

Son of Celluloïd

Books of Blood, #12

by Clive Barker, 1952-

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One

Barberio felt fine, despite the bullet.

Sure, there was a catch in his chest if he breathed too hard, and the wound in his thigh wasn't too pretty to look at, but he'd been holed before and come up smiling. At least he was free: that was the main thing. Nobody, he swore, nobody would ever lock him up again, he'd kill himself rather than be taken back into custody. If he was unlucky and they cornered him, he'd stick the gun in his mouth and blow off the top of his head. No way would they drag him back to that cell alive.

Life was too long if you were locked away and counting it in seconds. It had only taken him a couple of months to learn that lesson. Life was long, and repetitive and debilitating, and if you weren't careful you were soon thinking it would be better to die than go on existing in the shit-hole they'd put you in. Better to string yourself up by your belt in the middle of the night rather than face the tedium of another twenty-four hours, all eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds of it.

So he went for broke.

First he bought a gun on the prison black market. It cost him everything he had and a handful of IOUs he'd have to make good on the outside if he wanted to stay alive. Then he made the most obvious move in the book: he climbed the wall. And whatever god looked after the liquor-store muggers of this world was looking after him that night, because hot damn if he didn't scoot right over that wall and away without so much as a dog sniffing at his heels.

And the cops? Why they screwed it up every which way from Sunday, looking for him where he'd never gone, pulling in his brother and his sister-in-law on suspicion of harbouring him when they didn't even know he'd escaped, putting out an All-Points Bulletin with a description of his pre-prison self, twenty pounds heavier than he was now. All this he'd heard from Geraldine, a lady he'd courted in the good old days, who'd given him a dressing for his leg and the bottle of Southern Comfort that was now almost empty in his pocket. He'd taken the booze and sympathy and gone on his way, trusting to the legendary idiocy of the law and the god who'd got him so far already.

Sing-Sing he called this god. Pictured him as a fat guy with a grin that hooked from one ear to the other, a prime salami in one hand, and a cup of dark coffee in the other. In Barberio's mind Sing-Sing smelt like a full belly at Mama's house, back in the days when Mama was still well in the head, and he'd been her pride and joy.

Unfortunately Sing-Sing had been looking the other way when the one eagle eye cop in the whole city saw Barberio draining his snake in a back alley, and recognised him from that obsolete APB. Young cop, couldn't have been more than

twenty-five, out to be a hero. He was too dumb to learn the lesson of Barberio's warning shot. Instead of taking cover, and letting Barberio make a break, he'd forced the issue by coming straight down the alley at him.

Barberio had no choice. He fired.

The cop fired back. Sing-Sing must have stepped in there somewhere, spoiling the cop's aim so that the bullet that should have found Barberio's heart hit his leg, and guiding the returning shot straight into the cop's nose. Eagle-eye went down as if he'd just remembered an appointment with the ground, and Barberio was away, cursing, bleeding and scared. He'd never shot a man before, and he'd started with a cop. Quite an introduction to the craft.

Sing-Sing was still with him though. The bullet in his leg ached, but Geraldine's ministrations had stopped the blood, the liquor had done wonders for the pain, and here he was half a day later, tired but alive, having hopped half-way across a city so thick with vengeful cops it was like a psycho's parade at the Policemen's Ball. Now all he asked of his protector was a place to rest up awhile. Not for long, just enough time to catch his breath and plan his future movements. An hour or two of shut-eye wouldn't go miss either.

Thing was, he'd got that belly-ache, the deep, gnawing pain he got more and more these days. Maybe he'd find a phone, when he'd rested for a time, and call Geraldine again, get her to sweet-talk a doctor into seeing him. He'd been planning to get out of the city before midnight, but that didn't look like a plausible option now. Dangerous as it was, he would have to stay in the locality a night and maybe the best part of the next day; make his break for the open country when he'd recouped a little energy and had the bullet taken out of his leg.

Jeez, but that belly griped. His guess was it was an ulcer, brought on by the filthy slop they called food at the penitentiary. Lots of guys had belly and shit-chute problems in there. He'd be better after a few days of pizzas and beers, he was damn sure of that.

The word cancer wasn't in Barberio's vocabulary. He never thought about terminal disease, especially in reference to himself. That'd be like a piece of slaughterhouse beef fretting about an in growing hoof as it stepped up to meet the gun. A man in his trade, surrounded by lethal tools, doesn't expect to perish from a malignancy in his belly. But that's what that ache was.

The lot at the back of the Movie Palace cinema had been a restaurant, but a fire had gutted it three years back, and the ground had never been cleared.

It wasn't a good spec for rebuilding, and no-one had shown much interest in the site. The neighbourhood had once been buzzing, but that was in the sixties, early seventies. For a heady decade places of entertainment-restaurants, bars, cinemas had flourished. Then came the inevitable slump. Fewer and fewer kids came this way to spend their money: there were new spots to hit, new places to be seen in. The bars closed up, the restaurants followed. Only the Movie Palace remained as a token reminder of more innocent days in a district that was becoming tackier and more dangerous every year.

The jungle of convolvulus and rotted timbers that throttled the vacant lot suited Barberio just fine. His leg was giving him jip, he was stumbling from sheer fatigue, and the pain in his belly was worsening. A spot to lay down his clammy head was

needed, and damn quick. Finish off the Southern Comfort, and think about Geraldine.

It was one-thirty am; the lot was a trysting-ground for cats. They ran, startled, through the man-high weeds as he pushed aside some of the fencing timbers and slid into the shadows. The refuge stank of piss, human and cat, of garbage, of old fires, but it felt like a sanctuary.

Seeking the support of the back wall of the Movie Palace, Barberio leaned on his forearm and threw up a bellyful of Southern Comfort and acid. Along the wall a little way some kids had built a makeshift den of girders, fire-blackened planks and corrugated iron. Ideal, he thought, a sanctuary within a sanctuary. Sing-Sing was smiling at him, all greasy chops. Groaning a little (the belly was really bad tonight) he staggered along the wall to the lean-to den, and ducked through the door.

Somebody else had used this place to sleep in: he could feel damp sacking under his hand as he sat down, and a bottle clinked against a brick somewhere to his left. There was a smell close by he didn't want to think too much about, like the sewers were backing up. All in all, it was squalid: but it was safer than the street. He sat with his back against the wall of the Movie Palace and exhaled his fears in a long, slow breath.

No more than a block away, perhaps half a block, the babe-in-the-night wail of a cop-car began, and his newly acquired sense of security sank without trace. They were closing in for the kill, he knew it. They'd just been playing him along, letting him think he was away, all the time cruising him like sharks, sleek and silent, until he was too tired to put up any resistance. Jeez: he'd killed a cop, what they wouldn't do to him once they had him alone. They'd crucify him.

OK Sing-Sing, what now? Take that surprised look off your face, and get me out of this.

For a moment, nothing. Then the god smiled in his mind's eye, and quite coincidentally he felt the hinges pressing into his back.

Shit! A door. He was leaning against a door.

Grunting with pain he turned and ran his fingers around this escape hatch at his back. To judge by touch it was a small ventilation grille no more than three feet square. Maybe it let on to a crawlspace or maybe into someone's kitchen – what the hell? It was safer inside than out: that was the first lesson any newborn kid got slapped into him.

The siren-song wailed on, making Barberio's skin creep. Foul sound. It quickened his heart hearing it.

His thick fingers fumbled down the side of the grille feeling for a lock of some kind, and sure as shit there was a padlock, as gritty with rust as the rest of the metal work.

Come on Sing-Sing, he prayed, one more break is all I'm asking, let me in, and I swear I'm yours forever. He pulled at the lock, but damn it, it wasn't about to give so easily. Either it was stronger than it felt, or he was weaker. Maybe a little of both.

The car was slinking closer with every second. The wail drowned out the sound of his own panicking breath.

He pulled the gun, the cop-killer, out of his jacket-pocket and pressed it into service as a snub-nosed crowbar. He couldn't get much leverage on the thing, it was too short, but a couple of cursing heavens did the trick. The lock gave, a shower of rust scales peppered his face. He only just silenced a whoop of triumph.

