

CAFFEINE CINEMA

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This story is dedicated to my wife Karyn, who believed, and still believes.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Part One.

Any day Eddie got up before noon was something like a little victory, and the alarm clock said it was only ten. Eddie smiled.

He wasn't out of bed yet, but he knew he soon would be. Without air conditioning, it was already uncomfortably warm in his apartment. Standing, he peeled off his shirt. He scratched at his ribs, feeling the bones there. Losing weight again?

Leaving his boxers in the basket near the bathroom that served as a hamper, he took a quick shower, toweled off, then stood in front of the mirror. He wiped the fog off the mirror with the towel, considered his reflection. Yes, losing weight. Could do with a shave, but not today. Maybe he'd grow a beard. Cold weather was just around the corner, though you wouldn't think it. Weather changes fast in the Midwest. He ran his fingers through his hair, left it messy. He'd let it dry that way.

He headed back to the bedroom, found clean boxers and put them on. He found his wrinkled work pants on the bedroom floor and fished plain white socks out of the hamper-basket. Clean enough. He kept his work shirt on a hanger in the bathroom. A navy-blue t-shirt, somewhat faded, with the logo for Plainview Cinemas on the front, where the breast pocket would be. Black work shoes completed the uniform.

Dressed, he headed for the kitchen and took his cereal bowl out of the dish drainer. He had two boxes of cereal in the cabinet, one a sugary kid's cereal, one a healthier adult choice. He selected the adult cereal. With bowl, cereal, milk, and spoon on the table, he sat down for breakfast.

Outside, he walked down his street, sticking to the side with the most shade. Sonnerville is a typical Midwest town, with flat terrain and ruler-straight roads. Reynolds State University sat at Sonnerville's center, and the whole town had grown out from that. Eddie lived on Clark street, in an apartment that was actually the second floor of an old house. It was fairly central to everything in Sonnerville, though nothing was very far from anything else in this town.

He stopped at the gas station for coffee, then continued on. A few blocks up to Center, then one over to Hemlock, the street he grew up on. Four houses up from Center street was Connor's house, or more accurately, his parents'. Connor's mom and dad had split during his senior year in college, and each had left town for opposite coasts, his mom to South Carolina, his dad to California. They left the house as it was, and Connor moved in after he graduated. Connor, known as Joshua to his parents, had been living there while he looked for a job.

Eddie walked up to Connor's front door, rang the bell, and waited. He rang it again. Connor appeared, wearing corduroy pants and no shirt. "Sup." He turned away, leaving Eddie to let himself in.

Inside, the house smelled like fried food. "Just on my way to work," Eddie said.

"Yeah?" Connor sat on the couch, hunched over the coffee table, shuffling papers around. In their youth, Connor had been incredibly fit, having a lot of wiry strength in his arms and shoulders. These days, to Eddie, Connor looked scrawny and underfed.

"What's all that?" Eddie sat across from Connor in the recliner.

"Stuff my dad sent me, from the divorce. He wants me to help him sell the house."

"Really?"

"Says I could move out there if I wanted. Plenty of jobs, all that." Connor sat back. "Place is a shithole, though."

"You been there?" Eddie asked.

Connor nodded. "Yeah. Had a guy in school, wanted to see Hollywood, so we took a trip out there. I hated it."

"Hollywood?"

"California."

"Ah." Eddie sipped his coffee.

"Still. There's jobs," Connor said. "Kinda need one of those."

Eddie nodded. Connor had gone to school in Indiana and majored in business. His problem, Eddie knew, wasn't that there weren't jobs available. It was something else. Eddie didn't understand it completely, but he'd always thought of Connor as someone with a plan, and somehow, this had to all be part of his plan. In the meantime, Connor had a part-time clerical job at Reynolds University, which was apparently completely unsatisfying. It all made Connor seem generally depressed, and he'd been drinking a lot more than when he first got back to town.

“What time you gotta be at work?” Connor asked.

“Two.”

“Any good movies out this weekend?”

“Nope.”

“Shit.” Connor stood. “I’m gonna hop in the shower. You stickin’ around?”

“For a bit.”

“Cool.” Connor left for the bathroom.

“Yep.” Eddie picked up the remote, turned on the TV.

Eddie had seen every movie that came out during the summer of 2001. Now that summer was over, he’d lost interest, and a few had escaped his notice. He worked at Plainview Cinemas, part of an unfortunately named chain of multiplex theaters with locations throughout the Midwest. Eddie’s theater, a repurposed warehouse built from beige brick, didn’t much look like a theater in the daylight, with all the neon and signage unlit. He’d walked there from Connor’s, maybe ten minutes straight down Center Street.

He stepped inside, passing from humid heat into a frosty cool. He waved to the box-office ladies and headed back towards the concession stand, to a door marked Employees Only, which led back to the break room and time-clock. There were miniature brooms and long-handled dustpans lined up along the wall. Eddie clocked in, grabbed a broom and dustpan, and got to work.

Stacy was already out in the building, strolling with her broom, ready to clean up after a crowd that had yet to arrive. She was a college student, very thin, with long hair that had once been brown and was now blonde and tied back in a ponytail. She smiled when she saw Eddie.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Same as always. You?”

“Yeah, the same.” She fell into step next to him. Stacy seemed to smile a lot when Eddie was around, but for Eddie’s part, he just wasn’t interested, and he found himself having to hide his indifference. So they walked the halls together, making small talk, just like every shift. There really wasn’t anything to do yet, and that was fine with Eddie.

Just before the first of the evening shows started, Eddie set his broom and dustpan back in the break room and headed upstairs to the projection booth. Larry, the theater’s only full-time projectionist, was reading a newspaper as Eddie approached. The managers all knew how to run the projectors, and ran them when Larry wasn’t working. They figured having someone else trained for the job would be a good idea, so Eddie volunteered.

