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SILVER SCREEN FIEND

.....

LEARNING ABOUT LIFE
FROM AN ADDICTION TO FILM



PATTON OSWALT

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Sherman Torgan,
all twenty-four frames of this
are yours

"Film is a disease, when it infects your bloodstream, it takes over as the number one hormone . . . it plays lingo to your psyche. As with heroin, the antidote to film is more film."

—Frank Capra

"Oh Bert, do stop this worrying. You must have heard surely of 'movie magic.' You should be a stunt man, who is an actor, who is a character in a movie, who is an enemy soldier. Who'll look for you amongst all those? People like to believe in things, and policemen are just people. Or so I'm told. Frankly, our problem is so simple it's almost beneath us. Now listen to me: That door is the looking glass, and inside it is Wonderland. Have faith Alice! Close your eyes and enjoy."

—Peter O'Toole, in Richard Rush's *The Stunt Man*

"Already the present starts plotting its recurrence somewhere in the future, weaving what happens in among our fabrics, launching its aroma, its music imbuing itself into floorboards, plaster, nothing can stop it, it can't stop itself. You will never have access to its entirety, and you have asked how to calculate what resists calculation . . ."

—Timothy Donnelly, *Dream of the Overlook*

"This WAS our dream, surrounding us. The fucking studios! People's dreams were their business, and they knew their business. They had us by the heart, and we just walked, and looked around, and longed, all the way to the cattle chutes."

—Michael Shea, *The Extra*

"No good movie is too long and no bad movie is short enough."

—Roger Ebert

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I like to drink.

At my drunkest the worst I do is rewatch
Murder on the Orient Express or fall asleep.

I used to smoke a lot of pot. All it made me do
was go on long walks by myself and laugh at things.

I've enjoyed my share of LSD and mushrooms.
They exploded my being from the inside out—
while I sat and listened to music.

I've done my due diligence as far as vices,
but I'm an unbearable slouch when it comes
to interesting stories connected to them.

This will be either the most interesting or
the most boring addiction memoir you've ever read.

I can't promise it ever gets "harrowing,"
but I can promise that I tried—I really tried—
to make it funny.

Here we go.

CHAPTER ONE
Movie Freaks and Sprocket Fiends
The New Beverly Cinema,
May 20, 1995

12 132/233 <u>SWIMMING w/</u> <u>SUBREKS</u> Sunset 5 ✓	13 133/232
19 139/226 <u>Search & Destroy</u> Sunset 5 ✓ <u>IMPROV</u> 8:20 pm ✓	20 Armed Forces Day 140/225 <u>SUNSET BLVD.</u> <u>Ace in the Hole</u> New Beverly ✓

Listen—you don't *have* to follow me into the darkness here. It's sunny out. It's a syrupy Los Angeles Saturday afternoon in May of 1995. We're standing on Beverly Boulevard, just west of La Brea. Wide, pleasant street. A few blocks' walk from restaurants, some vintage furniture stores, coffee. Midnineties hipsters are wearing what they think is cool that week. Orthodox Jews committed

to their wardrobe thousands of years ago and are walking it like they talk it. Life's going on. We're about to enter the New Beverly Cinema for a double feature of Billy Wilder's 1950 smash-hit, critically acclaimed *Sunset Boulevard*. Wilder cowrote and directed *Sunset Boulevard* in 1950, took home an Oscar for alchemizing its brilliance at the typewriter, and saw it nominated for ten more Oscars. Wilder etched his name onto the first year of a new decade with a knife made of ink and celluloid.

I can see you want to say something here but now the Fact Fever is on me, and I bulldoze right over you and keep gabbing.

The second feature on the double bill is *Ace in the Hole*, Wilder's follow-up. Cowritten and directed, again, by Wilder. A man who had not only *Sunset Boulevard* behind him but also *Double Indemnity* and *The Lost Weekend*. He wasn't simply "riding a wave of success" when he started *Ace in the Hole*. He was on a three-engine speedboat of triumph and he punched *through* the waves like a shark gone blood simple on surfer guts. He pushed his winnings back onto a single square at the roulette wheel of cinema and gave it a confident spin.

Wait, let me finish. I know, hang on . . .

Where was I? Oh yeah—*Ace in the Hole*. *That one*. The opposite of *Sunset Boulevard*, success-wise. Double zeroes. House wins. Box office bomb, critical revulsion. Some cynical industry types nicknamed the movie *Ass in the Wringer*. Poor Wilder got one Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay (back when the writing category for

Oscars was divided up between Motion Picture Story and Screenplay) and saw Jan Sterling, the lead actress, grab a much-deserved National Board of Review for her sly, reptilian tour de force. The Venice Film Festival tossed an International Award into his bruised, bloodied lap, as well as nominating him for a Golden Lion (which he lost).

Not that the awards stopped there. In 2007—*fifty-six years later*—*Ace in the Hole* was nominated for a Satellite Award for Best Classic DVD. Which it lost to the fortieth-anniversary edition of *The Graduate*.

Hang. On. In a minute. *Sheesh*.

Billy Wilder still had *Stalag 17*, *Sabrina*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment* ahead of him. At the bottom of this particular valley in his career was a trampoline, apparently.

I could go on, and I do. This is where you start to pull away. Where you *should* start to pull away. Even though you're talking to a relatively fresh-faced twenty-six-year-old on a sunny sidewalk, you can tell something's wrong, can't you? The way I talk in unwieldy chunks of paragraphs, rather than inquisitive sentences. I'm a boxing glove with a horseshoe inside of it, conversationally. I speak at you. I speak *through* you. You've got the queasy feeling you might not even need to *be* here right now, and I'd still spit Facts About Billy Wilder into the afternoon air.

You're not up for two movies? Hmmm. Wanna just see the one? I mean, you've gotta see *Sunset Boulevard*. *Gotta*. You've never seen it? How can you be alive and not have seen *Sunset Boulevard*?

I mean, I'm definitely seeing both of these, but if you only want to catch *Sunset Boulevard* and then split, fine with me. There are cameos by Erich von Stroheim and Buster Keaton, and did you know that Jack Webb is . . . ?

. . . Really? You're gonna bail?

That's cool. Maybe I'll call you later.

I turn to the ticket booth and hand my \$5 to Sherman Torgan, the owner and visionary behind the New Beverly. This is my first time, ever, visiting the theater. Sherman stares from the scratched, grimy ticket booth window. White coals glowing under gray glass, those eyes. I've sat in booths like that before, taking tickets, with zero interest in the customers handing their money through. I stared out at a procession of faces, most of them tilted up and away from me, at the different choices playing at the multiplex I once worked at. The New Beverly has one screen, and Sherman's customers know what's playing. And they rarely tilt their heads up. Their eyes are, more often than not, aimed at the ground. Or, like mine, into the middle distance.

Sherman takes my money and hands me two pale,

orange tickets. There's no one to tear them when I enter, passing to his right and crossing the six or seven feet of dingy carpet to the concession stand, where the air becomes saltier, greasier, stickier and all-around more delicious as I approach. I weigh the cost of a medium popcorn against a large one. In the booth, Sherman files away the memory of my face. He remembers everyone, I'm soon to discover. In four years, to the *exact day* I've purchased the ticket that's now in my pocket, I'll find out exactly how sharp Sherman's memory is.

But now it's 1995, and the first of many nourishing, sun-warmed days has been pushed behind me, behind the swinging doors of the New Beverly. I take my bent, warped-spring seat in the briny darkness. This is the sort of abyssal darkness deep-sea fishes thrive on. Fueling themselves on glowing, volcanic vents on the ocean floor. The New Beverly has a volcanic vent of its own—up on the wall, there, big enough for a *megalodon* shark to swim through. Or a horde of zombies to shuffle through. Or a fleet of spaceships to fly through. Or a teardrop on Ingrid Bergman's hopeful, heartbroken face to slip through. Me and the other deep-sea fishes inside the New Beverly—the movie freaks, sprocket fiends,

II

celluloid junkies, single-

star satellites and garden-variety misanthropes, loners and sun haters—we, too, feed from the glow pulsing off of the screen. The movie screen—*that's* our volcanic vent.

Trailers for upcoming movies unspool—*The Nutty Professor* is playing on Tuesday, along with *Cinderella*. Hmm. *Repulsion* and *Knife in the Water*. Never seen either at this point in my life. Gonna check those off. It's starting to dawn on me, as I sit in the New Beverly and munch, alternately, popcorn (salt) and Red Vines (sweet), that this is the beginning of My Training. My Training to Become a Great Filmmaker. Hasn't Scorsese seen every movie ever made, and doesn't he still lurk in his Manhattan loft, projecting some obscure British horror movie on a 16 mm projector, looking to be inspired by a single out-of-context tableaux of brilliance? The summer before now I was disintegrated and reassembled by Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* at the Alhambra in San Francisco. Isn't Tarantino this holy fool who can take various parts of disintegrated movies and reassemble them into a greater whole? Like . . . like . . . oh! Yeah! Like that scene in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, where Eli Wallach disassembles all of the different revolvers to make the Supergun he's going to use to ventilate Clint Eastwood? *There!* Haven't I done, *just now* with the Eli Wallach analogy, what Tarantino does on a more epic, transcendent scale in his films?

I remember walking out of that screening a year before, when *Pulp Fiction* had finished its Möbius-strip narrative and the audience floated back out into the world on the magic carpet of Dick Dale's "Miserlou." I saw it with Blaine Capatch and Marc Maron, two comedian friends.

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"You wanna go get some lunch, or some coffee?" asked Blaine.

I said, "Nah, I gotta go."

"Where?" snapped Maron. "Gotta go home and burn that screenplay you were working on?"

Good one, Marc. And good advice, as it turned out. I hadn't even considered writing screenplays up to that point. My ambition then—six years into a stand-up career—was to get an HBO special. The rest of my Career Whiteboard was a blue question mark in erasable ink.

And here I am, a year later. Sitting down to devour two Billy Wilder films. One I've seen (*Sunset*) one I haven't (*Ace*). A fledgling completist. It starts here. And on an *actual movie screen*, so I can clock the experience of how I react to the film. As well as the unspoken vibe of the audience around me, of how the amorphous, mass "we" responds to the film. What pierces us. What pings off us, leaving only an echo. What passes through us. What misses us. Look at me—aren't I a diligent soon-to-be filmmaker, doing my time in the darkness like this? Not just watching movies on videotapes or, someday if I ever get rich, DVDs? On. A. Screen. This is a serious crossroads in my life, a new path, and I'm confidently making my first steps.

By sitting in the dark.

No, I'm no dilettante. Light through celluloid, onto a

movie screen. Darkness and uncomfortable seats. That's the only way I'll see these, from now on. Give me more laps,

coach. I'm a champion. Someday. Can't you see it?

More trailers. *Touch of Evil* and *Kiss of Death* are coming up. Noir! Nice! I became addicted to film noir during the three years I lived in San Francisco, when the Roxie Theater on Sixteenth Street would do its noir festival every spring. I saw H. Bruce Humberstone's brilliant *I Wake Up Screaming* in 1993. That scene where psycho policeman Laird Cregar

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stares, openmouthed and turtle-eyed, as the film of his now-dead, unattainable dream girl plays in the smoky interrogation room? The one he's using to torment slick, grinning Victor Mature, hoping to railroad the poor bastard into the electric chair?

That got me. Wow, did that get me. It was Frankenstein's monster staring at his hissing, stitched-together Bride and knowing she'd never return his truehearted, cemetery love. It was also me—although I didn't know it yet—shoveling popcorn and licorice into my gaping mouth while every film I would devour off of the New Beverly's stained screen could march and lunge and glide and swoop out of the darkness. *I'll create one of those someday*, I tell myself. *And my films will march and lunge and glide and swoop in ways no one has ever dreamed of. All I have to do is keep watching. I'll know when to make my move.*

At this point in my life, I have every reason to believe

that this is a viable process for mastering a creative skill. This strategy worked for me before. For instance: When I was nineteen, I wanted to be a comedian. I'd spent the first nineteen years of life memorizing every comedy album I could play on my parents' turntable. I knew the exact timing for the pause between the words *waited* and *July* in Bill Cosby's "Revenge" routine.

V

Not only did I memorize every heckler put-down on Rodney Dangerfield's *No Respect* and Steve Martin's *A Wild and Crazy Guy*, I could even recite, perfectly, the hecklers—walking themselves into vinyl, drunken, douchebag immortality. Yes, I could recite George Carlin's "seven dirty words" and all of their permutations, Richard Pryor's multicharacter "God Was a Junkie" off of *Supernigger* and pretty much every single flawless word from Emo Philips's *E = MO²* and Steven Wright's *I Have a Pony*. I could also sing every Python song, and recite, word-perfect, the "Bookshop" sketch off of Monty Python's *Contractual Obligation Album*. Come senior year, I did "Bookshop" in a forensics competition. Both voices, back and forth. That was the first time I experienced, if only secondhand, the effect that *doing* comedy had on the comedian. The laugh you get after dropping your joke is akin to a rush of emotional heroin after the nerve-scraping silence of the setup. That's how the addiction begins. But unlike a common junkie, you crave the discomfort as much as you do the high. The risk of that silence sputtering into nothing, or, worse, anger and jeering from an audience, is what makes the

laughter that much sweeter. And you keep chasing that scenario where you artificially set up the . . .

. . . deadly, deafening, jarring SILENCE . . .

—and then the—

. . . *gentle, roaring-through-your-veins surf-crash of* LAUGHTER.

And "chasing that scenario" meant going onstage, over and over again. Except in my case—my frightened, self-doubting, raised-in-the-suburban-Nerf, penned-veal timidity that I've fought my whole life—going onstage first meant going *to* stages. And watching. Like I'm doing now, in the New Beverly. I have no idea, sitting here in the dark in May of 1995, that the watching will stretch into four years.

And why would I? It didn't take me four years of watching, as a wannabe stand-up, before I hopped onstage. I mean, there were nineteen years of absorption, but did that count? Then there was a Christmas visit to San Francisco when I was eighteen years old, with my family. We stayed at the Marines Memorial Club and Hotel, and around the corner at Mason and Geary, in a space now inhabited by a jazz club, was an Improv.

I walked down, talked the doorman (Dave Becky, who would briefly be a future manager of mine) into letting me slide by the twenty-one-and-older restriction and watched a show. Pro showcase. Short sets. Solid, forgettable material in front of happy tourists. But even in the blandness of a weeknight showcase of airline food and cats vs. dogs and men vs. women boilerplate stand-up, there was still the simple, addicting solute underneath it. SILENCE/

laughter. I'd tasted the drug in high school. Now I was visiting the equivalent of a junkie's shooting gallery. The pallor of the comedians' skin, their free-for-performers nacho-and-rail-drinks breath, their constant brushes with instant failure and annihilation—none of it drove me away. I wanted in.

I'm feeling the same pull, here in the New Beverly, watching William Holden floating facedown in the pool at the beginning of *Sunset*, the police flashlights knifing around him while his voice-over fills the icy theater air.

How ballsy! That's the *beginning* of the movie! Seriously, what an all-chips-on-one-spin way to start a film! I want to do that. It won't take long, I say to myself, hearing the buttered thunder crunch of another mouthful of popcorn in my ears.

Maybe a year, tops, of My Training here at the New Beverly, and I'll be aiming a lens at something that will *swoop*.

A year after my visit to the San Francisco Improv I was a nineteen-year-old college sophomore. I spent my summer weeknights watching open-mikers at Garvin's in Washington, DC. Professionals would drop by every now and then but

Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Garvin's were a raw meat duty-dance. My first Tuesday watching a show some skinny guy named Blaine Capatch made a Harlan Ellison reference during his set. No one I'd grown up with read Ellison, let alone knew who he was. Now here was this guy, using him as a casual reference. In the same show Mark Voyce—later to be my roommate—said, mock-jovially, "You know, it takes all kinds." Then his voice shifted to a Balmer-accent diesel bark: "No, it don't.

We just *have* all kinds." I was an H. L. Mencken junkie all through high school, but I'd *never* heard his worldview distilled into such a single, elegant dart. And there was fourteen-year-old Dave Chappelle, who performed onstage like he'd been doing comedy for forty years.

I watched them stalk the stage and bomb, or stand still and slay, or a combination of both. They seemed as delighted by the failures as they did by the successes. But these weren't successes or failures with the same pace or flavor as those you'd experience during a week in an office cubicle. I was certain of *that*, at least—I was spending eight hours of zombie time in a legal firm Monday through Friday. No, those successes and failures had a secondhand flavor and a mine cart's pace. They only affected you insofar as they made someone *else* succeed or fail. And they were stretched out and diluted—first over the space of a week, then months and years and, before you realized it, over the span of a life you were looking back on with rage and exhaustion.

But once you walked onstage you rented, if only for five minutes, a kingdom where you owned the air, you owned time, you owned silence, you owned attention and indifference and defeat and failure. If you could master that kingdom, you could trade up for bigger and bigger kingdoms. It wasn't a fair marketplace you traded in, and there were plenty of people who built their kingdoms solidly, only to see them usurped and diminished by bold thieves, fleeting flavors and the chummily mediocre, but it wasn't any more harsh than the cubicle world. At least, that's how I saw it. Like I was seeing it now, in the New

Beverly, when Norma Desmond suddenly stands up and thrusts a rebuking hand into the glowing chrome beam of a movie projector, demanding that time and silence come under her thrall again. Even if you know *nothing* about the process of filmmaking (as I do at that moment), you can sense the fear, excitement and risk that went into a scene like that—for the writer to conceive it, for the director to facilitate it, for the actors to execute it and for the editor to hinge it to the flow of a thousand other moments with as much gambled on them.

And even more than the thrill of the stage, there was the Hang.

Before and after sets, waiting to go on or coming down off the high (or swimming up through the low) of a set, comedians talked to each other in a coded cant that I craved over the warmed-over catchphrase chatter of the cubicle. I copped, immediately, to one of the first and most enduring bonuses to being a comedian: *you got to hang out with comedians*. You sat by the source of the jokes. You saw them get formed and could maybe add to or refine them. The back-and-forth, the jousting and competition, and the heat it emitted. Another vent of creativity, hidden in the darkness. Instead of one silvery movie screen, you were in a forest of agile, hyper-wired minds. I imagine newsrooms, cop bars and marine platoons have the same hum. And if you pick up that frequency, you're saved. And doomed.

I wanted to be doomed.

I will not trust a comedian who doesn't hang out with other comedians. Or who doesn't really have any comedian friends. Or worse, if they *do* have comedian friends,

they make sure their friends are less funny, and less successful, than they are. Because they must suspect (or learned early) that nothing funny, startling or original is ever going to fly out of their minds. Why be reminded by the stony, unimpressed faces of the most talented of your tribe? Better to rely on the love of fans and sycophants who, you hope, don't know better.

Watching those first few open mikes before I stoked my courage, I couldn't figure out what I was more excited by: the Stage or the Hang.

So on July 18, 1988, I made the leap. A god-awful five-minute set at Garvin's, in front of—and I'm being generous—twelve people. Jokes about Mike Tyson, jokes about Gummi Bears and jokes about being nervous. Yuck.

And then one joke—it was barely a joke, come to think of it. It was only an idea. Something you'd let float in the air during a Hang, see if anyone responded, bat it around, riff anything off of it.

"I think they should replace the word *of* with the word *o*. It'd make life a lot less serious. Like, if a wife comes home, and she's upset, and her husband's like, 'What's wrong, sweetie?'"

Here came the drop: "And she says, 'The doctor says I have cancer *o* the cervix.' *Huh!* That doesn't sound so bad!"

A single laugh. And it was from a comedian. Mark Voyce. And when I say a single laugh, I mean it was a barking, mirthless "Hah!" Which, I was to discover, was how comedians laughed at each other's jokes. We're so inside our heads, thinking of the set we're about to do, or the one we just did, that the objectively stated *hah*, like a nod between

samurai, is some of the highest praise you can hope for. It's a way of saying, "Despite how deeply I'm living in my own head right now, and thinking about my jokes, you've just said something that punched through that Wall of Me."

And it was all I needed to doom me forever. Since that night—leading all the way up to this afternoon in May, sitting in the New Beverly—a week hasn't gone by where I haven't gotten up on a stage at least four times a week. Usually closer

to ten. Seven years, and never a week without shows, somewhere. That streak is about to end. I sit here, as *Ace in the Hole* winds down to its final, twilight-before-oblivion shot of Kirk Douglas slumped at his desk, with no future and not a garlic pickle in sight. I have the same feeling I had back in San Francisco at the Improv, and then a year later at Garvin's in DC. I glimpse—in black and white, and not the garish primary-colored sport coats and T-shirts of late-eighties American stand-up—another world I want to enter. What is their Hang like, the directors? What is their thieves' cant? Did Wilder's fellow directors recognize the genius of *Ace in the Hole* in its day? Did they know it instinctually, or was it years of labor before they could see through paltry box office and negative reviews to something that would last beyond the momentary inferno of failure? The same way comedians would watch Andy Kaufman, and then Larry David and Colin Quinn, marveling at the grace and balls it took to completely disregard the audience, to always go for broke with every line? It's one thing to do it onstage—it's you alone, soaring or sinking. But a *movie*? Weeks and months and years of collective labor by talented people in front of and behind the camera? How do you convince anyone to take that sort of risk and then maintain that commitment through all of the bad days of shooting, all of the hopeless hours in the editing room? How do you convince anyone to ever work with you again? What kind of person does that cauldron pressure produce, over time?

I step out into the infant twilight of a Saturday evening in Los Angeles and begin my first full week of not going onstage in seven years. There are stages I can hit tonight, too. If not to perform, to watch. Someone great, someone shitty, it doesn't matter. The great ones show you what you can get away with. The shitty ones remind you what never to bother with. Instead I go back to my apartment at Normandie and Hollywood, just up the block from the LITTLE ARMENIA and THAI TOWN signs, forever in cross-angled conflict. I get out my copies of *The Film Noir Encyclopedia* and all three volumes of Danny Peary's *Cult Movies* as well as the Necronomicon of Z-grade celluloid—Michael Weldon's indispensable *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*. I want to read up, in classic fledgling-movie-junkie style, on the movies I've just seen. There's *Sunset Boulevard* in *Cult Movies* volume 1, with Peary's usual loving, combative praise. There's *Ace in the Hole*, under the title *The Big Carnival*,

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in *The Film Noir Encyclopedia*.

As I read about them an idea strikes me. I get out a pencil and, after etching in a dark, graphite-gray star next to each title, I note the date and location of where I saw it. A star, "5/20/95" and "New Beverly Cinema" go next to *Sunset Boulevard*'s entry in *Cult Movies*. The same for *Ace in*—well, *The Big Carnival*—in *The Film Noir Encyclopedia*.

And for no reason save for the fact that these are the five volumes in front of me as I sit cross-legged on my living room floor, I decided that part of My Training will be to see how many titles I can star, date and place-name in these books. *These five books*. At the time, I'm thinking, "How many in one year?"

And on Tuesday, instead of going up and doing a set like I usually do, trying to hone my skills as a comedian, I find myself back at the New Beverly. You see, *The Nutty Professor* is playing. And it's listed in both *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia* and volume 1 of *Cult Movies*. So, I mean, I *have* to see it. To, you know . . . check it off.

I won't even learn that much from watching *The Nutty Professor*, an exhausting comedy made by an exhausted man. Jerry Lewis, in the getting-to-know-you phase of his Percocet addiction, wrestles with the two-headed snake of his loathing of Dean Martin's soul and his thirst to live Dino's life. It's an ice-water-on-bare-skin naked shock, watching Jerry's id play out in that movie. I sit in the New

Beverly, letting Jerry Lewis's nasal cri de coeur bounce off of me, thinking of all the loud, aggressive, alpha-clown comedians I'd been stuck with on the road. It is nothing I ever want to do on-screen.

I'm in Los Angeles, with a steady writing job on weekdays at MADtv, a dozen "alternative comedy" spaces to go up in and work on material—and now this, the New Beverly, my \$5-a-night film school.

Pretty good trio of films to start off my education with, right? *Sunset Boulevard*—a cynical, heartbroken writer, dragged to his doom by a true believer in the illusion of film. *Ace in the Hole*—a satanic, exploitative reporter who picks apart a dying man at the bottom of a pit in the hope that his career will rise back into the sun. And *The Nutty Professor*—an ignored nerd who's tempted by popular monstrosity. Obsession, darkness and magical thinking. Sitting in my apartment late in the night, penciling the star, date and venue name next to *The Nutty Professor* in two film books, I will have no idea I've entered my fourth Night Café.

It will be four years before I pull myself out of it.

I.

This same conversation is happening, simultaneously, across every other facet of the arts. It's happened before I say this to you, it's happening while I say this to you and it will keep on happening, forever and ever. Someone at a used record store is admonishing a friend for never having heard Love's *Forever Changes*. At a used bookstore, an ever-ravenous bookworm shakes their head sadly at their friend, who's never read Charles Portis's *Masters of Atlantis*. Or someone's never had the fries at the Apple Pan. Or encountered Michael C. McMillen's art installation *The Central Meridian*. Or visited Joshua Tree. An infinite crowd of apostles, spreading the word to their unwashed, heathen acquaintances.

II. *Sprocket fiend* is the name I have for the subterranean dimension to my film addiction. The subtle, beneath-the-sound-track sound of the clattering projector in those old rep theaters, *especially* the New Beverly. The defiant, twenty-four-frames-per-second mechanical heartbeat that says, at least for the duration of whatever movie you're watching, the world's time doesn't apply to you. You're safe in whatever chronal flow the director chooses to take you through. Real time, or a span of months or years, or backward and forward through a life. You are given the space of a film *to steal time*. And the projector is your only clock. And the need for that subtle, clicking sprocket time makes you—made me—a sprocket fiend.

III.

Well, Maron was—and still is—a beloved frenemy.

IV.

Died young. Thirty-one. Heart attack after a crash diet. He had the girth and skull of an unforgettable character actor, but he tried to whittle himself into a boring leading man. The knife hit bone.

V.

Four seconds.

VI.

Films rereleased under different titles. Another annoying, alienating weapon in my film fiend conversational spray. "Yeah, I saw a cheap print of Franju's *Eyes Without a Face*, under the title *The Horror Chamber of Doctor Faustus*. Must've been a print that got sent out on the drive-in movie circuit in the sixties. Imagine some poor yokel, killing an evening with a double bill, when *Les Yeux Sans Visage* gets slung at him after half-snoozing through *The Alligator People*! Hey, where're you goin'?"

CHAPTER TWO
My First Four
Night Cafés
Arles, France,
September 1888



Here's where I explain what I meant when I said "Night Café" back at the end of the last chapter. We have to go way back for the explanation, but it won't take long. Just to the end of summer 1888.

I love the end of summer, by the way. The hellish wick

of August, beginning to yield to the waiting fall. Leaves finally surrendering their green, the sky having one last furnace exhalation before it's safe for a coat to show its face in the afternoon. So this is a pungent, rancid shank of history we're about to gnaw on, the awfulness of August 1888.

Seriously, *what* was in the air in the dying summer of 1888? Did our planet pass through some gigantic, ghostly comet? One that hissed and emitted pure evil? What hung off of the twilight mist and, in the morning, rustled out of view at the first hint of sunlight?

On September 4 of 1888 George Eastman registered the trademark, and also clinched the patent, for his roll camera film. Five days earlier, on August 31, Jack the Ripper left the throat-slit, butcher-gutted body of Mary Ann Nichols on the bricks of Buck's Row in London's East End. Fast-forward to September 8—four days *after* Kodak film existed in the world. The body of Annie Chapman was dumped in a Whitechapel doorway.

Three more victims followed. As did the world's first motion picture. *Roundhay Garden Scene*—a two-second film by Louis Le Prince. Four people in a garden. Two men, two women. There, on the left, a man in a dark suit takes gentlemanly strides past a woman in a smart white dress. She shifts her feet, turns and takes a step away from the camera. And there on the right, the other couple. A stout woman in a dark dress who appears to walk backward. And circling around her, at a less gentlemanly, more predatory pace, a man in a white, duster-length overcoat and hat. We never see his face. A circling wraith, captured on celluloid.

No photographs of Jack the Ripper. No movies, either—not even a two-second blip, maybe of his dropping the bloody fragment of Catherine Eddowes's apron after he killed her on September 30. Whatever was infecting the crisp air near the end of 1888 evaded being captured on film.

It didn't escape oil and canvas, though.

In that same September, in the city of Arles—in the south of France and snuggled by the Mediterranean Sea—Vincent van Gogh painted a masterpiece that destroyed him.

Vincent van Gogh was a "tormented genius" the way Jimi Hendrix was a "guitar player." I remember, reading Stephen King's *On Writing*, when he said something about how "your art needs to be a function of your life, not the other way around." Van Gogh's art had moved beyond being a "function" of his life and had metastasized into a tumor that was keeping him alive only to kill him more slowly. But in Arles, Vincent decided to take control of his "art." Except that he made it hurry up with the task of his annihilation.

It didn't help that Vincent was a religious fanatic. And, again, not to hit the "tormented genius" comparison again, but his career as a simple country priest was cut short when his parishioners were appalled at his intensity, his Saint Francis of Assisi-like commitment to squalor, poverty and filth. His flock wanted Huey Lewis and the News—what they got was GG Allin and the Murder Junkies. And his religious fervor spread to his art, the way cancer will spread to other organs of a sufferer's body. He

had a gift—the gift of transcendent artistic talent. But his religious convictions made him feel that this talent was demonic, and something to be ashamed and frightened of.

What to do? Simple—he only ever painted *what he saw*. What he was specifically looking at while he painted. He was only creating a representation of the world as it presented itself before his eyes. See? Demonic forces kept at bay, artistic itch scratched. Win-win.

For a while. Any true creative endeavor demands constant evolution, growth, experimentation and challenge. As the summer of 1888 bloomed and ripened and then rotted in the August heat, Vincent van Gogh walked the earth feeling like a rusty cage barely holding a cackling, paint-stained legion of bright, gibbering demons.

And so, to Arles. A change of scenery—*that* was the solution! A whole city full of people and places and objects he'd never seen before! More cordwood for the demons to burn away to ash.

And it didn't help. "They change their sky, not their soul, who run across the sea." That was Horace in 65 BC. A truism that applies so perfectly to every one of my friends who leave L.A. for New York, and find themselves a year later with newly toned legs from walking, scraped-raw nerves from the assault that is Manhattan, and a sudden yearning to ". . . I dunno, move upstate, or maybe to Williamsburg."

Van Gogh didn't even have a Williamsburg. Arles was going to need to save him *and* propel him forward. That combination rarely happens in quotidian existence. In art? It's as rare as Sasquatch riding a unicorn.

But, after first arriving, it seemed that Vincent might have pulled it off. The town offered endless, gorgeous sights for him to capture in thick, manic gobs of oil on canvas. Starry, starry night skies, lush interiors, peaceful street scenes where the sea-scrubbed air gave the atmosphere the tickly tingle of a daydream.

And something even better happened for him, in terms of artistic inspiration. His friend, ex-accountant turned Tahitian layabout artist Paul Gauguin, suggested something radical. Why not paint something . . . *from memory*? Just once, instead of painting what you're *actually* looking at, render an artwork through the prism of recollection. What newer, emotional details might surface through the rigid, unyielding mesh of religion and shame that you've used to bind that throbbing, genius brain of yours? Vincent, give it a try.

And he did. *The Night Café*, painted in September of 1888. While George Eastman made it possible to forever trap reality on paper, while Jack the Ripper carved, in flesh wounds, a ragged peephole into the twentieth century, van Gogh painted from memory. And it destroyed him.

The first time I saw *The Night Café* was in college, during a psychology class. We were watching a slide show about the artwork of schizophrenics. About how certain characteristics appeared, over and over again, in their work. Distorted perspective. Faceless figures. Light sources with what appeared to be cartoon "stink lines" emanating from them, as if the painter could see (or feel? or hear? or smell and taste?) the beams of illumination cutting through the darkness.

And in the middle of the slide show of crude, crayon-on-construction-paper renderings, saved from the trash bins of countless mental hospitals, there clicked into view van Gogh's *The Night Café*.

It kicked me in the head. Even looking at it from the middle of a lecture hall, a distant, projected transparency on a classroom screen, the menace and magic of that painting grabbed me. Tendrils of glistening paint whipped out, snagged my eyeballs, and held fast.

