



OWEN KING

"Double Feature is a beautiful, wrenching beginning, and Owen King is a young writer of immense promise." —LARRY McMURTRY

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DOUBLE FEATURE

A NOVEL

OWEN KING

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CONTENTS

PART 1:
PREPRODUCTION (2002–2003)

Coming Attractions (1969)

PART 2:
THE LONG WEEKEND (2011):
Thursday Night and Friday Morning

Reel Change (1991)

PART 3:
THE LONG WEEKEND (2011):
Later Friday

Concessions (2000)

PART 4:
THE LONG WEEKEND (2011):
Saturday and Sunday

Credits

Acknowledgments

Wesley Latsch's List of Seventy-five Things that Cause Unnecessary Fatigue

About Owen King

*This book is dedicated to the inspiring,
irreplaceable women in my life.*

ZJBK

KTB

NRK

TJFSK

&

in memory of Sarah Jane White Spruce, 12/7/23–5/14/07

DOCTOR

(to Guido, the director)

Well, what are you working on now?

Another film without hope?

—Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, Brunello Rondi, *8 1/2* (dialogue spoken by Roberto Nicolosi)

The steel-on-steel whisk of the curtain rings scraping along the rod seemed to come from the sky, and for the last seven or eight seconds of his dream, Sam Dolan found himself turning in a circle, searching for the source of the sound, but there was no one else in the vast parking lot. "Samuel!" bellowed an unmistakable voice. "Samuel! I must speak to you!"

Sam opened his eyes and recoiled at the rectangle of white light. He threw his hands out to block the brilliant autumn morning cascading through the revealed window. Something was wrong. "What is it? What's happened?"

A shadow grew, grew and grew, its mountainous shoulders overwhelming the bright frame. Boo stepped closer. His eyes were wide, his peppery beard tangled and wild, as if he had been rending it.

"What?" Sam's pulse was in his fingers and his toes, behind his eyes, under his tongue. He was afraid.

"Samuel, my son." His father cleared his throat and held up a sheaf of pages. "I have some notes for your script."

PART 1

PREPRODUCTION

(2002-2003)

The script was for a film called *Who We Are*, a drama set at Russell College, the small liberal arts school in northern New York where Sam had matriculated. The partly autobiographical story had been his senior thesis. Central to the design of the work was the way it compacted time, by means of a trope that Sam privately considered so ingenious he sometimes broke into cackles just thinking about it.

At the break of day, the narrative's half dozen or so main figures are callow eighteen-year-old freshmen, but as the film advances—through parties and drugged-out drum circles, couplings and arguments and pranks—they age at a super-accelerated rate, encapsulating all four years of college in a single Spring Festival, the annual daylong bacchanalia that was the inebriated topper on every red-blooded Russell undergraduate's year. At sunup of the following morning, finally partied out, the characters are grown-up seniors on the verge of graduation, with different haircuts and thinner faces and better clothes, yet in every significant way no more prepared for the real world than when they started.

While most readers of *Who We Are* found it funny in places, it was an essentially lyric piece that Sam felt spoke to the mad, arrested quality of those four years and, in general, of what a desperate thing it was to be young and free and American.

One character, Rachel, is a buttoned-down suburban honor student when we meet her in the morning; when we leave her, four years later, she is a fully committed member of an ecoterrorist cell. Through the first quarter of the movie, Hugh drinks beer after beer, backslaps everyone in sight, climbs on every available chair and tabletop to make ribald acclamations to his friends; by the last fifteen minutes or so, Hugh has stopped going out altogether, developed a policy of conducting communication exclusively via the Internet or speakerphone, become too indolent to bother dressing himself, and just lies on his couch, gloating aloud about the energy that his old companions are wasting while he is relaxing. Another, Florence, renames herself Diana, and then Aurora, and then Divinity, before finally going back to Florence—the bright, gifted arts major who woke up that morning gradually transforming into a grumpy scold, her final project an installation of a Dumpster filled with words carved from piss-soaked foam blocks: EMPATHY, TRUTH, INTEGRITY, and so on; a gold-chain-wearing high school football star when we meet him, Brunson discovers his homosexuality during the first twenty minutes of the film, begins to treat his shame and anxiety with crystal meth around the forty-minute mark, and shortly afterwards disappears completely right in the middle of a scene, at which point everyone ceases to refer to him except in the past tense; Kira spends the entire movie holding hands, only the person with whom she is holding hands keeps changing, and they're always arguing about that other person's lack of faithfulness; she becomes angrier and angrier until she literally bites her last lover and rips a chunk of flesh from his cheek.

In a typical scene about midway through, Roger, the ostensible leader of the group, abruptly breaks up with his girlfriend. Initially a humorous skeptic, by the film's latter stages, Roger has become so chronically dubious that he refuses to believe his own father when he calls, sobbing, to inform him that his father has suffered a fatal aneurysm. "Nice try," he says, and hangs up on him.

Several of the screenplay's characters were modeled on real people: Roger, for instance, was Sam's stand-in, and most of the things that happened to Roger—like the phone call scene—were semi-fictionalized versions of events from Sam's own life. Another key player, Hugh, was plainly based on Sam's best friend, Wesley Latsch, who had in reality, over time, winnowed his direct human contact to the bare minimum, and become so resolute in his fecklessness that there was a kind of integrity to it. Claire, Roger's girlfriend, was a dead ringer for Sam's actual college girlfriend, an indefatigably good-natured young woman named Polly Dressler:

EXT. NORTH FIELD PARKING LOT—MIDAFTERNOON

~~The group comes to Roger's Saab. Behind them, in the meadow and on the hillside, the festival continues—people jumping up and down in the bouncy castle, a juggler with devil sticks, the rotating Ferris wheel, etc.~~

CLAIRE

Slurpee time!

HUGH

T-minus Slurpee!