Larry spotted Eddie as he walked up. “Afternoon,” Larry said, and stood up, slowly. Larry was apparently only in his late thirties, but he looked much older. Larry suffered from chronic back problems, and walked with a limp. He wore a wool cap in the booth, which he liked to keep as cool as possible, for the machines. Eddie liked Larry, who seemed to have a lot more booth experience than his age would have allowed. According to Larry, though, the modern projection booth was nothing like it was in the old days. These days, he said, the machinery was designed to be operated by literally anyone. The old art and skill of the projectionist was all but lost. Now, it was not much harder than loading a tape in a VCR, Larry once said.

Larry consulted the status board mounted on the wall, a black box with a pair of LEDs for each of the auditoriums, indicating the status of each of the projectors. Red meant ready, green

meant running, and no LED meant it needed laced up. “Let’s head to thirteen,” Larry said. “Starts in ten minutes, I believe.”

“Sounds good.” Eddie followed Larry to projector thirteen.

Eddie worked with Larry in the booth until the last movie started, around eleven-thirty. He said goodnight to Larry and headed back downstairs to help clean up. The lobby was mostly deserted, just a handful of stragglers making their way to the auditoriums or the concession stand. Eddie grabbed his broom and started sweeping up.

After midnight, Eddie said goodnight to his co-workers and clocked out. He stepped outside, and was disappointed to find that the temperature outside hadn’t gone down very much. Still very warm and muggy. He considered staying behind and watching a movie, but decided to head home and eat dinner.

Stopping at the grocery store, Eddie bought a frozen pizza and a half-gallon of chocolate milk, which was something of a weekly tradition for him. Pizza and a DVD, in bed around 3am. It was something he looked forward to. The cashiers had caught on to his routine, and seemed genuinely impressed with his consistency. The old lady at the register smiled at him as he paid. “Have fun,” she told him.

Back at his apartment, Eddie had the oven preheating before he took his shoes off. He stood in front of his DVD collection, selected a movie, and switched on his television. He headed into his bedroom to change out of his work clothes.

The phone rang. Eddie had learned to dread the late-night phone call. Last time it was a friend-of-a-friend who had succumbed to alcohol poisoning. For some reason, they’d called Eddie, asking for advice. Eddie said take her to the hospital. The whole call lasted about forty seconds.

Eddie picked up the phone. “Yeah?”

The caller had been Russ, a mutual friend of Eddie’s and Connor’s. Russ had just gotten a call from Connor, who was in the hospital. Russ wouldn’t say much over the phone, he just wanted Eddie to go with him. Russ didn’t like doctors, and liked hospitals less. Eddie switched off his oven and went back outside to wait for Russ.

“Car accident,” Russ said, after Eddie asked. They were on their way to the hospital, but Russ wasn’t taking the most direct route, at least not as Eddie knew it.

“So where are we going?”

“He said he crashed his car into some trees,” Russ said. “I wanna check it out.”

Up ahead, there was a police car parked along the road. They were in an older part of town, near the campus. The street was lined with big, old trees. They saw Connor’s car, off the road and perpendicular to it, smashed up against the gray trunk of a very large tree.

“Shit,” Eddie said, as they drove past. They saw a cop talking to an old man, probably the guy who lived in the nearby house. The old man looked agitated, no doubt upset at the damage done to the tree in his front yard. The tree, Eddie knew, was actually in the city right-of-way, planted by the Public Works department several decades before.

“What the hell did he do?” Russ said, glancing between the wreckage and the road ahead.

“Let’s go ask,” Eddie said.

Russ found parking on the street a half-block from the main entrance to the Emergency Room. Eddie walked ahead of Russ, who had his hands in his pockets and his head down as they walked inside.

“Cool if I wait over there?” Russ asked. He nodded towards the waiting room, then walked over to sit down before Eddie could answer.

Eddie looked around. A few ladies sitting at the desk, checking people in. Nurses or clerks, he wasn’t sure. He also wasn’t sure what the rules were when friends showed up to visit patients in the Emergency Room. He headed for the double-doors that lead back to the treatment rooms, and just walked through.

No one paid him any attention. He kept moving, glancing into the rooms, looking for Connor. He found him in a single room, sitting up in bed, a plaster cast over his left forearm and hand.

“What the hell?” Eddie asked.

“Dude,” Connor said, shaking his head.

“We drove past the aftermath,” Eddie said. “Me and Russ.”

“Where’s he at?”

“Waiting room,” Eddie said, poking around the medical equipment. “Were you drunk?”

“No.”

Eddie waited.

“Seriously. Not a drop.”

Eddie nodded. He started opening drawers and cabinets.

“Hey, you remember Shelly?” Connor asked.

That stopped him. Eddie knew the name, and hearing it brought back memories, not of the girl named Shelly he’d first met when he was twelve, but of his mother.

“Why do you ask?”

“I think she works here,” Connor said. “She’s a nurse, I think.”

“Really.”

“Go check, see if you can find her.”

Eddie went to the door, looked towards the nurse’s station. He started to wonder if he’d even recognize her, but then he saw her. It was the hair, long, brown, curly. And that same sharp nose. It was her. Shelly Ackers. She had to be about thirty now, Eddie figured. She looked so skinny. Eddie remembered her being a bit meatier, curvier.

“Go talk to her,” Connor said.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. He walked over to the nurses’ station. His mind was back at his house, ten years earlier. The same smell of antiseptic, all the medical equipment.

“Shelly?”

“Yes?” she said, not looking up. She was writing on a clipboard.