Go look at *The Night Café*, if you have any access—art book, Internet, anything. This was van Gogh's memory of the Café de la Gare in Arles. Probably a seedy place, but not unpleasant. A room where drunks and derelicts could rent a chair against the cold of night for the price of a glass of brandy. Could, perhaps, sleep off a day's self-abuse on the crook of an arm on a tabletop. Gauguin painted it, later, in much sunnier tones.

But that's not how van Gogh remembered it. Or saw it. Or saw all of life, it seems. Whatever piloted his body from inside the blue-eyed skull of van Gogh rarely saw a pretty planet.

Look at *The Night Café*. See the red walls, like the color of butchered meat, or the inside of a carcass during an autopsy? See the lines coming off of the yellow lamps on the ceiling, almost as if they're screaming? The way the pool table seems to crouch, like some badly constructed hell-beast, about to lurch out of the drawing at you? The faceless waiter, in his spotless whites, struggling to stand upright and human while surrounded with the hunched-over gargoyle figures of the café's denizens? And finally

the overall, claustrophobic architecture of the room, of the building, like evil itself is outside, softening the building's timbers with hot saliva and warping the framework inward through need and rage. George Eastman's camera filmed garden parties and bridges. Van Gogh's paintbrush captured, like a Q-tip swabbing a germ-filled throat culture, a sample of the dirty darkness loose in the air at the end of 1888. There it is, on the canvas of *The Night Café*. Murder-vibe tentacles, coiling out around your eyes and muddying your heart.

Van Gogh entered a room in his mind when he painted *The Night Café*. He acknowledged his damaged (and worsening) psyche and, in acknowledging it, made a deal. He would be able to take newer, more original artistic conceptions out, would be able to capture them in paintings. His psyche found the deal acceptable. It let Vincent leave the room—the Night Café—with vistas and visions he hadn't come close to before in his career. But something followed him out, and latched on to him like a virus, and he was never the same.

He was a better painter. A transformed one. Masterpieces flew out of him like pigeons from a condemned cathedral. *Starry Night over the Rhône, The Yellow House, Bedroom in Arles, Les Arènes*—all before Christmas of 1888. Of course, by Christmas Eve Vincent was battering his head against the walls of the Old Hospital in Arles, having severed his ear and given it to a prostitute named Rachel. By February of 1889, after he'd been released from the Old Hospital a *second* time, the townspeople of Arles circulated a petition, demanding that Vincent be confined permanently. Van Gogh fled to Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (and the Saint-Paul asylum) shortly thereafter. One year later, in the summer of 1890, Vincent ended his life with a gunshot wound to the chest. It took him a day and a half to die. That sort of profound insanity pays dividends—in hideous endurance and terrible tenacity.

“I told you that story to tell you this one.”

That's Bill Cosby, again, off of his *Revenge* album. I know it seems like I'm taking a roundabout way to explain what I mean by *Night Café*, but everything I just laid out was to get you ready for the fact that I've had *six* of them. None of them drove me mad. I still have both ears. My chest cavity is bullet-free.

But the concept of the Night Café—the room you enter, and then leave having been forever changed—is an abiding, repeated event in my life. Six times, so far, it's happened to me. All of them had to do with my creativity, and my imagination, and how I saw the world and my place in it. Here are the first four:

The Tustin Library in Tustin, California, 1974

I've written about this, at length, in my last book, *Zombie Spaceship Wasteland*. So here's a quick summation. Nineteen seventy-four. Halloween. Five years old. Kids'

day at the library. Ghost stories and pumpkin cookies and witches made out of construction paper. And a movie! With zero malice on their part, the adults who organized the afternoon showed F. W. Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu*. They closed the blinds on the windows and projected it against a bare wall. Eight-millimeter film, clattering projector, that faint burning smell as the projector bulb ignited the microscopic dust particles. Dust particles are mostly flakes of dead human skin. So, when I was five, I watched *Nosferatu* with the atavistic, pagan odor of simmering flesh corkscrewing itself into my memory. The optics are dream-logic, ratman vampire imagery. The perfume is cannibal cookout. That little square of light took over that darkened room, and while I and the other kids around me screamed and cried,

I wanted onto the other side of that screen. By hook or by crook (as it turned out, by stage and by book), I'd do it. At five years old, I left my first Night Café. With nightmares and a pumpkin cookie.

Garvin's Comedy Club, 1988

Yes, that room full of overpriced potato skins, puerile dick jokes and watered-down drinks was my second Night Café. I went in thinking stand-up comedy would be one of a dozen things I'd try before I settled on what I would do with my life. During that summer I also worked as a sportswriter (under my own name) and a columnist (under a fake name—"Hartman Dreadstone") for a small, local paper. I worked as a paralegal trainee during the day. And a party deejay on weekends. Any one of those paid better and gave me more positive reinforcement than the four minutes of silence and one single laugh at Garvin's that night. But I left changed. Another Night Café. I wanted to be a comedian. I wanted to hang out with comedians. I wanted to be lunar, not solar. A tiny step toward the other side of that screen I'd seen when I was five.

The Holy City Zoo, May 1992

Another comedy club. Like Garvin's. Except not at all like Garvin's. The polar opposite. Between Garvin's in Washington, DC, and the Holy City Zoo in San Francisco, California—somewhere on the highway I drove west across the United States in 1992—there was a magical portal. Tornado or tollbooth, wardrobe or rabbit hole. I have no idea. But I'm glad I tumbled through it.

By the summer of 1992 I'd been doing comedy four years and was jock-confident about my skills and progress. That first night at Garvin's? One laugh? Well, those days were long behind me. I was starting to feature—and in some cases, headline—at some of the finest comedy clubs on the East Coast and in the eastern Midwest. Sir Laffs-a-Lot; the Shaft in Norton, Virginia; and Slapstix (the "x" meant "brace yourself for 'x'-citement!"). I had surefire

bits about tampon commercials, movie theater popcorn, farts, superheroes farting and shooting things out of their ass, and masturbating. And farting. Four years into my career and I was pulling in a hefty \$7,000 a year—and these were 1992 dollars! Yeah, I'd moved back in with my parents after a year in Baltimore, but that's only because I wanted to save money for my big move to the West Coast. Once I made it to the shores of the Pacific, my surefire brand of chuckle-making would rocket me straight onto an HBO special. A sitcom would follow. How could it not? *Patton Pending?* *Generally Patton?* *Oswalt My Gum?*

That's the attitude I had on Wednesday, May 6, 1992, when I first entered the Holy City Zoo in San Francisco. I'd moved there the day before. My wheezing Volkswagen Jetta had dropped its water pump onto a mountain road outside Truckee, California. All of the money I'd saved by moving back in with my parents went toward getting it fixed. I was moths-in-pockets broke, sharing an apartment with two other comedians. My room was the living room. My bed was a futon on the floor. One of my roommates, Carlos Alazraqui, was destined to be the voice of the Taco Bell Chihuahua. I was

destined to go onstage at the legendary Holy City Zoo, my second night in San Francisco, and announce myself as the new gunslinger in town. Hadn't I done my time in the countryside, training like a duelist, quickening my draw and honing my aim until all enemies fell when I slapped leather and fanned the hammer?

Oh, the cheap, cinematic victory I replayed over and over in my head as I walked down Clement Street that night, notebook under my arm.

I was dressed for battle, too. I learned, from my four years walking the giggle-shack latitudes, how to dress. Sport coat, ripped jeans and sneakers. Years ago, in Philadelphia, a comedy club owner told me, when I dared to go onstage wearing a Flaming Carrot Comics T-shirt, not to "ever wear anything that can distract from your jokes." Sage advice from a man who always slayed with the exact same twelve minutes the entire four years I knew him. I streamlined my act along the same lines, as well as my wardrobe. Now, tonight, for my crushing debut, I had a blue polka-dot shirt from Eddie Bauer; a bolo tie with a muted, abstract, brick-red scorpion as a clasp; and silver aglets. My jeans only had a few tears in them, and I wore black Chuck Taylors. I mean, how could anyone who even *glanced* at me not recognize this avatar of awesomeness they shared the planet with?

When you walked into the Holy City Zoo, you passed through two swinging doors into a room that had "vertical" and "narrow" to spare. "Wide" and "spacious"—not so much. A tiny bar to your left, a postage-stamp stage immediately beyond it. Seating for an audience of fifty, if it was packed. And, as if put there as a prank, an opera-style pair of elevated box seats to stage left. They held two people. Anyone who sat there drew more focus than anyone who was onstage.

The Holy City Zoo did comedy every single night of the week. Not just the Tuesday-maybe-Wednesday open mikes, with booked, professional Friday and Saturday shows like the clubs I worked, first in DC and then up and down the East Coast.

Every single night, there was some

thing at the Zoo. Open mikes Mondays and Tuesdays and, like tonight, sometimes Wednesdays. Other times Wednesdays were taken up by sketch or improv groups or . . . something. Friday and Saturday, sometimes Sunday—the pros, making money, drawing crowds of fifty. I was sure I'd be headlining those nights before 1992 was over.

Hey—it was looking pretty crowded. Lot of people there. They looked like civilians, too. Not comedians. Jeans, T-shirts. Maybe a button-up shirt over the T-shirt. They were probably waiting to get drinks before they sat down. I couldn't wait to rock their worlds. Hadn't I done that already, to sold-out crowds at Charlie Goodnight's in Raleigh, North Carolina? I mean, the show was sold out because I was opening for Bill Hicks, sure, but I proved I belonged up there, killing it with my no-fail closing bit about the Cookie Monster if he were gay. Hadn't Bill been gracious and polite to me, even speaking to me once between shows? He recognized a future great when he saw one, sure. No way was he trying to fill the awkward silence as I stared at him over my free-for-comedians soda, wondering how he slaughtered using a third of the energy I was so desperately putting out.

None of the crowd at the Holy City Zoo was taking their seats. Oh, wait. Well, *those* three people did. A young couple and a strange-looking older man with a bag of peanut M&M's that he ate, robotically, while staring off into space. Hopefully, more people would sit down before the show started. I found the sign-up sheet so I could add my name— Oh, hold on. There were already seventeen names before mine. Where were all the comedi

ans? Were you supposed to come in early? Did they sign up hours ago and then go to get dinner or something? Why didn't anyone tell me?

I added my name to the list and found a place at the bar where I could lean and check my notes and watch the show. The bar was crowded and most of the audience still hadn't taken a seat.

It took me a moment to realize that almost all of them were taking out notebooks, jotting down jokes, getting ready.

These were the comedians.

They were dressed just like they'd dress in real life. Flannel shirts, blank T-shirts, work boots. Like they'd walked, midconversation, from the sidewalk to the stage.

Blaine Capatch sat down at the bar beside me. We'd driven out a few weeks apart. The year before, Blaine had traveled out to San Francisco and returned to the East Coast with tales of wonder. Stages everywhere! Comedians our age, getting work! Cheap rent! Cheaper food! Strong coffee! Bookstores and sushi and fog and weed—right there for the taking, instead of in odd, out-of-the-way Baltimore neighborhoods or a single block in DC. The few pockets of strangeness that we took hummingbird-like sips from back home were simply part of the everyday scenery in San Francisco. I dreamed of standing at the corner where Miles Archer takes three slugs in the belly at the beginning of *The Maltese Falcon*, sipping an espresso machiatto and thinking deep thoughts in the chill mist.

"Isn't this place great?" said Blaine. He was dressed in his usual all black, looking the way every New Wave keyboard player wished they looked. Blaine had a Zen mind inside of a switchblade body. He fit right in. I already resented him.

"Yeah. I feel like the ghost of Lenny Bruce is going to walk through the doors."

Blaine said, "You're thinking of the Hungry I."

I winced. "You're right."

The show started. Every comedian was young. A few were "older" than me, in that they were twenty-three or twenty-four.

They did jokes in a way I'd never seen comedians do jokes in my four years of comedy. At Garvin's, on an open-mike night and even when I went pro and started working weekends, the only thing that mattered was the end result. If someone got laughs, and got rebooked, and made money? That was the end of the aesthetic argument. There was no such thing as "hack" comedy back where I started. There was only "working" and "not working." I remember very clearly, one night in 1990 during a comedy competition in Newport News, I pointed to a comedian on the cover of a magazine. I opined that maybe she wasn't the funniest person currently doing comedy. Every other comedian in the room turned on me. I was suddenly a rare steak in a hyena cage. "I don't see *you* on the cover of a magazine. She's on the *cover of a magazine*. So she's funny." There was no comeback for me—at least, not in my addled, mulleted, twenty-one-year-old head.

Now I was sitting in a dark, narrow chamber, an odd room that felt like a tiny, hidden lobe of the world's brain. Incarnate on the tiny stage, of that tiny room, was every retort and answer to that Newport News assault. Every answer to why it doesn't fucking matter if you get rich or famous *without* the funny was up on the stage that night, *enjoying* being comedians. No HBO specials on the horizon, no sitcom dreams, not even mainstream club headlining gigs. They wanted to do comedy for the sake of doing comedy. I hadn't seen that yet, in my career. I'd seen little glimpses of it, within my tiny circle of friends back on the East Coast. Blaine, and Mark, and Dave, and our friend Jeff Hatz. And me. But we were treated like mutants. We *thought* we were mutants, and for whatever few moments of genuine risk and weirdness we allowed ourselves, we also had our sights on fitting in and thriving in middle-of-the-road, mozzarella-sticks-and-comment-cards comedy clubs. We could at least argue that we belonged in the Hang since we were earning the Money, getting the Bookings.

Now I saw the perfect antithesis of that, comedian after comedian, at the Holy City Zoo. Jim Earl and Barry Lank, a comedy duo with Bob & Ray's genialness, channeling Carl Panzram's murderous misanthropy. Greg Behrendt, doing an extended riff about Jimi Hendrix's secret sideline as a pastry chef that made absolutely no sense and absolutely cracked my shit up. Laura Milligan—who was Nancy Spungen with Gore Vidal's brain. Greg Proops, a snide superego who could make you piss yourself simply with the way he said the name "Adolphe *Menjou*," like a dirty in-joke both of you were sharing in a fox hole. Warren Thomas (RIP), as shocked and delighted by his own seat-of-the-pants improvisations as the audience was. Kurt Weitzmann—casually, breezily blasphemous. Maybe you know some of these names. Maybe you don't. They were all—and still are, to me—crucial.

The comedians would finish their sets and sit or lean against the wall or huddle at the bar and watch the rest of the show. There was an energy in that room I never got to experience at *any* East Coast open mike—a feeling of delight in the silence as much as the laughter. If I'd become a junkie after my first open mike at Garvin's, four years ago, then I was now hanging out with steel-skinned freebasers.

II
Blaine went up. Pretty good. But something was wrong. His more esoteric references and odd non sequiturs got *way* bigger laughs than his killer "A" material. I was confused for a moment, and then allowed myself a shimmer of smugness that came more from the fear that he'd eclipse me and leave me behind in this new city. I told myself, *He's just not delivering his jokes with any real conviction. He's not selling them. I'm a headliner. A head* lining comedian. *I know how to sell a solid set, no matter what the audience.*

Blaine ended to solid applause from the other comedians. They knew him, remembered him from the previous summer. No one doesn't like Blaine Capatch.

Three more comedians went up and then it was my spot. I only had to do five to seven minutes. I mean, I've got an hour of solid-gold, can't-miss material, right? For a moment I flashed to Jack Nicholson as the Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman*, lit from below and sneering over a blood-streaked newspaper about the Dark Knight's terrorizing Gotham's criminal. "Terrorizes? Wait'll they get a load of me."

Yep, those were the strip-mall psych-up strategies I'd run in my head back then, but they'd worked so far, hadn't they? This audience was *mine*.

And up I went. I forget who the emcee was. But they are very pleasant as they read my name and ask the audience to welcome me and I step to the mike stand and I pivot not speaking immediately I'd learned that you see you don't just rush to the mike and start telling jokes like you're terrified you'll lose them right off the bat you take a moment show them you belong up there you're *confident* and they're in good hands they can relax and let themselves be taken *anywhere you want to take them* and then I clear my throat and look down at the stool next to me and it hits me all of a sudden I'm the *only* comedian besides Blaine who didn't go up onstage with a notebook I wanted to show them I had my act all memorized I was a professional and ready with the jokes *locked*

and loaded so here comes one look right out of the chute hi I'm Patton Oswalt and I'm cute and cuddly which I say with the same inflection I perfected out on the road and usually just saying that itself gets a laugh and puts me at ease 'cause I know I've got a killer line to say afterward but what in the fuck there's nothing *nothing* not even a chuckle and so I say too quick I don't pause enough like I do when the audience is responding I say you know what THAT means right and

before I can let them answer I too quick let tumble out can't get laid 'cause when a girl says you're cute and cuddly it's like she's saying oh you're like Teddy Ruxpin let me stick a tape cassette up your ass and you can talk to me while I fall asleep and it's hitting me now after seeing everyone else go up that *holy fuck* that isn't even really a joke at all it's a set of words designed to get a laugh from people who aren't really listening who are half-drunk and wondering when the fried shrimp are going to get there I just heard the comedian say *laid* and *Teddy Ruxpin* and *ass* and I guess that means there's a joke there so ha ha ha only this isn't the kind of crowd I'm performing for now in the Holy City Zoo it's other comedians funny comedians who give a shit how they write their jokes and none of them went for easy laughs and this is the way I'm announcing myself in a new city *no risk no* thought nothing to see here and I get dry-mouthed and rush right into the next joke something about Bob Dylan performing at Kings Dominion but that's an amusement park in Virginia no one here knows what the fuck Kings Dominion is but I'm just hurrying to the Bob Dylan impression which is also a surefire laugh

and when things are starting out shitty a way for me to buy myself a little breathing room but again nothing not a peep why the fuck would they care about a Bob Dylan *impression* especially after seeing Greg Behrendt's more conceptual smarter Jimi Hendrix stuff so I go into a story about having a hernia operation last year which totally didn't happen it's a fucking lie but there's all these funny jokes about bedpans and the drugs they give you and still nothing so now I'm three and a half minutes into what's supposed to be a seven-minute set and I go into my killer closer about the tampon commercials with that never-fail punch line Tampax we're not number one but we're up there and this gets a fucking *groan* of course why would it not it's so fucking shitty and I say good night and walk off the stage like I've had my shins shot off.

Hello, San Francisco! There's a new kid in town!

Blaine and I watched the rest of the show. When the show ended we mingled. Blaine seemed to know everyone. Greg Behrendt tried to be friendly but he couldn't help looking at my bolo tie and saying, "Really?"

Everyone was leaving. Blaine and I walked across Clement Street to a restaurant called Taiwan. It was the color of an old, pink rose and made the best dim sum I'd ever tasted. It's still there. Go in sometime. Sit at the third table to your right as you pass the hostess station. That's where Blaine and I sat that night, and ordered fried rice, and drank tea, and quietly tore pages out of our notebooks.

Old set lists. Lists of jokes, and concepts and ideas

we were working on. We carefully, methodically, brutally ripped away everything we'd built inside clubs like Garvin's and in a thousand forgotten one-night gigs in bars and restaurants and colleges. By the time our waiter slapped our check on the table, we were the proud owners of blank notebooks. We had no choice. Change or die.

The Holy City Zoo was my third Night Café. I went in wanting to be a comedian. I left wanting to be an artist. I know that's pretentious and grandiose and half of the comedians reading this right now are thinking *Fuck you, poser* but it is the absolute, embarrassing truth. Don't think for a second I don't value my years writing forgettable, passable, meat-and-potatoes jokes on the road. As you'll see, when I reached my fifth Night Café, those four years of hackery saved me.

But for now? In 1992 San Francisco? I needed the dark thought-temple that was the Holy City Zoo to burn my skills to the ground and force me to start over. I experienced complete humiliation in those four and a half minutes—but I also glimpsed a better Hang, whispers of better Stages, and, if I didn't crack or lose faith or just puss out and go home, the possibility of becoming a better comedian. So I spent the next year, over and over again, passing through those swinging doors. I watched. I wrote. I bombed. I bombed less. I wrote more. I started venturing out to the other clubs the city had to offer. Cobb's. The Punch Line. Then outside of the city—Tommy T's and Fubar's and the Punch Line in solid-steel Republican

Walnut Creek.

III

Slowly, and with way more crash-and-burn.

I unlearned.

So those were Night Cafés one through three. The first one was a projector-bulb beacon, which led to the second one. The second one contained a vocation, which I followed to the third one. The third one—the Holy City Zoo—contained an art. I curse the humiliation and bless the annihilation, and even more valuable than the impulse toward art, I gained an inner radar for dark, hidden places where the strange ones go. That inner beacon led me down to Los Angeles, a little more than three years after my Holy City Zoo debut/flameout. Where I found myself on Beverly Boulevard, in the sunshine, staring at the New Beverly Cinema.

The New Beverly Cinema, May of 1995

I was gonna be a director. The New Beverly Cinema was going to teach me how.

It had better, I thought. I was lucky, but for how long? After three years in San Francisco, I managed to get a staff writing job on *MADtv*. More money than I'd ever seen in my life. More money in two weeks than I'd made in my first *year* as a professional comedian.

But the boom years of stand-up comedy were over by 1995. I watched the Washington, DC, comedy scene fold up at the

end of 1991. The San Francisco scene began collapsing two years later. The Holy City Zoo? Gone. One year after my first set, closed up. A karaoke bar.

“We’ve been running across a log bridge that’s coming apart behind us,” said Blaine as we packed up our Lower Haight apartment in April and got ready to drive down to Los Angeles and plant ourselves in an office at Ren-Mar Studios, cranking out sketches like “Gump Fiction” and “Republican Gladiators.” We’d still do comedy at night, we told ourselves. More comedians were moving to Los Angeles from San Francisco, and New York and Boston, and they brought a DIY attitude with them. So stages were beginning to appear in coffee shops, and Laundromats, and record stores. We were still a year from someone calling our scene “alternative comedy,” so for now, it was simply “comedy not in clubs.” I saw a lot of fun and creativity in it. But how the fuck would I keep myself in what Blaine called “rent and ramen”?

So I sat in the New Beverly. And watched. And thought. And retraced. The projector beam when I was five. Garvin’s when I was nineteen. The Holy City Zoo when I was twenty-three. The Lure. The Job. The Art. Following the Art had led me to another Job. *MADtv*. An office. A fun job, but it was hard, sometimes, to squeeze Art out of it. I thought comedy club audiences were an impassable firewall. Then I met network executives.

And now the New Beverly Cinema, at twenty-six. Night after night, films by people who’d found a way to make Art and Commerce dance together to whatever tiny tune was playing in their heads. It seemed impossible to me, to make that leap. Too scary. My panned-veal suburban instincts were rearing their heads again. I mean, I had a job. A *really* good job, come to think of it. I couldn’t have stayed in San Francisco forever, I told myself. Ultimately, you had to be down in Los Angeles. I’d find peace here. Hadn’t Sherman Torgan? Up in his ticket booth, with a million combinations of double features in his head? He lived in San Francisco for a while in the late sixties. Scouted for the studios. Loved movies, like me. But moved back down to Los Angeles. Gotta be where the celluloid is fresh. Opened the New Beverly, kept Art alive. Barely made any money, but he was at peace. Wasn’t he?

“You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. Don’t ever count on having both at once.” Robert Heinlein wrote that. Well, I had neither. I wasn’t free at *MADtv*, and I wasn’t at peace inside my head.

Because the Holy City Zoo, as much as it made me pursue Art, had also made me jealous and competitive. And not in a good way. Now, at age twenty-six, when I saw a comedian do something brilliant or new? I wasn’t energized by it. Not like I had been at Garvin’s, when I was nineteen. Now I got threatened and envious and spiteful. Self-sabotaging. Los Angeles in 1995 was becoming a honey lure for writers and comedians who were so much funnier, so much more inventive and quick than I could ever dream of being. I’d fooled myself into thinking I was this young gunslinger, but now I felt like a nerve-blasted old cowboy with a shaky hand and a rusty revolver.

There I was, I thought, at *MADtv*, struggling to explain to a network suit what *Apocalypse Now* was, and how it could be funny if done through the prism of a Rankin Bass special.

IV

Meanwhile, over at HBO’s *Mr. Show*, my onetime San Francisco roommate Brian Posehn was writing and performing with Bob Odenkirk (from Chicago) and David Cross (Boston by way of Atlanta). They were changing the form, the way we’d been trying to at the Zoo. How had they willed that impulse onto television? I sure hadn’t. I was going to be swept away and forgotten. I’d end up like the sad old local headliners I’d see come into Garvin’s on a Tuesday night. Never moved out of their hometown, never stretched their skills. Hopping onstage to massage their egos for seven minutes, and then home to empty calendars, old jokes, compromise.

Remember the bullshit, grandiose victories I could imagine for myself? Well, I could do tragedy even better.

Brooding in the dark of the New Beverly with Welles and Kurosawa and Bergman all that summer was a day spa for my depression.

I didn’t know it, all through the months of self-serving terror and projected panic, but I was soon to enter my fifth Night Café. I couldn’t enter it then—mainly because it didn’t yet exist.

I.

Show your kids *Irreversible*, *Salo* or *The Last Temptation of Christ* before you show them *any* silent film. Even the benign ones are unintended windows into stutter, subconscious terror rhythms.

II.

I should probably point out here that when I say “East Coast” I mean Virginia, and North Carolina and Maryland and Delaware. I never made it up to New York between 1988 and 1992. Not to Boston, either. And Chicago? Unthinkable. Never had the money, couldn’t get the bookings. And I was also kind of a pussy. Like I said earlier, I was a suburban-raised veal. Imperviousness to the honk and hustle of big cities was a callus I hadn’t grown yet. Too bad—the same thing I’m describing here, in San Francisco in 1992, was happening on an even more intense, profound level in New York, Boston and Chicago. I would have been chewed up even worse in those cities. I hope that’s not too much of a spoiler. Keep reading—I’m sure you can tell, but this gets ugly.

III.

I got to work with Bill Hicks one more time at the Walnut Creek Punch Line. I saw him walk half an audience one night and when one lady barked at him, “Don’t you believe in *God*?” he retorted, “I do. I just don’t believe in people.”

IV.

They eventually shot my idea—a year after I left the show. Well, I really didn't leave. They didn't have me back. And with a good fucking reason. I was a judgmental, sour asshole of a writer. Quick with a criticism and never with a fix. A comedy and film snob who rolled his eyes half the time and turned in typo-filled scripts. But they shot it. And put my name in the credits. Misspelled. Revenge? They were entitled. The sketch was called "A Pack of Gifts Now," and it was lovingly animated by a stop-motion genius named Corky Quakenbush. An elf is sent by toy makers to the North Pole to terminate "the Kringle" and his cultlike operation of toy makers "with extreme prejudice." And, ironically enough, one of the producers I clashed with, Fax Bahr—who codirected the documentary *Hearts of Darkness*, about the making of . . . *Apocalypse Now*—shepherded the sketch through, with all of my visual jokes and references intact, and plenty of his own, which made the sketch even better. Even got a mention in *TV Guide*. Thanks, Fax. Sorry I was such a dick. Part of being in your twenties is not knowing an ally when you see one.

CHAPTER THREE

The Largo

Los Angeles, 1996

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October 22, 1996. I was hunkered down in the New Beverly, while Jean Cocteau's 1946 *Beauty and the Beast* swam across the screen above my head. Living arms holding candelabras reached from walls. Magic pools. Wicks that lit themselves. Time and gravity ignoring the rules of the universe, bending and flexing to the logic of Cocteau's tiny, enclosed eggshell dream theater of a film. Later on I checked off this film in my *Psychotronic Encyclopedia*. Michael Weldon, in his thumbnail description, mentioned

how anyone viewing this movie would wonder why people can't make movies today that look *half* as good as this fifty-year-old masterpiece.

Two weeks before this I'd been downtown, at the Orpheum, watching a double bill of *The Man from Planet X* and the original *Night of the Living Dead*. Did George Romero remember those reaching limbs from *Beauty and the Beast* when he made *Dead*—those fish-belly zombie arms insistent through the slats of the farmhouse, where the group of desperate outsiders barricaded themselves against the ravenous waves of flesh eaters? Come to think of it, did Roman Polanski also have that image in his head when he made *Repulsion*, and Catherine Deneuve had her blazing, third-act freak-out?

Connections pinged in my head while I watched. This was how I was consuming movies. More connective tissue the more films I saw. A year plus, since that Saturday spent with Billy Wilder, and almost nightly, I was returning to the New Beverly. And my hunger for films led me to other rep sites, too. Sherman Torgan was cool with that. He was the confident madam of an abiding brothel. There is no satiating a film freak's itch for variety. The New Beverly started as a doorway for me, and then became a hub. So I ventured out. First to the then-in-its-infancy American Cinematheque—a pirate operation that roamed from theater to theater, hoping for a home, its final nest in the Egyptian still years away. And then the late, lamented Tales Café (a gorgeous book-closet of a theater with plush, irregular chairs; a 16 mm projector; and stacks and stacks of short story collections—*absolutely no novels*, only

short story collections). The mighty Nuart on Santa Monica, one of a chain of Landmark *Thea-tahs*

that combined the restored classics with the up-and-comers like Christopher Nolan, Ramin Bahrani and Harmony Korine. And, finally, the impossibly lush, eerily understaffed and inexplicably-supplied-with-the-cleanest-prints-I've-ever-seen Four Star on Wilshire. Chinese Triad? Russian mob? What in God's name was happening there? Where did they find a scratch-and-blemish-free print of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*? Why was the snack bar sometimes, literally, three boxes of Sno-Caps and three Sprites, each for sale for fifty cents? It closed. It's gone. I don't want to dig any deeper. I value my life. I walked away from you, Four Star, but not before seeing a print of *Gone with the Wind* so perfect it felt like a massive hallucination from another dimension, where humans more operatic than us found a way to make the South's defeat in the Civil War the sexiest calamity that ever crashed into history.

But despite all of my film-junkie wanderings, the New Beverly was home base. And that night was a rarity for me. *One* movie, not the double feature I usually gobbled down. Just one film, complete immersion, and as much burning into memory as I could manage.

Because now, a year and five months after moving to Los Angeles, I'd found another competitor for my evenings. In fact, much like the other rep theaters that occasionally drew me from the New Beverly's punishing seats,

it was a host of lesser Night Cafés, enticing me toward the next big one, the next Room I Would Enter and Not Leave the Same.

After that first week, in 1995, of doing no stand-up—of getting my staff-writer sea legs and taking my first nibble at film

freedom, a gnashing, celluloid-swallow—I'd roared back into my routine of going onstage as much as I could. If gluttony was the way I was going to learn filmmaking, I thought, then that was how I was going to keep my comedian muscles limber and lethal. As much stage time as possible. It was the only way I knew.

So this was my routine, that first year:

1) Wake up in my blank, Ikea-heavy apartment on Normandie. 2) Drive to work at Ren-Mar studios. 3) Carb-and-coffee-heavy breakfast at craft services. 4) Pitch sketches. 5) Play *Doom* and *Hexen* at my computer for most of the day, then hastily write whatever sketches they accepted twenty minutes before they were due. 6) Self-righteously piss and moan about the legitimate notes and concerns the producers had with my sloppy, poorly executed concepts. I mean, couldn't they see how *brilliant* my idea was? Who cared about the typos or the fact that the sketch might not really have an ending? Ambiguity is what classic cinema and memorable sketch comedy are all about, *maaaaaaaan*.

At least I've kept the painful memory of every self-serving, lazy argument I made while I was at *MADtv*, to remind me to work on the execution as hard as the conception hit me. But that's another book.

Because my other routine—my lunar routine, my nocturnal gauntlet—was this:

1) Wet my hair, wash my face, brush my teeth in the men's room at Ren-Mar around seven thirty, which is usually when my day ended unless it was a Friday night taping. 2) Grab dinner. Two plastic trays of sushi from Ralph's and a big Evian was a reliable favorite. I could eat it in my car without spilling anything on my shirt as I drove to either 3a) the New Beverly, or some other rep theater to catch a movie, or 3b) a comedy stage, somewhere.

But a new wrinkle had been thrown into my routine. An insane one, a magical-thinking one, a baseball-player-wearing-the-same-pair-of-socks-through-a-pennant-series superstitious one.

Remember how, after that first double feature at the New Beverly, I went back to my apartment and checked off—in my *Film Noir Encyclopedia* and first volume of *Cult Movies* and *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia*—the date and place that I'd actually seen those movies? Well, I went and did it again with *The Nutty Professor* and then, a week later, with *Touch of Evil* and *Kiss of Death* (June 7 and 8, respectively, at the New Beverly).