Roger unlocks the car with a CLICK, as Claire pulls on the passenger-side door with a CLACK. Claire has pulled the handle too soon.

Roger opens his door and climbs in. Claire pulls again on the handle of the passenger-side door, to no avail. Hugh stands with her.

Roger stares at Claire through the dirty glass. Roger's Radio-head T-shirt is now a Wilco T-shirt. Claire's glasses are gone, and her hair is different.

BACK-AND-FORTH THROUGH THE PASSENGER WINDOW:

CLAIRE

Let me in! I want Slurpee!

HUGH

Slurpee motherfucker!

ROGER

No. It's over. I can't do this anymore, Claire.

CLAIRE

What?

ROGER

I can't be with you. You're a handle-puller.

CLAIRE

What?

ROGER

I'm sorry, but we're through.

CLAIRE

Why are you being such a jerk? I just want to get a Slurpee and have an enjoyable day.

ROGER

I could never love a handle-puller. I mean, it's proof that we don't fit.

CLAIRE

Are you serious? This is not funny, Roger.

ROGER

It's not that you're impatient, it's that you want more from life than I do. You want to get going. You want your Slurpee right away. You're a handle-puller, Claire. You pulled.

CLAIRE

Yes, but I didn't mean to!

ROGER

It's too late.

She starts to cry and gives Roger the finger.

HUGH

(to Claire:)

No Slurpee for you.

Hugh raps on the window, and Roger lets him in. They pull away a moment later, abandoning Claire in the parking lot. A Volvo pulls into the empty space. Bertie, the Welsh exchange student, climbs out, unloads his guitar. Claire, in fresh makeup now, face completely dry, runs over and leaps into his arms.

In truth, Polly dumped Sam. And she was the one who pointed out that their ambitions weren't especially compatible. Polly wanted to have a career and a family and a house and lots of affairs with men whose discretion she could trust. Sam's only real ambition was to make a movie. Beyond that, he conceded that he didn't have much in mind for the future.

But it was true that Polly was a handle-puller. This fact was important to Sam.

The breakup had also taken about two years, which was the beauty of the conceit: the compression of such a development brought it into greater relief. What Sam meant to convey was that minor troubles and lingering dissatisfactions—say, one man's deep-rooted irritation at his girlfriend's blithe impatience toward car-door locking mechanisms—often added up to personal shifts with massive consequences.

Taken as a whole, no one who read the screenplay for *Who We Are* denied that it was clever in its composition, original in its pattern, and ruthlessly unsentimental in its conclusions. It was also “a bit portentous,” according to Sam's father, Booth Dolan, the B-movie mainstay famous for his stentorian, blink-free performances in such films as *New Roman Empire*, *Hellhole*, *Hard Mommies*, *Hellhole*, *Wake the Devil*, *Black Soul Riders*, and *Hellhole 3: Endless Hell*, who, without invitation, had fished a copy of the script from Sam's laptop bag.

■ ■ ■

“Portentous?”

After waking him, Booth had trailed Sam to the bathroom, lingered outside while Sam took a leak, and followed him down to the kitchen, maintaining a running critique of the script throughout. The general theme seemed to be that he found *Who We Are* too serious. Sam disagreed; he felt that it was exactly as serious as it needed to be. In addition, he wasn't thrilled about having his work assessed by an intrusive old fat man before he'd even had coffee.

“Let me put it this way,” said Booth. “I don't find much in the way of generosity in the story. I'm worried that the irony is perhaps too thick.”

Tom Ritts—a wealthy contractor, Booth's best friend, and Sam's godfather, at whose house both Booth Dolan men were staying—had thoughtfully made them a pot of coffee before leaving for work. Sam went to the counter and poured some into a Ritts Design & Construction coffee mug. “Maybe I like my irony thick.”

“Irony is so easy, though, Samuel. It's so simple to pull out the rug and make everything bleak and awful. Isn't it more interesting to try and dig down into the hard dirt and scrape out that precious nugget of possibility? Of redemption? Of humor? Of hope? Cynicism is the predictable route. Now something hopeful! That would shock an audience, knock them back in their seats.” Booth stood in the middle of the kitchen as he delivered his homily. He was dressed in a gigantic pair of sky-blue pajamas. A big man in his youth and an enormous man in these later years, he had the legs of a monument and the torso of a snowman. Sam was tall, but his father towered over him. “Certainly, there are many amusing moments, but it leaves an acutely bitter taste. You should at least give your characters a chance at happiness, don't you think?”

Sam thought his father was completely wrong, about everything. He thought, I don't like you very much. He thought, It's too early in the morning.

A part of Sam wanted to yell, to just yell unintelligibly, until his father shut up and went away. He had to concentrate hard on maintaining a tranquil front. With exaggerated care, he set his brimming coffee mug on the counter. “Hold on, Booth. Just—hold it.”

For as long as he could remember, Booth had been Booth. Sam was aware that people found it odd

putting that he called his father by his first name—that it came off as severe or pissy or both, which admittedly, it pretty much was—but to call him Dad would have felt like giving in.

“You know—” Sam searched for a way to concisely summarize the man’s gall. To commit adultery was one thing. To break promises to your children was another. To do the things that Booth had done in movies—to rant and to brood and to stalk around like a tin-pot dictator on thousands of movie screens—was another. But to be guilty of all these trespasses, and then to carry yourself as though you were a serious person—The Most Serious Person—was something else altogether.

It wasn’t as though he had expected Booth to like the script, let alone understand it. *Who We Are* was about the hard reality of how quickly the days sped up, how suddenly you weren’t a kid anymore. Booth’s movies had nothing to do with reality. They had to do with killer rats and the car-wash mafiosos and the outbreak of werewolf attacks in ancient Greece. It annoyed Sam that he was annoyed by his father’s opinion, which was a meaningless opinion, and which he could have predicted.