Now to open the grille, to get out of this wretched world into the dark.

He insinuated his fingers through the lattice and pulled. Pain, a continuum of pain that ran from his belly to his bowel to his leg, made his head spin. Open, damn you, he said to the grille, open sesame.

The door conceded.

It opened suddenly, and he fell back on to the sodden sacking. A moment and he was up again, peering into the darkness within this darkness that was the interior of the Movie Palace.

Let the cop-car come, he thought buoyantly, I've got my hidey-hole to keep me warm. And warm it was: almost hot in fact. The air out of the hole smelt like it had been simmering in there for a good long while.

His leg had gone into a cramp and it hurt like fuck as he dragged himself through the door and into the solid black beyond. Even as he did so the siren turned a corner nearby and the baby wail died. Wasn't that the patter of law like feet he could hear on the sidewalk?

He turned clumsily in the blackness, his leg a dead-weight, his foot feeling about the size of a watermelon, and pulled the grille-door to after him. The satisfaction was that of pulling up a drawbridge and leaving the enemy on the other side of the moat, somehow it didn't matter that they could open the door just as easily as he had, and follow him in. Childlike, he felt sure nobody could possibly find him here. As long as he couldn't see his pursuers, his pursuers couldn't see him.

If the cops did indeed duck into the lot to look for him, he didn't hear them. Maybe he'd been mistaken, maybe they were after some other poor punk on the street, and not him. Well OK, whatever. He had found himself a nice niche to rest up awhile, and that was fine and dandy.

Funny, the air wasn't so bad in here after all. It wasn't the stagnant air of a crawlspace or an attic, the atmosphere in the hidey-hole was alive. Not fresh air, no it wasn't that, it smelt old and trapped sure enough, but it was buzzing nevertheless. It fairly sang in his ears, it made his skin tingle like a cold shower, it wormed its way up his nose and put the weirdest things in his head. It was like being high on something: he felt that good. His leg didn't hurt anymore, or if it did he was too distracted by the pictures in his head. He was filling up to overflowing with pictures: dancing girls and kissing couples, farewells at stations, old dark houses, comedians, cowboys, undersea adventures—scenes he'd never lived in a million years, but that moved him now like raw experience, true and incontestable. He wanted to cry at the farewells, except that he wanted to laugh at the comedians, except that the girls needed ogling, the cowboys needed hollering for.

What kind of place was this anyhow? He peered through the glamour of the pictures which were damn close to getting the better of his eyes. He was in a space no more than four feet wide, but tall, and lit by a flickering light that chanced through cracks in the inner wall. Barberio was too befuddled to recognise the

origins of the light, and his murmuring ears couldn't make sense of the dialogue from the screen on the other side of the wall. It was *Satyricon*, the second of the two Fellini movies the Palace was showing as their late-night double feature that Saturday.

Barberio had never seen the movie, never even heard of Fellini. It would have disgusted him (faggot film, Italian crap). He preferred undersea adventures, war movies. Oh, and dancing girls. Anything with dancing girls.

Funny, though he was all alone in his hidey-hole, he had the weird sensation of being watched. Through the kaleidoscope of Busby Berkeley routines that was playing on the inside of his skull he felt eyes, not a few—thousands—watching him. The feeling wasn't so bad you'd want to take a drink for it, but they were always there, staring away at him like he was something worth looking at, laughing at him sometimes, crying sometimes, but mostly just gawping with hungry eyes.

Truth was, there was nothing he could do about them anyhow. His limbs had given up the ghost; he couldn't feel his hands or feet at all. He didn't know, and it was probably better that he didn't, that he'd torn open his wound getting into this place, and he was bleeding to death.

About two-fifty-five am, as Fellini's *Satyricon* came to its ambiguous end, Barberio died in the space between the back of the building proper and the back wall of the cinema.

The Movie Palace had once been a Mission Hall, and if he'd looked up as he died he might have glimpsed the inept fresco depicting an Angelic Host that was still to be seen through the grime, and assumed his own Assumption. But he died watching the dancing girls, and that was fine by him.

The false wall, the one that let through the light from the back of the screen, had been erected as a makeshift partition to cover the fresco of the Host. It had seem more respectful to do that than paint the Angels out permanently, and besides the man who had ordered the alterations half-suspected that the movie house bubble would burst sooner or later. If so, he could simply demolish the wall, and he'd be back in business for the worship of God instead of Garbo.

It never happened. The bubble, though fragile, never burst, and the movies carried on. The Doubting Thomas (his name was Harry Cleveland) died, and the space was forgotten. Nobody now living even knew it existed. If he'd searched the city from top to bottom Barberio couldn't have found a more secret place to perish.

The space however, the air itself, had lived a life of its own in that fifty years. Like a reservoir, it had received the electric stares of thousands of eyes, of tens of thousands of eyes. Half a century of movie-goers had lived vicariously through the screen of the Movie Palace, pressing their sympathies and their passions on to the flickering illusion, the energy of their emotions gathering strength like a neglected cognac in that hidden passage of air. Sooner or later, it must discharge itself. All it lacked was a catalyst.

Until Barberio's cancer.

Two

The Main Feature.

After loitering in the cramped foyer of the Movie Palace for twenty minutes or so, the young girl in the cerise and lemon print dress began to look distinctly agitated. It was almost three in the morning, and the late-night movies were well over.

Eight months had passed since Barberio had died in the back of the cinema, eight slow months in which business had been at best patchy. Still, the late-night double bill on Fridays and Saturdays always packed in the punters. Tonight it had been two Eastwood movies: spaghetti westerns. The girl in the cerise dress didn't look like much of a western fan to Birdy; it wasn't really a women's genre. Maybe she'd come for Eastwood rather than the violence, though Birdy had never seen the attraction of that eternally squinting face.

"Can I help you?" Birdy asked.

The girl looked nervously at Birdy.

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend," she said. "Dean."

"Have you lost him?"

"He went to the rest-room at the end of the movie and he hasn't come out yet."

"Was he feeling... er... ill?"

"Oh no," said the girl quickly, protecting her date from this slight on his sobriety.

"I'll get someone to go and look for him," said Birdy. It was late, she was tired, and the speed was wearing off. The idea of spending any more time than she strictly needed to in this fleapit was not particularly appealing. She wanted home; bed and sleep. Just sleep. At thirty-four, she'd decided she'd grown out of sex. Bed was for sleep, especially for fat girls.

She pushed the swing door, and poked her head into the cinema. A ripe smell of cigarettes, popcorn and people enveloped her; it was a few degrees hotter in here than in the foyer.

"Ricky?"

Ricky was locking up the back exit, at the far end of the cinema.

"That smell's completely gone," he called to her.

"Good." A few months back there'd been a hell of a stench at the screen-end of the cinema.

"Something dead in the lot next door," he said.

"Can you help me a minute?" she called back.

"What'd you want?"

He sauntered up the red-carpeted aisle towards her, keys jangling at his belt. His tee-shirt proclaimed "Only the Young Die Good".

"Problem?" he said, blowing his nose.

"There's a girl out here. She says she lost her boyfriend in the John." Ricky looked pained.

"In the John?"

"Right. Will you take a look? You don't mind, do you?"

And she could cut out the wisecracks for a start, he thought, giving her a sickly smile. They were hardly on speaking terms these days. Too many high times

together: it always dealt a crippling blow to a friendship in the long run. Besides, Birdy'd made some very uncharitable (accurate) remarks about his associates and he'd returned the salvo with all guns blazing. They hadn't spoken for three and a half weeks after that. Now there was an uncomfortable truce, more for sanity's sake than anything. It was not meticulously observed.

He about turned, wandered back down the aisle, and took rowe across the cinema to the John, pushing up seats as he went. They'd seen better days, those seats: sometime around 'Now Voyager'. Now they looked thoroughly shot at: in need of refurbishing, or replacing altogether. In rowe alone four of the seats had been slashed beyond repair, now he counted a fifth mutilation which was new tonight. Some mindless kid bored with the movie and/or his girlfriend, and too stoned to leave. Time was he'd done that kind of thing himself: and counted it a blow for freedom against the capitalists who ran these joints. Time was he'd done a lot of damn-fool things.