And in *between* all of that—in between the Billy Wilder double feature and *The Nutty Professor* and then the two classic film noirs, I did a set at the UnCabaret at Luna Park.

The UnCabaret was a Sunday night show started by Beth Lapidés in 1993 as an alternative to a lot of the mainstream clubs in Los Angeles. Enough has been written

about it elsewhere, so let me boil it down here: Lapidés's creation was a crucial offshoot of spaces like the Holy City Zoo and, by the time I started doing sets there in 1994, one of the best places for a comedian to get seen, advance their career, gain new followers and grow beyond their limits.

It was also nerve-wracking, going in there to do sets. I was suddenly sharing the stage with idols of mine, like David Cross, Dana Gould and Laura Kightlinger. And the crowd was packed with not only rabid comedy fans but celebrities who were even bigger idols to me. I descended the stairs one night to do my set and realized, in an ass-clinching moment after I'd passed them, that the goddamned motherfucking oh-my-fucking-Christ *Beastie Boys* were the three guys I'd pushed past to make my way to the stage.

I had a great set that night. Killer. I'd only rarely connected like that with an audience, making even my moments of silence and fumbling into laughs. And in front of the guys who crafted *Paul's Boutique*, a hip-hop album as dense as one of Gabriel García Márquez's phantasmal libraries!

Where *did* that sudden surge come from? Why did I suddenly feel like I had a nitrous tank strapped to a part of me, like Mad Max's V8 Interceptor in *The Road Warrior*?

Maybe, I thought, back in my apartment that night, it was the Five Books. The checking off of classic films, after actually going to watch them on-screen. As I filled in each hole in my movie buff's incomplete knowledge, perhaps I was unlocking some secret level of skill I had as a comedian.

Before you start in on me, yes, I realize now this was superstition and ritual and illogical voodoo-mind. Salt tossed over your shoulder. Always saying "the Scottish play" and not . . . you know. Hats on beds.

Movies checked off in books. That was to become my ritual. My secret spell, my wards and glyphs and incantations, aiding me in my pursuit as a comedian. And—I seemed to keep forgetting—my goal to become a filmmaker. That would happen, right?

So after that night at the UnCabaret, I wasn't merely going out to see movies. I was seeking magical assistance. Anywhere I could find it, often at the risk of career, life or relationships. A late matinee of *Last Tango in Paris* (*Cult Movies*, volume 2) on a Sunday in San Francisco, which made me almost miss getting to my show at Cobb's that evening. *Bloodsucking Freaks* (*The Psychotronic Encyclopedia*) at midnight at the Sunset 5, sneaking out of an amazing rooftop party downtown and racing across the city to make it on time. If I missed even a *second* of the film, it didn't count. I was an obsessive sorcerer with a jealous, sentient spellbook.

Jesus—oh God, I'm just now remembering this; holy moley was I an asshole—I even made a girl I'd been going out with for six years walk to her car *by herself* at two o'clock in the morning because I was in the middle of an all-night horrorathon at the Cinerama Dome. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* had just ended, and *Mr. Sardonicus* was about to

start.

“So, I’m really going to walk out there, two in the morning, by myself? You’re okay with that?” I can still see her half-exasperated, half-pitying face in the semi-darkness.

“Well, I’ve never, uh, seen the . . . uh . . . the beginning of . . .”

She justifiably broke up with me shortly after that.

So that was my push-pull, that first year as a sprocket fiend and born-again stage ghoul, all through the rest of 1995 and into 1996. Devouring movies, checking off, and convincing myself that my improving fortunes onstage came from expanding this alternate movie world inside my head.

I did something that night, watching *Beauty and the Beast* (listed in both *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia* and *Cult Movies* volume 1—bonus!), that I’d only done rarely up to that point. I tried to think about what the actors and directors had gone through to make it. I’d read about that movie, knew the struggle that Cocteau had, what with the postwar shortages in film stock at the time. And poor Jean Marais, his skin cracked and burning from the animal fur glued to it for five hours every morning. Cocteau himself, his stress and inner turmoil erupting onto his skin, checking into a hospital and turning the reins of his masterpiece over to another director. These people had struggled against even more than the usual odds against making a movie.

II

They’d done it in spite of the

hostility of the world to the mere act of filmmaking, the indifference of the public to gauzy fantasy in the face of exhausted, war-ravaged reality.

I’d think of *Beauty and the Beast* every time I’d do a set in some small, out-of-the-way coffeehouse, often one I’d booked myself or helped promote with my friends. A lot of times we’d end up performing for each other. I did an afternoon at Highland Grounds—me and Sarah Silverman and Tenacious D—in front of fifteen people, half of whom slammed their laptops shut or scooped up their coffee and scones to find a quieter place away from these *fucking clowns*. I’d do the tiny, stark, overlit Onyx Café on Vermont, milling around with three or four other comedians while a pre-“Loser” Beck would pack up his guitar and his audience of eight would head for the door. The Creativity Bookstore, out at the beach, a usually empty space with the occasional tanned, gorgeous homeless guy and his dog.

III

The show at the Onyx Café moved across the street to Pedro’s Grille, and as 1995 turned to 1996, it caught on. Bigger crowds, bigger comedians—Bobcat Goldthwait and Jon Stewart would drop in. Something was beginning to gel. No one could say what it was, exactly, but my group of friends were starting to come into their own. Tenacious D and *Mr. Show* came out of the Diamond Club—another usually half-empty showcase theater, on Hollywood Boulevard. Stand-up comedians mixed with characters and sketches. Will Ferrell performed with his group Simpatico. Jeff Hatz staged his elaborate “Assembly North Gym,” a brilliant mock-up of a high school assembly, with various comedians exorcising whatever angst they carried from teachers, administrators, or dismissive fellow students.

Then Margaret Cho got a sitcom. Jack Black became a movie star. Was it our time? I remember watching *Psych-Out* and *The Trip* and *Head* at the New Beverly, seeing Jack Nicholson and Dennis Hopper getting to act in movies only because they also wrote and produced them. Me

and my friends got to go onstage only because we asked a bookstore or coffee shop manager to let us do a show. Then *Easy Rider* came along and pulled Nicholson and Hopper and, if they were close enough to their jetwash, everyone else in their crew into the establishment.

And then came the Largo.

The Largo had opened in August of 1996—formerly a dodgy, mocking attempt at a French bistro called the Café Largo. An Irish music promoter named Mark Flanagan had bought the place, planning on showcasing the music acts he liked, in the fashion he thought they should be seen. Like Sherman over at the New Beverly with his idiosyncratic pairing of movies, Flanagan saw connective tissue between, say, Aimee Mann and Colin Hay and an audience that might actually like to sit down and relax with a glass of wine and let the musicians take their time. A relief from the knee-and-eardrum-destroying, standing-room-only rock club model. The way the New Beverly was a relief from the multiplex. There were plenty of multiplexes in L.A. in which to see *Con Air* or *Broken Arrow*

IV

or Eddie Murphy’s remake of *The Nutty Pro*

fessor. Nothing wrong with those movies. If people need bread and circuses, better it be bread from the best flour and springwater, and circuses under the cleanest canvas tents with the healthiest animals. Also nothing wrong with standing crotch-to-ass in a screaming throng while a band sends sonic boulders of aggression out of monolith speakers and blasts the dust off your skin. Regular doses of Spectacle and Subtle enhance your life.

Flanagan wanted to bring some Subtle. Once he bought the place he tried to change its name to the Establishment, after Peter Cook’s London club in the sixties, where Marty Feldman and the Goons and eventually Monty Python sprung from. But the previous owners, for murky legal reasons, had a say in the matter. And they said no. So Flanagan said fuck it and

just changed its name to the Largo.

It wasn't long before Flanagan got the idea to make Monday night a comedy night. Or maybe it wasn't his idea—maybe he was approached by Josh di Donato, who'd started the Onyx show and taken it to Pedro's and now, with a rabid weekly audience, was looking for a nicer venue.

V
What mattered to me, and to every other comedian who started doing those Monday nights, was that, even more than the UnCabaret, the Largo was truly a place to change your career. A good set could literally change the path of your life. I walked back into the kitchen one night, and there was Paul Thomas Anderson, inviting me to be in *Magnolia*. Another night the Farrelly brothers came, and I started punching up their movies.

And that was just me. There were suddenly other faces, other amazing talents. Paul F. Tompkins, dapper and razor witted, who, on most Mondays, did what another comedian described to me as “structural damage” to the room. Here came people I remembered from San Francisco—Greg Behrendt, Greg Proops, Karen Kilgariff. Mary Lynn Rajskub, whom I'd first seen in San Francisco doing poetry at the Albion, was now bringing the same off inflection, broken iambic attack and startling shifts up onto the stage. The Largo audience went anywhere, shifted gears effortlessly. None of us had ever seen anything like it. Sarah Silverman, David Cross and Louis CK would go up and destroy like they were playing the video game *Doom* in “God mode.”

VI
Zach Galifianakis would be up there, be-scarved and banging on a piano, peppering the silences with surreal one-liners. Mitch Hedberg went on one night and, in the middle of a set of even more surreal one-liners, said one of the wisest and truest things I've ever heard about comedy, and especially about a comedian's hubris: “Beware of any comedian who writes for half an hour and then tells you they have thirty minutes of new material.”

But that was the lure and danger of the Largo. You could go onstage totally unprepared, and if the crowd was in the right mood, you could actually do a solid half hour of off-the-top-of-your-head material that would vibrate the walls and lift you into an ego cloud you had no business floating in.

That was what Monday nights at the Largo were. And for the first time, the outside world started to notice. *Spin* magazine, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*—journalists were starting to write about it. Casting people and directors and producers would come to the shows. Again—and in opposition to everything I'd ever learned about being a comedian and everything I say now when giving advice—you could change your career with a single set.

And keep in mind, for the most part, you *can't* change your career with a single set. Can't do it. Don't try. Get that thought out of your head, now. The ones who make it, I still say, are the ones who go up, night after night, honing their craft, focusing more on the moment and blah blah blah. But there's a gigantic exception to that rule, and it's an exception that comes when time, place and venue line up. That convergence doesn't last long, but when it

happens, the “you can't change your career with one set” rule goes right out the window.

It's happened before. *The Ed Sullivan Show*. *The Tonight Show*—if Carson called you over to the couch after your set. The Comedy Store in the early eighties, I suppose. It's happened for other creative professions as well. The Grand Ole Opry. CBGB.

And it happened, for a time, at the Largo. And when it did, we started to eat each other alive.

Never in overt ways. More subtle, seventh-grade-cafeteria-pecking-order ways. Like jostling for the closing spot 'cause you were the alpha and believed no one could follow you. Or hanging out every single Monday, even if you weren't booked, on the off chance someone wouldn't show and you'd go up in their place. Comedians, addicted to the crack cocaine response of the Largo audience, would wear out their welcome, either in terms of multiple Monday nights in a row or, once they got onstage, hogging time. Twenty-minute closing sets became half hours became forty-five minutes. I know this because I was one of the worst offenders.

Sometimes I'd be in the room when someone—a friend, a fucking *friend*—would go onstage and I'd leave, not wanting to see them kill, not liking the curdled butane stink it'd create in my stomach, watching it. I remember one comedian, another San Francisco transplant who ended up spurning the stage for staff writing, strutting around one Monday night after looking at the lineup. “They've got me going on last. My first time visiting here, and they've got me going on last,” he said with the worst mock humility

I've ever seen. Turns out his name was simply at the top of the *comp* list, which made it appear that he was closing. His name had been jotted down on the lineup *after* the headliner's name, as a note to the doorman. He convinced himself, for the twenty minutes before someone took him aside and explained the confusion (after which point he fled in embarrassment), that just by *appearing* in the room, he had been given the prime spot in the lineup. He wasn't even on the show. Good thing, too—he would have had to follow Todd Glass, who was (and remains) a force of nature. Still, I envied his confidence and delusion.

That was the effect the Largo—which, at that point, had become industry shorthand for “the alternative elite”—had on a comedian visiting it for the *first time*. Imagine what it was doing to all of us—the core group who were there every single

Monday. We were glowing and crackling with ambition, with the sick radiation of potential fame and riches, swelling and mutating, terminal.

Other comedians divided off into cliques, treating friends, suddenly, like outsiders. A lot of these cliques were held together only by the energy created from excluding everyone. Once everyone was excluded, they'd turn on each other, and weeks later the members of the clique were enemies. And no, I'm not writing this to name names, settle scores, plant gossip. I was just as bad—if not worse—in my behavior and greed as anyone I'm describing. They've all got their stories to tell and I'm sure books will be written, blogs will be posted. The names, alliances and enmities don't matter. Not to me. It only matters that we were young, and we each handled fame

(or the promise of it) and success (or the hint of it) in our own, unique, clumsy and terrible ways. And what *also* matters, in my wider memory, is seeing firsthand what I'd only read about in places like Warhol's Factory, and Studio 54, and the Algonquin Round Table before that. Did even Ben Franklin think that life was some transitory, nebulous clique? "I must soon quit this scene . . ." And he would have been saying that to George Washington, who, if he wasn't the Andy Warhol of the Founding Fathers, certainly shared his hairstyle.

Oh, and here's something else that would happen, every few Mondays. See, once the Largo had been mentioned in, say, *Rolling Stone*? Suddenly we had big-time, mainstream headliners dropping by, wanting to flex their egos, roll with the new, and deny aging and death.

VII

These sets rarely went well. As one of the Largo regulars pointed out, onstage one Monday after a previous week's painful sitcom-titan flameout, "Is there anything more entertaining than watching some huge headliner come up here and eat it? And then attack the crowd for eating it? Nervously laughing while saying, 'Well, I guess this alternative comedy is all about *not* getting laughs, right? Heh heh heh.' *Sweat sweat sweat.*"

He was right. But the flip side of what he said was *also* true. The Largo, as amazing and nurturing as it was for the musicians and comedians who played there, could be

just as deadly and reality-warped as the castle of wonders and horrors in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. Because as entertaining as watching a mainstream comedian crash and burn in the Largo was, it was equally as hilarious watching a Largo hothouse flower wither and die in the harsher air of a mainstream club or, worse, on the road. "I went to Blockbuster with my friend *Terry*, right? And, so, he rents *The Pelican Brief*, can you believe it? I mean, uh . . . I mean, if you *knew* Terry. I guess . . . oh shit, you guys don't know Terry. Great." No, they didn't. Nor did they know the significance of referencing Kim Deal or *The Fast Show* or, as I discovered one night at the Riviera in Las Vegas, movie director Sam Fuller.

VIII

It went back to Hedberg's warning, back to Cocteau's castle. Inside the Largo, especially during its heyday, we were all kings and rebels and artists forging the new, and emerging victorious from the jungle every single time. Outside of the Largo? Just like Warhol's Factory denizens outside of their silver-wallpapered paradise, or Dorothy Parker away from her chair and vodka at the Algonquin, we were still comedians, blinking in the daylight, schlepping onto planes, nervous at auditions. For as much as we made fun of mainstream hack comedians, with their bits about airline food and cats vs. dogs? Alternative comedy soon had its own hack premises. The Shitty Blockbuster Movie We Still Shelled Out Money to See and Were Now Lambasting. The Audition That Didn't Go Well. The

Looking at Our Notes While Working on the Idea We Just Wrote Down and Were Trying to Work Out Onstage. Dozens of others.

I was right in the middle of this, by the way. My sets at the Largo were going great guns, and my road gigs—my headlining gigs, where I was actually making money (after *MADtv* decided to soldier on without me at the end of season two in 1997)—were starting to suffer. I was slow in realizing that a killer half an hour at the Largo meant about five solid, usable minutes on the road. Again, Mitch Hedberg's warning, unheeded.

On top of all this, I was falling deeper and deeper into my movie-watching-for-success-in-comedy superstition. I look back in my calendars and I'm amazed I didn't kill anyone, racing from some of these Monday night screenings to make it to the Largo. The New Beverly was always a godsend—a seven thirty screening of *The Pink Panther* or *Jason and the Argonauts* at the New Beverly meant a short drive down Beverly, a right onto Fairfax and then snag a parking space in the alley behind the Largo and zip through the kitchen with plenty of time to grab a drink, go over my notes, get a feel for the crowd and go onstage. Tales Café, just a little farther down La Brea from Beverly, was an equally short drive. I've done sets at the Largo with the image of James Coburn's paper-shredder grin from *The President's Analyst* in my head, or Jane Wyman's perky sneer from *Crime by Night*, after racing from Tales.

But other nights. Oh man. A restored print of *It's a Wonderful Life* at the Nuart, all the way out in Santa

Monica? How did I get through my set and *not* burst into tears, from the combination of both terror from the drive and emotion from the end of that film?

And even worse—one night I made it all the way from the Town Center 5 in Encino, fresh from a screening of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*,

and *still* made it to the Largo in time to do a set. I don't remember that set going well. Maybe I used up whatever luck I got from seeing de Sica's gorgeous memory box of a film in not dying while I slalomed and McQueen'd my way to another Monday night ego rub.

You see, the Largo was worth the risk. Because it completed an arc that started at Garvin's. Garvin's, back in DC in the summer of 1988, was a meat-and-potatoes vocational portal. This is stand-up comedy. You can either do it or not. If you show up every week, you'll get better. If you get better, you'll get work. Once you start getting work you need to figure out what will keep getting you work and craft your comedy along those lines.

Four years of that, of solidly working the road, of trying to learn how to make any audience my audience. A lot of failures. A lot of triumphs. After a few years, I became bulletproof, as far as having to go up and win over any crowd with material that anyone could relate to, that the majority would recognize, be amused by and then forget the instant they left the club. I made myself bookable, competent and, ultimately, disposable.

Then came the Holy City Zoo. Pure innovation for innovation's sake. Risk taking in front of no one—or tiny crowds that would hone in on *you* and not the jokes you were telling. Suddenly I had to chew my way out of the safe, pastel cocoon of road material I'd built around myself and learn to walk the stage in the raw red of my exposed psyche, the deep blue of my lurking depression, the stinging white of my angers and resentments, the blazing yellow of my cowardice and the black black black of whatever dark thoughts I might be having. The Zoo was a flight simulator—where it was safe to see what it felt like to nose-turf the 747 of your art and you could walk away unharmed. It wasn't going to launch you onto a TV or movie screen, but it would help you link up with comedians who would make you better at what you did—only because you had no choice. You either got better or they cast you out. Unlike the Garvin's comics, they weren't impressed with the work you were *getting*. They were impressed with the work you were *doing*.

And then, the Largo. Where, miraculously, those two ideas—art and commerce, risk and opportunity—fused and created a nameless new drug. It hung in the air, a narcotic vapor, and we all breathed it. It made all of us ambitious, competitive, resentful, jealous and, ultimately, more creative than we'd ever been before or since. At least, that's how it affected me.

I look again at my calendars from this time—the sets I did, the movies I saw. And it hits me—I can remember almost every detail of each night at the Largo. The other rooms, other dates? I did sets at the Improv and the Laugh Factory, as well as places with names I can barely remember. Book Grinders. Checca. The Upfront Theatre. Tempest. I mean, I went onstage at all of 'em. Told jokes. But I couldn't tell you with whom, or what I said, or what anyone else did.

At the same time, I was seeing every single movie I could. There they all are, noted in the calendar boxes, with the theater I saw them at. And not just classics at the New Beverly. I was going to see big-budget new releases, too. *Turbulence* at the Galaxy. *The Relic* at Mann's Chinese. *First Knight*. *Judge Dredd*. *Double Team*. *Volcano*.

I couldn't tell you anything about them.

But I remember the way Dennis Hopper said, "Hey, wait . . .," to the spooky girl who *might* be a mermaid near the beginning of Curtis Harrington's *Night Tide*—the way he delivered the line with just the right blend of longing, madness and terror. Or Timothy Carey screaming, "Please . . . please . . . please . . . please . . . take my HAND!" in *The World's Greatest Sinner*. Every second of Laura Dern's brilliantly empty-headed performance in *Citizen Ruth*. Harry Morgan, far away from his kindly Colonel Sherman T. Potter persona, sliding the penknife under Richard Basehart's fingernail in *Outside the Wall*. And so many more—random moments from small, brilliant, mostly forgotten films, which nevertheless burned their way into my memory better than anything the movie studios could attach sparklers and CGI to.

That's not to say that I thought all big-budget Holly

wood movies were forgettable garbage and that true cinema was to be found solely in tiny, out-of-the-way indies. As the nineties approached the aughts, independent film began to fall victim to the same clichés I was seeing in alternative comedy. One night, after leaving a particularly precious slice of manufactured quirkiness at the Sunset 5, a screenwriter friend of mine said, "Jesus, are there only three plots of independent films? 'Oh no, we ripped off the mob,' 'Hitman on his last job,' and 'How do we get rid of this dead body?'"

He wasn't wrong. And the makers of *Anaconda* weren't wrong to let Jon Voight blaze all over creation with his seven-headed hydra of an accent, or to shoot his death by anaconda from the POV of the anaconda's stomach as its mouth opened, or have his corpse wink after it regurgitated him to make room for the even-more-delectable Jennifer Lopez. And Samuel L. Jackson's interrupted monologue in the middle of *Deep Blue Sea*? The audience in the Cinerama Dome *stood and cheered*—I swear to you—when the scene met its bloody, eviscerating conclusion.

It took me a few years, though—and a lot of nights at the Largo and a lot more nights in movie theater seats—before I learned that just because something was "indie" and "underground" didn't automatically give it value. I also had to learn to look for the moments of substance and impact in the everyday. I was sitting in a minimall Subway having a sandwich one evening, on my way from work to go to the Largo, when I read a quote by Italo Calvino: "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in

the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

When I got to the Largo, there was a comedian onstage, literally reading a list of things he hated. That was it. No bigger

jokes, no deeper insights, no startling twist. Just a list of things he didn't like. And he killed. That's when I began to suspect that maybe even the Largo had elements to it that were inferno.

I also learned, on Thursday, October 2, 1997, that a place that was, in itself, entirely inferno had bits worth saving.

X

That was my debut set at the Comedy Store. I was scheduled to film my first HBO comedy special in just over two weeks, up in San Francisco. Mitzi Shore, the owner of the Comedy Store, had heard tell of this. She called my manager and wanted to see a set from me.

The Comedy Store was, to me, a legendary stage with a lot of history. I was excited to do it. I was also very excited about where my career was going. HBO special, regular at this hot new room called the Largo. Things were looking up. Time to do the Store. See what happened.

I got into the main room and Andrew "Dice" Clay was onstage. I'd been a huge fan of his when I was in college but I'd cooled a bit in my enthusiasm after I started doing comedy and began to think that what he did was becoming a bit repetitive and, after a while, slightly angry and resentful.

Well, he was spraying anger and resentment all over the room that night. Baiting the crowd, pissed off and seemingly entitled. I instinctively tuned him out as I made my way toward a dark table in the back, to go over my notes and get ready. And then . . .

. . . I tuned back in. Dice was, more than any comedian I'd seen at the Largo in the past few months up to that point, truly flying without a script. He segued from chatting amiably with a young wannabe actress in the front row to one of the most offensive, venomous, hilarious screeds about what, exactly, the phrase "follow your dreams" meant, especially in terms of Hollywood and the entertainment business. It involved, at various points, being the prettiest one in Omaha, tucking genitals under one's ass, and Marilyn Monroe. It was childish, profane and 100 percent true.

He left the stage and the room. I was genuinely, delightfully shaken up. I'd just seen a comedian—a comedian that, I'll admit, I and a lot of my Largo colleagues would regularly mock—deliver one of the more memorable sets I'd seen in a long time. On a random, rainy Thursday night in Los Angeles, to maybe one hundred people.

A few more comedians went up, and then me. I only had to do seven minutes. I did the newer stuff that I knew worked, that killed at the Largo as well as on the road. The set went great. The emcee brought me off. I walked away from the stage and there, sitting at the end of the aisle, like a soft, slumping Buddha, was Mitzi.

She extended her hand. I shook it. Cold vinyl.

She said, "Do you live in the city?"

"Yeah," I answered.

"Do you want to work as a doorman here?"

It took me a second to realize what she'd asked me. I recovered and said, "Well, I mean . . . I tour all the time, and in two weeks I'm filming my first—"

She whipped her hand away. She was still looking at me, but in a way that told me I was no longer in view. I trudged away, devastated. I thought my set went well.

There was a clutch of open-mikers, hanging at the back tables, waiting for their spot. A few of them came up to me.

"What'd she say?" This was from a comedian who was older than me, dressed in the height of comedian fashion, if it were 1984.

"She said I could work as a doorman here," I said. My tone must have sounded like the whine a balloon makes when it deflates.

The comedian's eyes went wide. "She *never* offers people the doorman spot on their first set!"

I suddenly saw the group of open-mikers not as a bunch of comedians, but as the doomed, alternate set of survivors in *The Poseidon Adventure*—the ones walking the

wrong way, deeper into the sinking ship, exhorting Gene Hackman to follow them, insisting that *he's* the one going the wrong way. I had to get out of there.

"Dice used to be the doorman here, too!" Another of the comedians spat this at me as I pushed through the glass door, as if I were making a career-killing mistake.

That's the moment the Largo truly became a Night Café for me—when I realized that the extreme perfection of the Largo was, for me as a comedian, as dangerous as the extreme shittiness of the Comedy Store was for the clutch of open-mikers huddled in the back of its black-on-black-on-black, haunted

XI

showroom. I saw the two choices in front of me, out on the Sunset Strip sidewalk, as I walked back to my car. Stay exclusive to the Largo and a hundred other alternative comedy rooms all over the city, and turn into a hothouse flower that could only perform in front of crowds that were *just so*. Or *only* do the mainstream rooms, and toughen my hide, and have my moments of humanity and transcendence leak through my pores randomly, the way Dice had just done, on weeknights when I wasn't getting paid, wasn't winning over new fans, was sweating resentment with the honesty.

I look at my calendars from after that night, as 1997 wound to a close and 1998 started up, and there it was—my solution.

Still did Monday nights at the Largo—and

other nights, opening for Aimee Mann and Michael Penn's Acoustic Vaudeville shows. Opening for Tenacious D. And Colin Hay. And 2 Headed Dog. And *White Trash Wins Lotto*. And the Naked Trucker and T-Bones and a dozen of the other precious, unforgettable, near-perfect evenings that transpired in the Cocteau/*Beauty and the Beast* fortress of the Largo. The other comedians were still there, but the alliances and enmities weren't as strong. It felt like we'd all graduated high school and were looking back at some of the more passionate couplings and ruptures with the amusement and discomfort that you get flipping through an old yearbook. I hated *that* guy so much I wished him dead? *She* broke my heart? Wow.

One night Paul F. Tompkins and I found ourselves at the bar. We'd had our share of tension and competition and passive-aggressive jousting. I said something about how now most of us finished our set and either watched the rest of the show, contentedly, or simply left.

Paul took a gentlemanly sip of scotch and said, "Well, we all got to know each other, didn't we?"

A perfect song lyric as elegy, smuggled into conversation.

But as much as I still loved the Largo, I made it a point to go out on the road—to the less receptive cities, where I still had to win people over. And I made sure to do a night at the Improv—where I could still count on having a shitty set once in a while. Or the Laugh Factory, where I first auditioned for *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, on a weekday "Latino Comedy Riot." Carlos Mencia was emceeding and brought me up by saying, verbatim,

"Okay, this next comedian's a white guy, but [over the rising boos] *give him a chance, motherfuckers!*" I didn't get booked on *Late Night* 'til years later. Looking back, I appreciate the struggle.

The Largo moved locations in 2008. Now it's in the much bigger, much grander Coronet. The Coronet is haunted by even more history than the Comedy Store could ever dream of. I still do shows at the new Largo at least once every two months. I'll never give up the nirvana of that stage or that crowd. But I've made it sweeter by always making sure that when I step foot onto it, I'm shaking off a weekend on the road or a night in front of cranky tourists at the Improv. I saw too many comedians acclimate to the Largo, to the point where any other environment shredded them like a Chihuahua in a dogfighting pit.

Even Cocteau's impossible castle, glowing up on the New Beverly screen, was a place that needed to be left behind before it had any value. The Largo was the only Night Café that changed me after I left but was still there for me to return to when I needed it. Besides, I was finally starting to take my first baby steps toward making films. Not as a director, mind you. It was as an actor—an extra, really—but that was a start, wasn't it?

Sure it was. Here, I'll show you.

I.

It was always weirdly comforting to hear the female voice on their in-house trailers put that Britpop, lilting rise on the last syllable of *theatre*.

II.

And I was still two years away from seeing *Les Enfants du Paradis*—for which I took a punishing early flight back from the Toronto Sketch Comedy Festival so I'd land in Los Angeles in time to get to the New Beverly to see it.

III.

I don't know where else to put this story, but it needs to be told.

One night, at the Onyx, a bunch of us were doing sets. I remember Bobcat Goldthwait being there, and Greg Behrendt, and Laura Kightlinger, and a few others. We were, essentially, performing for each other. The Onyx was a white, featureless space with harsh lighting and a big picture window that opened up out to Vermont. Passersby could peer inside and see a life-sized terrarium of a poorly attended open mike.

Halfway through the show, an older, African American man came in and sat down in one of the white plastic folding chairs. The chairs were in a sloppy half-circle around the "stage," which was really just a space on the floor with a microphone in a stand. I think Laura was onstage when this happened.

Laura finished her set. We laughed and applauded—all eight of us. The older, African American man slowly raised his hand. The emcee, midway through introducing the next act, stopped and said, "Sir? You have a comment?"

The man said, "Yes. I want to get sober, too."

Everyone was silent. The emcee's mouth dropped half-open but he didn't say anything.

"I need to get sober," said the man. More silence.

Then the older man laughed and said, "If that's how it is then fuck y'all. I knew this was a scam."

And then he rose, dignified, from his chair and strode out into the night.

It took a few more seconds of silence and then Bobcat said, "Oh Jesus, he thought this was an AA meeting. And we didn't help him."

A couple of us ran out onto Vermont, trying to catch him, maybe lead him to some help with his drinking. But he'd vanished. Probably to a bar, for some righteous drinking.

Comedy!

IV. Was there some sort of secret rivalry between *Broken Arrow* and *Con Air*? *Broken Arrow* came out in the winter of 1996 and climaxes with one of the craziest over-the-top, Wile E. Coyote villain deaths I'd seen up to that point (John Travolta speared and launched through a train by his own stolen, deactivated nuclear missile). Next summer here comes *Con Air*, which ends with John Malkovich leg-speared, dropped from a ladder and then head-smoothed by an industrial press—while lying on a conveyor belt. In 1998 there was *Armageddon*, and Bruce Willis nuking himself on a killer asteroid after experiencing a video montage of Liv Tyler, but it wasn't the topper I was expecting. If only *Shakespeare in Love* had ended with Joseph Fiennes falling off a cliff wearing rocket skates . . .

V. Josh di Donato is another story, and it'd be cruel and insensitive of me to say anything too harsh about the poor bastard in these pages. That's why we're crouching down in this footnote while I whisper to you. Look, yeah, he was kind of fucked up. I've run into him recently and he's a much calmer, more self-effacing guy. Without going into too much detail, he knew how to book a room. He was a one-man Internet mailing list before the Internet became the all-reaching clarion it is today. Tireless promoter. But also, tragically, a frustrated comedian who thought of himself as equal to a lot of the performers he booked. It's forgivable—as you'll see, when you read the rest of this chapter, we were all fucked up and full of ourselves then. There was a madness to the Largo, and Josh, just as much as anyone else, got caught up in it. That's another book—and not mine to write. Also, Pedro's Grille became even shadier and scarier than the Four Star, so it followed that Josh would want to take his admittedly superlative show to a more stable room. He'd have been a conquering hero if he'd just stuck to booking the room. But he let his hubris lead him up onto the stage, and so now he's an older, wiser motherfucker with a rueful calm. I like him. I do.

VI. "God mode": endless ammo, endless lives. A lot of my *MADtv* sketches never got written because I was too busy mowing down Beholders and Cacodemons with a pulse rifle.

VII. No, I'm not going to name any names here, either. Especially 'cause I suspect, in another ten years, I'm going to be dropping by whatever 2024's version of the Largo is to tell myself that my aching feet and spasming back are in no way signs of my unavoidable disintegration.

VIII. That was during a bit where I suggested that *Forrest Gump* might not be that good a film. An audience member politely pointed out, "It made a lotta money, you asshole!"