There was so much he could have said, and wanted to say, and there was Booth in his giant pajamas with that look of concern, as if he were not only entitled to offer his critique but actually cared. The words and the arguments became jammed up somewhere in Sam’s chest. “Who asked you, anyway? And why the fuck are you going through my laptop bag?”

Booth made an innocent face. “I was going to write you a nice note and put it in there.”

“What was it going to say?” asked Sam immediately, eager to catch him.

“That I was proud of you! You’re a college man now.”

“Booth. Who looks in a bag to put in a note before they’ve even written the note?”

“I needed paper to write my note.”

They stared at each other. The clifflike brow that hooded his father’s eyes gave him a haunted aspect. It also made him invincible in staring contests.

Sam broke away and snatched his coffee mug from the counter. A splash of hot liquid fell across his hand and fingers. He hated feeling like this, like he was a son and Booth was a father and they were arguing about whether curfew was eleven or twelve. It was embarrassing. “You know what? I want to go and drink my coffee now.”

“Samuel, I am not trying to offend you!” The exclamation was drafted in Booth’s Voice, the resonant declamatory tone that he adopted to lend credence to things that were ridiculous, such as killer rats and the carwash mafia and the werewolves of ancient Greece. “I am trying to help!”

His father blinked, very slowly, and in spite of all his experience, Sam found himself swayed to consider whether this once the man might mean what he was saying. The hot coffee dripped over his hand and plinked onto the floor. Around them, the machine guts of Tom’s house ticked and hummed.

“Samuel.” Sam’s father cleared his throat, shook his head, and lifted the hem of his pajama shirt to absently swish a finger around in the gray-haired nest of his belly button. “I am your father, and I only want the best for you”—Booth glanced down at the small meteor of hair and lint that he had mined from his navel, momentarily considered it, then carefully placed the artifact on the kitchen counter—“and that means that, above all else, I must be honest.”

Honesty had, in the twenty-two years of their relationship thus far, not proved the slightest burden on Booth. He had taken every “chance at happiness” that he ever wanted—fucked anyone he wanted, said whatever he wanted, left whenever he wanted.

“What?” asked Booth, reading the look on his son’s face. “What is it?”

What was it? It was everything about him.

“That,” said Sam, and flung out a hand to indicate Booth’s gut.

“All right, all right.” His father dropped his shirt and put up his palms. “All better?”

His father claimed that the edge in their relationship dated from their earliest meeting, in a hospital room in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1979. A nurse had handed him a bundle containing his son and, Sam's father would recall, "You peered up at me with your little scalded face, and you did not cry, did not make a single peep. You were enrobed in a kind of rough brown cloth, such as an extra would wear in a biblical production—you resembled a leper, a tiny leper. And you made no fuss at all, just squinted at me with those fierce blue eyes. You looked aggrieved, terribly aggrieved."

At this point in the telling, he would inevitably pause, taking the theatrical hesitation that could be so persuasive on the stage or the screen and so irritating in person. Booth's delivery seemed to suck up the entire atmosphere, stealing away even the air that was already in your lungs. Sam had been gagging for years.

"It was," his father would at last declare, frowning greatly, "most disquieting."

The story was undoubtedly an exaggeration if not an outright fabrication. Booth had been in the business of cheap entertainment for so long that he had gone native. In his telling, everything was a sensation, a shock, a crisis, a betrayal, amazing bad luck, or an unforeseeable confluence. When Sam was younger, his father had let him down. Now that Sam was older, his earlier self's stupidity mortified him. How could he have expected anything else from a man who relished any opportunity to tell strangers that his infant son looked like a leper? Booth's fallaciousness was right there all the time, as inherent as the nose on his face.

In 1969 Booth Dolan had produced, directed, written, and starred in *New Roman Empire*, a no-budget horror movie about hippie teenagers brainwashed by a cornpone Pied Piper. It was a naked allegory wherein Booth's character, Dr. Archibald "Horsefeathers" Law, appeared as the wicked hand of Nixonian politics, sending dazed hippies to their deaths à la Vietnam. It had been a modest success on the drive-in circuit and to this day maintained a certain cachet, primarily among B-movie superdorks. (In his telling, Sam felt, that along with their enthusiasm for Booth Dolan, this breed of cinephile could be relied upon to have an encyclopedic knowledge of all the monsters that had fought Godzilla, Ed Wood, and women-in-prison films.)

Booth had parlayed the minor triumph of *New Roman Empire* and his performance as the charlatan Dr. Law into a career spent mugging and shouting in the lowest category of B-movies. His particularly gassy flair had spiced clunkers from virtually every genre with bathos: horror, western, blaxploitation, sexploitation, sci-fi, fantasy, animation, and any combination thereof. A daylong retrospective could begin with the Nixon-era paranoia of *New Roman Empire* (1971); continue on to *Black Soul Ride* (1972), in which Booth played a racist judge named George Washington Cream and adopted a chicker-fried Southern accent to say things like "Wuhl yer an awl-ful buh-lack wan, ain'cha?"; followed by *Rat Fiend!* (1975), infamous for its utilization of miniature sets in order to make normal rats look gigantic; and featuring Booth's performance as a grizzled "sewer captain" with a "sword plunger"; going next to *Hard Mommies* (1976), wherein Booth's car-wash mafia messes with the wrong group of PTA moms in a belly-baring tank tops; and, as the main feature, *Devil of the Acropolis* (1977), arguably the crown jewel example of Sam's father's artistic offenses, for his portrayal of Plato as an expert in werewolf behavior (as well as a howling example of Hollywood's regard for historical accuracy: Plato is killed by the werewolf in the second act); then put a bow on the day with the first episode in the *Hellhole* trilogy (1983), the

title of which said everything a person needed to know, except maybe that Booth's character, Professor Graham Hawking Gould, was a "satanologist."