Birdy watched him duck into the Men's Room. He'll get a kick out of that, she thought with a sly smile, just his sort of occupation. And to think, she'd once had the hots for him, back in the old days (six months ago) when razor-thin men with noses like Durante and an encyclopedic knowledge of de Niro movies had really been her style. Now she saw him for what he was, flotsam from a lost ship of hope. Still a pill-freak, still a theoretical bisexual, still devoted to early Polanski movies and symbolic pacifism. What kind of dope did he have between his ears anyhow? The same as she'd had, she chided herself, thinking there was something sexy about the bum.

She waited for a few seconds, watching the door. When he failed to re-emerge she went back into the foyer for a moment, to see how the girl was going on. She was smoking a cigarette like an amateur actress who's failed to get the knack of it, leaning against the rail, her skirt hitched up as she scratched her leg.

"Tights," she explained.

The Manager's gone to find Dean. "Thanks," she scratched on. "They bring me out in a rash, I'm allergic to them."

There were blotches on the girl's pretty legs, which rather spoiled the effect.

"It's because I'm hot and bothered," she ventured. "Whenever I get hot and bothered, I get allergic."

"Oh."

"Dean's probably run off, you know, when I had my back turned. He'd do that. He doesn't give a f-. He doesn't care."

Birdy could see she was on her way to tears, which was a drag. She was bad with tears. Shouting matches, even fights, OK. Tears, no go.

"It'll be OK' was all she could find to say to keep the tears from coming.

"No it's not," said the girl. "It won't be OK, because he's a bastard. He treats everyone like dirt." She ground out the half-smoked cigarette with the pointed toe of her cerise shoes, taking particular care to extinguish every glowing fragment of tobacco.

"Men don't care, do they?" she said looking up at Birdy with heart-melting directness. Under the expert make-up, she was perhaps seventeen, certainly not much more. Her mascara was a little smeared, and there were arcs of tiredness under her eyes.

"No," replied Birdy, speaking from painful experience. "No they don't."

Birdy thought ruefully that she'd never looked as attractive as this tired nymphet. Her eyes were too small, and her arms were fat. (Be honest, girl, you're fat all over.) But the arms were her worst feature, she'd convinced herself of that. There were men, a lot of them, who got off on big breasts, on a sizeable ass, but no man she'd ever known liked fat arms. They always wanted to be able to encircle the wrist of their girlfriend between thumb and index finger, it was a primitive way to measure attachment. Her wrists, however, if she was brutal with herself, were practically indiscernible. Her fat hands became her fat fore-arms, which became, after a podgy time, her fat upper arms. Men couldn't encircle her wrists because she had no wrists, and that alienated them. Well, that was one of the reasons anyhow. She was also very bright: and that was always a drawback if you wanted men at your feet. But of the options as to why she'd never been successful in love, she plumped for the fat arms as the likeliest explanation. Whereas this girl had arms as slender as a Balinese dancer's, her wrists looked thin as glass, and about as fragile.

Sickening, really. She was probably a lousy conversationalist to boot. God, the girl had all the advantages.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Lindi Lee," the girl replied.

It would be.

Ricky thought he'd made a mistake. This can't be the toilet, he said to himself.

He was standing in what appeared to be the main street of a frontier town he'd seen in two hundred westerns. A dust storm seemed to be raging, forcing him to narrow his eyes against the stinging sand. Through the swirl of the ochre-grey air he could pick out, he thought, the General Stores, the Sheriff's Office and the Saloon. They stood in lieu of the toilet cubicles. Optional tumble-weed danced by him on the hot desert wind. The ground beneath his feet was impacted sand: no sign of tiles. No sign of anything that was faintly toilet-like.

Ricky looked to his right, down the street. Where the far wall of the John should have been the street receded, in forced perspective, towards a painted distance. It was a lie, of course, the whole thing was a lie. Surely if he concentrated he'd begin to see through the mirage to find out how it had been achieved; the projections, the concealed lighting effects, the backcloths, the miniatures; all the tricks of the trade. But though he concentrated as hard as his slightly spaced-out condition would allow, he just couldn't seem to get his fingers under the edge of the illusion to strip it back.

The wind just went on blowing, the tumble-weed tumbled on. Somewhere in the storm a barn-door was slamming, opening and slamming again in the gusts. He could even smell horse-shit. The effect was so damn perfect, he was breathless with admiration.

But whoever had created this extraordinary set had proved their point. He was impressed: now it was time to stop the game.

He turned back to the toilet door. It was gone. A wall of dust had erased it, and suddenly he was lost and alone.

The barn-door kept slamming. Voices called to each other in the worsening storm. Where was the Saloon and the Sheriff's office? They too had been obscured.

Ricky tasted something he hadn't experienced since childhood: the panic of losing the hand of a guardian. In this case the lost parent was his sanity. Somewhere to his left a shot sounded in the depths of the storm, and he heard something whistle in his ear, then felt a sharp pain. Gingerly he raised his hand to his ear-lobe and touched the place that hurt. Part of his ear had been shot away, a neat nick in his lobe. His ear-stud was gone, and there was blood, real blood, on his fingers. Someone had either just missed blowing off his head or was really playing silly fuckers.

"Hey, man," he appealed into the teeth of this wretched fiction, whirling around on his heel to see if he could locate the aggressor. But he could see no one. The dust had totally enclosed him: he couldn't move backwards or forwards with any safety. The gunman might be very close, waiting for him to step in his direction.

"I don't like this," he said aloud, hoping the real world would hear him somehow, and step in to salvage his tattered mind. He rummaged in his jeans pocket for a pill or two, anything to improve the situation, but he was all out of instant sunshine, not even a lowly Valium was to be found lurking in the seam of his pocket. He felt naked. What a time to be lost in the middle of Zane Grey's nightmares.

A second shot sounded, but this time there was no whistling. Ricky was certain this meant he'd been shot, but as there was neither pain nor blood it was difficult to be sure.

Then he heard the unmistakable flap of the saloon door, and the groan of another human being somewhere near. A tear opened up in the storm for a moment. Did he see the saloon through it, and a young man stumbling out, leaving behind him a painted world of tables, mirrors, and gunslingers? Before he could focus properly the tear was sewn up with sand, and he doubted the sight. Then, shockingly, the young man he'd come looking for was there, a foot away, blue-lipped with death, and falling forward into Ricky's arms. He wasn't dressed for a part in this movie anymore than Ricky was. His bomber jacket was a fair copy of a fifties style, his tee-shirt bore the smiling face of Mickey Mouse.

Mickey's left eye was bloodshot, and still bleeding. The bullet had unerringly found the young man's heart.

He used his last breath to ask: "What the fuck is going on?" and died.

As last words went, it lacked style, but it was deeply felt. Ricky stared into the young man's frozen face for a moment, then the dead weight in his arms became too much, and he had no choice but to drop him. As the body hit the ground the dust seemed to turn into piss-stained tiling for an instant. Then the fiction took precedence again, and the dust swirled, and the tumble-weed tumbled, and he was standing in the middle of Main Street, Deadwood Gulch, with a body at his feet.

Ricky felt something very like cold turkey in his system. His limbs began a St Virus' dance, and the urge to piss came on him, very strong. Another half-minute, he'd wet his pants.

Somewhere, he thought, somewhere in this wild world, there is a urinal. There is a graffiti-covered wall, with numbers for the sex-crazed to call, with "This is not a fallout shelter" scrawled on the tiles, and a cluster of obscene drawings. There are water-tanks and paperless toilet-roll holders and broken seats. There is the

squalid smell of piss and old farts. Find it in God's name find the real thing before the fiction does you some permanent damage.

If, for the sake of argument, the Saloon and the General Stores are the toilet cubicles, then the urinal must be behind me, he reasoned. So step back. It can't do you any more harm than staying here in the middle of the street while someone takes potshots at you.

Two steps, two cautious steps, and he found only air. But on the third—well, well, what have we here?—his hand touched a cold tile surface.

