

Final Showing

Stan tried to look cool, did his best to blend in with the bored pedestrians crowding the Saturday night sidewalks. He was too hyper, the adrenaline coursing through him kept him on edge, fearful and paranoid, practically jumping out of his skin. He stood out like a sore thumb--he had to find some place where he could regroup and get his shit together.

So: the movie theater.

A porno movie theater with a cracked, flickering marquee, *SKIN FLIX All Day All Night Even Christmas*. There were missing bulbs, the tang of fresh piss and some old moll of a ticket taker preserved in a plastic bubble by the front door. Maintained in her own natural habitat, floating in an airtight beaker of toxic cigarette smoke.

He paid for a ticket with the first bill off the roll. Got his change and hurried inside.

The shakes hit him bad when he was paying for a drink. As he reached for the cup it was like his hand spasmed or something, spilling the beverage all over the counter. Young bitch in charge wasn't impressed as she swabbed up the mess. He even had to pay for another drink.

As soon as he stepped through the curtain into the seating area, he felt a thousand times better. *This is great*, he enthused as he walked down the aisle, taking a seat about six rows from the front, prime viewing position. *I'll sit in here with these congenital losers and fuckups until I mellow out and then be on my merry way. Celebrating the fruits of my labor.*

The bills crackled in his pocket, their presence a tactile reminder of the events of the past ten or fifteen minutes. He felt the bundle. How much? Two hundred? Three hundred, if he was lucky. Maybe enough to put things right for awhile but time was running out, his options disappearing one by one. It wasn't looking good. He was down to this now, a bottom-feeder.

He reached into the other pocket, touched the gun. His fingers came away stippled with blood and trailing spidery wisps of hair. He wiped his hands on his jeans, wiped and wiped until he'd gotten it all off.

Stupid old fuck..

He was shaking again. *Shouldn't—shouldn't of reached under the counter like that. I coulda shot him, blown him away. Would've served him right. Jesus, he went down like a ton of bricks. And all that blood...he rubbed his fingers on his pants again. I gotta be crazy pulling this shit. It ain't my style and it ain't solving anything.*

It was like he was on one of those treadmill things, running as fast as he could but getting nowhere. Sooner or later he was going to get caught and if he wasn't killed they'd lock him up with people who would be happy to finish the job for them.

He stretched in his seat; his bones creaked appreciatively. God, he was tight. Tight as a wound spring. Tight as Tinkerbelle's twat. He grinned. Tight as a miser's purse. Tighter 'n a Jew's ass. Tight as a—

He started giggling.

“Shaddap,” someone snapped from the near dark.

The place smelled bad, a confluence of sweat, piss and other bodily secretions he didn't care to think about. The immorality plays depicted in the grainy, amateurish films had had a corrosive effect on the once-lavish interior. The screen was old, patched, threadbare. The walls were peeling, water-damaged, the floor should have been stickered by the EPA and the seats, well, the less said of their appearance and condition, the better.

The patrons hadn't been spared either. They had been worn down, winnowed away by their prolonged exposure to smut. Stan had seen their faces as he came in, features split and pockmarked by ten lifetimes of travails, cross-hatched by bitterness and grief and despair. Most of them sat alone, avoiding human contact, finding solace in personal perversions and delusions. This was a place of refuge for those who had experienced more than their fair share of suffering while cruising the dirty boulevards in pursuit of broken down dreams.

He looked up at the screen in time to be menaced by a closeup view of a guy getting head. He was practically being *devoured* by this woman who, like a snake, seemed capable of dislocating her jaw to accommodate larger pieces of meat.

Stan stirred restlessly in his seat. He'd seen lots of porno stuff in his time—hell, who hasn't—but it still made him sort of uncomfortable to be sitting there, watching. He

wasn't queer or anything, it was just that when they showed everything up close and personal it made sex look, well, *obscene*.

To Stan, sex had always been a pleasant, if over-rated experience. He thought he handled himself pretty well; not a cocksman maybe but no Quick Draw McGraw either. He couldn't remember sex ever looking like *that*. That wasn't the way two normal human beings did it. They resembled a couple of wild animals up there, sucking and slurping away at each other. Was this supposed to turn you on? It was the equivalent of watching two dogs fuck in the street. He decided to ignore the movie—*uh uh yeah, baby, c'mon*—and count the money instead.

Stan pulled the roll from his pocket, admiring its heft; he arranged the bills and began the tally, sometimes finding it hard to read denominations because of the poor illumination.

Meanwhile things were definitely heating up onscreen.

--five, ten, twenty, thirty—

“--*uh huh, uh huh, that's it, baby, that's it, ohhhh, you got it—*”

--fifty, fifty-five, fifty-six—

“--*feels so good, oh, like I'm gonna melt all over you—*”

--sixty, sixty-five...was that a ten or a five?

He gathered up the money, started all over again, doing his best to blot out the grunting, thudding cacophony. He was concentrating so hard on getting the count right—

“Hey, buddy...”