“You remember my mom?” Eddie asked.

She looked up. “Should I?”

“She was dying. You were sorta looking out for her, keeping her comfortable.” That’s what his dad said. Keeping her comfortable.

“Okay,” she said. She set the clipboard down. “You do look familiar.”

“Eddie,” he said. “Eddie Berk.”

“Berk,” she said, thinking it over. “Stroke, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “My mom.”

She picked up the clipboard, but didn’t look at it. “How’s your dad?” she asked.

“Good,” he said. “Living up in Chicago. Teaches at UIC.”

She nodded, took a deep breath. “Listen, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m really busy here.”

“Sure,” Eddie said. “I can imagine.”

“Are you visiting someone?” she asked.

“My friend Connor,” he said. “Joshua Connor. You met him. When we were younger.”

“Right,” she said.

“I think he’s about to leave,” Eddie said. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Can I call you? Catch up on old times?”

She took another deep breath. Eddie waited. “Sure,” she said.

Eddie watched as she scribbled a phone number on a scrap of paper. She handed it to him.

“Take care of your friend.” she said.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, taking the number. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Right,” she said, and hurried off.

Eddie stood at the nurses’ station, watched her disappear down the hall into a room. He turned and headed back to Connor’s room.

“Was it her?” Connor asked.

“Yeah, sure was.”

“What’d she say?”

He looked at the number, which was still in his hand. “Nothing,” he said, and pocketed the slip of paper. “You ready to go?”

“I think so,” Connor said. “Waiting for the doctor.”

“So how’d your car end up in the trees anyway?” Eddie asked.

Connor shook his head again. “Driving angry, dude. Driving angry.”

Eddie nodded.

They grabbed Russ from the waiting room and left the Emergency Room. Russ dropped Connor off first, then Eddie. Finally back in his apartment, Eddie switched his oven back on, then went to change out of his work clothes. He took the scrap of paper out of his pocket, looked at it for a bit, then folded it up and put it in his wallet.

Eddie rolled out of bed the following Tuesday morning and ate breakfast, skipping the shower. He put on the least dirty clothes he had and gathered up his laundry and stuffed it into an old sea-bag. With the bag over his shoulder, he left the house and headed for the laundromat.

He did his laundry as far away from campus as he could get. The place was pretty clean, and usually busy, but it was all but empty when Eddie arrived. Just one old woman sitting in one of the plastic chairs. She looked up but didn’t smile. Eddie just nodded. He loaded the washing machine, sat down, and waited.

Back at home, his phone was ringing as he unlocked his door. He sat the sea-bag down inside his front door and went to answer his phone.

“Yeah?”

“What, were you sleeping through this?” Eddie recognized his dad’s voice. He heard the television in the background.

“Through what?” he reached over to switch on his own television.

“We’re under attack,” his dad said. On the screen, he saw two buildings, buildings he’d only seen in movies. The World Trade Center. Both buildings had columns of smoke rising from them.

“What the hell?”

“They crashed planes into the Towers,” his dad said. “One after the other. Something happened at the Pentagon, too.”

“Holy shit.” Eddie sat down. “Why?”

“Don’t know. Listen. You be safe, okay? Just be safe.”

“Yeah, will do.”

“I love you son.”

Eddie watched the news for a little longer. One building crumbled, throwing up a cloud of dust and smoke and debris. Then, a little later, the other building fell.

“There are no words,” the newscaster said. “There are no words.”

His phone rang a few times throughout the morning, but he didn’t answer. Eventually it stopped. He sat watching the news, then ate some lunch. Sometime around two, the phone rang again, and this time he answered. It was Connor. They talked a bit about what they’d seen on the news.

“You talk to Russ?” Eddie asked.

“Yeah, he’s just chilling at his house.”

“Let’s head over.”

Eddie got to Russ’ house before Connor. Stacy was there, too.

“Thought you were working today,” Eddie said.

“They closed the theater,” Stacy said. “They didn’t call you?”

“No, I wasn’t on the schedule today.”

They sat watching the news until Connor showed up. “So now what?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” Eddie said. He looked at his watch. “I’m kinda hungry.”

“Nothing’s open,” Russ said.

“Why the fuck not?” Connor asked. He sounded like he’d dipped into the booze already.

“Dude, we’re about to get bombed or something,” Russ said.

“What about the Chinese Buffet?” Eddie suggested. It was a few blocks away. “I’ll bet they’re still open.”

“Sounds good,” Stacy said.

“I can do Chinese,” Connor said.

There were only a few other customers at the Chinese place. The owners had stayed open, but they had the radio on, and news of the morning’s attacks were broadcast all over the restaurant. They tried to keep the conversation light as they ate, but the talk turned to dark topics, about the end of the world, the possibility of nuclear or chemical war, the rumors of the government reinstating the draft. Russ and Connor both agreed to break each other’s legs if they got draft notices in the mail. They laughed, while the radio announcers spoke of thousands killed.

Later, they drove over to Plainview Cinemas and parked in the deserted parking lot. They sat on the hood of Russ' car, talking. More of their friends showed up, and they all spent the evening talking and hanging out, trying to keep their spirits up. The sun went down, and they stayed in the parking lot, watching the skies. No planes, not a single one. Not something they'd look for on any other day.

Eddie looked over at the theater as one of the front doors opened. Larry stepped out, then turned to lock up.

"I'll be right back," Eddie said. He jogged over to Larry. "Hey!"

"Yeah, I saw you," Larry said, still trying to lock the door. "Can't find the key."

"What were you doing in there?"

"Watching a movie," he said, pocketing his keys. "Watching several, actually."

"You heard the news?"

"Of course. That's why I'm here." He looked past Eddie towards Russ and Stacy and Connor and the half-dozen other of their friends. "What the hell are you guys doing?"