"Whoee-ee!" he said. It was the urinal: and touching it was like finding gold in a pan of trash. Wasn't that the sickly smell of disinfectant wafting up from the gutter? It was, oh boy, it was.

Still whooping, he unzipped and started to relieve the ache in his bladder, splashing his feet in his haste. What the hell: he had this illusion beat. If he turned round now he'd find the fantasy dispersed, surely. The saloon, the dead boy, the storm, all would be gone. It was some chemical throw-back, bad dope lingering in his system and playing dumb-ass games with his imagination. As he shook the last drops on to his blue suedes, he heard the hero of this movie speak.

"What you doin' pissin' in mah street, boy?"

It was John Wayne's voice, accurate to the last slurred syllable, and it was just behind him. Ricky couldn't even contemplate turning round. The guy would blow off his head for sure. It was in the voice, that threatful ease that warned: I'm ready to draw, so do your worst. The cowboy was armed, and all Ricky had in his hand was his dick, which was no match for a gun even if he'd been better hung.

Very cautiously he tucked his weapon away and zipped himself up, then raised his hands. In front of him the wavering image of the toilet wall had disappeared again. The storm howled: his ear bled down his neck.

"OK boy, I want you to take off that gunbelt and drop it to the ground. You hear me?" said Wayne.

"Yes."

"Take it nice and slow, and keep those hands where I can see them."

Boy, this guy was really into it.

Nice and slow, like the man said, Ricky unbuckled his belt, pulled it through the loops in his jeans and dropped it to the-floor. The keys should have jangled as they hit the tiles, he hoped to God they would. No such luck. There was a clinking thud that was the sound of metal on sand.

"OK," said Wayne. "Now you're beginning to behave. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry?" said Ricky lamely.

"Sorry?"

"For pissing in the street."

"I don't reckon sorry is sufficient penitence," said Wayne.

"But really I am. It was all a mistake."

"We've had about enough of you strangers around these parts. Found that kid with his trousers round his ankles takin' a dump in the middle of the saloon. Well I call that uncouth! Where's you sons of bitches been educated anyhow? It that what they're teaching you in them fancy schools out East?"

"I can't apologise enough."

"Damn right you can't! Wayne drawled. "You with the kid?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"What kind of fancy-talk is that?" he jabbed his gun in Rick's back: it felt very real indeed. "Are you with him or not?"

"I just meant—"

"You don't mean nothing in this territory, mister, you take that from me."

He cocked the gun, audibly.

"Why don't you turn round, son and lets us see what you're made of?" Ricky had seen this routine before. The man turns, he goes for a concealed gun, and Wayne shoots him. No debate, no time to discuss the ethics of it, a bullet would do the job better than words.

Turn round I said."

Very slowly, Ricky turned to face the survivor of a thousand shootouts, and there was the man himself, or rather a brilliant impersonation of him. A middle period Wayne, before he'd grown fat and sick-looking. A Rio Grande Wayne, dusty from the long trail and squinting from a lifetime of looking at the horizon. Ricky had never had a taste for Westerns. He hated all the forced machismo, the glorification of dirt and cheap heroism. His generation had put flowers in rifle-barrels, and he'd thought that was a nice thing to do at the time; still did, in fact.

This face, so mock-manly, so uncompromising, personified a handful of lethal lies – about the glory of America's frontier origins, the morality of swift justice, the tenderness in the heart of brutes. Ricky hated the face. His hands just itched to hit it.

Fuck it, if the actor, whoever he was, was going to shoot him anyway, what was to be lost by putting his fist in the bastard's face? The thought became the act: Ricky made a fist, swung and his knuckles connected with Wayne's chin. The actor was slower than his screen image. He failed to dodge the blow, and Ricky took the opportunity to knock the gun out of Wayne's hand. He then followed through with a barrage of punches to the body, just as he'd seen in the movies. It was a spectacular display.

The bigger man reeled backwards under the blows, and tripped, his spur catching in the dead boy's hair. He lost his balance and fell in the dust, bested.

The bastard was down! Ricky felt a thrill he'd never tasted before; the exhilaration of physical triumph. My God! He'd brought down the greatest cowboy in the world. His critical faculties were overwhelmed by the victory.

The dust-storm suddenly thickened. Wayne was still on the floor, splattered with blood from a smashed nose and a broken lip. The sand was already obscuring him, a curtain drawn across the shame of his defeat.

"Get up," Ricky demanded, trying to capitalise on the situation before the opportunity was lost entirely.

Wayne seemed to grin as the storm covered him.

"Well boy," he leered, rubbing his chin, "we'll make a man of you yet..." Then his body was eroded by the driving dust, and momentarily something else was there in its place, a form Ricky could make no real sense of. A shape that was and was not Wayne, which deteriorated rapidly towards inhumanity.

The dust was already a furious bombardment, filling ears and eyes. Ricky stumbled away from the scene of the fight, choking, and miraculously he found a

wall, a door, and before he could make sense of where he was the roaring storm had spat him out into the silence of the Movie Palace.

There, though he'd promised himself to butch it up since he'd grown a moustache, he gave a small cry that would not have shamed Fay Wray, and collapsed.

In the foyer Lindi Lee was telling Birdy why she didn't like films very much.

"I mean, Dean likes cowboy movies. I don't really like any of that stuff. I guess I shouldn't say that to you -"

"No, that's OK."

"—But I mean you must really love movies, I guess. "Cause you work here."

"I like some movies. Not everything."

"Oh." She seemed surprised. A lot of things seemed to surprise her. "I like wild-life movies, you know."

"Yes..."

"You know? Animals... and stuff."

"Yes..." Birdy remembered her guess about Lindi Lee, that she wasn't much of a conversationalist. Got it in one.

"I wonder what's keeping them?" said Lindi.

The lifetime Ricky had been living in the dust-storm had lasted no more than two minutes in real time. But then in the movies time was elastic.

"I'll go look," Birdy ventured.

"He's probably left without me," Lindi said again.

"We'll find out."

Thanks."

"Don't fret," said Birdy, lightly putting her hand on the girl's thin arm as she passed. "I'm sure everything's OK."

She disappeared through the swing doors into the cinema, leaving Lindi Lee alone in the foyer. Lindi sighed. Dean wasn't the first boy who'd run out on her, just because she wouldn't produce the goods. Lindi had her own ideas about when and how she'd go all the way with a boy; this wasn't the time and Dean wasn't the boy. He was too slick, too shifty, and his hair smelt of diesel oil. If he had run out on her, she wasn't going to weep buckets over the loss. As her mother always said, there were plenty more fish in the sea.

She was staring at the poster for next week's attraction when she heard a thump behind her, and there was a pie-bald rabbit, a fat, dozy sweetheart of a thing, sitting in the middle of the foyer staring up at her.

"Hello," she said to the rabbit.

The rabbit licked itself adorably.

Lindi Lee loved animals; she loved True Life Adventure Movies in which creatures were filmed in their native habitat to tunes from Rossini, and scorpions did square-dances while mating, and every bear-cub was lovingly called a little scamp. She lapped up that stuff. But most of all she loved rabbits.

The rabbit took a couple of hops towards her. She knelt to stroke it. It was warm and its eyes were round and pink. It hopped past her up the stairs.

"Oh I don't think you should go up there," she said.

For one thing it was dark at the top of the stairs. For another there was a sign that read "Private. Staff only" on the wall. But the rabbit seemed determined, and the clever mite kept well ahead of her as she followed it up the stairs.

At the top it was pitch black, and the rabbit had gone.

Something else was sitting there in the rabbit's place, its eyes burning bright.

With Lindi Lee illusions could be simple. No need to seduce her into a complete fiction like the boy, this one was already dreaming. Easy meat.

"Hello," Lindi Lee said, scared a little by the presence ahead of her. She looked into the dark, trying to sort out some outline, a hint of a face. But there was none. Not even a breath.

She took one step back down the stairs but it reached for her suddenly, and caught her before she toppled, silencing her quickly, intimately.

