

**twenty-three | centration**

Divine foresight could not prepare me for this.

The booze will surely run dry within the hour. Barbecue sauce bubbles alone in the crockpot, micro-sausages long gone. Of the twenty-three invitations Layla extended, we expected a fifty percent maximum return rate and a handful of plus-ones.

Word got out. Cellular reproduction. Man crawled forth from the primordial sludge and made landfall in Edgewater.

My eleven hundred square feet of lower-middle-class dwelling limits each accomplice to phonebooth-sized personal space, with a prayer for deodorant fortitude and fresh breath.

No one seems to mind the trappings. We're one big, happy foster family united by a rich uncle who provides job security two months at a time.

This crowd is what we call *below the line*. Crew. Just like service industry night at the club. The air is refreshingly free of pretense and politics. We are order-followers and our conversations reflect those of the oppressed. A dolly grip regales his clique with tales of Texas pussy. The script supervisor tosses me a fleeting glance while Marvin runs her through his progressions. A day player (I believe she was credited as Hostile Shopkeeper) grimaces after a

tequila shot with the key makeup girl, each taunting the other to approach the “yummy” camera assistant.

Cy Becker captures context-free glimpses of all these moments via roving video invasion, the surrogate emcee working the room until I fill his viewfinder.

“Ladies and gentle, gentle men – Andrew, our host from the coast!” A few vodka cranberries, and no closet can contain him.

I clasp hands and bow to the chorus of requisite “woo”s and raised-and-spilled drinks. Cy, I suspect, was our leak – the town crier responsible for this fire code violation. It all makes sense now. A scene-setting hipster he’s not, so there’s only one reason so many could be lured by our pied piper on such an excursion.

“Alright, who’s here for the free drugs?” I toast.

The awkward smattering of assent is not the rousing ovation I’d anticipated.

“No, I mean *besides* you, Marvin. Heh ... heh.” I haven’t died like this since the Down Boys played Settler Days last summer. Layla shakes her buried head from the corner, then after a little goading, gives an animated testimonial to Cy’s camera out of earshot. She, too, is a one-woman show on these rare occasions when the sauce overtakes the bloodstream, a coup requiring only two drinks.

A festive platter of appetizers wrapped in leaves is at the door, offered by my upstairs neighbors, parents of Sanjay. They cannot stay, nor were they invited, although his bride is clad in a formal salwar well past their bedtime just for the twelve-step journey into Hades. He looks like he came straight from the office (or the gym, where I always see him treadmilling in dress clothes). No laptop bag is slung from his shoulder, no corporate ID badge. No homicidal screaming. Just smiles, satisfied curiosity, and being on their way.

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“Anybody ever tell you you look like Timmy Olyphant?” the set dresser slurs, one arm around her friend’s neck for lack of a firm spine.

Which is not at all offensive; he’s a pretty good-looking guy. My security guard CV is vastly more extensive, but he has better teeth.

“What’s peculiar about that,” Barron steps in, chalice in one hand and cocktail shrimp in the other, “is that as an actor, he’s played both a cover band guitarist *and* a drug dealer.”

Casting my movie gets easier every day, suppressing even the inclination to gift-wrap Barron’s watermelon head in duct tape. Of course, all my suggestions will long be off the market by the time anyone in power cares about this story or can remember what the hell an Alero is.

“He ever played a murderer?” I jest, slapping him on the back just as he sips. “Ladies, this is Barron Vaughn. Socially observant, hygienically rebellious, hung like a seahorse, only mildly obsessive, and best of all, available. You shave his back and he’ll scratch yours. I’ll leave you three to get acquainted.”

I close the bathroom door to catch a breath and relieve toxins when it’s stalled by the script supervisor’s strappy heel. The one I told you about earlier who puts the *harlot* in *Charlotte*.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says, hand over her insincere mouth. “Good thing I didn’t catch you with your dick in your hand, huh?”