"Just hanging out," Eddie said. "What're you up to now?"

Larry checked his watch. "Thinkin' I might go close down Joker's."

"Yeah?"

"Seems like the place to be," Larry said. "I'll buy you one."

Eddie glanced back towards Connor and the crew. "Let me tell them I'm leaving."

"I'm sure you can catch up," Larry said, then starting walking in the direction of Center Street.

"I had to cross the picket line once," Larry was saying. They had a table at Joker's, which Eddie had always thought of as a college bar. There didn't seem to be any college kids in the place, though. Larry was drinking bourbon, straight and neat. Eddie had a bottle of Sam Adams.

"When?" Eddie asked.

"Ninety-five. My wife was pregnant, the goddamn union picked about the worst time to go on strike. I had a friend, old guy, managed a twin in Downers Grove. He set me up with some shifts. Things were okay. For about a week."

"What happened? You get in trouble?"

"Something like that," Larry said. He emptied his glass. "Couple of guys showed up, threatened the manager. Next thing I know I'm in the hospital, broken wrist, busted back. Couldn't remember what happened. Official story was that I fell down the stairs." He chuckled, then shook his head. "Hell of a thing. I gotta sleep sitting up now. Can't lay down."

"This was up in Chicago?"

"Nearby. I got a job at some insurance company after that. Figured it was safer. They laid me off not too long after that." He stood slowly, took his glass over to the bar. Eddie watched as he ordered another bourbon, then brought it back to the table.

"So you like working at Plainview?" Eddie asked.

"It's not bad," Larry said. "Pay's good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The job ain't what it used to be, but there's still room for a little art, you know? A little showmanship."

"Really?"

“Sure. Everything’s so goddamn automated now. But that just makes it easier to screw it up. Makes it really easy, actually. So you pay attention to what you’re doing, make your splices clean, place your cues properly, you can still be good at it.” Larry was quiet for a moment.

“At being a projectionist?” Eddie asked.

“At being a projectionist. You know, the best kind of projectionist is the kind the audience never has to think about. They never know he’s there.” He took a sip of his drink. “Or she, I guess.”

“You ever train a girl?”

“Had a girl train me, actually.” He smiled. “Good times.”

They had a few more, and something in their conversation reminded Eddie of the number in his wallet, of Shelly Ackers. He excused himself and found a payphone. Luckily, Joker’s seemed to be a relatively quiet place, quiet enough for a phone call. Maybe that was because of the day’s events.

“Hello?” Shelly answered after five rings.

“Shelly? It’s Eddie Berk.”

“Yeah?”

Eddie realized he wasn’t really prepared for this call. “Been one hell of a day, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure has.”

“You doing okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Eddie paused. “I don’t know.”

She sighed. “Sorry. Things were bad already. Today, well, it just made a bad time worse. I really don’t mean to be so bitchy.”

“It’s okay.” He glanced over at Larry. “I’m in a bar with a grizzled old projectionist.”

She laughed. “Friend of yours?”

“Coworker. I work at Plainview Cinemas.”

“I see.” She was quiet for a moment. “Listen. I’m kind of in a weird place right now. I wanna catch up with you, I think that’d be great. But I’m about to start chemo. I’ve got Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.”

Eddie held the phone, waiting for further explanation. The bar had suddenly become dreadfully silent. “What’s that?” he asked finally.

“It’s cancer, Eddie. I’ve got cancer.”

“Shit.”

“Just what I said. I wanted you to know that, though. I’ve got kind of a long road ahead of me.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. His stomach started to churn. He felt a cold sweat on his forehead. “I can imagine.”

“The outlook is mostly good. They saw a mass in my lungs, so I’ll need radiation, too. But,” she paused. “I’ll be okay, Eddie.”

“I really hope so,” Eddie said.

“So, it was really nice seeing you, but I’ve gotta deal with this thing. Okay?”

Eddie swallowed. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Eddie.”

“Goodnight.”

Part Two.

In the weeks following the attacks in New York and Pennsylvania and DC, Eddie found he could only really think about Shelly. Something about the word ‘cancer,’ with its implication of a slow, painful death, along with its proximity to his own life, weighed heavier on his mind than the tragic events back east, all those people who lost their lives, all those grieving families.

He did think about them, though, the attacks. The world was a different place, and it felt like a different place.

Eddie kept busy at work, avoiding the usual idle chatter with Stacy and Larry and the rest of his coworkers. Too much on his mind. He’d called Shelly a few days after she told him about her sickness, but she wasn’t home. He found he knew almost nothing about cancer, and exactly nothing about her specific disease. Connor would know. He seemed to know a lot about almost everything. But he hadn’t asked.

Eddie wasn’t much of a drinker, but recent events had been working to change that. He was working a Wednesday night, a little over three weeks after the attacks, and was seriously craving a beer. He’d called Connor and a few other friends earlier in the evening and asked if anyone wanted to meet up. Now, cleaning up the lobby, Eddie could see Connor through the front doors, pacing in front of the theater. Couldn’t wait, Eddie figured.

Putting away his broom and dustpan, Eddie clocked out and went outside. It was starting to cool off in the evenings, becoming comfortable, the sort of weather Eddie could actually enjoy. Connor seemed a little morose, and they talked very little as they walked in the direction of downtown.

“We going to a bar?” Eddie asked. “I don’t feel like drinking in a bar.”

“Just walking,” Connor said. “Nice outside.”

“Sure is.”

They were passing a parking garage, a relatively new structure in Sonnerville. It was five levels high, making it taller than all of the existing buildings on the block. It was rumored that a few new, taller buildings would be going up soon. Progress.