IX. Yes, it's a gorgeous film about a brief, elegiac time in Italy before the rise of the Nazis destroyed the fabulous, yet unrealistic, gated paradise of the Finzi-Continis. Sure there's a weak-ass parallel with me and my friends' immersing ourselves in the unreality of the Largo, but, I mean . . . *Nazis*. Nazis, right? There's no real comparison. That's why I'm hiding it down in this footnote.

X. Davey Marlin-Jones. He was a film critic for the local CBS affiliate in Washington, DC, when I was growing up. And he'd do these roundups of currently playing movies, and he'd review them by taking out a stack of index cards, and depending on how he'd treat each card, that was how he felt about a movie. So for a movie like *They Call Me Bruce?* or *The Burning*, the card would get crumpled up and tossed over the news desk. The card for a film like *The Verdict* or *The Empire Strikes Back* would be lovingly slid into the inside pocket of his tweed jacket. But sometimes, he'd rip off a tiny corner of a card—a corner that would represent, say, Michael Moriarty's performance in *Q: The Winged Serpent* or Morgan Freeman's in *Street Smart*—and this little bit would be saved in his vest pocket before the rest of the card was flung away. Calvino's "inferno" principle, illustrated for me on the local news. Thanks, Davey. RIP.

XI. The Comedy Store was Ciro's back in the forties. People murdered and disposed of in its back rooms, it was rumored. Lead-lined, bulletproof walls. Mickey Cohen himself survived a drive-by machine gun hit out front because he stooped down to pick up a dropped dollar. I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in vibes. And the Comedy Store has cosmically bad ones, to this day.

Down Periscope, 1995

DT T F S 8 4 5 10 11 12 17 18 19 24 25 26 31					1 182/183 Apollo 13 Sh-Oaks 2
	4 182/180 The Ross with Rajet New Beverly ✓	5 184/179	6 187/178 ● — "DOWN" — → ✓ First Patient Show GA ✓	7 188/177	8 189/176
	11 192/173 — PERISCOPE — → ✓ Met ✓	12 193/172	13 194/171	14 195/170	15 196/169 "Down" PERISCOPE
	18 199/166	19 200/165	20 201/164	21 SW 1905 21 30 pm 31 35 pm OALD ✓ — COBB'S — → ✓	22 203/162 New LED Show

I was sitting in a multiplex in Sherman Oaks, nearly rising out of my seat, electrified with inspiration. Clint Howard had just spoken on-screen. It was a "Eureka!" moment for me.

It was Saturday, July 1, 1995. A pitiless hell-blast of an afternoon in the Valley. This wasn't the pleasant May warmth of the Saturday I'd first entered the New Beverly, two months before. The Valley in July was a concentrated slice of the sun. Everyone on the sidewalk was a

scuttling ant under a magnifying glass. I'd tucked myself into the cool-and-carpeting oasis of the Sherman Oaks Galleria, into their bland multiplex, to see Ron Howard's *Apollo 13*.

I was digging it. I'm a sucker for contemporary history, especially when it involves uncomfortable-looking clothing, galactic risk undertaken with slide-rule-level technology, and Ed Harris looking grim. *Apollo 13* was a fun lunch.

I was at the "Houston, we have a problem . . ." moment in the movie. Kevin Bacon stirs the oxygen tanks, and somewhere within the wiring of the fragile coffee can in which they're soaring through space, an imp leaps loose. Sparks and fire, rattling and lurching, and now the drama is under way.

Back at ground control, Ed Harris's team of scientists and technicians gape at their eight-bit computer screens, seeing Atari 2600-style error messages and hearing ominous, urgent bleeps. These are men who, like Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* or a hedge fund risk manager, could see danger in tumbling clusters of numbers. The numbers here add up to defeat and death for the three astronauts.

And there's Clint Howard, wearing a pair of glasses that would soon adorn the bridge of every hipster's nose in Williamsburg and Los Feliz. And a tight, conservative comb-over haircut and Church of the SubGenius pipe. He's one voice in a chorus of calm, robotic engineer and monitor vigil keepers, spitting out only what the numbers could prove.

And he does it, too. At first. Reading off of his frantic, scrambled screen, in defiance of its digital panic, he says, tersely but professionally, "O₂ tank two not reading at all. Tank one is at seven hundred twenty-five PSI and falling. Fuel cells one and three are, uh . . ."

And then a pause. He's so determined, in that moment, to offer up his report, to be a part of the team, to *function*. But that *pause*. It's as long as an intake of breath. And then, with a frightened flutter in his voice (and notice how there's also a touch of anger, at himself, for allowing this moment of doubt in the face of science and the infinite):

"Oh boy, *what's* going on here?"

That single moment in *Apollo 13*, that single line reading by a lifer actor who, like the character he's playing, never fails to show up and deliver a solid piece of work, pierced me. I realized that up until that point in *Apollo 13*, all of its pyrotechnic special effects and thrilling cinematography had left me cold. Well, not cold. I liked the rocket taking off and the explosions and the editing and the *Apollo 13* itself spinning through the void, spitting instantly frozen oxygen. Good moviemaking.

But it was Clint Howard's line. The pause, and the "oh boy," which hit me with twice the impact of a thousand rocket engines and all of their vulcanized thrust.

I'd seen single lines in movies land with that kind of weight before, at least for me. Jerry Ziesmer, as "Jerry the Civilian" in *Apocalypse Now*, intoning the icy line "Terminate . . . with extreme prejudice." The single, terminal "Neutered," from *Gates of Heaven*. Glenn Shadix's "ES-kimo" from *Heathers*. "Rosebud," fer Chrissakes.

Up until this moment, in my sealed, air-conditioned cube in a Sherman Oaks multiplex, I'd always noted those moments and enjoyed them and then lost them to the larger flow (or failure) of whatever movie I was watching. They were either a tiny, perfected detail in a larger masterpiece or a

brief glimmer of goodness in something forgettable. Like a fast food meal where, out of nowhere, you pluck one of the most transcendently perfect French fries out of a soggy mound of blandness.

But things were different now. Because now, watching *Apollo 13*, I was halfway through filming my first movie role. I'd been cast in a movie called *Down Periscope*. Kelsey Grammar was playing an iconoclastic, brilliant submarine captain with a tattoo on his dick. He gets picked to helm an old diesel sub in a war game to see if a rattletrap relic from World War II, in the hands of radical terrorists, could be used successfully in a suicide attack.

The crew he's tasked to work with are the usual misfits, malcontents, rogues and oddballs that are usually assembled around whatever comedic alpha dog drives movies like this. His rivals in the exercise, arrayed against him in a sleek nuclear submarine, are William H. Macy and Bruce Dern. Rip Torn is his only ally among the top brass. Somewhere within the bowels of Kelsey's sub lurks Harry Dean Stanton, as a crusty old engineer. In terms of my sprocket-fiend tastes, *Down Periscope* was a smorgasbord.

I didn't get to meet any of those guys, by the way.

I'd been cast as "*Stingray* Radioman," the nameless sailor assigned to sit at and monitor the radio of the *Stingray*, the diesel sub. I'd lurk in the background, silently taking in numbers and facts. And, at one point in the script, I look up from my station and say to Kelsey, "Radio message for you, sir. It's Admiral Graham."

Not an auspicious debut. It's not Sydney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon* or Eddie Murphy in *48 Hrs.* or even Nick Nolte in *Dirty Little Billy*, whom I *still* can't spot after watching that muddy masterpiece three times. But it was work, and a SAG card, and getting used to the drudgery of acting in movies. Without having to expend any effort of my own—I'm sitting in every single scene except one, which we'll get to shortly—I was able to watch as Kelsey and the other actors did take after take, from angle after angle, to slowly assemble what would be scenes important, inconsequential and a combination of both. I sat at my fake radio inside a practical submarine set that had, according to one of the producers, also been used in *Run Silent, Run Deep* (was I sitting in a chair that once held the ass of Don Rickles?) and concluded that shooting a movie was like blasting a tunnel through a mountain. Or brushing every grain of sand off of a fossil. You attacked it relentlessly. The form was hidden in unyielding, indifferent rock. Or, in the case of a movie, nonjudgmental reels of virgin celluloid. It really came down to where you pointed the camera. And how you assembled the pieces afterward. I must have known that in the abstract, sitting in the New Beverly, marveling at the shower scene from *Psycho* or a Kurosawa katana

fight, but this was the first time I'd seen the process from the "take one" point.

Our director was David S. Ward. He wrote *The Sting!* Won an Oscar for it! Then started directing. Now it was twenty-one years after his fingertips first touched the gold plating on an Oscar statuette. He was sitting in front of a half-submarine set, telling Rob Schneider to yell louder. And David wore the bemused, happy expression of a man who was truly fascinated and startled by where his journey was taking him. I missed noticing it until recollecting all of this, just now.

I sat in my chair in front of a fake radio, pretending the water I was sipping was bracing navy coffee. I sat there and thought about Big Hollywood Stars who'd started as background actors. Richard Dreyfuss's concerned face, poking out of the crowd of rooming house boarders near the end of *The Graduate*. Tony Curtis, silent but magnetic, sharing maybe three steps of a close dance with Yvonne De Carlo before Burt Lancaster sweeps her away, back into the main narrative of *Criss Cross*. Alan Ladd, in silhouette, at the end of *Citizen Kane*.

Were those guys, even then, working some inner engine, some focus-pulling voodoo that set them on the path to bigger roles? Not that I was even looking to become a lead actor like them. My thinking was to become a solid character actor, a working-all-the-time type like Buscemi or, deep in the fake engine room of the fake sub I was sitting in, Harry Dean Stanton. That's how I would observe every kilowatt, sprocket and tape measure of the filmmaking process, until I grew into the Great Director I was

destined to be. I mean, John Ford was an extra in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Right?

I had a radio, a coffee cup and my profile to the camera for every single scene I was in. I had a single line of dialogue. For now, I had scene after scene in the background, blurred by the foreground antics of Harlan Williams and Toby Huss and Schneider.

I sat there at my fake radio and thought of a story a stage actor friend of mine from New York had told me. Apocryphal, probably. But I was holding on to it like it was gospel, at least for the situation I was in now. Sanford Meisner, the legendary acting teacher, was doing a play early in his career. He was young and was just a background extra. A man sitting at a desk. While they were rehearsing the director suddenly singled Sanford out, yelled at him for pulling focus from the main actors. All Sanford was supposed to do was sit at a desk in the background and pretend to fill out forms while the drama happened in front of him. But the simple act of his writing on paper became more fascinating than anything the two leads could do with their pages and pages of dialogue.

"What are you doing back there?" asked the director.

Sanford said, "I'm trying to draw a perfect seven." Over and over, that's what Sanford tried to do. And his concentration on the task was so intent, so laser-hot, that it became the center of attention.

Could I do that with a hollow radio and a coffee cup? And if I did, wouldn't I *not* be doing the job I was hired for? On the other hand, wasn't I supposed to think about, even at this near-faceless start of my movie career, learning how to hold an audience's attention on a movie screen? If this sounds grandiose, please remember that these are the thoughts that go through every extra's mind, in every TV show or movie or play you see. It's okay to have them.

But it wasn't smart, I soon learned, to act on them.

"What're you doing back there?" asked David on my second day of shooting. This was at the end of June, before we all took a break for the July 4 weekend.

I'd done something brilliant, I thought. I'd taken a sip of my coffee and reacted like it tasted god-awful, and did an exaggerated, almost silent-movie move of putting the cup back down, like it contained nitroglycerin that might explode if I set the cup down anything less than delicately.

"I just figured, you know, maybe the coffee tastes bad, and . . ."

David said, with zero malice, "You don't need to do that, Patton." He'd probably said this to a dozen different day players in a dozen different films by that point in his career. He'd seen the impulse before and understood where it came from, and he wasn't about to shame me for it. But seriously, Patton, sit in the fucking background. Don't act out the thirty-page character bio you've written in your head for "*Stingray Radioman*." You're not Jules in *Pulp Fiction*.

So that's how it went my first few days on *Down Periscope*. Fiddle with dials that did nothing, scrunch my eyes at the silence coming in on my radioman's headphones. Be a gray blur. This was my equivalent, acting-wise, of doing

open mikes where I did seven minutes in front of three people at two o'clock in the morning. I was putting the time in. Good. I was happy to do it.

I was even happier to hang in between shots. Because the camera had to roam all around the inside of the submarines, there were stretches—hours and, sometimes, days—when I'd come in and the actors in my shot angles ended up sitting around outside their trailers. Card games, board games. Someone set up a weight bench. I'd sit and listen to Toby talk about nightmare construction jobs he'd done, or Harlan would tell us about a series of children's books he was writing.

This is how it must be on movie sets, I was thinking. You find creative ways to pass the time, and if it was with a group of people you liked, even better. There were mild, sunshiny days on the Fox lot while we waited. Ken Hudson Campbell, who played Buckman, the ship's cook whom Rob Schneider's character would yell at constantly, noticed there were a lot of studio golf carts sitting around, unused. The next day, without anyone saying anything to anyone, we all came in with newly purchased Super Soaker guns. Each of us would grab a golf cart—or pair up, with one driver and one shooter—and do an eight-mile-an-hour *Road Warrior* reenactment all over the studio lot. Until one day when we realized we'd slurped up every volt of charge in every single golf cart battery the studio had. Then we got shut down. Oh well. Back to Texas. Hold'em with sunflower seeds for chips.

We made up sea chanteys. Invented card games with illogical rules. Challenged each other to see how much weight we could bench-press. Talked about frustrating auditions and crazy girlfriends and anything. Everyone was relaxed and enjoying each other's company and had their eyes on the long, colorful lifer's arc of working in show business. Everyone except for me, of course. Make no mistake—outwardly, I was jovial. Inwardly? I was a box of snakes. Being on a movie set dawn to dusk was making me miss movies at the New Beverly. Movies I could have been ritualistically checking off in one of my Five Books. This was the first of many ignored warnings (removing myself from parties and social interaction, losing a girlfriend, losing sleep, subsisting on a diet of theater snacks and soft drinks) that maybe my movie addiction needed to be handled and quelled rather than stoked.

Because despite all the fun I was having, I still finished that first week frustrated and impatient. This was my usual state of mind all through my twenties. Wasn't it everyone's? I wanted to headline comedy clubs. Wanted to get bigger roles as an actor. Wanted to write epic scripts and then direct them as world-changing movies. How in the fuck was that going to happen if I didn't make my first screen appearance somehow memorable?

Does anyone act more like an overserious senior citizen with time running out on their chance for immortality than someone in their twenties?

So I finished my first week of shooting *Down Periscope*, somehow ended up in the Valley, and plunked down to watch *Apollo 13*. And I left that screening with Clint Howard's line reading ping-ponging around my skull and my path clear. I knew what I had to do.

"There's a call for you, sir. Admiral Graham."

There was a period at the end of each of those sentences. *That* was crucial. Here's why. Almost exactly one year before, I'd filmed my first-ever TV appearance. The "Couch" episode of *Seinfeld*. Jason Alexander is trying to rent *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, so he can avoid having to read the book for a book club he's joined. I play the video store clerk who tells him the movie's been rented. He asks if he can see who rented the movie. I say, "Sorry, sir. It doesn't work that way."

I was crashing at a house full of comedians at the time, for the week I was in Los Angeles auditioning. I was going over my sides for the part—when you're starting, a single-line day player part gets more scrutiny and sweat than Hickey's

monologue at the end of *The Iceman Cometh*.

One of the comedians, a veteran of a punishing audition-a-day regimen that was just starting to pay off in day parts on sitcoms, told me, "See that period? Every period's the beginning of a new thought." I took that into my *Seinfeld* audition and got the part.

And now here I was, back on the *Down Periscope* set for my second week of filming. I'd written on the *MADtv* pilot two months earlier and they were waiting to hear whether or not they'd get picked up. For now, I was logically in the movie until the end—sitting in the background in the main cabin, which is where the bulk of the film's action took place. My background actor "ploy" of slinging a little over-the-top not-enjoying-my-coffee pantomime hadn't paid off. But I was fresh from seeing Clint Howard perfectly nail that scene in *Apollo 13* with

his sublime line reading. And I'd remembered the "every period is a new thought" suggestion from my actor friend.

And this was the week I'd be filming my line.

"There's a call for you, sir. Admiral Graham."

I rolled those words around in my head. What new direction would I zing the line in after that period? Would I say, very matter-of-factly and professionally, that there was, indeed, a call coming in, and then drip a little acid onto the words *Admiral Graham*? Make it seem like I shared Kelsey's distaste for Bruce Dern's taciturn, petty antagonist? Or maybe I'd say it with a touch of ominous warning, like, "Hey, I bet this guy's gonna be pissed." Did I risk saying the *whole line* flat and unaffected, the way a real radioman with a hundred other tiny details he's got to be on top of and thinking about would deliver it? That would be more Method, I thought. More Meisner.

Rest assured that every movie you see where an actor delivers just one line? They've put this kind of thought into it. Sometimes you can see it. Sometimes they can hide it. But everyone who gets in front of that lens has this inner conversation. I was having mine now. I was about to speak on film.

The morning I was supposed to say my line I got a phone call. *MADtv* had been picked up. They were going to series. How much longer was I going to be on *Down Periscope*? They appreciated my work on the pilot, but they needed to nail the staff down. Should they look for someone else? We needed to start writing in a week.

Oh shit. I was slated for at least another two weeks' work on *Down Periscope*. Two weeks of pretty good pay, too—but not staff writer pay. The pay I was getting on *Down Periscope* was enough to get me into SAG and then pay a month's rent. A steady staff writing gig could pay off all of my running-across-the-collapsing-log-bridge-of-stand-up-comedy debts.

I stepped onto the submarine set for another day's filming. It was bifurcated, just the left interior, with the cameras now set to pan down from me, at the radio, to Kelsey, receiving my message and taking Admiral Graham's call.

The director called action, the camera swooped by me and I said, "There'sacallcominginforyousirAhhhhhhhhhhh . . .," and my mouth went dry.

Oh Jesus. It tumbled out in one big, moist pile of verbs. I sounded like a nineteenth-century automaton, standing in a Paris laboratory, trying to fit a four-second sentence into half a second of wax cylinder recording time. And I hadn't anticipated how hearing the word *action* and knowing that, for the first time, it actually referred to *my acting* would send all the saliva in my mouth into an adjacent dimension where people had mouths that were properly hydrated.

I coughed and cleared my throat, and David asked, Zen-like, "Would you like to do it again?" Yes, thank you, I would, please, yes.

I took a swig from the water bottle I'd hidden under the radio console as they tracked the camera back to its starting position.

"Action!"

"There's a call coming in for you, sir. Admiral Graham." Clipped, businesslike, unemotional. A submarine radioman doing his job.

"Aaaand moving on! Next setup!"

That was it. Two takes. Of course, the minute I did the second one it hit me how I might actually have done it better. I could have added even more lilt, more obliviousness to the "There's a call coming in for you, sir" line. Tee up Kelsey even better, like I'm unaware that Admiral Graham meant bad news. Would that have served the scene?

But I didn't dare ask for a third take. I'd done it in two takes, been efficient, hadn't gummed up the works. And since I was about to *seriously* gum up the works at lunchtime, I went back to my background silence. A gray-uniformed wraith.

Oh man, he's going to be so pissed. I am fucked.

I was approaching David, the director, midway through lunch. He'd finished his sandwich and was chatting with the producers. My mind was racing. I was terrified.

I was about to ask to be let off of a film—a film I'd signed on to for the duration. I didn't have my agent call in and do the asking for me. That's because, at that point, I didn't have one. And I thought managers only handled club bookings and the occasional TV spot. This was the *movies*, damn it. In my mind, I had to man up and handle this myself.

"Um, David?"

David said, "Oh hey, Patton. What's up?"

Well, there's a . . . the thing is . . ." I was stammering. Big throat-clear, and then I started again. "I wrote on a TV pilot that just got picked up. And they want me on as a staff writer. And they start next week so, uh . . . if I want the job, and I kinda need the job, y'know . . ."

David said, "It's no problem, seriously. We can fix this in just two more scenes."

"Really?" I was halfway thinking he'd blow up at me, or refer me to someone else who would say *No can do, you're fucked*.

Instead, this. A breezy "It's no problem" and a genuine, concerned and understanding smile.

"Um . . ." I was trying to think of something to say.

"We can fix it next setup. You'll see. Really, it's not a problem." Then he went back to his conversation. The whole thing was a cheery shoulder-shrug.

I went back to the hangout area near the trailers. I told everyone the next shot would be my last.

"Dude, you didn't get fired, did you?" asked Toby Huss. He and Harlan were playing a complicated hand of night baseball with some of the other actors.

I said, "No, it's just I have this staff writing job, and it starts next week, and if I want to keep it, I've got to wrap things up here."

"How're you going to 'wrap things up'?" asked Harlan. "We're on a submarine, aren't we?"

I hadn't thought of that. Wait, how was I going to leave a submarine?

Lunch was over and we headed back to set. I took my

seat in front of the radio console. David was talking to Kelsey. This was a major scene in the movie—Kelsey's character wins the war game with a genuinely brilliant tactical move, and we were about to shoot the obligatory "everyone cheers and celebrates" scene when we receive the news.

David looked over at me. "Patton. So, once everyone starts cheering, you get up, and clap Ken on the shoulder there, and head on down the passage toward the stern."

"I just walk away?"

David said, "Yep. Toby, take his seat at the radio for the rest of the shoot."

"Aren't people going to think it's weird?" asked Harlan. "The radioman just walking away?"

"It'll puzzle the shit out of them," laughed David. "Why not?"

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Down Periscope was released on March 1, 1996. My film debut. Earned my SAG card. I went to see it at the Sherman Oaks Galleria on Saturday, March 2. I saw *Harold and Maude* the night before, at the New Beverly. The next day I spent a gloomy Sunday afternoon back inside the New Beverly, getting tit-punched by *The Girl Can't Help It* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Then I grabbed egg rolls across the street and spent a rainy evening around the corner, inside Tales Café, watching *Girls Town*. The weekend of seeing myself for the first time on the big screen was preceded by Hal Ashby's gorgeous, early seventies song

fragment about love and sex in the face of annihilation and death. And then followed by the bosom-and-cartoon-obsessed celluloid limericks of Frank Tashlin, Russ Meyer

III

and Charles F. Haas. Ruth Gordon in *Harold and Maude*, aged and battered but clattering with hilarious life. Jayne Mansfield, Cynthia Meyers and Mamie Van Doren in *Girl*, *Beyond* and *Girls*, respectively—bulbous fuck dolls with glittering shark eyes.

And that Saturday, in a Sherman Oaks multiplex—*Down Periscope*.

Here comes my scene. Camera pans by me. I'm a gray mini-golem in my navy uniform.

"There's a call coming in for you—"

And the camera's already off of me.

"—sir. Admiral Graham." Kelsey nods and the scene proceeds with his verbally sparring with Bruce Dern on submarine radio.

A few scenes and several resolved character conflicts later Kelsey and his crew have won the war game. The bad guys have been shown up, the good guys have proved themselves and everyone's cheering. And, in the background, only visible if you're actually looking for it, is me. Heaving myself up from my radioman's chair, clapping a crewmate on the back, and then walking off, down the oval passageway and into the diesel guts of the submarine. It's not quite John Wayne at the end of

The Searchers, or Robert De Niro in the middle of *Taxi Driver*, but it's memorable all the same. In my film debut, I walk off of a submerged submarine. And I'm going to let that sentence simply end, instead of torturing a metaphor out of it.

I was happy. For better or worse, I'd made my first step to the other side of the screen. And, in the months since I'd wrapped *Down Periscope* to now, watching it with a mouthful of cineplex popcorn, I'd had an encounter that made the prospect of simply being in movies not entirely disappointing to me. I mean, I still wanted to be a director, but if that never happened . . .

Four months prior to watching myself for the first time on a movie screen I'd been, as usual, inside the New Beverly.

Thursday, December 28. Three days left in 1995. Post-Christmas, empty L.A. Rain and comfortable cold. Paradise for a movie-freak moleman like myself.

I'd seen *Toy Story* earlier that day. I'd just witnessed the beginning of the Pixar revolution. Tom Hanks and Tim Allen voicing a computer-animated story about toys that also, sneakily, managed to touch on parenthood, obsolescence, and the hidden wires that run the universe and that we'll never understand. If you'd told me that twelve years and fifty pounds farther in my life I'd be the voice in a Pixar film, I'd have gently pointed out that you probably thought you were talking to Jack Black.

Now it was the evening, and I was watching *Citizen Kane* for what had to have been the tenth time (so far). The first time I'd seen it was on a tiny TV screen in a college dorm room. Now I was in a comfortably neglected, sad-spring seat near the back row of the New Beverly, watching Orson Welles's debut and, in a way, swan song unfold. *Citizen Kane* is more panoramic than most wide-screen movies, in its literal and figurative depths. I was teasing out more of its riddles, the way people will return again and again to *Ulysses* or the *Rach 2*.

Or *The Night Café*.

So we were fifteen minutes into the movie. *Citizen Kane* is structured in so many interdependent flashbacks that even now, having seen it close to twenty times, I couldn't tell you what was happening at that point in its story. All I know is I was rapt. The theater and world around me were gone, and I was watching Charles Foster Kane chew and bully his way to the top of a mountain he was about to go tumbling down the other side of. And he was going to drain so much love and patience and charity out of everyone he knew in the ascent that none of them would have the energy to run around the other side of that mountain to catch him when he plummeted. You know what's going to happen every single time you see it but it's such a sweet ride—like bodysurfing a wave that you know is going to send you belly-first into abrasive sand; still, you can never resist the swell when you feel it rise.

But there was noise behind me—a rumbling, human-but-maybe-not-human gurgle and bark. Someone was sitting down, fifteen minutes into *Citizen Kane*, and they were talking to no one. Out loud. *Goddamn it*. I turned around to shush whoever was pulling me out of Welles's cinematic gravity.

IV

It was Lawrence Tierney. *Reservoir Dogs* Lawrence Tierney. Bar-brawling, knife-wound-surviving, battling bruiser T-shirted human tank Lawrence Tierney. Sitting alone in the dark behind me, watching *Citizen Kane*.

I didn't shush him.

For about fifteen minutes he sat there, talking to the screen as if he were just out of view to the other characters, admonishing Kane. "Don't clap for that squawking bitch, she can't sing. Siddown, ya chump!" "Aw Jesus, what's he staring at? You gonna cry, fancy man?" It was the best DVD commentary I've ever heard.

Suddenly there was a younger man behind him. His handler, I found out later from Sherman. A young kid who'd landed the exhausting, unenviable job of attempt

ing to guide a driverless tractor of a human being like Lawrence Tierney through his remaining days.

"Larry! How long you been in here? We gotta go!"

Lawrence said, "We do? Yeah?"

"Yeah. They're waiting."

Lawrence stood up. He considered the screen one last time.

"I ain't never seen this cocksucker," he said. "'S not half bad."

And then he was gone.

This was a professional actor, a noir icon who'd end up with a more-than-fifty-year career. And he'd never seen *Citizen Kane*. But the fifteen out-of-context minutes he's just watched—after missing the first fifteen—weren't "half bad."

I'd just started working in movies. One vaporous bit part. I'd tried to make it count. But I forgot something.

It's the doing it, over and over again, exactly like stand-up comedy. You did it until your mouth didn't dry up in front of a camera and you forgot the lens was there and you kept on doing it. The career and the bigger roles (and maybe the directing?) would happen without your thinking about it. No matter how deeply a movie pulled you into its orbit, there was always someone else—whether they were a screen lifer like Lawrence Tierney or a happy businessman with no desire to live on celluloid—who would merely be happy for the momentary distraction. That was the best I could hope for, at the beginning. The swooping and gliding and changing people's lives, like I'd grandiosely imagined when I watched *Sunset Bou*

Sunset Bou

levard and *Ace in the Hole*? That would be partially up to me, partially up to the audience, and partially up to time itself.

Lawrence Tierney giving *Citizen Kane* a "not half bad" in the New Beverly on a rainy December night was something I took with me when I watched *Down Periscope* three months later.

Not half bad. A start.

I.

Oh man. This was six years before the September 11 attacks. I hope this film doesn't become prophecy.

II. A Klansman!

III.

And yeah, Roger Ebert—one of my no-fail guides out of the suburban gray, along with Harlan Ellison, William S. Burroughs and H. L. Mencken—squeezed *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* from his typewriter, loins and fever dreams.

IV.

The New Beverly—like all rep theaters—had its usual cast of jabbering weirdos. It also had the occasional clueless Very Successful Interloper who'd end up being even more infuriating than the half-broken sprocket fiends who'd mutter along with Warren Beatty in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* or sing along with Eugene Pallette as he descended the stairs near the end of *The Lady Eve*. One particularly smug, self-satisfied, midnineties sitcom megastar decided to grace a screening of Albert Brooks's near-perfect *Modern Romance*, and proceeded to talk over the movie, full volume, adding brilliant shadings and observations like "Nice jacket" and "His record collection sucks." When I finally leaned forward and asked him to Shut. The. Fuck. Up, he looked back at me with open pity and a sad shake of his head, as if to say, "This poor bastard doesn't even know how lucky he is to hear me talking over this movie." I'm proud to say I've never watched a single episode of his zeitgeist-grabbing ensemble show and I'll say proudly, on my deathbed, "I made it all the way through the flesh carnival without seeing a second of that thing. But I've seen *Modern Romance* ten times, three of them probably to spite him and his friends." Glorious.

CHAPTER FIVE
Meat and Potatoes

Los Angeles,
August 1995

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By August of 1995 I was firmly inserted into an office chair at Ren-Mar Studios (formerly Desilu, home of both *I Love Lucy* and *Star Trek*), writing sketches for *MADtv*. I was also beginning to expand myself, physically, from relying on craft service snacks and endless sessions play

ing *Doom* and *Quake* to relieve the tension and boredom of writer's block. The days of pacing back and forth on comedy club stages plus working out in hotel gyms on the road were over. The lean was turning into small shelves of flab, which would solidify into the bureau of drawers I currently have perched on my chest and abdomen. Maybe I needed to learn that I only needed the "sock drawer" equivalent of food to get through a day.

Eventually. But back then, still in my carb-burning twenties, I didn't see the flesh avalanche coming. I didn't see a lot of things happening around me. Like my bosses' growing frustration with my constant whining about our show's not being more innovative. Or my then-girlfriend's disillusion with our relationship. Or a lot of my friends' avoidance of me, especially if there was the threat of movies entering the conversation. I had been an Asperger's-y movie fan when I got to Los Angeles three months earlier. And now? After scoping out where all of the first-run, rep, museum and campus screenings were? I was a jabbering, repellent acolyte.

Oh man. I just looked at my old calendar pages from May of 1995 through July of the same year? And keep in mind—I was writing down *every* movie I saw in a movie theater. And *only* theater viewings. So this wasn't counting movies I watched on TV—either broadcast or on VHS or a then-rare DVD.

Just in theaters: twenty-two films. Some old classics like *Kiss of Death* and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* New, quality films like *Muriel's Wedding* and *Crumb*. But mostly crap.

Crap either because it'd come out and I wanted to see everything (*Die Hard with a Vengeance*, *Batman Forever*) or crap because it was in one of my Five Movie Books.

Bloodsucking Freaks (Sunday, June 18, at the Sunset 5 at midnight), for instance, which had some weirdly brilliant performances because the director, Joel M. Reed, pulled his cast from experienced off-Broadway actors. It's a schizophrenic experience, watching that movie. Cheap gore and clumsy gallows humor delivered with genuine panache and skill. The disconnect is more disturbing than the red Karo syrup dripping off of the obvious mannequin body parts. Or *Maniac*, on another Sunday at midnight at the Sunset 5.

Now that I think of it, they were doing some sort of exploitation film festival on successive Sundays. I was determined to see every single one. They were all listed in *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, anyway. Who cared that I was showing up for Monday morning pitch meetings sleep deprived, incoherent and still coughing up shards of popcorn kernel husks? I was becoming a *director*.

And now we get to August of 1995. The mustard sunshine daggers of late-summer Los Angeles throbbled through the slats of my office window. And once it got dark, and

relatively cool, I'd be off to the movies.

This is what one month's movie menu looked like:

Friday, August 4,

***Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* at the New Beverly**

I skipped a Friday night *MADtv* taping to go see this, which was probably my third viewing at that point. But it was the first of mine on the big screen and, seeing as it was listed in two of my Five Movie Books, a can't-miss.