Even such a condensed list of Booth Dolan's inanities threatened his son with the promise of a crushing migraine. The idea of an expanded two-day retrospective, meanwhile—including such milestones as his father's voice-over turn as Dog, an all-knowing talking cloud, in what had to be the nadir of druggy cinema, *Buffalo Roam*, about a Nam vet leading a white buffalo to the Pacific Ocean; as well as Booth's role as a lovable ass-squeezing brothel owner and leader of cowboy prostitutes in *Alan II: Return to the Alamo—Daughters of Texas*—held lethal implications. Sam would rather have killed himself or someone else—Booth, hopefully—than suffer through such a sentence.

While the old man's star, such as it ever was, had faded in the late eighties before pretty much winking out completely in the nineties (along with the majority of the B-movie production houses), the earlier films in particular continued to play on cable. To this day, on the highest movie channels, the ones that are all gore and tits and robots, a black-haired Booth can still be found battling evil with a plunger.

■ ■ ■

The acorn of Tom Ritts's mansion was a four-room Sears kit house that dated from the fifties. Since the contractor had purchased it in the eighties, he had expanded it, horizontally and vertically, by a room or two every year, and now it had more rooms than anyone cared to count. Tom's ability to build, indeed had outpaced his wherewithal to furnish. Only a potted plant or a single folding chair occupied the newest six or seven rooms. Bats and squirrels had a knack for getting trapped in the less trafficked windows of the mansion, where they expired of thirst or starvation, to be discovered as webby, desiccated corpses months later. From the exterior, the building looked like something that a very intelligent and precise twelve-year-old might have built from LEGOS. It was a grandiose hobby for such a humble-seeming man. ("None of the choices on pay-per-view sound very interesting, and the next thing I know, I've got my measuring tape out and some drafting paper, and I'm planning a new bathroom or something," he once said apologetically to Sam. "It passes the time. Maybe someday I'll have a family and we can play hide-and-seek.")

The house had gone as far backward as it could. Perched above a steep embankment and upheld by cement pillars, a redwood deck extended to the edge of the property, where the forest cropped up and the land became the town of Hasbrouck's. On a clear morning like this one, the view was glorious; the rustling canopy of orange, red, and yellow swept away for miles, to the umber-colored shapes of the mountains.

Sam leaned against the balustrade and inhaled the crisp air and, as he released the breath, attempted to exhale his irritation along with it. A grand, towering sugar maple stood before the deck. On a branch just a few feet from the deck's railing, a bluebird perched in a resplendent tuffet of leaves and twittered. Sam had a dismal recollection of the anthology horror film *A Thousand Deaths*: Booth had played a barbarian chieftain and bitten the head off an obviously rubber pigeon, which had produced a geyser of fake blood from its neck and drenched his face in syrup.

"But I am being honest! You must admit that the whole story is heavy. There is, throughout, a sort of funereal drumbeat." Booth refused to give up. Showered and dressed, he had tracked his son to the deck and sidled right up beside him, almost shoulder to shoulder at the balustrade. On his way through the house, Sam had laid what had seemed a sure trap to divert his father's attention, setting the television in Tom's study to the Turner Classic Movies Channel, but Booth must have walked by during

commercial break.

“Okay, okay. What if, like, a gigantic hole opens up in the middle of the campus and it swallows all the characters?” Sam asked. “Could there be some fun in that? And suppose if there were mimes, too, a visiting mime troupe, and we put them in the gigantic hole and let them mime for their lives. How about that?”

“This poor young man who becomes a drug addict, for instance, and a little later, abracadabra, he turns into a little puddle of clothes. It is so harsh. And I do understand that college isn’t all fucking and giggles, but it’s certainly more fucking and giggles than you make it seem. I also think that young people are more self-aware than you give them credit for being. In fact, most young people I know, especially the young females, are—”

“Do you listen to anything I say, Booth? Because I have this impression that, to you, my voice is on the same frequency as a dog whistle.”

“No, no. Samuel, I listen to everything you say.”

“Because I was just being sarcastic. About the clowns. Did you catch that?”

Booth raised an eyebrow at him. Errant gray hairs stuck out from the eyebrow like frayed wires. Several of the wires had dandruff. “I thought they were mimes.”

“Yeah.” Sam dumped the last of his coffee over the side of the deck. The bluebird alighted.

Sam was aware that he was not an especially relaxed person. He was reactive. Optimism was not among his favored emotions. But Booth brought out the worst in him. Sam just wanted him to butt out. It was 2002, and Sam was twenty-two. He thought he had earned the right to finally have a bit of his own space. “Can you move away an inch or two, Booth? There’s a whole deck over that way. We don’t have to share this one spot.”

His father’s shrug seemed to imply that the request was over the top, but he was willing to cooperate for civility’s sake. He shifted down the railing a few feet.

“Okay, then,” said Sam. “I’ll grant you that it’s heavy. The story is heavy. So what?”

“So nothing!” Booth’s chuckle boomed across the open air. On film, he had utilized this same sonorous chuckle on many occasions, often when playing the role of an insane person. “It is a very great work of art. There is nothing wrong with that.”

“Terrific. We agree. Thanks.” It was easier to submit. The sun was warm on Sam’s face. He breathed in the good scents of dirt and leaves and thought about the drive to come, the privacy of his car, his future, not seeing having to see this man.

“You are perfectly welcome. But you see, this is a story about college students, and you have endowed it with the gravity of the Manhattan Project. And that is what I mean when I say that it could be construed as a bit *portentous*.” Booth gave the railing of the deck a sharp knock for emphasis and beamed out at the treetops as if he had conquered them. “Think about letting some light into the thing. You can do that, can’t you, think about it?”

Sam nodded. He wasn’t changing a fucking thing.