“Let’s head up here,” Connor said.

“Up where?” Eddie asked, but Connor was already heading into the garage. Eddie followed him to the stairs, then up to the top level, a climb that seemed to be rougher for Connor than it was for Eddie.

“Jesus, I’m out of shape,” Connor said as they pushed through the door at the top of the stairwell.

“What’s up here?” Eddie asked.

“Nothing,” Connor said. “Perspective, maybe.”

“Perspective?”

Connor leaned on the short wall at the edge, looked out over the city. Eddie joined him. It wasn’t nearly as hazy as it had been on previous nights, and they could see for a good distance in all directions.

“Great thing about the Midwest,” Connor said. “You can see for miles.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “No approaching army would stand a chance.”

“True.” Connor was looking down now, leaning over to get a view of the sidewalk directly below. They stood for a while, silently looking over Sonnerville. It was a quiet town, from any altitude.

“I took up smoking in college,” Connor said after a while.

Eddie looked at him. “Really?”

“For about a year. Goddamn filthy habit.”

“Yeah.” Eddie was genuinely surprised. Connor had always been the most health-conscious of anyone Eddie knew.

“Guess at some point, I just said ‘fuck it.’” He lunged up onto the wall, swung his legs over, and sat with his feet hanging out over the sidewalk.

“Okay.”

“People say they figure out who they really are in college,” Connor said. “I missed that part, I think.”

“So where does that leave me?” Eddie asked. He started to feel a bit anxious about Connor sitting up on that wall. Eddie’s mind had been filled with thoughts of death and dying, and this was one person he didn’t want to think of as being in peril.

“Guess you’ll never figure it out,” Connor said. He was looking down past his feet, to the pavement below. “Just like me.”

Eddie tried to figure out what to do, thought for a second he should step forward and hug him, which might console him and would have the added benefit of keeping him from jumping, if that was his plan. Christ, he didn’t want to think about Connor jumping.

Instead, Eddie looked around, hoping to find something to distract Connor. His eyes fell on a dark shape, a building maybe a half-mile away, barely lit by the surrounding buildings and streetlights. He knew what it was. The old Salem Theater, a long-dormant single-screen theater.

“How long has that theater been closed?” Eddie asked. He knew the answer already. He started walking away from Connor, his back to him, holding his breath. After a few long seconds, Eddie heard Connor’s feet hit the parking deck behind him.

“What theater?”

Eddie pointed. “The Salem.” Eddie stopped and leaned on the wall.

“Don’t know. Twenty years, maybe? Used to show porn until they closed it down.” Connor stood next to Eddie, leaning on the wall, but thankfully keeping his feet on the deck.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Gross.” Eddie, of course, had known about the porn.

“You talk to Shelly at all?” Connor asked.

“Some,” Eddie said. “She has cancer, dude.”

Connor was quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

“Started chemo a few weeks ago.”

“Shit. That sucks. She gonna be okay?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t talked to her since I found that out.”

“Why not?” Connor asked.

Eddie shrugged. “Don’t really know what to say.”

“Hey, how are you? Do you need anything? That’s a start.” Connor slapped him on the shoulder.

Eddie chuckled. “Hey, you have beer at your house? I could use one.”

“I do, actually,” Connor said. “Should we give Russ a call?”

“I called him earlier. Said he didn’t feel like drinking.”

“Just us, then.” Connor said, and headed for the stairs.

“Sounds good to me,” Eddie said. And it did. Connor was starting to worry him. Maybe he’d talk if they were alone. There’d be no chance of that, Eddie knew, if there was anyone else there.

Eddie fell asleep on Connor’s couch, and woke up with a headache. He had the day off, and figured at some point he’d try to call Shelly. But first he needed coffee, a shower, and a change of clothes.

He let Connor sleep and left quietly. Connor hadn’t said much the night before, and certainly didn’t elaborate on his college experimentation with nicotine. They watched some television, drank a few beers, and eventually fell asleep. Connor had gone up to his own bed at some point, leaving Eddie on the couch, still wearing his shoes.

Eddie stopped at the gas station for coffee. It was nine in the morning when he got back to his apartment. He took a shower, but it didn’t help his head. He sat in his living room, drinking his coffee. He finished the cup just sitting there in silence, then got up to call Shelly.

“Hello?” Shelly answered after three rings this time.

“Hey. It’s Eddie.”

“Hey. How are you?”

“I’m good. You?”

Shelly paused. “I’m doing okay. It’s been rough.” She definitely sounded different. Tired.

“Yeah. How’s everything going?” Eddie asked.

“Too soon to tell,” Shelly said. “The chemo takes a lot out of you, you know?”

“Yeah.” Eddie thought about it. “Well, no.”

She chuckled. “So what’s up?”

“I’m off today. I thought I’d call, see if you needed anything?”

Another pause. “I don’t think so,” she said.

“Some company then?”

A longer pause. “I’m kind of a mess right now,” she said.

“That’s okay,” Eddie said. “Really.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Great,” Eddie said. “Where’s your place?”

She gave him the address. He started to write it down, then realized he knew exactly where it was. Two blocks away, maybe less. “Wow,” he said, “you’re really close.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sure you don’t need anything? I can stop by the store.”

“No, I’m good,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

“See you.”

Eddie hung up, smiling.

Shelly really did look like a mess.

She met him at the door in pajamas. She wore a hat, but it didn’t cover her whole head, and Eddie could see that the back and sides were bald. Her hair was gone. All of it, on her head, her eyebrows. She looked pale and fragile, and moved slow. Only a few weeks of treatment had done this, Eddie thought.