*No, that was last time, remember?* Well, not *catching* me, but relegating me to it after our one-sided oral affair. To this day, the *Eddie & The Cruisers* saga still leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

“You gotta go?” I offer her john dibs. As far as she’s concerned, I’m still in denial of our past. It’s half true; her name went out with the bathwater.

“No no, you go right ahead.” She props up on the corner of the sink and leans back on her hands, unseasonably-tanned gams dangling like a schoolgirl’s below her black skirt. Even these nasty fluorescents flatter her olive pallor.

“I ... can’t. He doesn’t like an audience.”

Her finger calls me over. I was only standing two feet away, but am now drawn at the hip by some sort of vulvular gravity until silk and rayon collide. Two layers of fabric as front-line birth control between my now-constricting pants and her girl-junk. My palms intuitively on each thigh – for balance, I rationalize this concession. Her hands trace the contours of my face and her mouth moves to brush the side of my neck, then hot in my ear.

“Got you.” Her teasing whisper.

This is no chance encounter. She’s working me.

“What do you want?” I fight the trembles, and give nothing back but my mere presence.

“Wwwell ...” her calves lock me tight to her, “hows about we ...” her eyes considering my lips, “do a little powder together, mm? See what happens?”

The way she hits those notes, if one had no grasp of language, *powder* would be assumed to mean some kind of lusty mingling of genitals. Which it used to, actually, in ancient Ballardese. But I’d like to escape tonight stigmata-free.

I lean away, but her muscular legs are unyielding, something my ears should’ve remembered. “Did you meet my girlfriend?” is the best I can counter.

With Layla, you trade a little heat for a lot more warmth.

“Sweet girl,” she says as if it’s some tragic loss. “Amazing eyes. But ... she wasn’t holding.”

“Else you’d be in here grinding on her instead?”

“You talk too much,” she throws her arms around my neck. “Our secret. I can finally return the favor. Blow for blow.” A wicked laugh and she brings her lips to mine, when I recoil like a burnt tongue from the hot spoon.

“I’ve really gotta piss.”

“So?”

Well, we both know she’s no rocket surgeon, but this is either total ignorance or incredibly fucking kinky.

“So I don’t think you’re grasping the biology of the situation, here.”

“But I don’t have any money, honey.” Her baby-doll voice.

“And I don’t have any coke.”

She sneers and pushes me back into the towel rack in disgust. Lengthens her skirt and checks her lipstick in the mirror.

“I think the guy with the camera might have some weed,” I offer.

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Thirty-foot-high projection will humble any bloated actorly ego. And it can inflate the modest just as quickly. Cinema is one of the great societal equalizers, like the internet, the automobile, or cheeba. Every detail is amplified. The perfect becomes flawed, the nuanced overt, the inspired transcendent.

Even our own little film felt the breath of life once the light penetrated the back of the celluloid and flickered its way into our consciousness. It was no longer just a collection of 1,597 cuts, forty-two effects composites, 2,312 sound elements, and eighty-six musical cues on five reels. It became a single entity with its own atmosphere. The movie didn’t jump off the screen so much as it yanked us into itself.

Dread crept into my psyche as the opening frames elapsed into seconds and even minutes before I slowly realized not a single note of music graced the entire scene. I had been cut out completely. The worst performance of the film.

Now that I see the big picture, I *hope* that audiences share my terror, because that same neglected suspense nags at you until six minutes in, when the timpani at last shivs you in the gut from a blind corner.

God's own voice is not so loud.

The screening was held at a theater recently converted into a banquet hall, tables interspersed with counter seating. I was joined by Layla, production designer Elizabeth, and uncredited rewriter Barry, each with printed placeholders and festive crucifix centerpieces (an in-joke from Scene 22).

All of the principals sat in the back row, and were greeted with peer cheers at each of their screen entrances. There'd also be an occasional self-conscious groan, always from the rear, whenever a difficult line was delivered or gravitas lingered. Tonight's room put any ghetto theater to shame with our choral participation.