“Good! That is all I wished to say. However it turns out, I am terribly proud of you.” Booth spread his arms wide. “You are, and always have been, and always will be, an incomparable delight to me, and—I am sure I don’t need to add—to your mother. She could not have loved you more. I could not love you more.”

Sam touched his father on the shoulder and slipped inside the house and upstairs to the attic.

■ ■ ■

Other people found Booth charming. Women generally agreed that he was witty and adorable. Men instinctively took him as an authority. Tom Ritts, as forthright and sterling a character as Sam knew, let Booth sponge off him incessantly. Allie, Sam's mother, had continued to coddle him after their divorce. It could make Sam feel wild if he thought too much about it, as if the whole world were an airtight tank filling with water, but no one else would admit that they were getting wet, let alone help him find some way to escape.

His mother had given up everything for Booth: college, music, her business. Tough, resourceful, withering teaser, Allie had never been one to suffer nonsense—except when it came to Booth, from whom she had been capable of suffering nearly any amount. Tom at least had the excuse of having grown up with Booth. Allie had essentially raised the man's child on her own and absorbed his absence and adultery for nearly twenty years before divorcing him. Then, after everything, she continued to invite Booth to holiday dinners, where he was allowed to sit in his old chair, and talk his bullshit, and eat way more than his share, and act altogether as though he had never been cast from their home.

Sam could recall a particular Christmas Eve in the early nineties. Booth's arrival had been imminent. His mother had been in the kitchen, cooking for her ex-husband.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mom," Sam blurted. He had been thirteen, a craterous zit aching and glistening in the center of his chin.

Allie looked up from the trellis of piecrust that she was attempting to puzzle out. She frowned, blew her bangs out of her eyes. His mother had been one of those middle-aged women whose faces remained smooth while her brown hair spilled white. "Not too disappointed to help set the table, I hope."

"Why?" Sam asked. "Why does he have to come?"

"Because I love him, kiddo," said Allie. "Because he's your father." She smiled and shrugged, her expression full of sympathy and love for Sam, before adding, "And because it's my damn house."

His ears had grown hot. "Mom." What was he supposed to say to that?

His mother had tipped her head from side to side, the same way she did when she was contemplating a restaurant menu. "Just set the table." Without waiting for a response, she returned her attention to the crust. "Oh," she added, "you know, I was flipping through *TV Guide*. *Hard Mommies* is on sixty-four tonight. Have you seen that one? That's the one where Booth plays the mumbly mobster."

■ ■ ■

After Allie's death, Tom offered his attic to absorb the few possessions that weren't liquidated with the house. This was why Sam had come south from Quentinville—the location of Russell College and of his apartment—to Hasbrouck the previous night, to rummage the contents of the attic. He was looking for things to sell.

The attic was a long pine-smelling hallway with canted ceilings and triangular windows on either end. Sam kept to the center of the room so he wouldn't bang his head on the ceiling and sat on the floor, dragging the boxes over to sift one at a time.

There were Sam's baseball cards, his comic books, and a footlocker of red plastic figurines called Nukies that he had collected feverishly for a couple of years in his early adolescence. These one-inch statues were intended—with their humps and bulging eyeballs and claws and dripping flesh—to portray the mutant peoples of the post-apocalyptic world. Sam spared a moment's tender thought to the child who had amassed the little horrors and spent so many solemn, satisfying hours arranging them on surfaces. Then the cards, the comics, and the figurines went into a forty-gallon garbage bag, the Sell Bag.

When their tops were popped, a clutch of cardboard tubes divulged well-preserved posters of Ne

Roman Empire, Devil of the Acropolis, Buffalo Roam, and a few other Booth Dolan classics. The poster went into the Sell Bag, although if he didn't get a fair price, Sam planned to create a Burn Bag.

Last was a shoe box containing pieces of costume jewelry that he could not recall ever seeing his mother wear. He ran a few of the necklaces through his fingers and felt bewildered and unhappy. As often as she had frustrated him, Sam missed his mother to such a painful degree, and on such a basic level—wishing for her at that moment the way he remembered wishing for home one summer when he went away to camp, ecclesiastically—that it made him ashamed and scared. The feeling was so powerful that some interior sluice usually prevented him from thinking about her at all. But the unfamiliar jewelry had him blinking at tears. The beads of one necklace felt hollow between his fingertips, but as hard as he squeezed them, they didn't pop. Sam let out a breath, put the jewelry into the Sell Bag, and wiped at his face with the neck of his shirt.

Wadded in the corner of the shoe box was a faded black cloth. Sam pulled it out. The cloth was lace scalloped at the edges; it was a pair of panties, twelve years old, he knew.

■ ■ ■

Booth had offered to help load the car, but when Sam came downstairs, he discovered his father on the couch in Tom's living room. The television must have snared him on the second pass. On the screen, an alien and some children were flying through the sky on their bicycles against the backdrop of the moon.

Sam watched from the doorway. *E.T.* was among his least favorite movies. He thought it was sentimental and disingenuous. In *E.T.* the kids saved the day. His own childhood of divorce had unquestionably had its moments, but what he remembered most was feeling bewildered and ineffectual. Also, *E.T.* was magic, and magic annoyed Sam. Magic was puppets, lighting, computer animation, and latex.

"You still want to help me carry my stuff out?" he asked, not knowing why he bothered.

"I'll be right there," said Booth, leaning against the arm of the couch, head propped on fist, making no move. He was sitting in exactly the same position when his son stopped by on his way out the door.

"I'm leaving," said Sam.

The older man clicked off the television and, with a grunt of effort, shifted around to look at his son over the arm of the couch. "Already?"

"Yeah." It was about a two-hour drive north to Quentinville.