Eddie stepped into her apartment. She kept it dark, with the curtains tightly drawn. It smelled stale and musty. It was a nice enough place, though. She lived in an older apartment building, far enough from campus so that her neighbors weren't all students.

Shelly sat down on the couch and pulled a blanket over her legs.

"Haven't cleaned up much recently," Shelly said. She seemed out of breath.

"It's cleaner than my place," Eddie said. Which was true. Not much clutter anywhere.

"Thanks."

"So. I have to be honest," Eddie said. "I don't really know much about, you know, what you're going through."

She sighed. "Not much to say. Chemotherapy, radiation therapy. My hair's gone." He touched her hat. "My immune system's a bit weak, so don't touch anything."

"Do you have to get chemo every day?" he asked.

"I've gone twice so far," she said.

"Just twice?"

She nodded.

"Wow," Eddie said. "Do you have family in town?"

"Not really," she said. "My parents live up near Chicago. I have a lot of friends who are nurses, in case I need something. Help, I guess. They give me rides, things like that."

"No husband? Boyfriend?"

She shook her head. "One of those supposed to help with cancer?"

"For all I know," Eddie said. "Sorry, I'm no good at catching up, I guess."

"It's okay," Shelly said, then smiled. "How's your dad?"

"Good. He called recently," Eddie said, thinking about the matter-of-fact way he'd told Eddie about the attacks. "Sounds real good. He's teaching up at UIC."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Classic Literature."

"Really," Shelly said. "I can see that."

"Yeah." He remembered their house on Hemlock, the hospital bed they'd set up in the spare room, which had been full of his mom and dad's books until it was turned into a treatment room. He could remember his parents cooking together before his mom got sick, and standing side-by-side at the sink doing dishes after meals. "So you're a nurse."

"Yep," she said. "Six years. Been at that same hospital."

"Might have seen you if I had insurance," Eddie said. "And I went and got myself injured."

"And I happened to be working." She chuckled. "I work a lot. That's the joke."

"How much?"

"Right now? Not at all. A month ago? Sixty hours a week. Sometimes more."

"Jesus," Eddie said. "I work about fifty a week, but it sure ain't nursing."

Shelly smiled.

Eddie spent his shift the next day up in the booth with Larry. They had a broken projector, and the audience wasn't getting a picture with their movie. Larry had stopped the projector just one or two trailers into to it. Nothing the customers would get worked up about.

Eddie tried to watch him work, but Larry's head was blocking his view. He looked out the porthole into the auditorium. There was maybe a dozen people in there, waiting for the movie to start back up. Stacy was in there, talking to the customers. She was laughing.

“Got it,” Larry said. He pressed the start button and stepped back. Picture looked good. Eddie watched for a bit.

“Didn’t take long,” Eddie said. He looked back at Larry, who nodded and walked away. Eddie followed.

“She’s cute,” Larry said.

“Who’s that? Stacy?”

“That her name?” Larry smiled.

Eddie smiled back. “Yeah, I guess she’s cute.”

“I was working at this four-screen, they’d gotten a new manager. He’d been there a few days before I got there. He wanted to show off to the lady ushers, so he’d brought in his leaf blower. Showed them how a man cleans a theater.”

They stopped at projector four. “Go for it,” Larry said.

“You got it,” Eddie said, and started lacing up the projector,

“So this guy’s been cleaning the theaters like that for a few days, and I see him doing it. Started at the back with the leaf-blower, blew everything up towards the screen. I went downstairs and showed him what he’d been doing. Couldn’t see it with the theater lights, too dim, but I brought a flashlight, showed him all the little pieces of candy and popcorn and garbage that were stuck to the screen.” He laughed.

“So what happened?”

“Screen’s not something you can clean on your own. He had to call in a specialist, this old Indian, traveled around the country cleaning screens. Not cheap, but definitely worth it. Those screens looked brand new when he was done.”

“Lesson learned,” Eddie said.

“I hope so.” Larry was looking over his shoulder. “Backwards.”

Eddie stopped. He’d run the film through the projector flipped the wrong way. “Shit.”

Later, Eddie sat in the break room, eating a sandwich and idly flipping through a newspaper someone had left in there. The day’s shift would be a long one, open to close, so a meal that consisted of more than Pepsi and popcorn was not a bad idea.

The door opened. Eddie looked up to see Bradley, the theater’s manager. “Got a minute?” he asked.

Eddie sat his sandwich down. “Just the one.”

Bradley sat down. “Sorry to do this now, but I didn’t want to wait. Larry says you’re doing good.”

Eddie nodded.

“We’ve had a bit of a shake-up. Sarah’s leaving in a month.”

“Really,” Eddie said. Sarah was an assistant manager.

“Not for public discussion, of course,” Bradley said. “We want to do something a little different with that vacancy.” He smiled. “May be a good thing for you.”

“Booth manager,” Eddie said, later, talking with Larry. “That’s what he said.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that,” Larry said. He was sitting in his usual spot in the booth. “The idea is to put someone in charge of the booth, populate it with kids.” He chuckled. “Job sure ain’t what it used to be.”

“What do you mean, ‘populate it with kids?’” Eddie asked.

“Same sort of kids that sell popcorn, tear tickets,” Larry said. “Pay ‘em seven bucks an hour. Put one guy in charge who can maintain the machines, train the new staff. A babysitter, mostly. Save a bundle.”

“They didn’t ask you?”

Larry smiled. “They did. I declined. Don’t really want to be in charge of anything.”

“But you’d take orders from me,” Eddie said, smiling.

“You thinking about taking the job?”

Eddie shrugged. “Haven’t really thought about it.”

Larry stood up. “Well, think about it. Bradley, he’s a lifer. Should’ve gone to college, but he’s been working here for ages. He’s gotten stagnant.” He started walking towards one of the projectors.