This one might not have much passion to steal, but it sensed another use here. The tender body was still budding: the orifices unused to invasions. It took Lindi up the few remaining stairs and sealed her away for future investigation.

"Ricky? Oh God, Ricky!"

Birdy knelt beside Ricky's body and shook him. At least he was still breathing, that was something, and though at first sight there seemed to be a great deal of blood, in fact the wound was merely a nick in his ear.

She shook him again, more roughly, but there was no response. After a frantic search she found his pulse: it was strong and regular. Obviously he'd been attacked by somebody, possibly Lindi Lee's absent boyfriend. In which case, where was he? Still in the John perhaps, armed and dangerous. There was no way she was going to be damn fool enough to step in there and have a look, she'd seen that routine too many times. Woman in Peril: standard stuff. The darkened room, the stalking beast. Well, instead of walking bang into that cliché she was going to do what she silently exhorted heroines to do time and again: defy her curiosity and call the cops.

Leaving Ricky where he lay, she walked up the aisle, and back into the foyer.

It was empty. Lindi Lee had either given up on her boyfriend altogether, or found somebody else on the street outside to take her home. Whichever, she'd closed the front door behind her as she left, leaving only a hint of Johnson's Baby Powder on the air behind her. OK, that certainly made things easier, Birdy thought, as she stepped into the Ticket Office to dial the cops. She was rather pleased to think that the girl had found the commonsense to give up on her lousy date.

She picked up the receiver, and immediately somebody spoke.

"Hello there," said the voice, nasal and ingratiating, "it's a little late at night to be using the phone, isn't it?"

It wasn't the operator, she was sure. She hadn't even punched a number.

Besides, it sounded like Peter Loire.

"Who is this?"

"Don't you recognise me?"

"I want to speak to the police."

"I'd like to oblige, really I would."

"Get off the line, will you? This is an emergency! I need the police."

"I heard you first time," the whine went on.

"Who are you?"

"You already played that line." "There's somebody hurt in here. Will you please—

"Poor Rick."

He knew the name. Poor Rick, he said, as though he was a loving friend.

She felt the sweat begin in her brow: felt it sprout out of her pores. He knew Ricky's name.

"Poor, poor Rick," the voice said again. "Still I'm sure we'll have a happy ending. Aren't you?"

"This is a matter of life and death," Birdy insisted, impressed by how controlled she felt sure she was sounding.

"I know," said Lorre. "Isn't it exciting?"

"Damn you! Get off this phone! Or so help me -"

"So help you what? What can a fat girl like you hope to do in a situation like this, except blubber?"

"You fucking creep."

"My pleasure."

"Do I know you?"

"Yes and no," the tone of the voice was wavering.

"You're a friend of Ricky's, is that it?" One of the dope-fiends he used to hang out with. Kind of idiot-game they'd get up'to. All right, you've had your stupid little joke," she said, "now get off the line before you do some serious harm."

"You're harassed," the voice said, softening. "I understand..." it was changing magically, sliding up an octave, "you're trying to help the man you love..." its tone was feminine now, the accent altering, the slime becoming a purr. And suddenly it was Garbo.

"Poor Richard," she said to Birdy. "He's tried so hard, hasn't he?" She was gentle as a lamb.

Birdy was speechless: the impersonation was as faultless as that of Lorre, as female as the first had been male.

"All right, I'm impressed," said Birdy, "now let me speak to the cops."

"Wouldn't this be a fine and lovely night to go out walking, Birdy? Just we two girls together."

"You know my name."

"Of course I know your name. I'm very close to you."

"What do you mean, close to me?"

The reply was throaty laughter, Garbo's lovely laughter.

Birdy couldn't take it anymore. The trick was too clever; she could feel herself succumbing to the impersonation, as though she were speaking to the star herself. "No," she said down the phone, "you don't convince me, you hear?" Then her temper snapped. She yelled: "You're a fake!" into the mouthpiece of the phone so loudly she felt the receiver tremble, and then slammed it down. She opened the Office and went to the outer door. Lindi Lee had not simply slammed the door behind her. It was locked and bolted from the inside.

"Shit," Birdy said quietly.

Suddenly the foyer seemed smaller than she'd previously thought it, and so did her reserve of cool. She mentally slapped herself across the face, the standard

response for a heroine verging on hysteria. Think this through, she instructed herself. One: the door was locked. Lindi Lee hadn't done it, Ricky couldn't have done it, she certainly hadn't done it. Which implied Two: There was a weirdo in here. Maybe the same he, she or it that was on the phone. Which implied Three: He, she or it must have access to another line, somewhere in the building. The only one she knew of was upstairs, in the storeroom. But there was no way she was going up there. For reasons see Heroine in Peril. Which implied Four: She had to open this door with Ricky's keys.

Right, there was the imperative: get the keys from Ricky.

She stepped back into the cinema. For some reason the house-lights were jumpy, or was that just panic in her optic nerve? No, they were flickering slightly; the whole interior seemed to be fluctuating, as though it were breathing.

Ignore it: fetch the keys.

She raced down the aisle, aware, as she always was when she ran, that her breasts were doing a jig, her buttocks too. A right sight I look, she thought for anyone with the eyes to see. Ricky, was moaning in his faint. Birdy looked for the keys, but his belt had disappeared.

"Ricky..." she said close to his face. The moans multiplied.

"Ricky, can you hear me? It's Birdy, Rick. Birdy."

"Birdy?"

"We're locked in, Ricky. Where are the keys?"

"...keys?"

"You're not wearing your belt, Ricky," she spoke slowly, as if to an idiot, "where-are-your-keys?"

The jigsaw Ricky was doing in his aching head was suddenly solved, and he sat up. "Boy!" he said.

"What boy?"

"In the John. Dead in the John."

"Dead? Oh Christ. Dead? Are you sure?"

Ricky was in some sort of trance, it seemed. He didn't look at her, he just stared into middle-distance, seeing something she couldn't.

"Where are the keys?" she asked again. "Ricky. It's important. Concentrate."

"Keys?"

She wanted to slap him now, but his face was already bloody and it seemed sadistic.

"On the floor," he said after a time.

"In the John? On the floor in the John?"

Ricky nodded. The movement of his head seemed to dislodge some terrible thoughts: suddenly he looked as though he was going to cry.

"It's all going to be all right," said Birdy.

Ricky's hands had found his face, and he was feeling his features, a ritual of reassurance.

"Am I here?" he inquired quietly. Birdy didn't hear him, she was steeling herself for the John. She had to go in there, no doubt about that, body or no body. Get in, fetch the keys, get out again. Do it now.

She stepped through the door. It occurred to her as she did so that she'd never been in a men's toilet before, and she sincerely hoped this would be the first and only occasion.

The toilet was almost in darkness. The light was flickering in the same fitful way as the lights in the cinema, but at a lower level. She stood at the door, letting her eyes accommodate the gloom, and scanned the place.

The toilet was empty. There was no boy on the floor, dead or alive.

The keys were there though. Ricky's belt was lying in the gutter of the urinal. She fished it out, the oppressive smell of the disinfectant block making her sinuses ache. Disengaging the keys from their ring she stepped out of the toilet into the comparative freshness of the cinema. And it was all over, simple as that.

Ricky had hoisted himself on to one of the seats, and was slumped in it, looking sicker and sorrier for himself than ever. He looked up as he heard Birdy emerge. "I've got the keys," she said.

He grunted: God, he looked ill, she thought. Some of her sympathy had evaporated however. He was obviously having hallucinations, and they probably had chemical 'origins. It was his own damn fault.

"There's no boy in there, Ricky."

"What?"

There's no body in the John; nobody at all. What are you on anyhow?"

Ricky looked down at his shaking hands.

"I'm not on anything. Honestly."

"Damn stupid," she said. She half-suspected that he'd set her up for this somehow, except that practical jokes weren't his style. Ricky was quite a puritan in his way: that had been one of his attractions.

"Do you need a doctor?"

He shook his head sulkily.

"Are you sure?"

"I said no," he snapped.

"OK, I offered." She was already marching up the rake of the aisle, muttering something under her breath. At the foyer door she stopped and called across to him.