"Very well, then. Two last pieces of advice. One: have fun! It's supposed to be fun! That is why they call it *entertainment!*"

"Ah," said Sam, "I'd always wondered." The man's philistinism was ceaseless. Like Tom's mansion, it spread ever outward.

Booth flourished the television controller. "And two: get your coverage!"

"Coverage" was the most basic principle of filmmaking, whereby you made sure to "cover," say, the angles of a two-person conversation at a restaurant table. There was a master shot that showed both people, a medium shot of the one on the left, a medium shot of the one on the right, a close-up of the left, and a close-up of the right. Perhaps you also snapped a cutaway or two, the bell ringing above the door as someone enters, maybe, or a geezer on a nearby stool sipping coffee. That was it: you were covered.

Coverage was the director's first responsibility. Coverage was the essence of responsibility. To be reminded of such a thing by Booth Dolan—well, now there was a faultless irony.

Who did the man think he was?

Sam strode into the room, tore the pair of panties from his pocket, and threw it at Booth's face.

~~The article of clothing missed Booth's face and landed on his shoulder, like a very small net.~~ His father recoiled, snatched the panties off, and studied them with a perplexed grimace. It was bullshit, though. He knew. They both knew exactly to whom the panties belonged, and the singularly unpardonable place that they held in their shared history. Sam waited for the lie, waited for it like waves in the dark, the interval between crashes.

"Jesus Christ, Samuel." Booth blinked at him. "Why did you just throw a pair of underpants at me? What is wrong? I'm sorry I got caught up in the film and didn't help load the car."

"Never mind," said Sam, thinking, miserably, He's actually not such a bad actor when he wants to be. "I need to go."

Booth held the panties, crumpled in his hand. "What do you mean, 'never mind'? You don't throw underwear at people without cause. Look, don't hurry off. Relax. Why don't you stay and watch a movie with me?" His grimace opened into an anxious yellow smile. "There's always something good on cable."

"I can't," said Sam. "Goodbye, Booth."

He left his father's hand hanging in the air, left the room, left the house, climbed in his car, put it in reverse, backed out into the street, and got going.

When it came to making the film, Sam began with two key advantages.

The first of these was that *Who We Are* could be made relatively cheaply. The script included no special effects, no costly Hollywood-style spectacles, no stunts, no explosions. Many other elements of a typical production were irrelevant: set design was unnecessary—the college was exactly what they needed it to be; the actors could provide their own wardrobes; and the conceit of the film was such that lighting continuity was not particularly important—all that mattered was that the “day” of the movie gradually fade into “night.”

It wasn't as though Sam didn't care how the movie looked; he didn't want it to look bad, but he didn't want it to look too good, either, and he certainly didn't want it to appear planned or affected. God help him, fucking “covered.” If they couldn't flag a given shot—block the excess light—a little resultant flare on the lens wasn't going to end the world, and it might actually add to the audience's sense of realism. Light did sometimes shine too brightly, after all.

Sam's professor and adviser, Professor Julian Stuart, had greased the wheels of the college bureaucracy and, in exchange for a relative pittance, arranged for twenty days of full access to the major locations. On top of that, much of the necessary equipment was already available to borrow from the film department. Julian had also proved instrumental in helping Sam assemble a cast and crew. To earn an independent study credit, a small group of juniors and seniors had eagerly signed on at no cost except a board.

None of which was to say that the movie could be made for free.

The “relative pittance” that Russell required to allow them to tramp freely about the college grounds was enough to purchase a new car. Because the film department's equipment had been manhandled by thousands of trust-fund fuckwits, there were still a number of pieces that he had to rent, including the camera and several lenses. The 16mm stock that Sam had decided to use was cheap by Hollywood standards, but not by any other standards. Developing fees, video transfer fees, and storage fees were significant and unavoidable. The cast and crew, meanwhile, did have to be fed, and though the summer rates for Russell's dorm rooms were not exorbitant, the cost of a whole hall of them added up.

Sam had also consented to the necessity of hiring one true ringer, a middle-aged makeup artist named Monica Noble who had experience in the theater. When he posted an ad for the position on Craigslist, she initially answered just to mock him for the amount of money he was offering, but ended up signing on because she was attracted by the challenge. It was the makeup artist who had to make the actor's physical transformations—hairstyle changes, beards, scars, etc.—convincing. If she pulled it off, Monica Noble would have quite a calling card for herself. Nonetheless, she had promised Sam, “If you don't hand me eight thousand dollars in new twenties and tens the moment I step off that bus from Philadelphia, I am stepping right back on.”

And those were just the things he had to have. Should he strike a financing geyser, high atop Sam's wish list was the rental of the carnival rides and attractions—Ferris wheel, teacups, duck shooting galleries, etc.—that the college brought in every year for the actual Spring Festival. While he was preparing to make the film without them, their inclusion would add a degree of verisimilitude that couldn't be created otherwise.

No matter how you cut it, rides or no rides, the movie needed at least thirty-five thousand dollars (and preferably three times that amount), every penny of which he needed to raise in under a year.

Which led to the matter of his second great advantage: Sam had determined to absolve himself ~~advance of any and all crimes, moral or otherwise, committed in the service of the film, from the first~~ dollar raised to the locking of the final print. Whatever bullying, manipulation, or duplicity was required, he was duty-bound and preforgiven to do what was best for *Who We Are*. When it was over, he could strive to make whatever amends were possible.

■ ■ ■

“I don’t believe you,” Polly said. “You’re such a totally nice guy.” She was in Florida. Sam was on his couch in New York. It was October then, a couple of weeks after he’d seen Booth in Hasbrouck.

“Not about this. You only get one chance. It can’t suck.”

“Why not?”