I've seen this movie at least four more times since that screening, but this is the one I remember the most. Probably because I was so thirsty to receive it. I'd spent the day struggling with some half-assed sketch idea of mine that I couldn't find an engine for, a nebulous half-a-joke that stared back at me from my Mac's screen like a snide drunk I was facing down in a bar. And now—Kubrick. Especially in *Strangelove*, a movie at once sprawling and precise, inhuman and tragic.

I remember this screening because, when Peter Sellers appears for the first time as Strangelove, reversing himself in his wheelchair (while keeping his head at the same jaunty angle and his smile in the same forced rictus as FDR), the crowd I was seeing it with exploded with applause. And we'd already seen him as Colonel Mandrake and President Muffley. But here he was, a much-imitated, recon

textualized pop culture reference, springing up from his place of origin. Imitation leads to exhilaration when you follow it back to its source.

I left the screening feeling recharged in my nascent comedy snobbery. If Kubrick could wring laughs from nuclear annihilation at the height of the Cold War, while also throwing in Nazis, sexual frustration and the beginning of the nerds vs. jocks schism (Sellers's Muffley vs. George C. Scott's General Turgidson), then I should be going even farther with my sketches, with my stand-up, right?

Sunday, August 6,

***La Jetée* at the New Beverly**

Chris Marker's moody, near-motionless meditation on the costs of time travel and nostalgia—barely half an hour long but leaving you feeling like you'd just been dragged through a lifetime's worth of emotion and loss. This must have been showing with other movies—*Sans Soleil*? Maybe a Tarkovsky? But all I wrote down was *La Jetée*.

To go from Kubrick's massive, orchestral doomsday screwball to, two days later, Marker's elegant single postapocalypse stanza was the kind of thrilling drop that only the true film freak gets to experience. It's like driving, listening to the radio, being completely at the whim of whatever the deejay wants to play. Instead of some perfect mix tape that you've assembled, making you thus fully aware of the shifts in tone to come, you surf in the foam of chance. I drove cross-country in 1992 and one

night outside of Denver, listening to a classic rock station, the end of Pink Floyd's "Breathe (Reprise)" was winding down. The words "to hear the softly spoken magic spells" floated away on the highway ink. And then a beat of silence and then Elton John's "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" sneered out of the speakers, a hilarious, drunken youthful rebuke to Roger Waters's morose musings on wasted time. I remember laughing out loud at the gear-stripping brilliance of the reversal.

I felt the same way leaving that Sunday afternoon screening of *La Jetée*. Only I wasn't laughing. Again, I was frustrated, seeing two more of the extremes that film could exist at. I was writing on a sketch show for the Fox network. Why wasn't I summoning and executing brilliance like that in the stuff I pitched? Why was I being so lazy?

Wednesday, August 9,

***The Bicycle Thief* at the New Beverly**

The first and only time I've ever seen this. I probably need to see it again, now that I'm a dad. At the time, in my twenties and thinking I'd never get married or burden myself with kids (I needed all the sleep I could get if I was going to make all of the before-dawn call times a director has to deal with), I loved this film academically. Recovering a stolen bicycle becomes as edge-of-your-seat important as, say, blowing up a Death Star or defeating a

twenty-five-foot killer shark. A quick meal of fried bread is the equivalent to the father and son bonding over the table, of a warrior's victory banquet. You're rooting for two people you probably see a dozen times a day, in a 7-Eleven, in line at the DMV. It's the kind of movie that makes you realize that each person you glance at, interact with or ignore is an epic film or thrilling novel you'll never get to experience. Makes you bless the grandeur of life and curse it at the same time for being too painfully narrow and brief.

What if I could successfully pitch a sketch about a guy just trying to retrieve a wallet he left at a Laundromat? Could I smuggle even a small slice of *The Bicycle Thief* into a filmed short for *MADtv*? Would they let me direct it?

Thursday, August 17,

***Hiroshima Mon Amour* at the New Beverly**

I know people hold this and *The Seventh Seal* up as examples of why art films or foreign films suck, but for once? The dullards are right. I hated this movie when I saw it in college but I had to see it again to make sure. It wasn't even in one of my Five Movie Books. But I watched it and it pissed me off all over again and ended up confusing me, a year later, when I went to see Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, which is an even bigger arty-farty *fuck you* and I ended up really

liking it.
Sigh.

**Saturday, August 19,
Belle de Jour at the Los Feliz 3**

Buñuel made this movie in 1967, fer chrissakes. That's all I kept thinking when I was watching it. Casual prostitution, and boredom, and boredom with sex treated hilariously? And what was in that *box*? None of the whores would agree to its owner's entreaty, before Catherine Deneuve shrugged her flawless shoulders and all but looked at the camera like a Flintstones animal appliance muttering, "It's a living."

Something shocking, something that goes too far—that's where my thinking has to be from now on, I raged to myself, leaving the theater and crossing Vermont Street to the House of Pies for a late evening slice of pecan and some coffee. *It's 1995, fer chrissakes. Kurt Cobain and GG Allin are dead. What the hell am I doing with my life?*

**Friday, August 25,
Kids at the Sunset 5**

Here it was. Here was the next shocking thing, as far as I was concerned. I was mesmerized by the energy and heat and sweat and cum up on the screen. It made me resee my teenage, suburban years as maybe not so bland as I remember them. Because I suddenly remembered the constant, tormenting fuck-throb of adolescence, how it yanked and shoved me in some pretty embarrassing direc-

tions, how I could scorch away the wick of an entire day on the distant promise of sex or even a glimpse of female flesh. There I was, up on the screen, fractured into a dozen different inarticulate, real characters, pinging around a grimy New York City on an even hotter summer day than the one in *Do the Right Thing*. That movie ended with a racial apocalypse.

Kids begins and ends with a sexual one, only it's an apocalypse at plague pace. I've never seen *Kids* again. I haven't needed to.

I ought to point a camera at my life. Or the people around me, I thought, leaving that screening. I had that weekend before a Monday morning *MADtv* pitch meeting. Now I had Buñuel, and a stolen bicycle and Slim Pickens riding a nuclear warhead and teenage lust and the heartbreak of time travel in my head. I think I went out the next night and got Russian-wedding drunk at the sketchiest bar I could find. I probably ended up staring at the sky while the scotch and ginger ale detached my mind from my body. I was going to pull down the universe and strain its essence through a comedy sketch, is what I probably thought. Scotch-drunk. Film-drunk. Self-drunk.

**Monday, August 28, eleven a.m.
MADtv pitch meeting**

My head feels like a rotted cantaloupe, and my body is a single corpse in a cosmic, mass grave. I've got three pages of handwritten notes—partially from Saturday night (illegible) and partially from that Monday morning (try ing to decipher the drunken, roller-coaster penmanship over McDonald's coffee and a McMuffin).

Garry Campbell and Brian Hartt, both veterans of *The Kids in the Hall*, have each finished their individual pitches. Brilliant, as always. Brian is weeks away from becoming the head writer. Then Blaine Capatch, my office-mate, pitches six or seven wicked, literate, oddball sketches.

Over to me.

"What if . . . now, follow me here . . ."

Everyone's following me. Go ahead.

"It's a bunch of kids . . . like, younger. In their early twenties. And there's been this apocalypse. They're living in ruins. The ruins of Los Angeles. You can just make out it's Los Angeles in the ruins. And there's this one girl we're following, her mom, you see, is working in this brothel. Like, okay, wait. They've turned a ruined bicycle shop into a brothel. And there are these mutants coming in who want to do certain sex acts.

"Okay, no, wait. What the sketch is about is, there's this brothel in this postnuclear wasteland, and it's a younger girl in her twenties, and she's arguing with her mom about how uncool her mom is about not being up on all of the new mutant sex acts that everyone's doing.

"But what we reveal, what we do as a twist is show that the mom is actually a time traveler, and it's the mom taking her daughter, uh, forward in time, because she's worried that her daughter getting into skateboarding will lead her to drugs or dangerous sex, only the mom is such a hysterical prude that she's zapped them forward to this crazy,

violent, postapocalyptic scenario. It's like the mom is saying, 'See where all the skateboarding is going to take you?' Only this is the mom's overkill method of doing that.

"And then what's worse for the mom is that her daughter still isn't shocked, and is more embarrassed that her mom is too uptight to have weird, uh, tentacle sex with mutants.

"Oh, and we could do it in segments, and keep interspersing it throughout the episode, little short films that, when you get to the end, tell this whole story. It'd be really, uh, innovative."

Silence. Then Adam Small, one of the executive producers, with the poise and patience of a saint, says, "Well, write up a version. Let's see it on paper."

"Yeah, okay. I'll give you a better idea what I'm talking about."

Then I go back to my office, play *Doom* for two hours, and write a sketch about a really dumb doughnut shop employee.

They don't use it. They're right.

This is the first time it hits me—maybe I need to change my life.

Two days later, Wednesday, August 30, I'm back at the New Beverly, seeing a double feature of *Blow Out* and *Dressed to Kill*.

"You really only need to see *Blow Out*," says Sherman, tearing my ticket. "*Dressed to Kill*'s kind of a mess."

But they're both in *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia*, so I'm in for the duration. And, as it turns out when *Dressed to Kill* ends? Sherman was right. I really only needed to see *Blow Out*.

Less movies, more living. That's what I'm saying to myself as I walk out onto the street. Gonna make that change, soon . . .

But a few more hits of celluloid can't hurt, right?

Or maybe a massive, brain-shortening overdose?

I.
The director of *Maniac*, Bill Lustig, was there to introduce that screening. A Latino couple, dressed in black leather, sat beside me holding their sleeping baby. It never once woke up, during all of the screaming and stabbings and shotgun blasts of *Maniac*. Bill introduced his masterpiece succinctly: "I made this film on a wing and a prayer back in 1979. It stars Joe Spinell—" At that moment the Latino dad barked out, "Joe Spinell fuckin' rules!" Bill answered, "God bless you. Joe's dead now. Okay, so I'll be in the lobby after if any of you have questions. On second thought, no. I won't. I won't be there. Enjoy the film."

CHAPTER SIX
Overdosing
Los Angeles,
October 21–22, 1995

<p>13 286/79 <u>THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN OF THE HIMALAYAS</u> <u>STOLEN FACE</u> <u>CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN</u> STEIN DGA ✓</p>	<p>14 287/78 <u>HOUSE OF THE BASKERVILLES</u> <u>HORROR OF DRACULA</u> <u>THE STRANGLERS OF BOMBAY</u> <u>THESE ARE THE DAMNED</u> MADTV PREMIER ✓ DGA ✓</p>	<p>15 288/77 <u>NEVER TAKE SWEETS FROM A STRANGER</u> <u>SCREAM OF FEAR</u> DGA ✓</p>
<p>20 293/72 "Booze B'ds" + THEATRE THEATER ✓</p>	<p>21 294/71 <u>REVENGE OF FRANKENSTEIN</u> <u>DIE! DIE! MY DARLING</u> <u>THE MUMMY</u> <u>PREHISTORIC WOMEN</u> <u>THE VAMPIRE LOVERS</u> <u>THE REPTILE PLAGUE OF THE ZOMBIES</u> CHAPLIN THEATER ✓</p>	<p>22 295/70 X <u>THE UNKNOWN</u> <u>WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH</u> <u>5 MILLION MILES TO EARTH</u> <u>FRANKENSTEIN MUST BE DESTROYED</u> <u>CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER</u> CHAPLIN THEATER ✓</p>
<p>27 300/65 <u>FRANKENSTEIN</u> + <u>DRACULA</u> @ the ORBITUM ✓</p>	<p>28 301/64 <u>LEAVING LAS VEGAS</u> <u>BEVERLY HILLS</u> <u>HIGH SIEKED</u> NEW BEVERLY ✓</p>	<p>29 302/63 Daylight Savings Time Ends <u>GET SHORTY</u> Goby Cinema ✓</p>

A shimmering, satanic, alien insect head is hovering over London and I can't remember if the dinosaurs are coming back or not.

I've spent all of an autumn weekend, Saturday and Sunday, both days starting at ten a.m. inside the DGA Theater, watching a marathon Hammer film festival.

With a few exceptions, it's a very rich, color-saturated marathon. It's a marathon where I'm seeing a lot of the same people over and over again. Peter Cushing. Christopher Lee. The indispensable, sad-eyed Michael Ripper. Buxom women with creamy skin and tight, frightened mouths and impeccable diction.

The first day whips by in quick succession: *The Revenge of Frankenstein*, *Die! Die! My Darling!*, *The Mummy*, *Prehistoric Women*, *The Vampire Lovers*, *The Reptile*, *The Plague of the Zombies*. When Tallulah Bankhead had her meltdown near the end of *Die! Die! My Darling!* and broke out her secret stash of forbidden lipstick, I was still four hours away from Ingrid Pitt's bathtub scene in *The Vampire Lovers* (and the fang marks on many a heaving bosom). It was midnight when I staggered out onto the darkened lot, the plot and details of *The Plague of the Zombies* already leaking out of my skull forever. I got home, checked off my *Psychotronic Encyclopedia* and went to sleep.

Only to wake up the next morning at eight, eat a hurried breakfast and head back to DGA for a ten a.m. screening of *X: The Unknown*. Followed by *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*, *Five Million Years to Earth* (*Cult Movies* volume 3!!!), *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* and *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*.

Playwright Jack Gelber, who penned *The Connection*, wrote an interesting essay about overdosing on films. He was living in New York in the sixties, when Times Square was a bleak, sleazy wasteland and the all-day, all-night grindhouse theaters ruled the landscape. And, in the mid

dle of a personal crisis, he spent several sleepless days wandering from one theater to the next, watching film after film, nonstop. And he got to a point where all of the films he had seen—gangster pictures, Westerns, schlocky sex romps and Z-grade horror movies—started to blend together into one massive, daymare-fueled meganarrative. Humphrey Bogart and Randolph Scott having sex with space aliens.

Now, on a Sunday evening, near the end of the brilliant *Five Million Years to Earth*, when our scientist hero, Quatermass, is realizing that maybe our perceptions of God and the devil are just psychic mind-slog from a crashed alien spaceship, and the Very Very British James Donald is riding the construction crane into the glowing insect alien's head to destroy the vision virus that's infecting the planet, I experienced . . . slippage.

I was partially exhausted, which didn't help. But suddenly the alien insect head turned into Tallulah Bankhead's face, hovering over Hobbs End, London, screaming about lipstick and God. Mummies, cavewomen and lesbian vampires came spilling out of her mouth. A gigantic Peter Cushing, tight-lipped and driven as Dr. Frankenstein, appeared to sew Tallulah's mouth shut. But her hellish progeny were loose on the streets, and somewhere nearby Christopher Lee opened the door to the reptile woman's cage and she pounced on the shambling mummy, sinking her tusky fangs into his powdery, rotted shoulder.

I blinked, hard. I was awake. I'd made friends with a schoolteacher named Dana, who was also there for the duration. He seemed more amused by the lineup of films

than I was. He also, probably, didn't have a pagan shrine of Five Movie Books crouching at home for him to check the titles off in. He wasn't quite the sprocket fiend, like me, with absolutely nothing else to do on a weekend but stack it with films. Oh shit, I realize now I was judging him.

Dana had one arm. He'd lost the other one to cancer. Being the film freak I was, I never bothered to ask about it further. Or even what his last name was. Not enough time before or between the films. A one-armed schoolteacher, teaching kids in the shitty L.A. school district, probably full of more stories and personality than the electric fables being projected above us. But I was more focused on the mummies and vampires and dinosaurs and aliens to take a deeper interest in an actual, unique human being sitting right next to me. Such was my addiction, at that point. Cut off from the world. A ghost, but breathing and jacketed with flesh.

I looked over at Dana and he must have seen something in my eyes.

"You okay?" he whispered.

I said, "All of these . . . these movies are kind of blending . . ."

Dana laughed and then suppressed it. "I know what you mean. It's kind of cool, isn't it?"

I didn't say anything. I was dead set on a course of cutting off more and more human contact in my life—of cutting off more and more life—so that I could devour more movies. You know, to become a director. Though, I imagine, you should probably know something about human dimensions, and connections, and all the facets

of emotion, if you're ever going to want to put anything memorable on-screen. Like *Casablanca*.

Or *Kids*.

But all I was focused on, in the initial heat of my addiction, were the two dimensions of the screen and the ritual of the Five Books.

Five Million Years to Earth ended and *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* began. It was eight p.m. on a Sunday night. Peter Cushing is extraordinary in that movie, and even my exhaustion fog and slippage couldn't dilute Cushing's sharp-edged, misanthropic tour-de-force in what is hands-down Hammer Films' best Frankenstein movie.

Halfway through the movie, after Dr. Frankenstein has charmed and sweet-talked the widow of a man he's secretly cut up and restitched into what will be a confused, pathetic monster, Cushing turns to the camera—to his two unwilling associates—and barks, "PACK. We're leaving!"

It's a verbal gunshot, and it's the last thing I remember from this two-day Iditarod of cinema. *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* started immediately after *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* ended. Caroline Munro is in that one. I can't remember a single frame. I sat there. I stared at the screen while it was projected. I couldn't tell you a single thing about it.

Dana and I walked out of the empty DGA Theater. Midnight. Twelve movies in two days.

"We made it," said Dana, grinning.

"We did," I said. We stood there.

"Well, I'll see you," said Dana. I think my glazed, jittery-pupiled look unnerved him. He walked away, west down Sunset, three blocks east of where I'd parked. I watched him go and then, eerily enough, stopped myself from saying, "PACK. We're leaving!" out loud.

I wasn't leaving any time soon. Not the world of the sprocket fiend, that's for sure. I found out, one year later, that the addiction could follow me anywhere. Even back home to Virginia.

CHAPTER SEVEN
 You Can, Unfortunately,
 Go Home Again
 Sterling, Virginia,
 Thanksgiving 1996

11 VETERANS DAY REMEMBRANCE DAY (CANADA)	12	13	14 THE NEXT BIG THING Hitting Gold Screens Again ✓
18	19	20	21 IMPROV ✓
25	26 LARGER MAN LIFE Towncenter 3 ✓ VIRG	27 LAST MAN STANDING Herndon Twin ✓ 2 N STAR TREK I FIRST CONTACT Reston Towncenter ✓	28 THANKSGIVING DAY

I'm sitting in a movie theater in Northern Virginia, hating my best friend from childhood.

It's Wednesday, November 27. I'm home visiting my family for Thanksgiving. I've got days to kill afterward, except I have to kill them back in my hometown, which is difficult.

First, most of my friends have moved away. Either com

pletely out of state, to new lives and families and jobs, or to suburbs or towns so far away that navigating the DC metro traffic just to see them would, coming and going, eat up an entire day for what would probably amount to an hour or so of awkward conversation. At least it seems awkward to me. What's wrong with people? All they want to yak about is their kids or places they've traveled to or divorces or affairs or encounters they've had in bars or at weddings or family reunions. Don't they want to talk about the movies of the newly rediscovered French crime master Jean-Pierre Melville, or the Dogme 95 movement, or the dozen or so hidden references in the latest Tarantino film? Why are people so boring?

And then I got a call. The first friend I made in Virginia, when my family moved there from Tustin Meadows when I was five. My dad decided to make Northern Virginia our permanent home after that move. Good-bye, blond hair and suntan. Hello, pasty pudginess.

"I'm here visiting my folks," he said. "You free one of these days? I'm here 'til Saturday."

I said, "So am I! Yeah, what do you want to do?"

"I dunno. I may be busy nights, actually, with all these relatives coming in."

I said, "Then let's go to Hunan Gardens in Herndon some afternoon, then go catch a movie next door."

He laughed. Hunan Gardens was a strip mall Chinese/Polynesian restaurant that, when we were seventeen,

would serve us those big-ass tiki-style alcoholic drinks without bothering to look at our IDs. Going back there now, on a Wednesday afternoon, sipping Zombies and Scorpions out of skull-and volcano-shaped ceramic mugs, was boozy nostalgia at its best.

Next door to Hunan Gardens was a second-run movie theater. The Herndon Twin. Movies for \$2. Gone now, of course. But in 1996? It was my old suburb's closest approximation to the New Beverly.

Not that they were showing Ozus or Chabrols to the housewives and night-shift workers of Herndon. In our case, full of rum and fried rice and swaying in the bracing November afternoon air, we could choose between Bill Murray in *Larger Than Life* or Bruce Willis in *Last Man Standing*.

"Willis," said my friend. I agreed. Two tickets. Just like at the New Beverly, our ticket seller tore our stubs. I wondered if he resold the other half of the tickets, like I used to when I worked at the Towncenter 3, pocketing the money to spend on cassette tapes later. I wouldn't have blamed the poor guy. We were the only ones in the theater.

So my friend and I chatted for a while. Gossip about mutual friends from childhood—who's married, or divorced, or living back home with the folks. I told him stories about Los Angeles, about some of the more colorful, difficult guest stars on *MADtv*. He told me about his job, about how they were trying to "put the company on a page on the Internet" so people could "shop at [the company] with their computers." Neither of us could see, in the long run, how that would work.

We were a couple of minutes from the movie starting and I chuckled. To him, it seemed as if I was laughing at nothing specific.

"What's funny?"

CHAPTER EIGHT
 The Day the Clown
 Didn't Cry
 The Powerhouse Theatre,
 January 27, 1997

12 BREWING THE WIVES NIGHT OF THE HUNTERS -Take Cafe ✓ Los Feliz SV ✓	13	14
19 HAMLET [163] Royal ✓	20 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY	21
26 RETRIEVED Take Cafe ✓	27 "THE DAY THE CLOWN CRIED" POWERHOUSE THEATRE ✓	28

"Chevy Chase was *born* to play a clown who leads children into a gas oven!" That's Bob Odenkirk, onstage at the Powerhouse Theatre in Santa Monica, improvising one of the most brilliant lines in a brilliant night of comedy that me and all of my friends had to lash together at the last minute. I'd been handed a cease-and-desist order one hour before the show started. Jerry Lewis was pissed and threatening legal action. Or, at least, that's what I initially thought. It turned out to be even worse, and, tragically, funnier than that. You'll see. Let me give you a little background here. It was my twenty-eighth birthday. The year before, I'd gotten my hands on the shooting script of Jerry Lewis's *The Day the Clown Cried*. It was a drama about a clown in Auschwitz, forced by the Nazis to entertain Jewish children on their way to the gas chamber. If he does this, his life will be spared. But his conscience can't bear the burden, so, at the last minute, he enters the gas chamber with them. Slam. Hiss. Fade to black. The script was originally written by Joan O'Brien and Charles Denton. But when Jerry Lewis decided to make it, he made . . . revisions. Slapstick. Pratfalls. A scene where it's so cold in the concentration camp barracks that the clown—named Helmut Doork—pisses ice. I wish I was making this up. No, wait, no I don't. It was glorious. As Harry Shearer wrote, in a *Spy* magazine article about actually being able to see the movie, "It was like going down to Tijuana and seeing a painting on black velvet of Auschwitz." The tortured history of *The Day the Clown Cried* has been recounted elsewhere. The legends that have grown around it are contradictory, fascinating and exhausting. My deal was simple: I'd gotten my hands on a copy of the script. I pared it down to a manageable length, saving all of the most Jerry Lewis-ian scenes, and started doing live readings of it at the Largo. I gathered together all of my comedian friends and assigned them multiple roles. All except for the role of the clown, which only ever went to one actor, since that person had to do all of the heavy lifting. Toby Huss performed it first, brilliantly. He'd do the clown part as a frightened, fey German when he was interacting with other adults. But for the scenes where he entertained the kids, he'd suddenly be a mean, short-fused, no-patience Frank Sinatra. Later on, due to Toby's increasingly crazy work schedule in TV and film, Jay Johnston (from *Mr. Show*) inherited the role, doing a one-man tour-de-force of distilled Jerry Lewis mawkishness and spastic clowning, oftentimes in the same moment. And I was directing! Well, kind of. I mean, I had to figure out who to cast where, and make sure everyone was in the right position when they'd step forward, and . . . oh, fuck it, this was the farthest from "directing" anything you can be, but it was something. Plus, my friends were all better, more experienced stage actors than me, so I wasn't so much directing as staying out of their way. I never advertised the show, at first. It was invite-only. But word got around. Jerry Lewis's take on the Holocaust is a unique creature of discomfort and a dirty jewel to behold. And after three hush-hush performances at the Largo, I got a call from *LA Weekly*. They wanted to make the next reading their "Pick of the Week." This next bit is my fault. I should've politely said no and kept it quiet, but my ambition and hunger for fame got the better of me, and I said sure. So they called, and I did a brief interview, and the next week there it was, in a box alongside their other pick of the week, *Full House's* Dave Coulier in concert somewhere. "Patton Oswalt Presents A Staged Reading of Jerry Lewis' *The Day the Clown Cried*" at the Powerhouse Theatre in Santa Monica. In the paragraph I said a few pithy, oh-so-ironic things about how inane a script it was, that the idea of Jerry Lewis playing a clown at

Auschwitz who's forced to entertain children on their way to the gas ovens was, from that description alone, something that would spill out of the mouth of Joyce Carol Oates or Richard Brautigan, rather than the star of *Cinderfella* and *The Nutty Professor*.

Fast-forward to the day of the show. I was at the Powerhouse early, waiting for the cast to arrive. Every single seat had been grabbed the moment we announced the reading. Again, not charging admission. Simply offering the spectacle. I walked up to the theater and there was a man standing on the sidewalk. Try to imagine an even skinnier, even seedier-looking John Waters. A "suit" that was a sport coat desperately matched with an almost-the-same-color pair of slacks. He was holding a sheet of paper. I approached him. He threw it at me. It had no weight, so it fluttered in concentric arcs until one end of the paper hit my pant leg.

"You've been served, Mr. Oswald." And then he stalked away.

I picked up the paper. It was a cease-and-desist order on the reading. Do not proceed with the performance or face legal action. I glanced over it a few more times and headed inside the theater.

"What's up?" asked the manager.

I said, "I think Jerry Lewis just hit us with a cease-and-desist order. He found out about the reading and is shutting us down." I'll admit I felt a little shaky. What sort of power did Jerry Lewis still hold in Hollywood?

"That's awesome!" said the manager.

I wasn't so sure. The Powerhouse Theatre had been named in the letter, and I didn't want them getting dragged into any trouble. The theater's phone started ringing. It was the law firm that had just presented me with the letter. After a few terse phone conversations, the theater manager didn't find the situation so awesome. The cast—and the audience—was starting to arrive. What the fuck were we supposed to do?

I sat the cast down—a group that included not only Toby Huss but also David Cross, Bob Odenkirk, Paul F. Tompkins, Brian Posehn, Laura Milligan, Scott Aukerman and Dave Foley from *The Kids in the Hall*. I told them the predicament I was in. I suggested we go out and just improvise, on the fly, a show about being canceled, about being shut down.

Most of my friends were cool about it. They were game to try. Cross, as usual, was defiant.

He said, "Let me see the letter."

I handed it to him. The theater manager came backstage and said someone was there to talk to me. He looked a little shaken.

I walked out to the empty lawn in the back of the theater and was confronted by the single douchiest-looking adult male I'd ever seen. All of the worst aspects of 1) a jock, 2) a shrill NPR listener, 3) a wannabe alpha male and 4) a movie producer, which, it turned out, he was. Or, at least, he said he was.

He said, "I just hosted a party at the Sundance Film Festival for *six hundred people*." That was his way of introducing himself. This was before he said his name, come to think of it.

"Um, that's, uh—"

"And now I gotta come home to my five-room house in Malibu, and I find out a bunch of C-list actors are reading a script that I've optioned?" said the Kale Salad Eater with Rage Issues.

"Well, we're not charging any money for it, and it's—"

The Hot Yoga Enthusiast's face turned purple with wrath and he spat, "Oh *fuck you*, that doesn't matter! It doesn't matter and you *know* it fucking doesn't goddamned cocksucking matter!!!" I felt sorry for his desktop Zen sand garden when he got home later that night. His yin-yang peace-symbol necklace charm bobbed up and down on his chest as he screamed.

"Do you have any idea what Jerry Lewis did to this script when he got his hands on it? Any fucking idea? It's an important story and it needs to be told the way it was originally written and I've got Chevy Chase interested in it and you have *no fucking!! right!!!*"

This was the one point in the conversation where I became truly terrified. Not of him. I was terrified of suddenly exploding with laughter, right in his face, and causing him to turn into a Pillar of Roaring, Sentient Wheatgrass and strangle me.

Chevy Chase. In clown makeup. In Auschwitz. I

wanted, more than anything in the world, to see that film. If my shutting down my reading could do anything toward helping that become a reality, I felt like it was my cosmic duty to man up and disappoint my audience.

The Would-Be Producer and his bulging neck veins stomped back to his Volvo and screeched away, after I assured him that not a single word of the bastardized miracle that was *The Day the Clown Cried* would be uttered by my hopeless company of nobodies. And I also promised him I would never never never do anything like this again in Los Angeles, cross my heart and hope to die. This seemed to placate him, and his reminding me, again, that he'd hosted a party at Sundance for six hundred people seemed to calm him down even more.

The sun was setting and the audience was settling in. I walked back into the theater, giddy and depressed.

I was giddy about the whole Chevy Chase/clown makeup/Auschwitz thing. I was depressed for two reasons. The first being that I realized it wasn't Jerry Lewis who had presented the cease-and-desist. It was this beautiful, bellowing bozo

who truly believed this was a Script That Must Be Filmed. I was also disappointed in myself, for making the internal decision to agree to his demands. I was cringing at how I was going to break the news to the cast. But this was outside the mere sphere of my own honor and stature. The Powerhouse Theatre was in jeopardy, along with the owner. What was it that Stephen King wrote, near the end of his novella *The Body*? If you die alone, you're a hero. Take anyone with you, you're dog shit. I was feeling the same way, at the moment, about legal action.

So I lowered the boom on the cast. There was frustration, and amusement, and some quick haggling as we all figured out what to do. David Cross pointed out that, in their haste and stupidity, they'd cc'd the cease-and-desist letter to Dave Coulier, who was also mentioned in the "Pick of the Week" blurb. We all had a nice laugh over that, but it didn't change my mind.

The lights went down and I stepped out onstage with the cease-and-desist letter in my hand. I explained to the audience what had happened. Boos. Groans. And then, piece by piece, we all improvised an evening around the fact that we'd been canceled. Bob and David improvised their interpretation of exactly what happened when the producer found out about the reading in *LA Weekly* ("How the fuck will anyone go see our movie in Kansas if eight people watch a script reading for free in Santa Monica?"). Paul F. Tompkins did a flawless phone call between the producer of the film and Peter O'Toole, trying to snake the role of the clown away from Jerry Lewis. Toby Huss played a concerned white supremacist who took issue with the screenplay's "negative" depiction of the Third Reich. And then everyone did a massive, free-form, back-and-forth "interpretive dance/pantomime/musical" version of the screenplay. Sloppy, hilarious and impossible to sue. What else could you ask for in an evening of theater?

I stayed true to the promise I gave to Soy Spasm the Producer. I never once did another reading of *The Day the Clown Cried* in Los Angeles. Every other reading I did was in New York. If it makes him feel any better, I tried my best to avoid any C-list entertainers. I hope he considers Stephen Colbert, Will Arnett and Fred Willard at least B-list. I mean, they're no Chevy Chase . . .

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Postscript: I didn't write down the exact date. I must have been too stunned, when it happened, to remember to write it down. But the year after the Powerhouse Theatre disaster, I came within ten feet of *The Day the Clown Cried*.

At least, I think I did.

It was early August 1998. Henny Youngman died in February of that year. I and about a dozen other comedians were brought to the CBS Television City studios, weeks before the Muscular Dystrophy Association Labor Day telethon. Jerry Lewis had an idea—have a group of young comedians come out, during the telethon, and each perform one of Henny's signature one-liners.

I can't tell you who else was in that room, meeting with Jerry, discussing the idea. For one, *Jerry fucking Lewis* was sitting there. I said hello briefly and that was it, as far as our interacting.

The second reason I can't tell you who else was in that room besides me and Jerry was the fact that a silvery, bulletproof-looking briefcase was sitting on Jerry's desk, between Jerry and me. And urban legend had it that Jerry carried the print—or at least a videotape—of *The Day the Clown Cried* with him, at all times, in a big, bulletproof briefcase.

And there it was. As far as I knew.

Jerry had us each do a one-liner and it was clear, almost instantly, that this was a bad idea.