Eddie followed. “Stagnant?”

“Can’t really get much higher,” Larry said, “can he? Twenty-five and a general manager? And if he has to leave for some reason? Where’s he gonna go that’ll pay him the same?”

“I see what you’re saying,” Eddie said. Although he really didn’t. A job’s a job, and there’s plenty worse he could be doing. “Well, I told him I’d think about it.”

“Do that.”

Eddie tried to call Connor from the break room at the end of his shift, but there was no answer. He called Russ, but he hadn’t seen Connor in a couple days. Eddie hung up and clocked out.

Eddie picked up a frozen pizza on his way home. It was after midnight when he switched on his oven and kicked his shoes off.

After he ate and watched his movie, Eddie laid in bed, thinking about Bradley’s offer.

He remembered the last time he visited his dad up in Chicago, about a year earlier. They’d had dinner at a restaurant in Greektown. Eddie got there first, then Dad showed up on the arm of the hostess, who guided him to Eddie’s table. Dad ordered a bottle of wine. They talked about the future, about Eddie’s plans, and when it became clear that Eddie had no real plans, they stopped talking for a bit. It was hard for Eddie to read Dad’s face, his eyes hidden behind those dark glasses. Eddie started to feel ashamed and uncomfortable, but then Dad raised his glass.

“You have a good head on your shoulders,” Dad said. “There’s still plenty of time to figure out what you want to do with the rest of your life.” He smiled. “I have faith in you, son.” He drank.

Eddie raised his own glass, a gesture his father couldn’t see, and drank.

He remembered his mom’s funeral, all of their extended family standing in the funeral home around the casket, reciting the rosary prayer in an eerie monotone. Eddie didn’t know any of the prayers, so he just stood quietly, his father’s hand on his shoulder, waiting for it to end so he could get away from the casket. He remembered feeling scared, listening to his relatives, wondering what the prayer meant.

Eddie’s mom hung on for four months after the stroke, before Dad finally decided to let her die. She spent that entire time laying in a hospital bed, in a room Eddie refused to set foot in. He would just watch the nurses and Shelly from the doorway. To Eddie, it wasn’t his mom in that bed, not anymore. His mom had died the day they found her on the floor in the living room, shaking and staring at the ceiling.

Eddie looked at the clock. Three in the morning. His bosses would want an answer. And he knew what his answer would be. He'd take the job.

Tired as he was, it made perfect sense. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

A few weeks later, on the day he finally and officially got promoted, Eddie worked a relatively short shift and went to the break room to make some phone calls. Shelly wasn't feeling well, and seemed kind of annoyed to hear from him. Connor still wasn't answering his phone. Eddie would've called Dad, but it would've been long distance.

Eddie left the theater around nine at night. He didn't go to the store for his frozen pizza, but headed for Hemlock instead, to Connor's house. He'd been stopping there as often as he could, and calling nearly every day without success. Eddie was worried, and realized, walking up to Connor's front door, that he'd been worried for a while.

Eddie knocked, then knocked again. He peeked in the windows. No lights, no movement. He took out his wallet and pulled out an old expired phone card, a plastic card the same size as a credit card, but just a bit thinner. Eddie slid the card into the door jamb and felt it contact the latch, and after a bit of prying and wiggling, the door swung open. Eddie smiled. First time lucky.

Eddie walked through the house, checking for notes or phone numbers, anything that might tell where he went. He stood over the phone and the little Caller I.D. box, pressing the buttons and seeing Eddie's own number, or the theater's, or Russ'. It told him nothing. He hesitated checking the bedroom, imagining Connor hanging by the neck from ceiling, but after searching the entire house, Connor was nowhere to be found.

Eddie left through the front door, making sure it was locked. Too late to bother the neighbors, Eddie thought. He walked back to Center Street and to the grocery store.

Eddie stood in the liquor aisle, looking up and down at the mostly brown bottles of alcohol. He tried to remember what Larry was drinking at Joker's. Bourbon, but which brand? He found a bottle of Jim Beam, marked down to what Eddie assumed was a good price. He carried the bottle to the register.

Russ and Stacy were watching television when Eddie showed up. He asked Russ for a glass and offered to share his bourbon. Stacy had a glass to celebrate Eddie's promotion, and made a face with every sip she took. Eddie found the burn of the bourbon a little uncomfortable at first, but he got used to it as the night wore on.

Eventually, sitting in the armchair with his feet up, Eddie realized he'd hit his limit. He closed his eyes as the room spun around him. He focused on the sound of the television, trying to keep himself from getting too disoriented. He could hear Russ and Stacy talking, not paying him any attention.

And that was just fine with Eddie.

Eddie woke up, still in the recliner. His eyeballs felt swollen. He stood slowly, looked around the living room. The sunlight hurt. Russ had probably gone to bed, maybe with Stacy, but not likely. He made his way to the kitchen and drank two glasses of water. After finding and putting on his shoes, not quite an easy task, he stepped outside.

Back at his apartment, he kicked his shoes off. The water he drank at Russ' still felt heavy in his stomach, but he drank another glass. He knew he needed breakfast, and he really needed coffee. All he wanted to do was go to sleep. Nothing else mattered. He had a new job, and none of the people he cared about were there to celebrate with him, to help him drink his bourbon, which he suddenly realized he'd left at Russ'.

"Fuck it," he said. He was halfway to his bed when the phone rang.

Could be Connor, back in town after weeks of no contact.

Could be Shelly, feeling better and wanting to hang out.

Could be Dad, calling with more bad news.

He didn't care. The phone kept ringing. He laid down in his bed, pulling the blanket over his head, hoping whoever was calling him would just give up.

Part Three.

