

“But if you do that, you’d be at risk any way. Isn’t it better to go tog—”

The back door flew open and Emily Crow charged, her dress hanging off her, a look of utter murderous lunacy in her face.

Huck’s mouth dropped open and my grip tightened on his shoulder as I swung him around and shoved him into her oncoming attack. His revolver went off, *blaam!*, blowing his own sneaker open.

Then Emily’s hand found the back of Huck’s head and clamped on. “You wanna take everythin’ from me! Everythin’!” she was screaming, crazy, her body rigid, the cords in her neck standing out, her lean farm muscles taut, bare nipples erect. “Then—take it!”

Huck fell to his knees as she pulled him close, against one breast. He flailed uselessly, his gasp of horror reduced to a pressure-cooker hiss seeping from the corners of his mouth.

The first thing to break was his nose. Huck tried to shove away, but Emily was stronger, a matriarch determined to put another colicky child to the teat.

For a moment, I watched, ever the devilish voyeur. Emily wasn’t as tall as she’d been inside the building—as if her big screen height was reducing the further she ventured into reality—but she was just as livid. There was a fierce *snap!* as Huck’s front teeth broke. Already I knew his muffled screams would stay with me forever. As would the sight of Emily Crow forcing his jaw open, while her other hand crushed him harder and harder into her chest. “*Take it allllllll!*” she shrieked, and her wild eyes landed on me, the one she’d really wanted.

Huck’s tiny car was still idling and I jumped in and sped away in reverse.

And still, I watched, helpless, the scene growing smaller in the windshield. And Emily went on watching me. And Huck went on jerking against her, his skull bulging out between her

hand and breast. Next moment, his car jumped a curb and struck a bike rack behind me. I looked away, cut the wheel, and was gone in the night.

Well, I regret the way I handled things afterward. I do. Never calling the police to help whoever was left. Never coming forward with information in the days that followed. The suspects were believed to be a deranged group of... cultists, political extremists?... who had fired on and savagely attacked a group of innocent filmgoers.

In the days that followed, there weren't—nor have there ever been—reports of crazed 19th Century farmers wandering the streets. And that's the worst of it. Even if my guilt and terror and post-traumatic-whatever made me confess what I'd seen, how could I ever prove it?

It was better not to let certain things sneak past the smile on your face. Better to tell investigators, when they pointed out that you were on the guest list, that you'd had a migraine and couldn't attend last minute, that yes, there had been something a little off about Ashford Huckabee, about the whole event he'd planned, but who could have ever predicted all of... that....

I continued producing films, though no longer attended the openings (couldn't stomach the claustrophobic theater, the large figures onscreen, the flickering projection light) and I couldn't do horror anymore. So after a failed romantic comedy, I transitioned to producing low-budget, high-concept pornography. The money was good and it was all straight-to-internet. Though I have to admit I didn't watch much of it and certainly didn't date any of the stars—my perspective of the breast being forever altered.



Through the years Emily Crow found her way into my dreams, and I'd wake with a gasp as her words echoed inside me: *Wherever you's hide, however long it takes, I will find you. I will be rid of you!*

You never know who you'll run into in this city. And I do regret what happened in the parking lot of Complete Organic on the sunny, innocuous day I ran into Margot Bellis.

How was I to know who she really was? She saw me and her expression changed. Was it fear rising in her or unbridled rage? Was she glowing cinematically or simply radiant in the California sun?

It's a farfetched excuse, I realize, but no less plausible than characters leaving the screen to murder their audience.

And even if it's just a story, as some of you are no doubt concluding, as my psychiatrist has long concluded, as I myself sometimes conclude while buoyed up on mandatory drugs, it was still enough to prove insanity.

The accommodations aren't terrible. *Safe behind bars*, as the saying goes. And with so many human rights organizations keeping an eye on things, there's a library here and daily fitness and checkers. Even a movie night. Those I don't go to, as you might guess. The films that play on that old Eiki projector are all donated, and there's no telling what's on them.