But I could not take my eyes off of that briefcase. What if something in my brain fritzed out, some politeness firewall crumbled and burst, and I grabbed the briefcase and ran? Fled into the city, with whatever minions Jerry Lewis could muster scouring the earth searching for me? Would the videotape even be in there? Could I get to a pair of VCRs in time to make a dub, to send it out into the world? What would happen if I did?

I stood, frozen. After the last comedian did a Youngman joke, Jerry's assistant thanked us, wished us a pleasant day and, through tone and stance alone, sent us out of the room. I looked at the briefcase one last time. Then at Jerry. He looked back at me—right into my eyes—but betrayed nothing. Did his eyes say nothing because there was nothing to say? Or was it a trained response, a defense built up after years of guarding his terrible, forbidden prize?

It's my briefcase—from—*Pulp Fiction* moment. Occasionally, in my dreams, I pop the lid on that case and a rebuking, Ark of the Covenant, Nazi-melting glow bursts from its maw and turns me into soggy, goy ashes. Other times, there's a returned letter from Dean Martin and a bottle of Ensure. Each possibility holds secrets and terrors.

CHAPTER NINE
Amsterdam
January 7–13, 1998

FEBRUARY							1		2	
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	S.F. 4:10 pm FLY 2427 GR 5:16 pm ✓		NEW YEAR'S DAY	
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	7		8	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Toomler Amsterdam		9	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28	14		15	
							IMPROV Irvine ✓		16	
							WAG THE DOG Lou Pele 3 ✓			
GOOD WILL MUSIC Galaxy ✓							21		22	
SUPER NEEDS: DUGOOD QUANTITY ✓									23	
							Seattle Comedy Underground			

I was standing inside the Van Gogh Museum on January 11—a gray, rainy Sunday. And I was crying my eyes out. Not because I'd been let go by *MADtv*. And not because their decision was right. No one gives a shit if you can point out that a sketch idea was already done by *Saturday Night Live* or *Monty Python* if you don't have a better suggestion. It also didn't help that my writing at the time was so fashionably half-assed. I hadn't even developed my

distaste for typos, which made all the sketches I turned in look like I'd written them while being chased by Turkish assassins on a drifting steamboat.

I also wasn't sad because my comedy wasn't going over well in Amsterdam. I'd been booked there for a week at a club called Toomler. Me and Louie CK. Louie was headlining and absolutely killing. His ideas were huge and his delivery was simple. I was still in that awkward stage where my ideas were simpler and less startling than I cared to admit, so I masked that with a lot of unnecessarily ornate vocabulary and dense cultural references. The audiences were very . . . *polite* to me.

I didn't do myself any favors by making a beeline for Amsterdam's pot-friendly "coffee shops" and inhaling lungfuls of White Widow, Abraxas and Deep Purple every morning with my coffee, orange juice and croissants. After one afternoon spent at a shop called Lucky Mothers, where they packed three joints' worth of high-octane weed into a Snickers bar, which I promptly ate while walking around, I did an entire set of comedy with my eyes closed. The pot didn't affect my diction or lucidity. I could speak clearly. I knew the order of all of my jokes. I could deliver everything perfectly and professionally. But I could not *physically keep my eyes open*. The audience didn't seem at all shocked. They'd seen smacked-assed young Americans before. And watching me deliver jokes with my eyelids firmly snapped shut ended up being way more entertaining than the actual jokes.

I was crying because I was looking at, essentially, a collection of self-portraits that van Gogh and his circle of then-friends—Gauguin included—had done of each other and then exchanged, "Secret Santa" style, one Christmas when they were broke and unable to buy each other presents.

It was one of the many times I've been completely, from-the-ground-up wrong about how I saw the world and my assumptions about how to live in it. In that moment, looking at all of those little self-portraits, exchanged by a circle of friends to make a poverty-level Christmas bearable, all of my beacons were scrambled.

Van Gogh did have true, crackling genius inside of him. But it didn't save him, and despite what I always believed about how absolute geniuses must view the world and move through it, unencumbered by sentiment or responsibility, van Gogh didn't look to his genius to save him. He wanted to live in—and be saved by—the world.

The man who tore *The Night Café* from the boarded basement of his subconscious also organized a simple, prosaic gift exchange among his friends. So he and his friends could have a Christmas. So the world they lived in could seem a little less dim, cold and bleak. *The Night Café* and Secret Santa. I can never know for sure, but I'll bet the inspiration about the gifting of the self-portraits pleased and comforted him far more than *The Night Café* ever could.

What the fuck was I doing? I'd been in Amsterdam almost a week, and despite spending most mornings walking around and seeing the chess clubs, museums, red-light districts, Anne Frank House and pot cafés, I was also spending a good portion of my afternoons holed up in my hotel room, devouring Criterion Collection DVDs.

I Know Where I'm Going!, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai Trilogy*. Hoping for some sort of frisson of madness to unlock . . . something. What? Some hidden Key to Directing that needed to be teased out of my head? I was traveling with Louie CK—a stand-up on his way to becoming a filmmaker by simply shooting film. I'd probably

watched three times the amount of films that guy had seen, so far, in his life. But I hadn't shot one frame of celluloid.

One afternoon Louie and I went walking, randomly, through the north part of the city. We found a basement chess club. Nothing formal. Card tables set up. Old men slapping pieces onto cheap chessboards. Cigarette smoke. Strong tea in plastic cups. A woman in the back with a sandwich press. You want a ham and cheese? Two guilders. You only have one? Fine, one. Here's your sandwich.

Paperbacks with no covers, ancient magazines. Cats curled up in the window. At three o'clock, with no warning, the owner suddenly shooed everyone out.

"Closing. We have to close. I remembered a thing I have to do." Unsmiling, but weirdly polite. It was how his day was going. Everyone should have been happy for the few hours he was open.

Walking away, Louie said, "That'd be a good place to end up. A good life to have."

"What, running a chess club?"

Louie said, "He doesn't exactly run it. He just really likes chess, so he found a little space where some of his friends, and random people like us, can come by and play. Maybe have a sandwich, some tea. That's a peaceful life."

I said, "Probably doesn't have to answer to anyone."

"Opens and closes when he wants."

I said, "I wonder, then, back in the States? When you see some little, I don't know, model train shop? Or candle store or used bookstore? I wonder how many foreign travelers have stepped into those places and thought the same thing we're thinking now, about that chess club."

Louie said, "Well, yeah. We see that stuff every day in our lives, and we don't think twice about it. But you see it in a foreign country and it makes you rethink your life."

That conversation stayed with me, always. Mainly for its own merits. But, years later, when Louie got his show on FX? That brilliant, one-of-a-kind show he does at his own pace, with no notes, in a small way for zero money because he loves writing and acting and directing, and also showcasing his funny friends? He finally got his Amsterdam chess club.

I remember another conversation with Louie, during after-show drinks, when he waxed horrific and hilarious about tourism:

"One way to do a city like this would be to put your passport and a change of clean clothes and a wad of money in a safe-deposit box. Or a locker at a train station, right? And you leave the key with someone you trust, who'll know where you are. And then you go out and eat the city whole. All the booze you want, pot, any pills that get thrown at you, anything sexually, stuff you can't even remember. And you know you've got this escape hatch in a little storage locker somewhere. And you can scrub off anything you do to yourself for a twenty-four-hour period. Either a city like this, or maybe somewhere in Thailand or Jamaica."

I'm waiting to see what that TV show's going to be.

Then we visited the Rijksmuseum and viewed Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. The painting had been slashed with a shoemaker's knife in 1911, and again in 1975 (this time with a bread knife, leaving massive, still-visible scars) and, finally, eight years before our visit, by an acid-throwing maniac. More madness, this time surrounding a painting depicting, at least in its action, law and order shining a beam through the darkness.

And how was the museum protecting this dark star of a canvas from future attacks? A single velvet rope between two stanchions, a nearby fire extinguisher and a sleepy, septuagenarian security guard.

"That probably includes a lunch break for the guard," said Louie.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

So there I was, my second-to-last day in Amsterdam, alone inside the Van Gogh Museum, getting kicked in the head. Gently. Again. Unlike the movies, where Our Hero suddenly has some massive revelation and becomes a New Person instantly, the true road out of a rut consists of a bunch of small, sharp kicks. Here was one small kick—crying in public, thinking of Vincent, clinging to the cliff-edge of friendship, and peace, and happiness, and being pulled down by a demon with paint-gob eyes and streaked, blazing claws of color.

Other kicks were piling up. The Hammer Studios marathon. And my trip back to Virginia for Thanksgiving. *The Day the Clown Cried* debacle at the Powerhouse Theatre. And now this. I'm embarrassed to say it, but looking at those little self-portraits? I thought of a line from *Apocalypse Now*. When Dennis Hopper is describing Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz:

"The man is clear in his mind. But his soul is mad."

And I still had a year and a half to go before the final kick that launched me out of my movie-watching madness.

CHAPTER TEN
The Knave of Queens
March 26–27, 1998

11 PERJURED NIGHT @ the DOA ✓	12 IMPROV ✓	13 IMPROV ✓	14 WACO RULES OF ENGAGEMENT SUNDS ✓ MEAN STREETS NIGHT ✓
18 TRAVELER NOISE: STATION, THE CUBAN Velvets N. Bandy ✓ UNDERGROUND ✓	19 LET'S GET LOST N. Bandy ✓	20 MR. NICE GUY COLUMBIAN ✓ WILD STRINGS Galaxy ✓	21 THE PRODUCERS I IT'S A MAD, MAD, WORLD, NO MORE AS FAMILIAR ✓ HOLLYWOOD COFFEE SHOP ✓
25 LUNA PARK ✓ "stella"	26 TOOL @ the Palladium ✓	27 "KING OF QUEENS" pilot taping Sony (Columbia) ✓	28 JAMES EARL RAY: DENIAL OF DEEDS AND OTHER FILMS NIGHT ✓

Movie-wise, March of 1998 was looking like a champion. I started the month seeing *Dark City* in Toronto, then went back to Los Angeles for a gorgeous print of *Les Enfants du Paradis* at the New Beverly. And then, of course, *The Big Lebowski*. Endless night, battered hope and bowling noir. Nice beginning.

The month ended surreal.

I saw *The Big Lebowski* in Sherman Oaks on Friday, March 6. Brian Posehn and I went, fresh off the plane from Portland, Oregon, where we'd spent four days writing the pilot script for *Super Nerds*, which Comedy Central would shoot and then bury in a salt mine somewhere in Colorado. Oh well.

We spent the next day in a studio somewhere on the outskirts of Silver Lake, dressed as hookers and being filmed by Maynard Keenan for a video. His band, Tool, had a song called "Hooker with a Penis" and he wanted footage of shadowy, man-shaped but ostensibly female dancers to be projected behind him when they performed at the Palladium on March 26. He asked us. We are tragically, hopelessly man-shaped, Brian and I. So we squeezed into garters and nighties, threw boas around our necks and danced for the cameras. Our silhouettes were captured for eternity. Maynard and his crew took some still photographs of our journey into half-assed cross-dressing. At one goofy juncture, I sat on the toilet and pretended to wipe my crotch with a wad of toilet paper while scowling from under the curly bangs of a black wig. Snap! Comedy!

The night of the concert I was sober and looking to go home early. The next day, Friday the twenty-seventh, I was set to tape the pilot of *The King of Queens*. All the way out at Sony, in Culver City. I was ambivalent about the pilot and frustrated at the concert about having to stay sober. I liked getting a solid buzz at a show and letting the sonic surge scrape my frontal lobes. Tool, live, is a full-body scour.

I could have used the scour, too. The rest of the month, film-wise, had gotten relentless and heavy. *Hidden Fear* (repressed, late-fifties noir, set in Denmark [!]), then the documentary *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (burned babies), then *Mean Streets* ("You don't fuck with the infinite"), John Sayles's *Men with Guns* (the grinding hopelessness and sudden blood under eco-friendly tourism) and finally *Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser* (more genius at the price of madness).

But there I was, in the balcony, watching my and Brian's shadows writhing clumsily behind Maynard and Tool as they stutter-stomped through "Hooker with a Penis." They segued into "Sober" and then Brian came up behind me.

"Check out the tour T-shirt," he said, laughing.

Black tee. An image on the front—grainy, me on the toilet, clutching the toilet paper wad. Scowling at the lens. And around the image, in a circle, was: "*Tool Fucked the Shit out of Me at the Palladium and All I Got Was This Lousy T-shirt.*"

"Wow!" I said. "That's fantastic! Oh man, he didn't tell me he was going to do *that*." I ran and bought five of them.

The *King of Queens* pilot taping went until three a.m. on the twenty-eighth. At one point me, Kevin James, Victor Williams and Larry Romano are all piled onto Doug's bed, trying to watch a football game on Doug's big-screen TV. In between takes I lay down on the bed and fell instantly asleep. I dreamed a very prosaic, undreamy dream about being back in my apartment. When they called for the next shot I snapped awake and didn't know where I was. It was the kind of panic I used to get when I'd wake up after a Norse-warrior night of drinking, only I was stone sober and lying safe on a frilly bed on a soundstage.

The day before I had been a forty-foot silhouette of a she-male behind Tool at the Palladium. My face was on a T-shirt that extolled rough group sex. Now I was taping the pilot for an eight p.m., Monday night sitcom that would be my main source of employment for the next nine years. It bought me a house. It bought me breathing room and the ability to fill comedy clubs and small theaters. I learned to act, literally, by getting to work with Kevin James every day. He was the most solid TV actor I've ever seen since Danny DeVito and, before Danny, Jackie Gleason. Those are rare birds, with the ability to rampage with movie-star bluster inside of a TV-screen playing field.

And I could not have had a more solid demarcation line between my young, pissed-off “alt comic” years and my mellowing, mainstream acting years. Being a hooker with a penis for Tool the night before my *King of Queens* pilot taping is my reverse “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.” But the lure of television, especially for people outside of it, is a more sinister tractor beam pull than the distant, emerald glow of Oz. Within a year, I’d find out exactly how sinister that pull was, and how warping to a seemingly sane psyche.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
 Killer Burger and
 the Myth of the Largo
 March 4–20, 1999

10 69/296	11 70/295	12 71/294 "KING of QUEENS" + 20mg ✓	13 72/293
17 76/289 St. Patrick's Day (Ireland, 195) <u>The Brandon</u> Teddy Sports Nuart ✓	18 77/288	19 78/287	20 79/286 KILLER BURGER ✓
24 83/282 COBB'S ✓ Shadow of a Doubt Centro ✓	25 84/281 LENNY BRUCE: SWEAR to tell the TRUTH Rorie ✓ PUNCHLINE	26 85/280 S.F. —————→ ✓ ED TV Killer ✓	27 86/279 R. QUEENS Renshaw II ✓

"Hey, long time no see!"

I'm finishing a set at a Borders bookstore. It's the Borders that used to be perched above the intersection of La Cienega and Blackburn. As I'm writing this it's a Men's Wearhouse. By the time you're reading this it might be a Chipotle. Welcome to Los Angeles.

It's March, 4, 1999. I'm filming episodes of *The King of Queens*, getting used to being on TV. Just like when I was at *MADtv*, I'm doing sets ferociously. Almost every night, except for the ones where I huddle in a seat at the New Beverly.

The Largo is at the peak of its popularity and influence. I do regular Monday night sets there. But I make sure to seek out odder, on-the-fringes rooms. Rooms where you have to *work*. Like this Borders, where a friend of mine puts on a regular Thursday night show in the upstairs Borders Café. The crowd is ideal if you're in the mood to work out. Half of them are there to actually see the show; the other half just want to sit and read, and you have to win them over. Oftentimes, the half that was there to see comedy ends up agreeing with the oblivious half. It's pitiless and perfect.

I come offstage. Wait, no. There isn't a stage. I've stepped away from the spot they cleared in one corner of the café area, away from the mike and back toward the shelves of books. I judge the set successful because, after one joke, an Asian girl who was reading John Grisham's *The Runaway Jury* looked up and halfheartedly smiled at me. And then went back to her book.

I don't recognize, at first, the man who walks up to me. He says, "Hey, long time no see!" Brown haired, slightly older than me, average-by-way-of-pleasant-looking. Solid, Midwestern breeding. Like he's stepped out of one of those stock photo images you see in magazine ads for dress slacks. "Not since Richmond, right?"

And then it comes flooding back to me.

Before we proceed, I've got to tell you that I'm not going to name the guy. He doesn't come off well in this story. And he isn't a bad guy. *Misguided* is a better word.

But for the purposes of this chapter, let's call him Ted. Ted Richmond. *Ted* because, well—is there any more average-by-way-of-pleasant name than *Ted*? And *Richmond* because I've realized that Richmond was the last place I saw him.

It was back in 1991, just before I moved west. The spring. I was still in college, getting ready to graduate. My senior year of college was an epic struggle for me. I realized, halfway through my junior year, that all I wanted to do with my life was become a stand-up comedian. So my senior year of college was a live-action version of those high school anxiety dreams. You know the ones, where you're not ready for some huge test, but you're also vaguely aware of the life you're living now, and of the knowledge and wisdom you've accrued through your life, and how you *do not belong back in high school anymore* but—you're trapped! You're *trapped*! How did it get like this? Don't they realize you already graduated?

Every Wednesday, those last two years of college, I hosted an open mike at a local comedy club, there in my college town. There was a regular circle of comedians I hung out with way more than my college friends. Every weekend I was away, working a gig. I knew what I wanted to do.

Ted Richmond was a regular at the Wednesday night open mike. And of all the regular comedians on that show, he was far and away my favorite. He had a truly original, bizarre, oblique approach to jokes. Sometimes the punch lines were hidden in the middle. Sometimes the setup was the punch line, in that it was so startling, so confusing, that he'd follow it, masterfully, with everyday observations, to give the audience time to let the crust-shifting, plangent thought sink in. He did okay with audiences but amazing with every other comedian. A true original, I thought, with an unhurried, confident, long-view approach to his art and career.

"They say we're going to know the devil by his number, 666," began one of Ted's bits. Then he'd say, "Aren't we going to

know him by the fact he's the only one with a *number*? What does 666 have to do with it? 'What's your number? Six sixty-four? How about you? Six sixty-five? Okay . . .

"And you? Six six six? Okey-doke. Six six six, come over here for a second."

Laconic, weird, playful. Brilliant.

We were acquaintances. He was always friendly but never particularly close to anyone. A true lovable oddball. I moved west and never heard from him.

For a short time.

And then . . .

Starting in 1994, he'd call me. Always at weird, random hours, when I wasn't picking up my phone. At first he'd call the number in my apartment. Someone I knew on the East Coast must have given it to him. After I got a cell phone, he began calling that. But, as if he had some eerie sixth sense, never when I was there to answer. Always wanting to talk, yet never *once* leaving a number at which to return his calls. I think at one point, when I was back visiting the East Coast, I ran into a mutual friend from those open-mike days at my college.

"Hey, do you keep up with Ted Richmond at all?"

My East Coast friend said, "Yeah. He lives in New York now, but I see him sometimes."

I asked, "Do you have his phone number?"

"Not on me."

I said, "Well, when you see him, tell him to call me and leave a number where I can call him back. He's left me ten messages over these last few years, and I think he thinks I have his number, but I don't, and I feel like I'm being rude."

"You got it," said my friend.

A week later, on my answering machine, a call from Ted. He left it at three o'clock in the morning, West Coast time. His flat, pleasant, slightly spacey voice was on the tape, like a stoned ghost:

"Hey, Patton. Ted. Giving you a call. I was told you've been trying to call me back. Well, nothing's stopping you. Give me a call." *Click.* Goddamn it.

And now, here he is. In the flesh.

"Do you know how many times I wanted to call you back? You never left a number!" I say, shaking my head.

"I didn't? I always left messages on your machine."

I say, "Yeah, but you've got to *say* what your phone number is. It doesn't just leave it on the machine, you know? That's why I couldn't call you back. I hope you weren't pissed off."

Ted says, "Nah, I figured you were just getting around to it." In Ted's mind, a three-year lapse is a perfectly acceptable, on-pace lag for returning a phone call.

"So what're you doing in Los Angeles? You move here?"

Ted smiles. "Thinking of it. Thinking real hard about it. Want to do some stand-up."

I say, "Oh, cool! Right now you can pretty much go onstage every night. There are all of these amazing—"

"Largo."

Something in his tone catches me short. His eyes, which were always twinkling with the slightly unhinged genius you see in people like Andy Kaufman or Maria Bamford, have suddenly gone dead. Dead, but still hungry, which doesn't fit his face. Shark eyes in a teddy bear skull.

"Well, the Largo's a great room, but you don't want to just—"

Ted cuts me off again. "The Largo. I want to go up at the Largo and do a set and have a TV show. I read about that place. In *Rolling Stone*. There are TV people there and you go onstage and you get a show."

I say, "Hey, whoa. It's not exactly like that. The room's really popular, but it's not like you do one set and suddenly you're on TV."

"Well, *you're* on TV. And you do the Largo."

Okay, let's stop here for a second. Because I don't want you thinking this is a Country Mouse/City Mouse story where I suddenly have to contend with a misinformed yokel who's putting his misperceptions about show business and Life in the Big City on me, and I have to avoid him and find a way to extract him from my life. I like this guy. And he's no fool. He is, objectively, one of the more original comedic minds I've ever encountered. It's true that some of the full-goose creative types can be a little . . . shaky, when it comes to quotidian life, but Ted

is far from that. And he isn't like some other friends of mine from back home. Like the high school friend who called me after my single line of dialogue on the "Couch" episode of *Seinfeld*, demanding I let him live in the guest house of my "mansion" while he started learning to "act for the movies." When I assured him that I didn't have a house, that I still lived in an efficiency apartment in Little Armenia, he countered with, "I saw you on TV. You don't think I have a TV? You're a millionaire. *I saw you on TV.*" When I explained that I'd gotten a little over four hundred dollars for my acting services on *Seinfeld*, he hung up on me and told everyone I still knew back home that I'd turned into a "Hollywood asshole."

But Ted isn't like that. Or so I think. And I am well and truly his fan, and I guess I think I'm his friend, as far as that's

possible with someone like Ted.

“Look, you don’t want to just go up at the Largo just like that. Let me take you to a few of the smaller rooms. They’re all amazing. I want you to have a feel for how stand-up is out here, and then, yeah, I’ll definitely get you up at the Largo.”

Ted scowls at me. “I read about that place. You go up and you get a show. And you’re trying to keep me from going on there and you’re already on TV and I don’t have *time* to do these little rooms.”

Now I’m starting to doubt myself. Am I being an asshole to him?

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Sixteen days later we’re in the cramped back room of a Hollywood Boulevard restaurant called Killer Burger. There’s a Saturday night open mike hosted by Jeremy Kramer, about whom a better writer than me needs to compose a sprawling, Robert Caro–sized biography. To the alternate comedy scene, he is Johnny Cash, Joey Ramone and Bo Diddley. The three-in-one. The Rosetta stone. Too big for my head, too wild for my pen.

Anyway.

So I’ve brought Ted here to do a set. It’s a tiny room that’s gotten a lot of heat. Mainly because of Jeremy. Jeremy does the sort of free-form, fearless, nonlinear humor that Ted does. I figure they’re a perfect match, that Jeremy will set the table for him, then Ted can go up, do a set where it doesn’t matter how good or bad he does. What kind of friend would I be if I simply tossed him onto the Largo? In the sixteen days leading up to the Killer Burger show, I’ve learned from him that he’s never even been to the Largo or seen a show there. He read an article, formed a myth and is proceeding as if the myth were gospel.

Then I find out something else, something even more frustrating and exasperating, while he waits to go on.

“How long were you living in New York?”

Ted says, “About a month.”

“A month in the city? In Manhattan?” I’m confused. “Where did you end up living?”

Ted says, “Upstate.”

“Huh.” I think about this. Then: “Where’d you do sets?”

Ted stares at me. “I didn’t like Manhattan. I didn’t do any sets there. I painted houses upstate.”

“Was there a club upstate?”

Ted thinks about this for a second. “I don’t think I’ve done comedy in, um. Um. Eight years.”

Now it’s my turn to stare. “You haven’t done *any* stand-up. In eight years.”

“Nope.” He grins. “There really weren’t any rooms to work out in upstate. And like I said, I hated Manhattan.”

He hasn’t been onstage in eight fucking years. Holy shit.

“Why . . . I mean, why are you suddenly wanting to do comedy now?”

Ted says, confidently, “To go onstage at the Largo. And get a TV show.”

Ten minutes later, Jeremy brings Ted onstage.

I really, really, really want to tell you a victorious, Geoffrey Rush–in–*Shine* tale of victory here. But even though that movie is based on a true story, it’s still a fucking movie. And there’s nothing cinematic about Ted’s set at the Killer Burger that night.

Jeremy gives him a nice intro. Straight up. “Ladies and gentlemen, from New York, please welcome Ted Richmond.”

Ted walks up, holds on to the mike stand with both hands. Looks at Jeremy. “I’m from New York State. You made it sound like I’m from New York City. I don’t live there now.”

Jeremy says, from his seat, “Ladies and gentlemen, from the *state* of New York but not the city, Ted Richmond.” He’s being playful, but with a solid undercurrent of *Let’s not fuck with me, okay?*

Ted glares back at him. “New York *state*.”

“I said that,” says Jeremy.

“Not originally.”

Jeremy says, “We should move on.”

Ted keeps staring at Jeremy. The audience is getting uncomfortable.

What follows is eight minutes of . . . look, someone who didn’t know comedy would call it “hate-fucking a crowd.” But there’s no malice to it. Which makes it even more disturbing. A complete emotional disconnect as he delivers half concepts (“Everyone’s mad that the president is lying to us. But he’s talking to us. And *we* lie. And *we* don’t talk to the president”) and apologies before an attempt at humor was ever gambled (“I don’t want to talk about the next thing that’s in my head to talk about, because you won’t want to hear me say it”). Stone-silent crowd. Ted walks off without saying good night. Midsentence. Simply stops talking and walks off the stage.

I meet him in the front restaurant. I try to be supportive.

“Old muscles, huh? But they come back, right?”

Ted says, “That sucked.”

“Well, aren’t you glad your first set in eight years wasn’t at the Largo?”

Ted considers this. “I wouldn’t have done that shit at the Largo. I would’ve done my best stuff and then gotten a TV show. None of those people in there could have given me a TV show.”

I don't know what to say. To be honest, I feel like if I open my mouth, say anything, he'll flat-out kill me.

Ted turns and walks out of Killer Burger and, as far as I know, off of the planet.

He says over his shoulder as he heads for the door, "You're on TV and you won't let me on. No one will let me on TV."

He disappears into the flow of pedestrians on Hollywood Boulevard. A random electron in Los Angeles's ever-crackling circuit of need and delusion. I never see him again.

CHAPTER TWELVE
The End of the Addiction
Thursday, May 20, 1999,
the Vista Theatre
Courtesy of Michael Torgan



Sherman Torgan

So now it's four years, to the day, since I first stepped inside the New Beverly. Stepped out of May sunshine to watch Billy Wilder noir. Billy Wilder—a double dose. *Sunset Boulevard* and *Ace in the Hole*. Billy Wilder stuck the needle in. Four years later, George Lucas yanks the needle out.

I see *The Phantom Menace*. Midnight screening at the Vista Theatre, Wednesday the nineteenth, at Hillhurst where it crazy-collides with Sunset and Hollywood. Gorgeous, old-school, art deco theater with extra-wide aisles, a movie palace interior and a manager—Victor—who often dresses up like characters in the movie they're showing. Victor is, and will continue to be, a friend. He gets me and two other friends into the midnight screening. I've waited since 1983, when I saw *Return of the Jedi* at the Tysons Corner 8 in Fairfax, Virginia, for another chapter of the *Star Wars* saga.

There's no point in my plumbing the depths of the disappointment I feel, later, trudging out of the Vista at two a.m. the morning of the twentieth. How do I put it? There've been so many metaphors, at this point.

My favorite, so far, is from comedian Dana Gould: "George Lucas told the greatest joke about two men walking into a bar in 1977. Now, twenty-two years later, it's time to find out how the bar got its zoning permits, and liquor license, and how they hired the busboy."

But since I feel obligated to put *something* of my own here, even after all of the jaw flapping I've done about it, how about . . . Okay, think of it this way. Imagine that all four members of Led Zeppelin are still alive. And they're doing a reunion show. And you get there, and it turns out that Robert Plant has fired the other three members, and he's hired three frightened music students and is insisting they perform acoustic versions of the chord progressions that led to songs like "Black Dog" and "Whole Lotta Love."

Eh. Still not as good as Dana. Here's another one, from my own brother, who sat next to me, during one of the Galactic Senate scenes:

"This is like watching C-SPAN but everyone's wearing monster masks."

But two things happen, a week after I leave that screening.

First off, let me fully admit to seeing *The Phantom Menace* again, that Saturday, at the now-defunct Coronet Theatre on Geary in San Francisco. I'm doing a weekend there at Cobb's Comedy Club, and I guess I'm hoping for some sort of redemptive miracle, or that maybe I was wrong in my initial assessment. Also, there are parts of it I like. It's sheer, uncut nostalgia. I want to see a *Star Wars* movie in a theater with a lot of people. Like I did when I was eight, and had my mind blown apart.

But it still sucks.

And then—the Two Things. These two things are what pull the needle out of my cinephilia, for good. They peel me forever from the projector sprockets. I still haven't directed a film, but films don't direct my life, either. So that's something.

The first thing that happens is: I go back to the New Beverly the Sunday I return from San Francisco. They're showing *Only Angels Have Wings* and *His Girl Friday*. Howard Hawks and Cary Grant. Two films about two different professions (bush pilots and newspapermen) with slangy secret languages and ethics that seem brutal and heartless to outsiders.

Come to think of it, those two films go farther than pretty much any other movie in explaining the codes and rituals of comedians. If the

second chapter of this book doesn't explain my world to you, go watch those two movies instead.

I buy my ticket and Sherman looks at me through the glass with his merry, camera-lens eyes.

"Patton."

I say, "Hey, Sherman."

"Four years to the day. Figured you'd be handing me a script to read by now."

(Kick.)

Then, a week later, I have dinner with some other movie-buff friends, all of us steeped in the *Star Wars* universe.

And—and I remember so much of this conversation—we pick apart *The Phantom Menace*. We aren't happy with it.

But we also have very detailed, very reasonable, *very* personal reasons for believing the film could have been better. And

not only better, but great. As thrilling as *Star Wars*, as deep and dark as *Empire* and as satisfying as *Jedi*.

Why is our conversation so detailed, so astute, so passionate? Well, part of it is we're sprocket fiends, film freaks, with

one foot always in the celluloid world. That would always be a fact.

But the other reason is: George Lucas created something that, even when it makes a wrong turn, has a rich enough

history to it, and has enough life pulsing through its heart, that we could have conversations like this. And arguments.

Classic films that are better regarded than *Star Wars* rarely spawn an entire subculture of argument, speculation and

even greater creativity. And I'm not even talking fan fiction. I'm talking about other short films, gorgeous YouTube spoofs

like *Troops* or *Stabbing*

at Leia's 22nd Birthday.

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Websites that make intricate, detailed short films about *The Phantom Menace* and the subsequent, even more

disappointing prequels, with anguished, often brilliant ideas on how to improve them. Like *The Godfather: Part III*, which

is a stunted flower growing on the rich loam of *The Godfather Parts 1* and *2*. I still have friends who've posited brilliant

alternate versions of the third part of Coppola's trilogy. About how it could have been a war for control between Michael

and Tom Hagen. Or how Connie Corleone could have been a hidden puppet master, like Maerose Prizzi in *Prizzi's Honor*.

David Thomson, in his brilliant *Suspects* essays, constructed a grand, epic narrative wherein Connie, Maerose and Elvira

Montana—Michelle Pfeiffer's character in *Scarface*—form a tripartite drug kingdom.

Movies—the truly great ones (and sometimes the truly bad)—should be a drop in the overall fuel formula for your life. A

fuel that should include sex and love and food and movement and friendships and your own work. All of it, feeding the

engine. But the engine of your life should be *your life*. And it hits me, sitting there with my friends, that for all of our

bluster and detailed, exotic knowledge *about* film, we aren't contributing anything *to* film.

I flash to the coffee shop in San Francisco that all of my comedian friends and I would hang out in, when we were young,

before we'd done anything in the way of television or movies. Bitching about how awful and shitty the indus

try was. We were very comfortable, waking up at eleven in the morning, choking down caffeinated mud, assuring

ourselves that some invisible foot was keeping us down. Some of us moved to Los Angeles, made our lives. But some of us

stayed in that coffee shop, because that's ultimately where our comfort was. There was comfort in preemptive

disappointment. Because it was never your fault.