"I think we've got an intruder. There was somebody on the extension line. Do you want to stand watch by the front door while I fetch a cop?"

"In a minute."

Ricky sat in the flickering light and examined his sanity. If Birdy said the boy wasn't in there, then presumably she was telling the truth. The best way to verify that was to see for himself. Then he'd be certain he'd suffered a minor reality crisis brought on by some bad dope, and he'd go home, lay his head down to sleep and wake tomorrow afternoon healed. Except that he didn't want to put his head in that evil-smelling room. Suppose she was wrong, and she was the one having the crisis? Weren't there such things as hallucinations of normality?

Shakily, he hauled himself up, crossed the aisle and pushed open the door. It was murky inside, but he could see enough to know that there were no sandstorms, or dead boys, no gun-toting cowboys, nor even a solitary rumble-weed. It's quite a thing, he thought, this mind of mine. To have created an alternative world

so eerily well. It was a wonderful trick. Pity it couldn't be turned to better use than scaring him shitless. You win some, you lose some.

And then he saw the blood. On the tiles. A smear of blood that hadn't come from his nicked ear, there was too much of it. Ha! He didn't imagine it at all. There was blood, heel marks, every sign that what he thought he'd seen, he'd seen. But Jesus in Heaven, which was worse? To see, or not to see? Wouldn't it have been better to be wrong, and just a little spaced-out tonight, than right, and in the hands of a power that could literally change the world?

Ricky stared at the trail of blood, and followed it across the floor of the toilet to the cubicle on the left of his vision. Its door was closed: it had been open before. The murderer, whoever he was, had put the boy in there, Ricky knew it without looking.

"OK," he said, "now I've got you."

He pushed on the door. It swung open and there was the boy, propped up on the toilet seat, legs spread, arms hanging.

His eyes had been scooped out of his head. Not neatly: no surgeon's job. They'd been wrenched out, leaving a trail of mechanics down his cheek.

Ricky put his hand over his mouth and told himself he wasn't going to throw up. His stomach churned, but obeyed, and he ran to the toilet door as though any moment the body was going to get up and demand its ticket-money back.

"Birdy... Birdy the fat bitch had been wrong, all wrong. There was death here, and worse.

Ricky flung himself out of the John into the body of the cinema.

The wall-lights were fairly dancing behind their Deco shades, guttering like candles on the verge of extinction. Darkness would be too much; he'd lose his mind.

There was, it occurred to him, something familiar about the way the lights flickered, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He stood in the aisle for a moment, hopelessly lost.

Then the voice came; and though he guessed it was death this time, he looked up.

"Hello Ricky," she was saying as she came along Rowe towards him. Not Birdy. No, Birdy never wore a white gossamer dress, never had bruise-full lips, or hair so fine, or eyes so sweetly promising. It was Monroe who was walking towards him, the blasted rose of America. "Aren't you going to say hello?" she gently chided.

"...er..."

"Ricky. Ricky. Ricky. After all this time."

All this time? What did she mean: all this time?

"Who are you?"

She smiled radiantly at him.

"As if you didn't know."

"You're not Marilyn. Marilyn's dead."

"Nobody dies in the movies, Ricky. You know that as well as I do. You can always thread the celluloid up again—"

—that was what the flickering reminded him of, the flicker of celluloid through the gate of a projector, one image hot on the next, the illusion of life created from a perfect sequence of little deaths.

"—and we're there again, all-talking, all-singing." She laughed: ice-in-a-glass laughter, "We never fluff our lines, never age, never lose our timing—"

"You're not real," said Ricky.

She looked faintly bored by the observation, as if he was being pedantic.

By now she'd come to the end of the row and was standing no more than three feet away from him. At this distance the illusion was as ravishing and as complete as ever. He suddenly wanted to take her, there, in the aisle. What the hell if she was just a fiction: fictions are fuckable if you don't want marriage.

"I want you," he said, surprised by his own bluntness.

"I want you," she replied, which surprised him even more. "In fact I need you. I'm very weak."

"Weak?"

"It's not easy, being the centre of attraction, you know. You find you need it, more and more. Need people to look at you. All the night, all the day."

"I'm looking."

"Am I beautiful?"

"You're a goddess: whoever you are."

"I'm yours: that's who I am."

It was a perfect answer. She was defining herself through him. I am a function of you; made for you out of you. The perfect fantasy. "Keep looking at me; looking forever, Ricky. I need your loving looks. I can't live without them."

The more he stared at her the stronger her image seemed to become. The flickering had almost stopped; a calm had settled over the place.

"Do you want to touch me?"

He thought she'd never ask.

"Yes," he said.

"Good." She smiled coaxingly at him, and he reached to make contact. She elegantly avoided his fingertips at the last possible moment, and ran, laughing, down the aisle towards the screen. He followed, eager. She wanted a game: that was fine by him.

She'd run into a cul-de-sac. There was no way out from this end of the cinema, and judging by the come-ons she was giving him, she knew it. She turned and flattened herself against the wall, feet spread a little.

He was within a couple of yards of her when a breeze out of nowhere billowed her skirt up around her waist. She laughed, half-closing her eyes, as the surf of silk rose and exposed her. She was naked underneath.

Ricky reached for her again and this time she didn't avoid his touch. The dress billowed up a little higher and he stared, fixated, at the part of Marilyn he had never seen, the fur divide that had been the dream of millions.

There was blood there. Not much, a few fingermarks on her inner thighs. The faultless gloss of her flesh was spoiled slightly. Still he stared; and the lips parted a little as she moved her hips, and he realised the glint of wetness in her interior was not the juice of her body, but something else altogether. As her muscles moved the bloody eyes she'd buried in her body shifted, and came to rest on him.

She knew by the look on his face that she hadn't hidden them deep enough, but where was a girl with barely a veil of cloth covering her nakedness to hide the fruits of her labour?

"You killed him," said Ricky, still looking at the lips, and the eyes that peeked out between. The image was so engrossing, so pristine, it all but cancelled out the horror in his belly. Perversely, his disgust fed his lust instead of killing it. So what if she was a murderer: she was legend.

"Love me," she said. "Love me forever."

He came to her, knowing now full well that it was death to do so. But death was a relative matter, wasn't it? Marilyn was dead in the flesh, but alive here, either in his brain, or in the buzzing matrix of the air or both; and he could be with her.

He embraced her, and she him. They kissed. It was easy. Her lips were softer than he'd imagined, and he felt something close to pain at his crotch he wanted to be in her so much.

The willow-thin arms slipped around his waist, and he was in the lap of luxury.

"You make me strong," she said. "Looking at me that way. I need to be looked at, or I die. It's the natural state of illusions."

Her embrace was tightening; the arms at his back no longer seemed quite so willow-like. He struggled a little against the discomfort.

"No use," she cooed in his ear. "You're mine."

He wrenched his head around to look at her grip and to his amazement the arms weren't arms any longer, just a loop of something round his back, without hands or fingers or wrists.

"Jesus Christ!" he said.

"Look at me, boy," she said. The words had lost their delicacy. It wasn't Marilyn that had him in its arms any more: nothing like her. The embrace tightened again, and the breath was forced from Ricky's body, breath the tightness of the hold prevented him from recapturing. His spine creaked under the pressure, and pain shot through his body like flares, exploding in his eyes, all colours.

"You should have got out of town," said Marilyn, as Wayne's face blossomed under the sweep of her perfect cheek-bones. His look was contemptuous, but Ricky had only a moment to register it before that image cracked too, and something else came into focus behind this facade of famous faces. For the last time in his life, Ricky asked the question: "Who are you?"

His captor didn't answer. It was feeding on his fascination; even as he stared twin organs erupted out of its body like the horns of a slug, antennae perhaps, forming themselves into probes and crossing the space between its head and Ricky's.

"I need you," it said, its voice now neither Wayne nor Monroe, but a crude, uncultivated voice, a thug's voice. Tm so fucking weak; it uses me up, being in the world."

It was mainlining on him, feeding itself, whatever it was, on his stares, once adoring – now horrified. He could feel it draining out his life through his eyes, luxuriating in the soul-looks he was giving it as he perished.