There's something about hearing your own music from an audience perspective at ten times studio volume that eclipses all else. Sexier than the growl of a Marshall stack at your back. Better than fried mozzarella.

Until the final name in the credits scrolled into darkness, I held my breath for some overlooked electrical hum to slip through my mix. Some harmony I misjudged. But it never came. I can only *imagine* the apprehension if it were my own five-foot nipple exposed up there. Graham said we might have scored a PG-13 if they'd trimmed that glorious shot and pruned up the language. You're only allowed two *fucks*. Semantically, that is.

The most traumatic nightmares *Necromancing the Stone* will cause are those of the Lighthouse marketing department. We made an R-rated movie that appeals to as many tweens as adults. It belongs in the art house but needs wide distribution to earn out. A first-time director. Polarizing morality.

My condolences to whoever is tasked with distilling the enigmatic *Necromancing* essence into poster form.

Cursed with a poorly-timed release, we're vying for the same pool of dollars as that sequel with the caped superhero, and opening weekend will see us conceding box office supremacy to animated farm animals with primetime voices.

Graham says he expects to double the theatrical gross on home video, and already has merchandising deals inked. And probably a handful of critics in his back pocket.

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Our party crashes with the obnoxious arrival of Ryo in suspended pinstripes and t-shirt. Stylus gashes the vinyl. (Before the digital age, music fans used a *turntable* to spin a vinyl *album* whose grooves were converted to electrical pulses via *stylus* needle.) It is immediately resuscitated two steps later when Toshi crosses the threshold of our apartment, cigar stubbed between his teeth in a whiplash smile, victorious over all he surveys.

Then Mark Ruffalo walks in.

He carries fewer airs than his predecessors, and swigs liberally from a square bottle containing either designer alcohol or hype-marketed water, his own handheld fountain of youth. Whispers surface all around, and while they're slightly more subtle than bugles, I assume this hushed entrance ceremony is routine for him.

It's not paranoia when they're not actually talking about *you* for a change.



“Right. How fucking I am made to land in Weermington aftah Caryfornia, anyray?” he muses, blessings uncounted. That, or my ability to discern humility from self-pity is bound by my knowledge of English.

“Because ... out here they’ll actually let you direct something besides Asian fetish porn?”

He squints, reefed. “What is ‘fetish’?”

“Eh, too hard to explain, man. Weird sex, basically. So, there wasn’t any hot upper-class ass over at Graham’s shindig?”

“But ... sex no weird if she orgasm.”

Maybe it’s just the Mexican aromatherapy, but that makes all the sense in the world right now. “Whatever creams your Twinkie,” I concede, flooding the air with canned freshener and rhetoric. Eyedrops cleanse my broken capillaries.

“You still want me fuck girlfriend?” Toshi brightens, lethargy in momentary remission as he dismounts the dryer.

I rub a sheet of fabric softener over my hands and fingers. “Nah, man, she’s a size queen, anyway. We’ll find you a nice, willing script supervisor,” I say, disinfecting my shirt before we rejoin society beyond the door.

In my open bedroom across the hall, Layla exalts Ruffalo with conviction I’d never have imagined six months ago. Floating around him like a pixie. And I’m powerless to chastise her for it unless I’m prepared to defend why I just emerged from the French doors of a double-wide closet with a Japanese man-boy, both of us reeking of guilt.

Ryo escorts Toshi away on cue, expert sleight of hand impounding the dragon pipe and stashing it in his own pocket with a single fluid maneuver. They retrieve Mark and amble to the dining room and its waiting eyes.

Which leaves Layla and I. An awkward postmortem rendezvous kicked off with mutual shoe gazing. Any attempt at speech would come too soon.

“So ... wouldja?” I gesture toward The Actor.

And that’s when I get the doghouse stare.

Celebrations, for me, have always been where celibacy meets masturbation.