(Kick.)

And then, once the group of us who moved down to Los Angeles got there, there was more bitching—about not getting

bigger roles or better opportunities to pitch shows for ourselves. And we'd piss and moan and get comfortable—fuck,

some of us built whole careers—pointing out how unfair and whimsical and chaotic the entertainment business was, how

it rarely rewarded the truly talented. None of us could see how it never rewarded the inert.

(Kick.)

And here I am. I've traded a late-morning coffee shop for a late-night, postscreening bar, angry at George Lucas for

producing something that doesn't live up to my exacting, demanding, ultimately nonparticipating standards, and failing to

see that the four hours of pontificating and connecting and correcting his work could be spent creating two or three

pages of my own.

(KICK KICK KICK.)

I still haven't made a film. As I write this, I'm fourteen years removed from that flurry of figurative head kicks. But I've

written six screenplays. Sold three of them. Have seen none of them made. They're just bigger open mikes

for me.

Film stock and movie theaters are dying as I write this, but I've got a phone in my pocket with a mini movie studio inside

that I'm learning to use. The Five Books are all gone—hailed away to Goodwill. Maybe you'll find one, with my tight, OCD

pencil scrawl next to dozens of movie titles. My movie-a-night habit is gone. And, as I've been cramming fewer films into

my head, my memory has opened up and brought into sharper focus moments in films that pierced me, that will stay with

me without my ever having to draw a star or check mark next to a title. And for every one of those moments that another

human, in a collaborative fit of struggle or passion, brought into being, I'm more attuned to moments in my everyday life—with friends and family and even (sometimes especially) strangers. Faces are scenes. People are films.

... *Kick* ...

Sherman Torgan and George Lucas pulled me off of the sprockets. My love of watching movies has turned into a love of savoring them. And the flirtation with becoming a filmmaker abides, and has stayed fun.

Listen—you don't *have* to follow me into the sunshine. If this is your first time seeing *Sunset Boulevard* and *Ace in the Hole*? By all means sit and see 'em. They're great. I envy your getting to watch them with new eyes. But take what you need from them and get out of the dark once in a while. You're going to have more of the dark than you can handle, sooner than you think.

The thing about the dark is, it can never get enough of you.

l.

Written and directed by Josh Trank, who edited *Big Fan*, my first lead dramatic role in a movie, ten years later.

Whistling in the Dark

Sherman Torgan died on July 18, 2007. He was riding his bike in Venice Beach when a heart attack toppled him off of the planet and out of this life. Did it look like a scene from a Jacques Tati comedy? Did his life flash before his eyes—and if it did, what movie scenes did it contain? Or had he beat the addiction, too, and was content to lead others into it, hoping for a screenplay from each one, exactly four years after they first entered his celluloid shooting gallery? I'd like to think that Sherman's memory was only enhanced by his years in the darkness, in front of the glowing screen. That the memories of his real life, lit by the cosmic candle of sunlight or deepened by the infinite ink of the evening, were clearer and more precious for his having seen life re-created, secondhand, for so many years watching films.

I was celebrating my nineteenth year, to the day, since I first stepped on a stage the day Sherman passed. I wish I could say I spent it at a club, working on new material. Or even at the New Beverly, watching a Wednesday night double feature and filing away a camera angle, a focus pull or a simple cut as something to emulate and strive for if I ever directed a movie. Instead, I was on a

soundstage in Santa Monica, sitting in front of a green screen, running my trap on another episode of VH1's *Best Week Ever*. I was probably mumbling about Paris Hilton or Britney Spears or Some Other Dumb Idiot What Was on TV Acting Like an Idiot. Disposable. Rent and ramen on a grander scale.

It was also twenty days after I'd voiced the lead character in Pixar's *Ratatouille*. I was planning on bringing a bottle of "Ratatouille" vintage white wine to Sherman. Pixar and Disney had planned to do a product tie-in but then decided alcohol wasn't appropriate for their young audience. But they sent me one of the bottles, now a near-impossible-to-get collector's item. I don't like accruing artifacts of my career, so I wanted to give it to Sherman. To make up for the screenplay I never handed him through the booth. But now he was gone.

On August 18 there was a sloppy, spontaneously organized "wake" inside the Egyptian Theatre. Everyone who attended had decided, without ever saying it out loud, that it would have been impossible to mourn Sherman inside his own temple. So we met in a theater designed for a pharaoh's farewell journey and told New Beverly stories. I told the one about Laurence Tierney. Clu Gulager, who played the fitness-obsessed hitman in Don Siegel's *The Killers* as well as fighting off a punk-rock ghoul invasion in *Return of the Living Dead*, talked about how going to the New Beverly stopped him from sinking into despair and alcoholism. Julie Marchese, and her bright green Louise Brooks haircut, didn't attend.

The despair was too deep, too fresh for her. She, along with Sherman's son Michael, was about to grab the tiller of the temporarily adrift movie ark that the New Beverly was becoming. A few days later, Quentin Tarantino announced, "As long as I draw breath, the New Beverly will remain open." When film preservation pioneer Henri Langlois died,

thirty years before and an ocean away, his Cinémathèque Française was also kept running. He saved films from being destroyed by Nazis. Sherman saved them from indifference and passive digital downloads. The Nazis were better dressed than the digital pirates.

I told another story at Sherman's wake, besides the Laurence Tierney one. It was this:

On Friday, November 3, 1995—still fresh into my addiction, still going to the New Beverly three or four times a week—I stopped in to see *Casablanca*. I'd actually seen it twice before—once on television, and then at the Alhambra in San Francisco. But I had a free Friday night, and *Casablanca* is a movie that pays increasing dividends every single time you see it. Why not study it when it's twenty feet tall and early December Los Angeles rain is tattooing the roof? What would I see?

It was a medium-sized audience. Some of the usual freaks were there. I was one of the usual freaks, at that point. I was already noting, to myself, that *Casablanca* appeared in both *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia* (because of Peter Lorre) and *Cult Movies* volume 1. This was a well-spent evening.

We got to the point, near the end, where Rick is sending Ilsa off to be with Laszlo. He's regaining his heart by breaking it. About to start the "Here's looking at you, kid . . .," speech.

He actually got out the words, "The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of—" and then the word "beans" became warped and shrill and then silent as *the film broke*. The fucking film *broke* right at the moment in *Casablanca* that everyone knows, that everyone can quote, that the whole film leads up to, emotionally!

There was, at most, half a second of outrage, of half-expelled *Whas* and *Huhs*, and then silence. Stunned. And then . . . Laughter. From everyone. The house lights went up as Sherman and his projectionist rushed up to the projection room to fix the problem. The light brought more laughter. Of all the places for *Casablanca* to break. It couldn't have been timed more perfectly.

And then the lights went down again. Darkness. Was the movie going to restart? Nope. Not yet. Just sitting there, in the dark. Nothing glowing on the screen.

And then everyone . . .

. . . began . . .

. . . *whistling*.

We all started spontaneously whistling “As Time Goes By,” maybe twenty of us, on a rainy Los Angeles evening in the little New Beverly Cinema. Elsewhere in the city people were at nightclubs, seeing concerts, roaring their youth at parties or sporting events. Big movies were premiering to packed houses. Famous comedians were doing sets in crowded clubs. Crimes were being committed, decisions to change one’s life were being agreed to. Money changed hands. Rain fell to the earth and made its way back to the sea.

And we were whistling in the dark. “As Time Goes By.” You must remember this . . .

I thanked Sherman, apologized for never handing him my screenplay and sat back down in the front row of the Egyptian. Later that week, I stopped by the New Beverly and gave Michael my *Blade Runner* replica gun. It could not have been farther from a finished screenplay, but I needed something symbolic to soothe my self-loathing. The replica gun exchange did it. Barely.

As I write this now, Sherman’s been gone for six years. No one’s even sure if movie theaters will exist six years from now. Just like when silent movies transitioned to sound, and then black and white to color, and then television appeared, and then videotapes and DVDs. Now there’s the Internet, and the ability to pull cinema from an electronic empyrean, to funnel it onto a tiny screen in your pocket. And us sprocket fiends are waiting to see if the movie theaters will continue to stand. We’re whistling in the dark. Time is going by.

One thing I didn’t talk about at Sherman’s wake was a blog I’d written a few weeks after he died. I did it quietly, posted it on my website, used it to vent any residual grief

I was feeling and then didn’t think much about it after. I certainly wasn’t going to mention a fucking blog inside of a movie palace on Hollywood Boulevard. Why invoke another soldier in the electronic army of distractions that was making it hard on movie theaters?

But I went back and reread it while writing this chapter. It’s called “I Will Program a Month in Heaven for You, Sherman Torgan.” The second paragraph of that entry, I now realize, was a rough précis of this entire book:

All I know is, when I moved to Los Angeles in May of 1995, the New Beverly was a cool, dark continent of then-forgotten history. It was Saturday, May 20th—blazing and white outside on Beverly Boulevard. I watched a double feature of *Ace in the Hole* and *Sunset Boulevard*. *Ace in the Hole* just came out on a deluxe Criterion DVD. Thanks to people like Sherman Torgan, “NOT AVAILABLE ON DVD” will quickly go the way of phrases like, “Who’s Michael Reeves?” and “I’ve never seen *El Topo* or *Blast of Silence*—are they good?”

What I’d done was organize a month’s worth of titles to play in a netherworld movie palace. Someplace cool and comfortable, and smelling of popcorn fumes and spilled-soda perfume, where Sherman could unspool heaven.

I’ve said this elsewhere, but I’m a stone-cold atheist who’s genuinely grateful that religion exists. All religions. I look at them as a testament to the human race’s imagination, to our ability to invent stories that explain

away—or at least make manageable—the nameless terrors, horrific randomness and utter, galactic meaninglessness of the universe. Is there anything more defiant and beautiful than, when faced with a roaring void, to say, “I know a story that fits this quite nicely. And I’m going to use it, pitiless universe, to give meaning and poetry and hope to my days inside this maelstrom into which I’ve, in Joseph Conrad’s words, ‘blundered unbidden’?”

II
None of these movies exist. Well, except for one of them *definitely* and one of them *maybe*. Some of their source materials and the actors starring in these films don’t exist in the same time frames. Time and mortality don’t hold sway once you’re off this planet. Just like Neil Gaiman did in the *Brief Lives* story line in his *Sandman* comics, wherein exists a “dream library” of all the novels that the great writers dreamed of writing but never did (Chandler’s *Love Can Be Murder*, Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures on the Moon*), I dreamed up a cinema where Sherman could spend the afterlife watching movies that various great directors dreamed of directing or that the collective sprocket-fiend consciousness would want to will into being.

August 1 and 2

A Confederacy of Dunces

dir: Hal Ashby

(w/ John Belushi, Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin)

Blood Meridian

dir: Terrence Malick

(w/ Gene Hackman, Barry Brown
and Marlon Brando)

Hal Ashby and Terrence Malick were at the height of their powers when they each filmed these supposedly “unfilmable” novels.

Ashby refused to “contain” human hurricanes like Belushi and Pryor in his heat-haze adaptation of *Dunces*. Instead, he reportedly played them against each other, expanding the character of Burma Jones from the novel for Pryor to inhabit, and letting Belushi create his own interpretation of Ignatius, which was miraculous for how close it ended up being to

John Kennedy Toole's vision without Belushi's *ever reading the novel*. Lily Tomlin, fresh off of *The Late Show*, is hilarious as Ignatius's mother. And that's a very young Frances McDormand as Myrna Minkoff. Sublime.

Malick's four-and-a-half-hour *Blood Meridian*, partially financed by star Marlon Brando (he sold off his island), is at once the best Western, historical and horror movie ever made. Brando underwent sumo wrestler training and had his head, eyebrows and body completely

waxed to play the massive, hairless, indestructible Judge Holden. The Comanche attack sequence is both beautiful and nearly unwatchable. Watch Barry Brown carefully during the final confrontation scene in Fort Griffin. He had himself hypnotized. Despite the on-screen tension, Hackman and Brando were fast friends on set. The meteor showers that open and close the film were real.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 3 and 4

Stalingrad (1988)

dir: Sergio Leone

Opening with a close-up of the muzzle of a cannon and closing with a similar close-up of a crying newborn's mouth, Leone's *Stalingrad* is a blazing loop of war and rebirth. No one's ever been able to spot Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach or Lee Van Cleef among the *half a million* background actors, but all three stars and the director insist they're there.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 5, 6 and 7

ORSON WELLES DOUBLE FEATURE!

Heart of Darkness (1942)

and

Batman: Riddle of the Ghoul (1944)

Welles starved himself down to a human skeleton to play Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. His jittery, no-sleep, diet-pills performance is worth the shadowy slog upriver with Joseph Cotten that makes up the first hour of *Heart of Darkness*. Welles steals the movie from the movie itself.

And who'd have guessed that Gary Cooper could pull off the roles of the Dark Knight Detective *and* Bruce Wayne? But somehow he slides perfectly into the tuxedo and the cowl, a tormented, urbane playboy who becomes a driven, taciturn bruiser by night. And leave it to Welles to populate his movie with *six* of Batman's cast of villains: Lee Marvin as Two-Face, Edward G. Robinson as the Penguin, Ella Raines as Catwoman, Dwight Frye as the Riddler, Everett Sloane as the Scarecrow and, towering imperiously over the whole mad feast, Welles himself as Ra's al Ghul. The Richard Widmark cameo, at the end, as the newly scarred Joker, leaping toward the screen from the smoking ruins of the chemical plant, still makes people scream. The costumes that longtime fans wear to midnight showings only add to the chiaroscuro carnival.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 8 and 9

Weeping Blade, Laughing Bullet

dir: Seijun Suzuki

Whisper of Panic

dir: Allen Baron

Was there ever a loopier, more existential revenge plot than in Suzuki's lost yakuza drama, set among the go-go clubs and gambling halls of modern-day Tokyo? Jo Shishido is a disgraced yakuza hit man who decides he can regain his honor if he steals a samurai blade from a museum and uses it to kill his beloved prostitute girlfriend, who, he believes, is the last living descendant of a corrupt dynasty of shoguns. If I tried to explain to you how a razor necktie, Spirit's "I Got a Line on You" and an opium-addicted horse figure into the plot, your head would explode.

And then *Whisper of Panic*, Allen Baron's follow-up to his 1961 film *Blast of Silence*. Peter Falk (whom he originally wanted for *Blast*) is "Blind" Billy Farnum, a war veteran hotel detective with a piece of shrapnel from a Korean hand grenade embedded in his skull. He talks to it. There are voices from behind the door of one of the suites. A girl in trouble. He kicks in the door and realizes it was the shrapnel, fooling him into becoming a white knight. Except the room isn't empty. And it's the last person "Blind" Billy wants to see.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 10 and 11

CAROLE LOMBARD DOUBLE FEATURE!

Ride a Cockhorse

and

Emma

A plane crash took "the Profane Angel" off the planet when she was thirty-three. Here, in the infinite, she's ageless and perfect. Perfectly insane in King Vidor's adaptation of Raymond Kennedy's *Ride a Cockhorse*, and perfectly charming (and dimwitted) in Michael Curtiz's *Emma*.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 12 and 13

KENNETH ANGER DOUBLE FEATURE!

On the Road

and

The Ticket That Exploded

(both starring James Dean and Sal Mineo)

We can only show these with Kenneth in attendance. Luckily, he's one of the few living people allowed to cross over to this side, if only briefly. He's bringing mescal and fireworks. And yes, we've set up the eight projectors needed to show *The Ticket That Exploded*.



August 14

GRINDHOUSE DOUBLE FEATURE!

Space Jockey

dir: Phil Tucker (1952)

Billy Jack vs. Blacula

dir: Melvin Van Peebles and Tom Laughlin

(1977)

Phil Tucker directed *Robot Monster*, which jostled shoulders with *Plan Nine from Outer Space* and *The Beast of Yucca Flats* as the worst movie ever made. But Phil Tucker, in an interview for the book *The Golden Turkey Awards*, hinted darkly at another, "lost" film he made, called *Space Jockey*. And he asserted that it was ten times worse than *Robot Monster*.

Go watch *Robot Monster* sometime. Then think about the director of that film bragging that he's got something even worse. In the movie palace I'm building for you, Sherman, you're going to be the first to see it.

And, I mean, *Billy Jack vs. Blacula*. That should have happened long before I ever thought of it here. Tom

Laughlin barefoot-kicking the stake through the vampire pimp's heart in the opening scene still gets applause.



August 15 and 16

Superman

dir: Sam Peckinpah

Doctor Strange

dir: Francis Ford Coppola

Yes, at one point Peckinpah was developing *Superman*, and Coppola briefly had the rights to Marvel Comics' *Doctor Strange*. I want these movies to exist. They won't. So here they are, in my head.

Steve McQueen is a revelation as the moody, determined, tragic Last Son of Krypton. Warren Oates is loathsome and magnetic as the Parasite. And fuck it, Gene Hackman is still Lex Luthor. Has to be. Ali MacGraw is miscast as Lois Lane, but if you wanted McQueen in the seventies . . .

Coppola's *Doctor Strange*. I mean, where do I start? Three hours. Gordon Willis cinematography. A young Christopher Walken, prowling the streets of early-seventies Greenwich Village, fighting demons and the establishment. The hidden Avengers "cameos" are also fun to spot.



August 17 and 18

DISNEY DOUBLE FEATURE!

Half Magic

and

The Phantom Tollbooth

Classic, 2-D cel animation by the Nine Old Men. Edward Eager's book *Half Magic* was so truly enchanting that it was the one time Walt ever let the Nine Old Men have carte blanche. What they came up with was so unprecedented, so gorgeous (and such a blockbuster), that when it came time to do *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Walt reportedly said, "I'll see it when it premieres." Again, his instinct didn't fail him.



August 19, 20 and 21

JERRY LEWIS DOUBLE FEATURE!

The Day the Clown Cried

and

The Catcher in the Rye

I am proud and ashamed that the slang term "Oswalt's briefcase" has become shorthand for revealing any forbidden work to the public. Now that I'm older, I think what I did was wrong, that day in Jerry Lewis's office. But the briefcase is opened, and it's out there, and even though it isn't good, *The Day the Clown Cried* always fills a theater. And I'm a snatch-and-grab thief, forever.

But Lewis's true dream was to be Holden Caulfield, and watching the nervous, seventeen-year-old Lewis make his film

debut (and subsequently pursue a dramatic acting career, only once venturing into comedy when he played opposite John Belushi in *Noble Rot*) is a wonder. Those eyes, those pain-filled eyes.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 22 and 23

MICHAEL REEVES DOUBLE FEATURE!

The Wasp Factory

and

The Land of Laughs

Michael Reeves. Twenty-five years old when he died. Barbiturate overdose. Four brilliant films and then gone. Here's where you get to see his intense, hilarious adaptation of Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* and his hilarious, intense, much-debated version of Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs*.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 24 and 25

RUSS MEYER DOUBLE FEATURE!

Jaws of Vixen

and

Mmmmmmmounds!

What happens when the breast-obsessed director has a dump truck full of money? I'm not going to spoil either of these with a description. But you get to find out—*twice*. And that's Christy Hartburg—SuperLorna from *Supervixens*—as the Nude in the Tube. Testosterone bliss.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 26, 27 and 28

HITCHCOCK DOUBLE FEATURE!

The Boy Who Followed Ripley

and

I Was Dora Suarez

Hitchcock at his most subtle (*Ripley*) and lurid (*Suarez*). Fascinating to watch back-to-back, since *I Was Dora Suarez* violates Hitchcock's principle of making an audience wait for a shock. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*,

the shock only comes after the final, tortured fade-out, when you fully realize what has happened. And in *I Was Dora Suarez*, the opening scene is *all shock*. And then we slide into inexorable, slow-motion dread until that last graphic scene with the rowing machine and the final judgment of the Nameless Detective—superbly played by Michael Caine.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 29 and 30

BUSTER KEATON DOUBLE FEATURE!

Hassle Magnet

and

Masters of Atlantis

Hassle Magnet was Keaton's glorious, roaring return to form after sobering up in the late sixties. It was also a sly love letter to the kung-fu films he secretly loved, hilariously taking the piss out of the concept of the "ballet of violence." And his stone-faced tour de force in *Masters of Atlantis* won him a much-deserved Oscar, which he shared with costar Art Carney.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

August 31 and September 1

SCORSESE DOUBLE FEATURE!

The Hawkline Monster (1974)

(starring Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel)

The Moviegoer (1978)

(starring John Cazale)

And now we're at the end of the month. Scorsese's poisoned love letter to the sixties, *The Hawkline Monster* is as darkly hilarious as *Raging Bull*, as well as an elegiac ode to the unrealized, childlike mysticism of the Summer of Love, turned sour and mirrored in De Niro and Keitel's hit-men duo Cameron and Greer (stand-ins for every Nixonian dirty trickster who smirked behind mirrored sunglasses and went unpunished).

And *The Moviegoer* is my thank-you to you, Sherman. Cazale's searching, knowing eyes, blinking from too much time staring at a flickering screen, finally realizing that what he's searching for lies in the real world and outside of his books and films. You asked me to hand you a script after four years. That question sent me back out into the sunshine. Let's see if I can bring back something to unspool in the dark.

I.

"He died like an elephant," said one of his friends.

II.

And yes, I'm aware of Conrad's decidedly unatheistic afterthought, in the very next sentence from this quote: "Or else

decoyed." It's from *The Shadow Line*. You ought to read it. No need to see the Andrzej Wajda movie.

SECOND EPILOGUE
The Second-to-Last
Night Café
April 15, 2009

“We’re going to hold her up. Don’t look down.”

That’s the doctor in the delivery room. He’s just cut my daughter out of my wife’s womb. Amy Winehouse’s “Rehab” is playing softly on the sound system. My wife is smiling, drugged and blissful, humming along.

The doctor holds up my daughter. She takes a big gulp of hospital air, her ribs flaring against her pink-and-purple skin from the effort, and lets loose a squalling blast that hits me harder than any Sergio Leone pistol shot, Donald Sutherland pod-person scream or Steve McQueen tire squeal.

I entered this eight-sided, all-white delivery room dressed like a helmetless astronaut. I’m going to emerge a dad. I’m going to see many fewer movies. I still might not ever get to make one. But I came close enough to being consumed by them to know how to raise a human who’s drawn to the wide-angle world stronger than to any flickering movie temple.

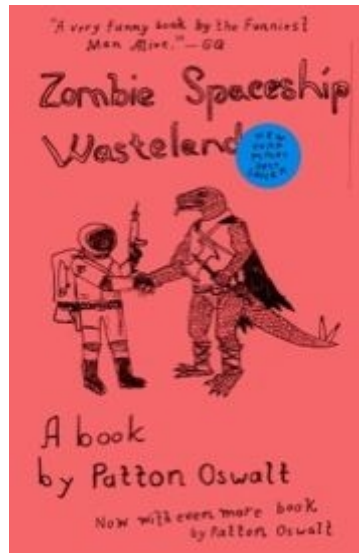
We’ll see.

There’s one more Night Café after this one. But none of us return from that one.

We’ll see.

Also by Patton Oswalt

Patton Oswalt laces memoir with uproarious humor in this inventive account of the evolution of his worldview.



Zombie Spaceship Wasteland

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Acknowledgments

I've been very lucky in my life in terms of people who are able to tolerate me. How I've ended up amid the group of creative, infuriating, hilarious, truly beautiful people I call friends and family is beyond my understanding and outside of logic.

My wife, Michelle McNamara—thank you for being a companion, a sly mom, a safe home, and for being a much better writer than I can dream of being. I aspire to your level of expertise with the English language. So far I've made it a fourth of the way there. That failure makes me a highly competent writer.

Alice, who is five years old as I write this—I hope there are still movie theaters in your future. If not, I'll try to create the experience for you, or at least pass along the excitement and wonder.

My parents—Mom, for letting me watch the original *King Kong* on TV when I was three, and who had to explain to me that it wasn't a book where I could turn the page away from the scary/fun parts; Dad, for Sunday afternoons watching *The Great Escape* and *The Longest Yard* and *The Taking of Pelham 123*, which is what dads were supposed to do in the seventies.

My brother, Matt, a sprocket-fiend-come-lately and vengefully. Someone's going to let you point a camera at those writhing, fantastic screenplays you churn out. A mad billionaire, a wealthy cougar—I don't care. I just want to see them.

Michael Torgan and Julia Marchese, still manning the furnace and patching the hull of the New Beverly. Thank you for sharing your memories of Sherman and making sure there are memories to come in the future.

Everyone I used to see movies with at the New Beverly—Ben Schwartz; Karen Kilgariff; Drew McQueeney; David Goyer; Harlan Ellison; Josh Olsen; Joe Wagner; my brother, Matt (*Once Upon A Time in the West* on mushrooms!); Tim Kirk; Edgar Wright; Brian Posehn; Gerry Duggan and Blaine Capatch. Thanks for the arguments, shared disbelief and joy, and shared boxes of Red Vines.

My agent, Daniel Greenburg, for wrestling this second memoir from me; Brant Rumble, for having the patience with all of my blown deadlines, and Aja Pollock, for copyediting it into coherence.

Michael Weldon and Danny Peary and everyone at *The Onion A.V. Club* and *The Dissolve*.

And, finally, to the freaks—the ones who make the films and the ones who devour them. I don't know if I'll ever become the former, but it won't be for lack of being the latter.

CUT.

1995

Saturday, May 20, 1995

Sunset Boulevard and *Ace in the Hole*

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, May 23, 1995

The Nutty Professor

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, May 28, 1995

Muriel's Wedding

Balboa Theater, San Francisco

Friday, June 2, 1995

Crimson Tide

Town Center 5, Encino

Saturday, June 3, 1995

Amateur

Sunset 5

Sunday, June 4, 1995

Die Hard with a Vengeance

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Wednesday, June 7, 1995

Touch of Evil

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, June 8, 1995

Kiss of Death

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, June 13, 1995

Buster Keaton Shorts and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, June 15, 1995

Little Odessa

Town Center 5, Encino

Saturday, June 17, 1995

Batman Forever

Sherman Oaks 2

Sunday, June 18, 1995

Bloodsucking Freaks (midnight show)

Sunset 5

Wednesday, June 21, 1995

Repulsion and *Knife in the Water*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, July 1, 1995

Apollo 13

Sherman Oaks 2

Tuesday, July 4, 1995

The Road Warrior

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, July 7, 1995

First Knight

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Sunday, July 9, 1995

A Clockwork Orange (midnight show)

Sunset 5

Judge Dredd

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Saturday, July 22, 1995

The New Legend of Shaolin
Roxie Theater, San Francisco
Sunday, July 23, 1995
Last Tango in Paris
Red Vic Movie House, San Francisco
Friday, August 4, 1995
Dr. Strangelove
New Beverly Cinema
Sunday, August 6, 1995
La Jetée
New Beverly Cinema
Wednesday, August 9, 1995
The Bicycle Thief
New Beverly Cinema
Thursday, August 17, 1995
Hiroshima Mon Amour
New Beverly Cinema
Saturday, August 19, 1995
Belle de Jour
Los Feliz 3
Sunday, August 20, 1995
Peking Opera Blues
New Beverly Cinema
Friday, August 25, 1995
Kids
Sunset 5
Saturday, August 26, 1995
Desperado
Cinerama Dome (midnight show)
Tuesday, August 29, 1995
The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T.
New Beverly Cinema
Wednesday, August 30, 1995
Blow Out and *Dressed to Kill*
New Beverly Cinema
Friday, September 1, 1995
The Usual Suspects
Los Feliz 3
Sunday, September 3, 1995
The Chinese Feast
Red Vic Movie House, San Francisco
Saturday, September 9, 1995
The Maltese Falcon
New Beverly Cinema
Sunday, September 10, 1995
Two-Lane Blacktop and *Cisco Pike*
New Beverly Cinema
Thursday, September 14, 1995
Unzipped
Los Feliz 3
Friday, September 15, 1995
Young Frankenstein
New Beverly Cinema
Sunday, September 17, 1995
Full Contact
New Beverly Cinema
Tuesday, September 19, 1995

The Deadly Cure

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, September 22, 1995

Funny Bones and *The Entertainer*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, September 23, 1995

Seven

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Sunday, September 24, 1995

Chinatown and *Klute*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, September 25, 1995

Mute Witness

Sunset 5

Thursday, October 5, 1995

The Seven Samurai

Monica 4-Plex

Friday, October 6, 1995

Devil in a Blue Dress

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, October 7, 1995

Bride of Frankenstein

Alex Theatre

Tuesday, October 10, 1995

Abby

Nuart

Friday, October 13, 1995

The Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas, *Stolen Face*, and *The Curse of Frankenstein*

DGA Theater (American Cinematheque)

Saturday, October 14, 1995

The Hound of the Baskervilles, *Horror of Dracula*, *The Stranglers of Bombay* and *These Are the Damned*

DGA Theater (American Cinematheque)

Sunday, October 15, 1995

Never Take Sweets from a Stranger and *Scream of Fear*

DGA Theater (American Cinematheque)

Wednesday, October 18, 1995

The Addiction

Sunset 5

Saturday, October 21, 1995

The Revenge of Frankenstein, *Die! Die! My Darling*, *The Mummy*, *Prehistoric Women*, *The Vampire Lovers*, *The Reptile*
and *The Plague of the Zombies*

DGA Theater (American Cinematheque)

Sunday, October 22, 1995

X: The Unknown, *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*, *Five Million Miles to Earth*, *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* and

Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter

DGA Theater (American Cinematheque)

Friday, October 27, 1995

Frankenstein (1931) and *Dracula* (1931)

Orpheum Theatre

Saturday, October 28, 1995

Leaving Las Vegas

Beverly Connection Cinema

High Sierra

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, October 29, 1995

Get Shorty

Galaxy Cinema

Friday, November 3, 1995

Casablanca and *The Big Sleep*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, November 11, 1995

Copycat

Beverly Connection Cinema

Thursday, November 16, 1995

2001: A Space Odyssey

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, November 18, 1995

The Doom Generation

Los Feliz 3

Sunday, November 19, 1995

Solaris

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, November 24, 1995

Casino

Crossroads UA Cinema, Monterey

Tuesday, November 28, 1995

Carrington

Sunset 5

Friday, December 8, 1995

Il Postino

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, December 9, 1995

Cinema Paradiso

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, December 10, 1995

Grease

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, December 17, 1995

Sherlock Jr. and *Pandora's Box*

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Sunday, December 24, 1995

Rosemary's Baby (midnight)

Sunset 5

The Wizard of Oz and *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, December 25, 1995

Nixon

Los Feliz 3

Georgia

Sunset 5

Tuesday, December 26, 1995

The City of Lost Children

Nuart

Four Rooms

Sunset 5

Wednesday, December 27, 1995

Babe

Fairfax Theater

Thursday, December 28, 1995

Toy Story

AMC 14

Citizen Kane

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, December 29, 1995

Twelve Monkeys

AMC 14

Sabrina and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, December 30, 1995

I Am Cuba

Sunset 5

Richard III

Beverly Center Cinemas

Sunday, December 31, 1995

Theremin

Sunset 5

The Killing and *The Asphalt Jungle*

New Beverly Cinema

1996

Thursday, January 4, 1996

Rashomon

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, January 7, 1996

The Thing (1982)

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, January 12, 1996

Blue Velvet

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, January 13, 1996

The Big Combo

Tales Café

Sunday, January 14, 1996

The Horror Chamber of Doctor Faustus

Red Vic Movie House, San Francisco

Saturday, January 27, 1996

Laura

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, January 29, 1996

Rififi

Tales Café

Wednesday, January 31, 1996

The World's Greatest Sinner

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, February 3, 1996

Annie Hall and *Manhattan*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, February 4, 1996

The Shining and *The Exorcist*

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, February 7, 1996

The Seventh Seal

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, February 8, 1996

Wild Strawberries

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, February 10, 1996

The Big Heat

Tales Café

Friday, February 16, 1996

The Wild One

Tales Café

Sunday, February 18, 1996

Five Against the House

Nuart

Monday, February 19, 1996

Taxi Driver

Nuart

Friday, February 23, 1996

The Beat Generation

Tales Café

Saturday, February 24, 1996

If . . .