He knew he must be nearly dead, because he hadn't taken a breath in a long while. It seemed like minutes, but he couldn't be sure.

Just as he was listening for the sound of his heart, the horns divided around his head and pressed themselves into his ears. Even in this reverie, the sensation was disgusting, and he wanted to cry out for it to stop. But the fingers were working their way into his head, bursting his ear-drums, and passing on like inquisitive

tapeworms through brain and skull. He was alive, even now, still staring at his tormentor, and he knew that the fingers were finding his eyeballs, and pressing on them now from behind.

His eyes bulged suddenly and broke from their housing, splashing from his sockets. Momentarily he saw the world from a different angle as his sense of sight cascaded down his cheek. There was his lip, his chin. It was an appalling experience, and mercifully short. Then the feature Ricky'd lived for thirty-seven years snapped in mid-reel, and he slumped in the arms of fiction.

Ricky's seduction and death had occupied less than three minutes. In that time Birdy had tried every key on Ricky's ring, and could get none of the damn things to open the door. Had she not persisted she might have gone back into the cinema and asked for some help. But things mechanical, even locks and keys, were a challenge to her womanhood. She despised the way men felt some instinctive superiority over her sex when it came to engines, systems and logical processes, and she was damned if she was going to go whining back to Ricky to tell him she couldn't open the damn door.

By the time she'd given up the job, so had Ricky. He was dead and gone. She swore, colourfully, at the keys, and admitted defeat. Ricky clearly had a knack with these wretched things that she'd never quite grasp. Good luck to him. All she wanted now was out of this place. It was getting claustrophobic. She didn't like being locked in, not knowing who was lurking around upstairs.

And now to cap it all, the lights in the foyer were on the blink, dying away flicker by flicker. What the hell was going on in this place anyhow?

Without warning the lights went out altogether, and beyond the doors into the cinema she was sure she heard movement. A light spilled through from the other side, stronger than torchlight, twitching, colourful.

"Ricky?" she chanced into the dark. It seemed to swallow her words. Either that or she didn't believe it was Ricky at all, and something was telling her to make her appeal, if she had to, in a whisper.

"Ricky...?"

The lips of the swing-doors smacked together gently as something pressed on them from the other side.

"...is that you?"

The air was electric: static was crackling off her shoes as she walked towards the door, the hairs on her arms were rigid. The light on the other side was growing brighter with every step.

She stopped advancing, thinking better of her enquiries. It wasn't Ricky, she knew that. Maybe it was the man or woman on the phone, some pebble-eyed lunatic who got off on stalking fat women.

She took two steps back towards the Ticket Office, her feet sparking, and reached under the counter for the Motherfucker, an iron bar which she'd kept there since she'd been trapped in the Office by three would-be thieves with shaved heads and electric drills. She'd screamed blue murder and they'd fled, but next time she swore she'd beat one (or all of them) senseless rather than be terrorised. And the Motherfucker, all three feet of it, was her chosen weapon.

Armed now, she faced the doors.

They blew open suddenly, and a roar of white noise filled her head, and a voice through the roar said: "Here's looking at you, kid."

An eye, a single vast eye, was filling the doorway. The noise deafened her; the eye blinked, huge and wet and lazy, scanning the doll in front of it with the insolence of the One True God, the maker of celluloid Earth and celluloid Heaven.

Birdy was terrified, no other word for it. This wasn't a look-behind-you thrill, there was no delicious anticipation, no pleasurable fright. It was real fear, bowel-fear, unadorned and ugly as shit.

She could hear herself whimpering under the relentless gaze of the eye, her legs were weakening. Soon she'd fall on the carpet in front of the door, and that would be the end of her, surely.

Then she remembered Motherfucker. Dear Motherfucker, bless his phallic heart. She raised the bar in a two-handed grip and ran at the eye, swinging.

Before she made contact the eye closed, the light went out, and she was in darkness again, her retina burning from the sight.

In the darkness, somebody said: "Ricky's dead."

Just that. It was worse than the eye, worse than all the dead voices of Hollywood, because she knew somehow it was true. The cinema had become a slaughterhouse. Lindi Lee's Dean had died as Ricky had said he had, and now Ricky was dead as well. The doors were all locked, the game was down to two. Her and it.

She made a dash for the stairs, not sure of her plan of action, but certain that remaining in the foyer was suicidal. As her foot touched the bottom stair the swing-doors sighed open again behind her and something came after her, fast and flickering. It was a step or two behind her as she breathlessly mounted the stairs, cursing her bulk. Spasms of brilliant light shot by her from its body like the first igniting flashes of a Roman Candle. It was preparing another trick, she was certain of it.

She reached the top of the stairs with her admirer still on her heels. Ahead, the corridor, lit by a single greasy bulb, promised very little comfort. It ran the full length of the cinema, and there were a few storerooms off it, piled with crap: posters, 3-D spectacles, mildewed stills. In one of the storerooms there was a fire-door, she was sure. But which? She'd only been up here once, and that two years ago.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," she said. She ran to the first storeroom. The door was locked. She beat on it, protesting. It stayed locked. The next the same. The third the same. Even if she could remember which storeroom contained the escape route the doors were too heavy to break down. Given ten minutes and Motherfucker's help she might do it. But the Eye was at her back: she didn't have ten seconds, never mind ten minutes.

There was nothing for it but confrontation. She spun on her heel, a prayer on her lips, to face the staircase and her pursuer. The landing was empty.

She stared at the forlorn arrangement of dead bulbs and peeling paint as if to discover the invisible, but the thing wasn't in front of her at all, it was behind. The brightness flared again at her back, and this time the Roman Candle caught, fire became light, light became image, and glories she'd almost forgotten were spilling down the corridor towards her. Unleashed scenes from a thousand movies: each

with its unique association. She began, for the first time, to understand the origins of this remarkable species. It was a ghost in the machine of the cinema: a son of celluloid.

"Give your soul to me," a thousand stars," said.

"I don't believe in souls," she replied truthfully.

Then give me what you give to the screen, what everybody gives. Give me some love."

That's why all those scenes were playing, and replaying, and playing again, in front of her. They were all moments when an audience was magically united with the screen, bleeding through its eyes, looking and looking and looking. She'd done it herself, often. Seen a film and felt it move her so deeply it was almost a physical pain when the end credits rolled and the illusion was broken, because she felt she'd left something of herself behind, a part of her inner being lost up there amongst her heroes and her heroines. Maybe she had. Maybe the air carried the cargo of her desires and deposited them somewhere, intermingled with the cargo of other hearts, all gathering together in some niche, until this. This child of their collective passions: this technicolour seducer; trite, crass and utterly bewitching.

Very well, she thought, it's one thing to understand your executioner: another thing altogether to talk it out of its professional obligations.

Even as she sorted the enigma out she was lapping up the pictures in the thing: she couldn't help herself. Teasing glimpses of lives she'd lived, faces she'd loved. Mickey Mouse, dancing with a broom, Gish in "Broken Blossoms", Garland (with Toto at her side) watching the twister louring over Kansas, Astaire in "Top Hat", Welles in "Kane", Brando and Crawford, Tracy and Hepburn—people so engraved on our hearts they need no Christian names. And so much better to be teased by these moments, to be shown only the pre-kiss melt, not the kiss itself; the slap, not the reconciliation; the shadow, not the monster; the wound, not death.

It had her in thrall, no doubt of it. She was held by her eyes as surely as if it had them out on their stalks, and chained. "Am I beautiful?" it said. Yes it was beautiful.

"Why don't you give yourself to me?"

She wasn't thinking any more, her powers of analysis had drained from her, until something appeared in the muddle of images that slapped her back into herself. "Dumbo". The fat elephant. Her fat elephant: no more than that, the fat elephant she'd thought was her.

The spell broke. She looked away from the creature. For a moment, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something sickly and fly-blown beneath the glamour. They'd called her Dumbo as a child, all the kids on her block. She'd lived with that ridiculous grey horror for twenty years, never able to shake it off. Its fat body reminded her of her fat, its lost look of her isolation. She thought of it cradled in the trunk of its mother, condemned as a Mad Elephant, and she wanted to beat the sentimental thing senseless.