Since their breakup the previous spring, the parameters of their relationship had grown murky. Through the end of the school year, they had continued to sleep together on occasion, and since Polly had returned home to live with her parents at their retirement community and take some time off before joining the workforce, they had been having semi-regular phone sex. Sam was careful not to probe too eagerly into the matter of whom besides her parents she had been spending time with, and he was deliberately vague about his own spare hours, not least because there was mortifyingly little to reveal. Since graduating and moving to the apartment, Sam hadn’t done much except work on the script and watch movies checked out from the library. He certainly hadn’t been getting laid.

Polly had the supple, amused voice of a sexy disc jockey, and Sam knew that, unlike a disc jockey, she was sexy in real life. This wasn’t to say she was beautiful—her tits were a little too big, her mouth was a little too big, and her bottom teeth were uneven. Rather, her allure came from her attitude, which was unapologetic, and her perspective, which yo-yoed between sunny and scandalized. Polly’s parents had been in their mid-forties when she was born, too old and tired to put up much of a fight, and the daughter was accustomed to getting her way. At Russell, she had studied to be a preschool teacher. Sam thought she’d be a good one; Polly was smart, not afraid to be silly, but impossible to budge if she didn’t want to budge.

It was true that they shared few enthusiasms. Polly was far more likely to want to curl up on the couch with a novel than go to a movie theater. Fat Russian novels were special favorites because, she said, the combination of sex, violence, and cold weather made her feel “safe and cozy, and so freakin’ lucky not to be a nineteenth-century Russian person.” Televised sports were another passion of hers that Sam couldn’t match. Pretty much anything besides golf and auto racing, she’d watch and sort of narrate what was happening, a habit that by all rights should have been tremendously annoying but which Sam found endearing. “Oh, look!” she’d exclaim after a football player scored a touchdown and all of his teammates piled on top of him. “They’re so happy!”

Although Sam was fairly sure he didn’t love Polly, he liked her a lot—and couldn’t resist the way she would wound him up.

“Why can’t it suck? Is this a trick question?” He could never be certain if Polly was being willfully obtuse in a flirtatious way, or just willfully obtuse.

“No,” she said. “I really want to know. And if you’re going to be crabby about it, maybe I ought to hang up right now.”

Sam sensed that his hopes for phone sex were on the verge of slipping away. He dropped his feet off the couch and sat up. “It can’t suck because it can’t. Because I’m not making it to suck. Who goes into something that they really care about, that’s really personal to them, and thinks, Oh well, it’ll be okay

it sucks?”

~~“All I can say to that, my dear, is that you’ve clearly never been a woman.”~~

Sam was prudent enough to refuse the bait. Polly let him hang for ten or fifteen seconds. When she spoke again, he could hear her smile. “Obviously, you’re not making it to suck, but it’s not a matter of life or death. It’s a movie.”

Polly had never been able to comprehend what it was like to have Booth Dolan for a father. Just the opposite, in fact: after years of listening to Sam’s grievances, it was clear that she had come to regard his alienation from Booth as being pretty adorable. Sam didn’t suppose she’d ever understand—and perhaps this was part of the reason why, despite his attachment to Polly, he couldn’t imagine them together in the long term—but after he’d reflected upon his interaction with Booth that morning at Tom’s, it now seemed to Sam that the relationship with his father had suffered a final break.

One needed look no further than the old man’s quintessential role as the diabolical traveling salesman of cures and elixirs, *New Roman Empire*’s Dr. Archibald “Horsefeathers” Law, to understand that the movie wasn’t a matter of life and death. It was life and death.

■ ■ ■

Early on in the film, Dr. Law—Horsefeathers—holds forth before a crowd of skeptical hippies. He is a grinning fat man in a checkered suit, a neckerchief, and a bowler hat.

“I am not a miracle worker!” he cries, removing his hat with a flourish, letting it tumble end over end along his arm. The charlatan casts around, fixing the eyes of each person in turn. In the background, a off-kilter caper begins, plucked on warbling strings. “I am a physician specializing in the deeper body. There is no magic about this. My medicine is, quite simply, a scientific treatment for the soul!”

Perhaps he was a different person before *New Roman Empire*, but ever since—as long as Sam had known him—Booth had played the part of the magnificent bullshitter ceaselessly. Two busted marriages, two children he saw infrequently, and Booth talked and talked without ever saying anything. Meanwhile, after thirty-plus years in the industry, Sam’s father’s greatest contribution to cinema was, in all likelihood, two days he had spent in 1975 on the set of *Yorick*, one of the many “lost” films of Orson Welles’s cash-strapped late period, as yet and probably forever unreleased. The years had dribbled away for Booth, and despite never being a real director in the first place—real directors did more than get coverage—now he had nothing better to do than criticize his son.

It didn’t matter, as Sam’s best friend Wesley Latsch pointed out, that everyone’s father had cheated on everyone’s mother, and that everyone’s father was mortifying and insufficient in a thousand ways. “You take your old man far too personally,” Wesley said, and Wesley was right. Sam’s resentment was achingly common.

But it just didn’t matter: because Booth was Booth, and Booth was his father.

And because, goddammit, the old fucking pervert had squirreled away a pair of his mistress’s panties for twelve years! And then he had lied about it right to Sam’s face!

Who We Are was only a small independent movie. It might never find distribution, might never make it beyond a few minor midwestern film festivals. But it was important to Sam. It was his statement, his vision, his movie. It wasn’t supposed to be just a couple of hours of escape, of people running around and splatting each other in the face with pies. To him, it was serious. *Who We Are* was about the costs of growing up—and the costs of not growing up. And that was heavy stuff, and Sam made no apology, not to Booth, not to anyone. Maybe it wasn’t fun, and maybe it wasn’t entertainment, but he was going to show them something real.

“I mean, it’s not even a big movie. It’s not like one of these ones with elephants and submarines and everything in it,” Polly went on. “You’re acting like it’s the biggest thing ever.”

“What movie has elephants and submarines?”