--that he had reached the two hundred mark before he realized—

“Hey, I’m talking to you...”

--something had gone wrong—

“You hear me, boy?”

--all wrong—

“I SAID ‘WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOIN?’”

--tragically and irrevocably wrong.

His hand hovered in the air, holding the next bill, a twenty.

“Low-life, pistol-whipping, motherfucking goon, that’s what you are.”

Stan slowly raised his eyes.

The couple had changed positions. The man was pumping her from behind while staring directly at the camera. Directly at *Stan*.

“That’s right, boy. Look *waaaay* up here. That’s it. Now you got it.”

Stan’d mouth filled with sand.

“You killed that old man,” the porn star, listed in the credits as Long John Quayle, told him. “Cracked his skull like a fucking egg. That makes you a murderer. And there ain’t nothin’ lower than that.” And all the while he was, like, banging away on the woman, never missing a stroke. She didn’t seem to notice the rather odd twist the plot had just taken—or didn’t care.

Stan sensed movement behind him. He twisted around but his fellow viewers gave no indication of having stirred. Except they were all two or three seats closer to him. He blinked and they seemed closer still.

He turned back to the screen. Telling himself *easy there, guy, don’t go losing it on me*.

He took a deep breath and held it. Then slowly let it out. That was better.

Okay, listen up:

This is what's commonly referred to as a freakout and the best thing to do is just—just let it go, ride it out. What it is is that you're worried about the old guy in the liquor store. That's it, you're worried and you're scared shitless because you ain't no master criminal and you ain't hard. You're just desperate. And it's fucking with your head. So you gotta get this under control, suck it up and fucking stay focussed and everything will be all right.

The money looked dirty and crumpled and sodden. It felt like he was holding somebody's garbage. He thrust it back into his pocket.

“Mister...Mister?” An ugly little man with a twisted lip was tapping him on the arm. “I saw ya drop dis on the way in. Here y’are...”

And he was automatically accepting a small pebble, a black, cinder-like nugget that smelled like steaming fresh dogshit. Stan gave an exclamation of disgust and threw it to the floor. “That was your soul,” the man told him, “your rotten, evil soul.”

“Get the fuck out of my face,” Stan rasped.

“Your soul,” he repeated, shambling away.

Cruel, derisive laughter from overhead.

And Stan thought, *right, fuck this noise, ready or not, I'm outta here.*

The amplified voice of Long John Qayle resounded again. “Fucker thinks he's just gonna get up and *leave.*” The woman was on top of him now, thrusting her hips half-heartedly while mouthing the usual stock entreaties. His head was lolling

over the side of the bed and he was looking—there was no use denying it—at Stan and no one else. “Forget it, killer. You’re not going anywhere.”

Stan pushed up from his seat, rising—and then he was falling back, windmilling his arms in a vain attempt to stay upright, nearly breaking his back across an armrest.

WHAT THE FUCK?

His feet wouldn’t move. He tried tugging on his legs but his running shoes were secured to the floor by the sticky residue of spilled drinks from time immemorial.

From the speakers, a dry, knowing chuckle.

“Take him,” the porn star instructed them, pulling the woman down to him. “He’s not one of us. Send him to Hell, where he belongs.”

As Stan bent and began to fumble with his laces, he could hear them coming. He sat up and saw them edging along his row and those parallel to it, closing the distance. Their glazed, fixed expressions were unnerving. Stan got one shoe off but then his sock got stuck in the resistant goo. He was working on the other sneaker when the first one reached him, seized his hair and jerked Stan’s head back while groping for his balls with the other hand.

Stan fucking lost it. He grabbed a fistful of the guy’s shirt and pulled him partially over the seat. Punched him in the face, three good, hard shots that cracked his knuckles. But the freak seemed unfazed, hanging on to Stan, grinning a bloody, gap-toothed grin.

The others moved in, snatching at Stan's flailing fists. He screamed for help, hoping someone would hear and call the cops. He clawed for the gun but the pocket was empty—must have fallen out. When he bent to retrieve it from the floor he found it stuck fast and then they were on top of him, forcing him down. His hands went out instinctively and were immersed in the goo. Their combined strength pressed his face into the sticky mess, rendering him helpless.

Then they killed him. With their fists and feet and their fingernails and their teeth.

When they were finished, when his battered body refused to expel another ragged breath, they left him, returned to their seats. Few paid any mind to the hissing, spitting sound the goo made as it went to work on Stan's body, reducing it to a brown, viscous puddle. They were once again engrossed in the movie.

The onscreen couple were indulging in some post-coital banter while they enjoyed a cigarette.

“Was it good for you, baby?” Long John Quayle, returning to the script, inquired of Suzie Wett.

The camera framed her face. She was plain but not homely. From the neck down maybe a seven out of ten. “Honey,” she purred, “I'll tell you one thing: you sure know how to treat a lady.”

They'd heard the joke at least five thousand times now. Maybe it was force of habit. Or something instinctive. It was hard to know.

But for some reason that line always got a good laugh.

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