"It's a fucking lie!" she spat at it.

"I don't know what you mean," it protested.

"What's under all the pizzazz then? Something very nasty I think."

The light began to flicker, the parade of trailers faltering. She could see another shape, small and dark, lurking behind the curtains of light. Doubt was in it. Doubt and fear of dying. She was sure she could smell the fear off it, at ten paces.

"What are you, under there?"

She took a step towards it.

"What are you hiding? Eh?"

It found a voice. A frightened, human voice. "You've no business with me."

"You tried to kill me."

"I want to live."

"So do I."

It was getting dark this end of the corridor, and there was an old, bad smell here, of rot. She knew rot, and this was something animal. Only last spring, when the snow had melted, she'd found something very dead in the yard behind her apartment. Small dog, large cat, it was difficult to be sure. Something domestic that had died of cold in the sudden snows the December before. Now it was besieged with maggots: yellowish, greyish, pinkish: a pastel fly-machine with a thousand moving parts.

It had around it the same stink that lingered here. Maybe that was somehow the flesh behind the fantasy. Taking courage, her eyes still stinging with 'Dumbo', she advanced on the wavering mirage, Motherfucker raised in case the thing tried any funny business.

The boards beneath her feet were creaking, but she was too interested in her quarry to listen to their warnings. It was time she got a hold of this killer, shook it and made it spit its secret.

They'd almost gone the length of the corridor now, her advancing, it retreating. There was nowhere left for the thing to go.

Suddenly the floorboards folded up into dusty fragments under her weight and she was falling through the floor in a cloud of dust. She dropped Motherfucker as she threw out her hands to catch hold of something, but it was all worm-ridden, and crumbled in her grasp.

She fell awkwardly and landed hard on something soft. Here the smell of rot was incalculably stronger, it coaxed the stomach into the throat. She reached out her hand to right herself in the darkness, and on every side there was slime and cold. She felt as though she'd been dumped in a case of partially-gutted fish. Above her, the anxious light shone through the boards as it fell on her bed. She looked, though God knows she didn't want to, and she was lying in the remains of a man, his body spread by his devourers over quite an area. She wanted to howl. Her instinct was to tear off her skirt and blouse, both of which were gluey with matter; but she couldn't go naked, not in front of the son of celluloid.

It still looked down at her.

"Now you know," it said, lost.

"This is you—"

"This is the body I once occupied, yes. His name was Barberio. A criminal; nothing spectacular. He never aspired to greatness."

"And you?"

"His cancer. I'm the piece of him which did aspire, that did long to be more than a humble cell. I am a dreaming disease. No wonder I love the movies."

The son of celluloid was weeping over the edge of the broken floor, its true body exposed now it had no reason to fabricate a glory.

It was a filthy thing, a tumour grown fat on wasted passion. A parasite with the shape of a slug, and the texture of raw liver. For a moment a toothless mouth, badly moulded, formed at its head-end and said: "I'm going to have to find a new way to eat your soul."

It flopped down into the crawlspace beside Birdy. Without its shimmering coat of many technicolours it was the size of a small child. She backed away as it stretched a sensor to touch her, but avoidance was a limited option. The crawlspace was narrow, and further along it was blocked with what looked to be broken chairs and discarded prayer-books. There was no way out but the way she'd come, and that was fifteen feet above her head.

Tentatively, the cancer touched her foot, and she was sick. She couldn't help it, even though she was ashamed to be giving in to such primitive responses. It revolted her as nothing ever had before; it brought to mind something aborted, a bucket-case.

"Go to hell," she said to it, kicking at its head, but it kept coming, its diarrheal mass trapping her legs. She could feel the churning motion of its innards as it rose up to her.

Its bulk on her belly and groin was almost sexual, and revolted as she was by her own train of thought she wondered dimly if such a thing aspired to sex. Something about the insistence of its forming and reforming feelers against her skin, probing tenderly beneath her blouse, stretching to touch her lips, only made sense as desire. Let it come then, she thought, let it come if it has to.

She let it crawl up her until it was entirely perched on her body, fighting every moment the urge to throw it off—and then she sprang her trap. She rolled over.

She'd weighed 225 pounds at the last count, and she was probably more now. The thing was beneath her before it could work out how or why this had happened, and its pores were oozing the sick sap of rumours.

It fought, but it couldn't get out from under, however much it squirmed. Birdy dug her nails into it and began to tear at its sides, taking cobs out of it, spongy cobs that set more fluids gushing. Its howls of anger turned into howls of pain. After a short while, the dreaming disease stopped fighting. Birdy lay still for a moment. Underneath her, nothing moved. At last, she got up. It was impossible to know if the tumour was dead. It hadn't, by any standards that she understood, lived. Besides, she wasn't touching it again. She'd wrestle the Devil himself rather than embrace Barberio's cancer a second time. She looked up at the corridor above her and despaired. Was she now to die in here, like Barberio before her? Then, as she glanced down at her adversary, she noticed the grille. It hadn't been visible while it was still night outside. Now dawn was breaking, and columns of dishwater light were creeping through the lattice.

She bent to the grille, pushed it hard, and suddenly the day was in the crawlspace with her, all around her. It was a squeeze to get through the small door, and she kept thinking every moment that she felt the thing crawling across her legs, but she hauled herself into the world with only bruised breasts to complain of.

The abandoned lot hadn't changed substantially since Barberio's visit there. It was merely more nettle-thronged. She stood for a while breathing in draughts of fresh air, then made for the fence and the street beyond it.

The fat woman with the haggard look and the stinking clothes was given a wide berth by newsboys and dogs alike as she made her way home.

Three

Censored Scenes.

It wasn't the end.

The police went to the Movie Palace just after nine-thirty. Birdy went with them. The search revealed the mutilated bodies of Dean and Ricky, as well as the remains of "Sonny" Barberio. Upstairs, in the corner of the corridor, they found a cerise shoe.

Birdy said nothing, but she knew. Lindi Lee had never left.

She was put on trial for a double murder nobody really thought she'd committed, and acquitted for lack of evidence. It was the order of the court that she be put under psychiatric observation for a period of not less than two years. The woman might not have committed murder, but it was clear she was a raving lunatic. Tales of walking cancers do nobody's reputation much good.

In the early summer of the following year Birdy gave up eating for a week. Most of the weight-loss in that time was water, but it was sufficient to encourage her friends that she was at last going-to tackle the Big Problem.

That weekend, she went missing for twenty-four hours.

Birdy found Lindi Lee in a deserted house in Seattle. She hadn't been so difficult to trace: it was hard for poor Lindi to keep control of herself these days, never mind avoid would-be pursuers. As it happened her parents had given up on her several months previous. Only Birdy had continued to look, paying for an investigator to trace the girl, and finally her patience was rewarded with the sight of the frail beauty, frailer than ever but still beautiful sitting in this bare room. Flies roamed the air. A turd, perhaps human, sat in the middle of the floor.

Birdy had a gun out before she opened the door. Lindi Lee looked up from her thoughts, or maybe its thoughts, and smiled at her. The greeting lasted a moment only before the parasite in Lindi Lee recognised Birdy's face, saw the gun in her hand and knew exactly what she'd come to do.

"Well," it said, getting up to meet its visitor.

Lindi Lee's eyes burst, her mouth burst, her cunt and ass, her ears and nose all burst, and the tumour poured out of her in shocking pink rivers. It came worming out of her milkless breasts, out of a cut in her thumb, from an abrasion on her thigh. Wherever Lindi Lee was open, it came.

Birdy raised the gun and fired three times. The cancer stretched once towards her, fell back, staggered and collapsed. Once it was still, Birdy calmly took the acid-bottle out of her pocket, unscrewed the top and emptied the scalding

contents on human limb and tumour alike. It made no shout as it dissolved, and she left it there, in a patch of sun, a pungent smoke rising from the confusion.

She stepped out into the street, her duty done, and went her way, confidently planning to live long after the credits for this particular comedy had rolled.