“Don’t be a snot. You know what I mean. Like *Star Wars*.”

“Look, Polly, to me, it is pretty much the biggest thing ever. To me, it’s a lot of money and a hell of a lot of work, and I’ve put a lot of thought into it. And all I’m saying is that if I have to kick some ass to make it what I need it to be, then I’m prepared to do that. I’ve never cared about anything so much ever.”

“Well, well, well. That’s quite a statement, young man. Ever?”

“Ever.” Sam decided he’d better throw the track switch before Polly started to prod him about his childhood, or his fears, or some other libido-extinguishing subject. “Let me give you an example: getting this film made requires me to debase myself over the phone, follow the whims of some depraved sex maniac in Florida, I’m prepared to do that.”

“No!” Polly cried. “Absolutely not! I just want to have a nice conversation for once. Besides, you just told me how you were going to squash all us little people to make your opus. I no longer trust your motives.”

“I didn’t say that. I’ve never said the word ‘opus’ in my life.” Frustrated, Sam rose from the couch and began to pace across the twenty or so feet of his apartment’s living space. It had come prefurnished with a desk, a single bed, a strip of maroon carpet remnant, a dusty plant, and a kitchenette, the cabinets of which so far contained one plastic plate and a mostly empty spray bottle of Febreze, both left by the previous resident. The window by the desk offered a view of the parking lot and the identical neighboring sections of the gray-walled, gray-roofed development. Sam looked out the window and saw a couple of boys spitting into the medicine ball-sized pothole in the parking lot. The huge pothole was the landmark he used to find which part of the development he lived in.

“Let’s just talk about something else. What else is happening?”

Sam asked her if he had mentioned the odd, heady smell of the hallways in the complex, like a drugstore, like Silly Putty, that medicinal-industrial odor. Polly said yes, he’d mentioned it. Had she told him about the dear biddy who lived in the neighboring bungalow and knocked on the door at four in the morning to bring them a fresh-picked gourd? He said she had. They were both so careful to stay clear of each other’s social lives, there wasn’t much left over.

“I was afraid that we’d become old and uninteresting,” Polly said. “I just didn’t expect it to happen so soon. What happened to the fascinating boy I went to college with, Sammy?”

“Well, shit, Polly. I don’t know. Hey, are you going to invest in my movie or what?”

Polly shrieked. “Now I feel really soiled! First you want me to help you masturbate, then you tell me I’m dull, and then you ask me for money. What’s next?”

“You give me money?”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Please?”

“More.”

“Pretty please? Pretty, pretty please?”

“See, polite is sexy,” she said, and smacked her lips. “Okay, bitch! Take off your pants, go to the refrigerator, and get out the butter.”

Sam didn’t have any butter—or margarine—but in addition to the plate and the mostly empty spray

of Febreze, his predecessor had bequeathed him a huge jug of electric-blue liquid soap called the Blue, whose label bore a cartoon of an impressively coiffed shark. Once Sam had retrieved the jug from the bathroom, he yanked down the window shade and jumped onto the bed. He wriggled out of his pants and boxers and squirted out a big handful of blue soap. “Got it. Now what?”

Polly directed him to rub up his stuff real good. “But don’t you dare ejaculate before I tell you! Not so much as a dribble!” Sam was close after four or five hard strokes, so he slowed down, limiting himself to the occasional paddle.

For the first time, Polly mentioned that she was alone in her house. Mr. and Mrs. Dressler had gone to the local clam shack for the early-bird special, and here she was in her panties, and now here she wasn’t in her panties. “Oh, look,” she said, “the dining room table . . .” There was a creaking sound as she climbed on top of it—or somehow, like a Foley artist, concocted a noise that perfectly replicated the sound of a 110-pound woman climbing onto a Shaker-style dining room table, which struck Sam as fairly unlikely. Polly informed him that she was pulling up her skirt, lying on her back. The wood was nice and cool against her ass, and across from the table, on the wall behind her daddy’s chair, there was a mirror. “And I can see all the way into myself, Sammy.”

“Jesus,” Sam said. He had started to speed up again and had to squeeze himself to hold off.

“Sammy.” In a whisper, Polly described how she was fingering herself, sliding her finger up and down, separating the hot, slick folds. He better be buttering himself; she was so incredibly tight, that they were going to need all the help they could get. “Sammy, Sammy, Sammy . . .”

The Blue was lathering around his penis and dripping bubbles into his pubic hair, spilling onto the sheets, making a mess. At the same time, he was trying to keep the soap away from the tip of his penis because who knew what the hell was in the Blue. There was a dangerous tingle along his shaft, which might have been his imagination. But he was huge, digging his heels into the mattress, shaking all over. Sam could see clearly enough that what was exciting was that Polly was telling him what to do, that was unlike every other aspect of his existence, wherein he struggled to contain and order. He had a suspicion that he was not the only director who, when it came to sex, liked to switch roles.

“Are you filming me? I want you to film this. This is my movie. My movie.”

“Okay.”

“Whose movie is it?”

“Yours, Polly.”

“Good. Are you ready? Are you on your mark?”

“Uh-huh,” Sam managed to say, and when Polly said, “Go!” he was gone.

■ ■ ■

He asked Polly if she came, too. “Eh,” she said.

“Do you want to keep going?” Sam sort of hoped she didn’t. He wanted to clean up before anything dried. Gobbets of blue soap, bubbles, and semen were mixed and spattered on his genitals, thighs, left hand, and the sheets between his legs. It looked like a member of the Blue Man Group had been shanked to death.

Holding a mingled puddle of soap and genetic material in his cupped hand, he maneuvered himself off the bed and around the kitchen bar to the sink. Sam tucked the phone between his ear and shoulder, turned on the faucet with his clean hand, and stuck his semen-and-soap hand under the water.

“Well . . .” she said.

“What?”

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