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, February 29, 1996

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

Tales Café

While the City Sleeps

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, March 1, 1996

Harold and Maude

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, March 3, 1996

The Girl Can't Help It and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*

New Beverly Cinema

Girls Town

Tales Café

Sunday, March 10, 1996

Beware, My Lovely

Tales Café

Monday, March 18, 1996

The Window

Tales Café

Thursday, March 21, 1996

Mildred Pierce

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, March 27, 1996

Murder by Contract

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, April 6, 1996

Naked City and *Undercover Man*

USC

Up in Smoke

Vine Theatre

Sunday, April 7, 1996

Kiss Me Deadly

UCLA Melnitz

Saturday, April 13, 1996

Amarcord

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, April 14, 1996

Yojimbo and *Sanjuro*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, April 15, 1996

My Name Is Julia Ross

Tales Café

Monday, April 22, 1996

The Force of Evil

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Wednesday, April 24, 1996

Berserk and *Strait Jacket*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, April 29, 1996

While the City Sleeps

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, April 30, 1996

Vertigo

UCLA Melnitz

Saturday, May 4, 1996

Jail Bait

Nuart

Jaws and *Psycho*

Four Star Theatre

Sunday, May 5, 1996

Double Indemnity

Monica 4-Plex

Peeping Tom

UCLA Melnitz

Friday, May 10, 1996

Bob le Flambeur

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, May 12, 1996

Obsession

Four Star Theatre

Wednesday, May 15, 1996

Pink Flamingos and *Female Trouble*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, May 19, 1996

Murder, My Sweet

Monica 4-Plex

Monday, May 20, 1996

Ruthless

Tales Café

Wednesday, May 22, 1996

Rebel Without a Cause

Four Star Theatre

Saturday, May 25, 1996

Pitfall

Tales Café

Sunday, May 26, 1996

Point Blank

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, June 10, 1996

Who Killed Teddy Bear?

The Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Tuesday, June 11, 1996

THX-1138

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, June 14, 1996

Switchblade Sisters

Sunset 5

Sunday, June 16, 1996

The Body Snatcher

Four Star Theatre (midnight show)

Saturday, June 22, 1996

La Cage aux Folles

Four Star Theatre

Sunday, June 23, 1996

I Was a Teenage Werewolf

Four Star Theatre (midnight show)

Diner

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, June 24, 1996

Caught

Tales Café

Wednesday, June 26, 1996

Singin' in the Rain

State Theatre

Saturday, June 29, 1996

The Last Waltz

Four Star Theatre (midnight show)

Monday, July 1, 1996

The Fallen Idol

Tales Café

Tuesday, July 2, 1996

The Search for One-Eye Jimmy

Music Hall

Wednesday, July 3, 1996

Independence Day

Golden State Theater, Monterey

Thursday, July 4, 1996

To Catch a Thief

Films in the Forest, Monterey

Friday, July 5, 1996

Phenomenon

Lighthouse Theater

Sunday, July 7, 1996

Gilda

Tales Café

Monday, July 8, 1996

The Crossing Guard

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, July 9, 1996

The Birdcage

Fairfax Theatre

Wednesday, July 10, 1996

The Tenant

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, July 11, 1996

The Great Escape

Four Star Theatre

Saturday, July 13, 1996

It Came from Outer Space and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*

Nuart

Atlantic City

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, July 14, 1996

Cool Hand Luke and *Hud*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, July 15, 1996

Nightfall

Tales Café

Saturday, July 20, 1996

The Mysterians and *Village of the Damned*

Nuart

The Big Sleep (unreleased 1945 version)

UCLA Melnitz

Sunday, July 21, 1996

Battle in Outer Space, 20 Million Miles to Earth and *Shotgun Freeway*

Nuart

Monday, July 22, 1996

Trainspotting

Showcase

Tuesday, July 23, 1996

Once a Thief

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, July 24, 1996

Fled

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Friday, July 26, 1996

Supercop

Monica 4-Plex

Saturday, July 27, 1996

Scandal Sheet

Tales Café

James Ellroy: Demon Dog of American Crime Fiction and *Daddy-O*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, July 28, 1996

War of the Worlds

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

Multiplicity

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, August 3, 1996

Black Sunday

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Lolita

New Beverly Cinema

The Party

Tales Café

Sunday, August 4, 1996

Evil Eye

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater (midnight show)

The Nutty Professor and *Kingpin*

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Thursday, August 8, 1996

The Harder They Fall

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, August 10, 1996

Cornered

Tales Café

Escape from L.A.

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, August 11, 1996

Picnic

Nuart

Tuesday, August 13, 1996

Thief

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, August 15, 1996

Barbarella

Nuart

Saturday, August 17, 1996

Planet of the Vampires

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Bad

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, August 18, 1996

The Manchurian Candidate

Four Star Theatre

The Burglar

Tales Café

Monday, August 19, 1996

Kansas City

Sunset 5

Tuesday, August 20, 1996

Bonnie and Clyde and *Badlands*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, August 22, 1996

Suspiria

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, August 24, 1996

Hercules in the Haunted World

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater (midnight show)

Queen of Outer Space

Nuart

Sunday, August 25, 1996

The Island of Dr. Moreau

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Tuesday, August 27, 1996

The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension and *A Boy and His Dog*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, August 28, 1996

Soylent Green and *The Omega Man*

Vine Theatre

Monday, September 2, 1996

California Split

Monica 4-Plex

Out of the Past

Tales Café

Friday, September 6, 1996

The Hippie Revolution

Nuart

Sunday, September 8, 1996

The Big Clock

Tales Café

Wednesday, September 11, 1996

Pushover

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, September 14, 1996

Maximum Risk

Mann's Chinese Theatre

The Palm Beach Story

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, September 15, 1996

Marty and *The Apartment*

Four Star Theatre

The Blue Dahlia

Tales Café

Thursday, September 19, 1996

Purple Noon and *The American Friend*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, September 21, 1996

They Won't Believe Me

Tales Café

Sunday, September 22, 1996

Assault on Precinct 13 and *Escape from New York*

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, September 27, 1996

Crossfire

Tales Café

Monday, September 30, 1996

All About Eve

Four Star Theatre

Tuesday, October 1, 1996

Planet of the Apes

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, October 3, 1996

The Racket

Tales Café

Detective Story

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, October 11, 1996

The Man from Planet X and *Night of the Living Dead*

Orpheum Theatre

Saturday, October 12, 1996

The Cincinnati Kid and *The Thomas Crown Affair*

Four Star Theatre

Sunday, October 13, 1996

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, October 14, 1996

Napoleon

Four Star Theatre

Tuesday, October 15, 1996

Raiders of the Lost Ark

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, October 16, 1996

Bound

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Saturday, October 19, 1996

Phantom Lady

Tales Café

Tuesday, October 22, 1996

Beauty and the Beast

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, October 24, 1996

Private Hell 36

Tales Café

Saturday, October 26, 1996

Gone with the Wind

Four Star Theatre

Thursday, October 31, 1996

Alien and *Aliens*

Four Star Theatre

Friday, November 1, 1996

Walk on the Wild Side

Tales Café

Saturday, November 2, 1996

Key Largo

New Beverly Cinema

Yojimbo and *A Fistful of Dollars*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Wednesday, November 6, 1996

The Lady from Shanghai

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, November 8, 1996

Blindman and *For a Few Dollars More*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, November 10, 1996

Criss Cross

Tales Café

Thursday, November 14, 1996

The Next Big Thing

Harmony Gold Preview House

Friday, November 15, 1996

Garden of the Finzi-Continis and *Swingers*

Town Center 5, Encino

Saturday, November 16, 1996

Space Jam

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Once Upon a Time in the West

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, November 17, 1996

Secrets and Lies

Sunset 5

The Loved One

New Beverly Cinema

Ransom

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, November 23, 1996

Strangers on a Train (UK Version)

Nuart

Tuesday, November 26, 1996

Larger Than Life

Towncenter 3

Wednesday, November 27, 1996

Last Man Standing

Herndon Twin

Star Trek: First Contact

Reston Town Center

Sunday, December 1, 1996

The Rocky Horror Picture Show

Nuart (midnight show)

Drunken Master

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, December 5, 1996

Sling Blade

Sunset 5

Friday, December 6, 1996

She Freak

Nuart

Saturday, December 7, 1996

The English Patient

Vista Theatre

All Through the Night

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, December 14, 1996

Mars Attacks!

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, December 15, 1996

Daylight

Beverly Center Cinemas

Deadline at Dawn

Tales Café

Thursday, December 19, 1996

Dirty Harry

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Friday, December 20, 1996

Beavis and Butt Head Do America

Royal Theatre, San Francisco

Saturday, December 21, 1996

Bell, Book and Candle

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Tuesday, December 24, 1996

Jerry Maguire

Galaxy Cinema

Wednesday, December 25, 1996

The Whole Wide World

Sunset 5

Lawrence of Arabia

Four Star Theatre

Friday, December 27, 1996

Zentropa and *The Tin Drum*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, December 28, 1996

The Crucible

Beverly Center Cinemas

Sunday, December 29, 1996

Dadetown

Nuart

Monday, December 30, 1996

Mother

Beverly Center Cinemas

Casino Royale

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, December 31, 1996

Shine

Town Center 5

1997

Wednesday, January 1, 1997

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex . . . and Sleeper

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, January 2, 1997

The People vs. Larry Flynt

Odeon Broadway (Third Street)

Friday, January 10, 1997

First Strike

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Saturday, January 11, 1997

Turbulence

Galaxy Cinema

The Relic

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, January 12, 1997

Breaking the Waves

Los Feliz 3

The Night of the Hunter

Tales Café

Friday, January 17, 1997

Citizen Ruth

Fairfax Theatre

Saturday, January 18, 1997

Two for the Road

New Beverly Cinema

The Big Steal

Tales Café

Scream

Galaxy Cinema

Sunday, January 19, 1997

Hamlet (1996)

Royal Theatre, San Francisco

Sunday, January 26, 1997

Betrayed

Tales Café

Friday, January 31, 1997

Evita

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, February 1, 1997

Star Wars (reissue)

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, February 2, 1997

The Omen

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, February 3, 1997

Angel Face

Tales Café

Friday, February 7, 1997

Night Tide

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, February 9, 1997

Where Danger Lives

Tales Café

Monday, February 10, 1997

The Hidden Fortress

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, February 11, 1997

Easy Rider

Four Star Theatre

[note: attended AFI Panel Discussion]

Saturday, February 15, 1997

Walkabout

Sunset 5

Sunday, February 16, 1997

Ninotchka

Sunset 5

Seconds

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, February 17, 1997

Waiting for Guffman

Nuart

Saturday, February 22, 1997

The Empire Strikes Back

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, February 23, 1997

Vanishing Point

Four Star Theatre

[note: last screening at the Four Star]

[note: 2/27–3/2 attended Aspen Comedy Arts Festival]

Saturday, March 1, 1997

This Is Spinal Tap

Stage 3 Theatre, Aspen

Monday, March 3, 1997

The File on Thelma Jordan

Tales Café

Thursday, March 6, 1997

Microcosmos

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, March 8, 1997

Private Parts

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, March 9, 1997

Utu

Nuart

Tuesday, March 11, 1997

Donnie Brasco

Beverly Connection Cinema

Thursday, March 13, 1997

The Kingdom

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, March 15, 1997

Clash by Night

Tales Café

Sunday, March 16, 1997

Modern Romance

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, March 17, 1997

Lost Highway

Sunset 5

Thursday, March 20, 1997

Cat People

Tales Café

Sunday, March 23, 1997

The Godfather

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Wednesday, March 26, 1997

The Curse of the Cat People

Tales Café

Saturday, March 29, 1997

Pickpocket

Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle

Horror Rises from the Tomb

Sanctuary Theater, Seattle

Sunday, March 30, 1997

Johnny Angel

Tales Café

Tuesday, April 1, 1997

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, April 2, 1997

Wise Blood

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, April 5, 1997

Double Team

Galaxy Cinema

Monday, April 7, 1997

Crash

Sunset 5

Tuesday, April 8, 1997

The Godfather

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Friday, April 11, 1997

Chasing Amy

Sunset 5

Sunday, April 13, 1997

King Kong

Sunset 5

Monday, April 14, 1997

Das Boot

Royal Theatre, San Francisco

Sunday, April 20, 1997

Ride the Pink Horse

Tales Café

Don't Look Now

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, April 22, 1997

Anaconda

Galaxy Cinema

Saturday, April 26, 1997

Volcano

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, April 27, 1997

Grosse Pointe Blank

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Monday, April 28, 1997

Narrow Margin

Tales Café

Thursday, May 1, 1997

The Blade and Swordsman II

UCLA James Bridges Theater

Friday, May 2, 1997

Jules and Jim and *The 400 Blows*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, May 3, 1997

The Saint

Beverly Center Cinemas

Thursday, May 8, 1997

The Line-Up

Nuart

Friday, May 9, 1997

Ridicule and Dangerous Liaisons

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, May 10, 1997

The Fifth Element

Cinerama Dome

Sunday, May 11, 1997

Where's Poppa?

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, May 12, 1997

The Desperate Hours

Tales Café

Austin Powers

Los Feliz 3

Tuesday, May 13, 1997

Shaft

Nuart

Wednesday, May 14, 1997

Night Moves

Nuart

Saturday, May 17, 1997

When We Were Kings

Monica 4-Plex

Sunday, May 18, 1997

Westworld and Rollerball

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, May 19, 1997

Night of the Living Dead

Tales Café

Wednesday, May 21, 1997

The Crimson Kimono

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, May 22, 1997

Underworld U.S.A.

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, May 23, 1997

Judex

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, May 24, 1997

The Lost World

Galaxy Cinema

Breathless

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, May 25, 1997

Fetishes

Sunset 5

Monday, May 26, 1997

Naked Alibi

Tales Café

Saturday, May 31, 1997

Shadowman

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, June 7, 1997

Con Air

Regency II

Monday, June 9, 1997

Crime by Night

Tales Café

Tuesday, June 10, 1997

The Island of Dr. Moreau

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Wednesday, June 11, 1997

Pather Panchali

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, June 15, 1997

The Long Goodbye

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, June 17, 1997

White Zombie

Tales Café

Saturday, June 21, 1997

Batman and Robin

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, June 22, 1997

Thieves' Highway

Tales Café

Monday, June 23, 1997

The Pink Panther

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, June 24, 1997

Battles Without Honour and Humanity

DGA Theater

Thursday, June 26, 1997

The Professionals

Monica 4-Plex

Sunday, June 29, 1997

Face/Off

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Monday, June 30, 1997

T-Men

Tales Café

Wednesday, July 2, 1997

Men in Black

Cinerama Dome

Friday, July 4, 1997

Contempt

Nuart

Life and Opinion of Masseur Ichi

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, July 5, 1997

Rio Bravo

Monica 4-Plex

This Gun for Hire

Tales Café

Thursday, July 10, 1997

Ocean's Eleven

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, July 12, 1997

Five Easy Pieces and *The Last Picture Show*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, July 17, 1997

Stray Dog

Tales Café

Friday, July 18, 1997

Operation Condor

Galaxy Cinema

Saturday, July 19, 1997

The Three Stooges Meet Hercules

Nuart (midnight show)

Sunday, July 20, 1997

The Fearless Vampire Killers

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, July 28, 1997

The President's Analyst

Tales Café

Tuesday, July 29, 1997

Dog Day Afternoon and *Serpico*

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, July 30, 1997

The Wrong Guy

DGA Theater

Thursday, July 31, 1997

Nostalghia

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, August 2, 1997

Forty Guns, I Shot Jesse James and *The Baron of Arizona*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, August 3, 1997

In the Company of Men

Sunset 5

Thursday, August 7, 1997

Air Force One

Galaxy Cinema

Sunday, August 10, 1997

Cape Fear

Kennedy Center/AFI Silver Theater

Monday, August 11, 1997

It's a Wonderful Life

Nuart

Saturday, August 16, 1997

Somewhere in the Night

Tales Café

Wednesday, August 20, 1997

Carrie

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, August 25, 1997

The Uninvited

Tales Café

Thursday, August 28, 1997

The Silencers and *Our Man Flint*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, August 31, 1997

Grey Gardens and *Salesman*

Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle

Wednesday, September 3, 1997

Cul-de-sac

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, September 8, 1997

Moonrise

Tales Café

Tuesday, September 9, 1997

Woman in the Dunes

Nuart

Sunday, September 14, 1997

The 7th Voyage of Sinbad

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, September 15, 1997

Jason and the Argonauts

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, September 21, 1997

Thunder Road and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, September 29, 1997

Band of Outsiders

Tales Café

Tuesday, September 30, 1997

Dial M for Murder

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, October 3, 1997

L.A. Confidential

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, October 5, 1997

Fast, Cheap and Out of Control

Nuart

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, October 8, 1997

Visions of Light

New Beverly Cinema

The Full Monty

Los Feliz 3

Friday, October 10, 1997

Niagara

Tales Café

Alphaville

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, October 11, 1997

Long Day's Journey into Night and *Tabu*

UCLA Melnitz

Monday, October 13, 1997

Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn

Mann Plaza Theatre

Wednesday, October 15, 1997

Shock Corridor

Roxie Theater, San Francisco

Saturday, October 18, 1997

Shall We Dance?

Bridge Theater, San Francisco

Sunday, October 19, 1997

The Game

Kabuki 8, San Francisco

Monday, October 20, 1997

I Walked with a Zombie

Tales Café

Wednesday, October 22, 1997

Mad Love and *The Devil-Doll*

Warner Grand Theatre, San Pedro

Thursday, October 23, 1997

Blow-Up

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, October 24, 1997

The Philadelphia Story

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, October 26, 1997

Leopard Man

Tales Café

A Better Tomorrow

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, October 27, 1997

The Devil's Advocate

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Wednesday, October 29, 1997

Eraserhead and *The Elephant Man*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, October 30, 1997

Boogie Nights

Galaxy Cinema

Friday, October 31, 1997

The Masque of the Red Death and *House of Usher*

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, November 1, 1997

Plan 9 from Outer Space, *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, *The Tingler*, *Mr. Sardonicus* and *Daughter of Horror*

Cinerama Dome

Sunday, November 2, 1997

Ministry of Fear

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Wednesday, November 5, 1997

To Have and Have Not

Warner Grand Theatre, San Pedro

Saturday, November 8, 1997

Starship Troopers

Cinerama Dome

Bean

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Tuesday, November 11, 1997

The Haunting

LACMA

Cronos

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, November 15, 1997

Seven Beauties

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, November 16, 1997

Super Fly and *The Mack*

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, November 19, 1997

Jailhouse Rock and *Viva Las Vegas*

Warner Grand Theatre, San Pedro

Thursday, November 20, 1997

The Locket

Tales Café

The Man Who Knew Too Much

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, November 21, 1997

Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist

Los Feliz 3

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Saturday, November 22, 1997

Swept Away

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, November 23, 1997

The Trip and Head

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, November 26, 1997

Alien: Resurrection

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Friday, November 28, 1997

The Ice Storm

Los Feliz 3

Saturday, November 29, 1997

The Sweet Hereafter

Sunset 5

Sunday, November 30, 1997

The Artist's Revolution

Sunset 5

Friday, December 5, 1997

Scream 2

Galaxy Cinema

Monday, December 8, 1997

Cry Danger

Tales Café

Sunday, December 14, 1997

Deconstructing Harry

Showcase

Monday, December 15, 1997

And Then There Were None

Tales Café

Wednesday, December 17, 1997

Sweet Smell of Success

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, December 19, 1997

Tomorrow Never Dies

Galaxy Cinema

Thursday, December 25, 1997

As Good as It Gets

Los Feliz 3

Saturday, December 27, 1997

White Heat

Roxie Theater, San Francisco

Sunday, December 28, 1997

The Letter

Roxie Theater, San Francisco

1998

Thursday, January 1, 1998

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, January 16, 1998

Wag the Dog

Los Feliz 3

Sunday, January 18, 1998

One False Move

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, January 19, 1998

Reform School Girl

Tales Café

Tuesday, January 20, 1998

Hard Rain

Galaxy Cinema

Wednesday, January 21, 1998

Good Will Hunting

Galaxy Cinema

Sunday, January 25, 1998

Spice World

Cineplex Odeon, Seattle

Sunday, February 1, 1998

Gonin

Nuart

Monday, February 2, 1998

The Apostle

Sunset 5

Tuesday, February 3, 1998

Titanic

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Friday, February 6, 1998

The Replacement Killers

Cinerama Dome

Saturday, February 7, 1998

World for Ransom

Raleigh Studios

Monday, February 9, 1998

Outside the Wall

Tales Café

Tuesday, February 10, 1998

West Side Story

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, February 14, 1998

Withnail & I

New Beverly Cinema

The Wedding Singer

Beverly Center Cinemas

Sunday, February 15, 1998

Experiment in Terror and *In Cold Blood*

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, February 18, 1998

Double Agent 73 and *Bad Girls Go to Hell*

Nuart

Thursday, February 19, 1998

Let Me Die a Woman

Nuart

Friday, February 20, 1998

The Legend of Lylah Clare

Raleigh Studios

Saturday, February 21, 1998

Network and *The Conversation*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, March 1, 1998

Dark City

Varsity Cinema, Toronto

Monday, March 2, 1998

Children of Paradise

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, March 4, 1998

Coffy

Mission Street Theater-Pub, Portland, Oregon

Thursday, March 5, 1998

Jackie Brown

Mission Street Theater-Pub, Portland, Oregon

Friday, March 6, 1998

The Big Lebowski

Sherman Oaks Galleria

Monday, March 9, 1998

Hidden Fear

Tales Café

Saturday, March 14, 1998

Waco: The Rules of Engagement

Sunset 5

Mean Streets

Nuart

Sunday, March 15, 1998

Room Service

New Beverly Cinema

Men with Guns

Sunset 5

Tuesday, March 17, 1998

A Night at the Opera

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, March 18, 1998

TheLionious Monk: Straight, No Chaser

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, March 19, 1998

Let's Get Lost

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, March 20, 1998

Mr. Nice Guy

Cinerama Dome

Wild Things

Galaxy Cinema

Saturday, March 21, 1998

The Producers and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, March 28, 1998

James Ellroy: Demon Dog of American Crime Fiction

Nuart

Monday, April 6, 1998

42nd Street

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Tuesday, April 7, 1998

Now, Voyager

Mann's Chinese Theatre

The Naked Kiss

Nuart

Wednesday, April 8, 1998

The Searchers

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Thursday, April 9, 1998

Days of Wine and Roses

Castro Theatre

Tuesday, April 14, 1998

Spike and Mike's Festival of Animation

Castro Theatre

Thursday, April 16, 1998

Underground

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, April 17, 1998

Kurt and Courtney

Sunset 5

Winchester '73, T-Men and Desperate

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Saturday, April 18, 1998

Z

New Beverly Cinema

The Naked Spur, Raw Deal and Railroaded

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, April 19, 1998

The Big Knife

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, April 20, 1998

The Spanish Prisoner

Royal Theatre, San Francisco

Wednesday, April 22, 1998

The Big One

Sunset 5

Friday, April 24, 1998

Bend of the River and Border Incident

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, April 26, 1998

The Big Hit

Beverly Connection Cinema

Wednesday, April 29, 1998

Wild Man Blues

Nuart

Saturday, May 2, 1998

Three Wise Girls, Man's Castle and Love Affair

Nuart

Sunday, May 3, 1998

Ann Carver's Profession, Black Moon and The Man I Stole

Nuart

Tuesday, May 5, 1998

Tomorrow Never Dies

Galaxy Cinema

Wednesday, May 6, 1998

Behind the Mask

Nuart

Friday, May 8, 1998

The Kingdom II

Nuart

Saturday, May 9, 1998

Black Dog

Galaxy Cinema

Friday, May 15, 1998

Shoot the Piano Player

Tales Café

Saturday, May 16, 1998

Body Heat and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

New Beverly Cinema

Deep Impact

Beverly Connection Cinema

Sunday, May 17, 1998

Logan's Run

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, May 19, 1998

Jour de Fête

Nuart

Friday, May 22, 1998

Enter the Dragon

Nuart

Saturday, May 23, 1998

Godzilla

Cinerama Dome

Sunday, May 24, 1998

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

Galaxy Cinema

Monday, May 25, 1998

Cabaret and *New York, New York*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, May 31, 1998

The Terminator

New Beverly Cinema

Monday, June 1, 1998

Second Breath

Tales Café

Friday, June 5, 1998

The Truman Show

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Saturday, June 6, 1998

Bulworth

Los Feliz 3

Monday, June 8, 1998

Duck Soup

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, June 11, 1998

The Opposite of Sex

Los Feliz 3

Friday, June 12, 1998

Dirty Work

Galaxy Cinema

Saturday, June 13, 1998

Le Trou

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, June 14, 1998

Forbidden Planet and *The Time Machine*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, June 18, 1998

Don't Look Back

Nuart

Friday, June 19, 1998

The X-Files

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Monday, June 22, 1998

The House on 92nd Street

Tales Café

Wednesday, June 24, 1998

The Tenth Victim

Nuart

Sunday, June 28, 1998

Destroy All Monsters

Nuart

Tuesday, June 30, 1998

Dersu Uzala

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, July 1, 1998

Armageddon

Galaxy Cinema

Picnic at Hanging Rock

Nuart

Friday, July 3, 1998

Hail, Mafia!

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, July 5, 1998

Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster

Nuart

Monday, July 6, 1998

High Art

Sunset 5

Friday, July 10, 1998

Small Soldiers

Beverly Center Cinemas

Saturday, July 11, 1998

Série Noire

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, July 12, 1998

Ghidra, the Three-Headed Monster

Nuart

Sunday, July 19, 1998

99.9

Cinéma Impérial, Montreal

Monday, July 20, 1998

Stardust Memories

Pre Cinema

Thursday, July 30, 1998

The Negotiator

Galaxy Cinema

Naked Lunch

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, August 1, 1998

There's Something About Mary

Los Feliz 3

Saturday, August 8, 1998

Snake Eyes

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Bigger Than Life

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, August 9, 1998

Halloween: H20

Galaxy Cinema

Saving Private Ryan

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Friday, August 14, 1998

Crimewave

Raleigh Studios

Sunday, August 16, 1998

Grey Gardens

Nuart

Saturday, August 22, 1998

It's a Gift

Old Town Music Hall

The Sword of Doom and *Cemetery Without Crosses*

Raleigh Studios, Chaplin Theater

Sunday, August 23, 1998

Blade

Galaxy Cinema

Tuesday, September 1, 1998

Excalibur

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, September 3, 1998

L'Avventura

New Beverly Cinema

Saturday, September 12, 1998

Touch of Evil

Nuart

Sunday, September 13, 1998

Some Like It Hot

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, September 15, 1998

Your Friends and Neighbors

Dream Theater

Friday, September 18, 1998

Rush Hour

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Wednesday, September 23, 1998

Sid and Nancy

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, September 25, 1998

Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog, *Dexter Gordon: More Than You Know* and *Art Pepper: Notes from a Jazz*

Survivor

LACMA, Leo S. Bing Theater

Monday, September 28, 1998

Permanent Midnight

Sunset 5

Thursday, October 1, 1998

The Glass Web

Tales Café

Sunday, October 4, 1998

Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia and *The Wild Bunch*

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, October 6, 1998

Day for Night

Royal Theatre

Sunday, October 11, 1998

Fantastic Planet

Nuart

Monday, October 12, 1998

Love Is the Devil

Sunset 5

Saturday, October 17, 1998

See the Sea (w/ A Summer Dress)

Sunset 5

Happiness

Sunset 5

Sunday, October 18, 1998

All That Jazz

Sunset 5

Monday, October 19, 1998

The Old Dark House

Grand Illusion Cinema

Tuesday, October 27, 1998

Pleasantville

Galaxy Cinema

Friday, October 30, 1998

Mystery of the Wax Museum and *The Shining*

Orpheum Theatre

Saturday, October 31, 1998

Them!

Orpheum Theatre

Sunday, November 1, 1998

The Lady Eve

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, November 4, 1998

Persona

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, November 12, 1998

The Cruise

Nuart

Friday, November 13, 1998

Background to Danger

Tales Café

Saturday, November 14, 1998

Gods and Monsters

Sunset 5

Sunday, November 22, 1998

Modern Times and *City Lights*

New Beverly Cinema

The Cruise

Music Hall

Friday, November 27, 1998

Elizabeth

Vista Theatre

Sunday, November 29, 1998

Thunderball and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, December 6, 1998

The Ten Commandments

Egyptian Theatre

Monday, December 7, 1998

Dracula's Daughter

Nuart

Friday, December 11, 1998

Star Trek: Insurrection

El Portal Theatre

Monday, December 14, 1998

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein and *The Invisible Man*

Nuart

Tuesday, December 15, 1998

Murders in the Rue Morgue and *House of Frankenstein*

Nuart

Wednesday, December 16, 1998

Viridiana and *The Exterminating Angel*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, December 20, 1998

A Simple Plan

Vista Theatre

Tuesday, December 22, 1998

The Thin Red Line

Samuel Goldwyn Theater

Wednesday, December 23, 1998

Touch of Evil and *The Lady from Shanghai*

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, December 25, 1998

Patch Adams

Galaxy Cinema

Hurlyburly

Sunset 5

Saturday, December 26, 1998

Shakespeare in Love

Los Feliz 3

Sunday, December 27, 1998

The General

Sunset 5

Monday, December 28, 1998

The Man Who Fell to Earth

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, December 30, 1998

Sisters

New Beverly Cinema

1999

Friday, January 1, 1999

The Celebration

Los Feliz 3

Sunday, January 17, 1999

Nashville

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, January 22, 1999

A Merry War

New Beverly Cinema

Life Is Beautiful

Cecchi Gori Fine Arts Theatre

Saturday, January 23, 1999

A Civil Action

El Capitan Theatre

Sunday, January 24, 1999

Still Crazy

Showcase

Thursday, February 4, 1999

What's the Matter with Helen? and *The Killing Kind*

Nuart

Saturday, February 6, 1999

Rushmore

Sunset 5

Sunday, February 7, 1999

Blade Runner

Cinerama Dome

Tuesday, February 16, 1999

Rushmore

Sunset 5

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and *It Happened One Night*

Cinerama Dome

Wednesday, February 17, 1999

The Virgin Spring

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, February 19, 1999

Jawbreaker

Galaxy Cinema

Sunday, February 21, 1999

Man of the West

New Beverly Cinema

Tuesday, February 23, 1999

On the Waterfront and *From Here to Eternity*

Cinerama Dome

Friday, February 26, 1999

Weekend

New Beverly Cinema

Wednesday, March 17, 1999

The Brandon Teena Story

Nuart

Wednesday, March 24, 1999

Shadow of a Doubt

Castro Theatre, San Francisco

Thursday, March 25, 1999

Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth

Roxie Theater, San Francisco

Saturday, March 27, 1999

Ravenous

Regency II

Wednesday, March 31, 1999

The Reckless Moment

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, April 2, 1999

Brazil

Nuart

Armored Car Robbery

Egyptian Theatre

Saturday, April 3, 1999

The Killer That Stalked New York and *99 River Street*

Egyptian Theatre

Sunday, April 4, 1999

Mad Max and *Death Race 2000*

New Beverly Cinema

Thursday, April 8, 1999

High and Low and *Ikiru*

New Beverly Cinema

Friday, April 9, 1999

Go

Los Feliz 3

Saturday, April 10, 1999

Sullivan's Travels and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*

New Beverly Cinema

Sunday, April 11, 1999

Nightmare Alley

Egyptian Theatre

Friday, April 16, 1999

The Matrix

Mann's Chinese Theatre

Sunday, April 18, 1999

Aguirre, the Wrath of God

New Beverly

Friday, April 23, 1999

The Birds and *The Trouble with Harry*

Nuart

Sunday, April 25, 1999

Burden of Dreams (w/ *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*)

Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle

Wednesday, April 28, 1999

Torn Curtain

Nuart

Friday, April 30, 1999

Marnie

Nuart

Thursday, May 6, 1999

The Blair Witch Project [video]

Friday, May 7, 1999

Election

Showcase

Saturday, May 8, 1999

The Mummy

Galaxy Cinema

Thursday, May 20, 1999

Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace

Vista Theatre



Photograph by Ryan Russell

Patton Oswalt is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Zombie Spaceship Wasteland*. He has released four TV specials and four critically acclaimed comedy albums, including the Grammy-nominated *My Weakness Is Strong*. He put together the Comedians of Comedy tour and television series. Oswalt has also appeared on many television shows and in more than twenty films, including *Young Adult*, *Big Fan*, and *Ratatouille*. He lives in Los Angeles, California.

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