Eddie stood in the break room, looking over the staff schedule posted on the bulletin board. Everyone had a shift on Friday. That would be the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday.

"Fucking stupid," Eddie said to himself. His shift would be open to close, a full fifteen hours.

"What is?" Stacy was standing next to him.

"Black Friday," he said. "People spending money on shit they don't need."

"Like movies?" Stacy said.

"Exactly." Eddie stepped away from the schedule. "Wish I was working tomorrow. Ain't doing shit else."

"No turkey?" Stacy asked.

"Nope."

"That's really sad, Eddie," she said.

He had a few minutes between starting projectors, so Eddie went downstairs to the break room and called Shelly.

She picked up after one ring. "Hello?"

"You sound better," Eddie said.

"A little," she said.

"Listen, do you have plans for tomorrow?"

"Sleeping, television, more sleeping."

"Well," Eddie said, "maybe I can come over and cook us some kind of dinner?"

"You make it sound so appetizing," she said. "Some kind of dinner."

"It'll be some kind," Eddie said. "Sound like a plan?"

"Sure," she said. "I don't have much in the way of ingredients, though."

"That's okay," Eddie said. "I'll figure it out."

When Eddie got home that night, instead of heading up to his second-floor apartment, he went down into the basement. It was dusty and smelled faintly like sewage, and lit only by a few bare bulbs that hung from the ceiling. There were boxes on shelves along the wall, some

belonging to the downstairs tenant, some belonging to Eddie, or rather, to Eddie's dad. Dad didn't want to keep them, but Eddie couldn't let them go.

One by one, Eddie pulled the boxes down and rifled through them. It took longer than he expected. Each box was stuffed with things from his past. The various knick-knacks and books and papers triggered a wide spectrum of memories. Eddie didn't go through this stuff much.

He finally found what he was looking for. His parents, mostly his mom, kept notebooks full of recipes. They didn't own any cookbooks. Instead, they experimented with their meals, and wrote down the results in the notebooks. Academics, Eddie thought.

He piled the notebooks on the floor and put the boxes back on the shelf. After straightening up a bit, he gathered up the notebooks and headed upstairs.

He put in a DVD but pretty much ignored it. He sat on his couch looking through the notebooks, trying to find a recipe that was within his cooking abilities, and that didn't require him to buy too much at the grocery store, not because of the expense, but the fact that he had to walk everywhere. He would need to go soon, since his local grocery store would be closing at midnight. Normally it would be open twenty-four hours a day, but the next day was Thanksgiving.

Eddie checked the clock. One hour left. He had his recipes narrowed down to three. He picked one at random, a simple chicken dish. He shut off the DVD player and television and headed out.

Back home, he turned on his oven for a frozen pizza. Everything else went in the fridge. After double-checking he had everything, he kicked off his shoes and sat on the couch.

"This'll be good," he said.

There was a parade on every channel the next morning. Eddie had arranged to be over at Shelly's around two in the afternoon, which meant he had a few hours to kill. He sat on the couch in his underwear, flipping between the parades for a while, then put in a DVD, then another. Finally, he got up to shower, got dressed, gathered up his groceries, and headed out.

He arrived a few minutes early at Shelly's, a grocery bag in each hand. He set one bag down and knocked. No answer. He knocked again. He checked the knob, found it unlocked, and opened the door.

Shelly was laying on the floor a few feet from the couch, curled up on her side. She was wearing a robe over her pajamas. She wasn't moving.

"Fuck." Eddie stood in the doorway, frozen, but just for a few seconds. He dropped the bag and moved towards Shelly, kneeling down next to her. He reached out to feel for a pulse, saw that his hand was shaking.

She was breathing, fast and shallow. Her lips were moving, but she couldn't talk.

"Shelly?" Eddie put his hand on her shoulder. She jerked a bit, and her eyes opened. "It's me."

She closed her eyes, and Eddie stood. He picked up the phone and dialed 911. Stammering, he asked for an ambulance but found he couldn't give many details. His hands were still shaking.

After hanging up, he went back to Shelly. After a moment, he went back to the door to pick up his groceries, dropping them in the kitchen out of the way. He left the door open so the

paramedics could get in easier, then wondered if they would be able to see the number if the door was open. He stood over Shelly, trying to decide.

“Eddie?” Barely a whisper.

Eddie knelt down, so quickly it made his knee hurt. He took her hand. “Ambulance is on the way.” His hand was still shaking, but he realized that Shelly was shaking as well, shivering. Eddie reached over to the couch and snagged the corner of the blanket, pulling it over her. “It’s gonna be okay,” he said. “Just stay with me, okay?”

Eddie waited.

The paramedics arrived, two of them, a man and a woman. Eddie stepped aside to let them work. He answered their questions as best he could, though he still didn’t know much about her cancer and her treatment.

The paramedics worked quickly, and had Shelly on the gurney within two minutes. They asked if he wanted to ride with them to the hospital. Eddie nodded. He looked around and picked up a set of keys on the kitchen counter. He left the groceries on the floor and followed the paramedics out the door, locking up behind him.

The nurses and medical people at the emergency room had moved into high gear the minute they saw who was on the gurney. A swarm of them followed the gurney back to the rooms, leaving Eddie in the waiting room. He sat, watching the doors, not wanting to sneak back like he did when Connor was there, not wanting to do anything that might jeopardize their work. For the moment, he was content to wait.

After a while, a nurse came out and sat down next to Eddie. “She’s awake,” the nurse said. “She told us you weren’t family, that you two aren’t romantically involved, so legally I can’t share anything with you. You understand, right?”

Eddie nodded. “As long as she’s okay,” he said. He tried to read her nametag, but it was flipped backwards.

“That’s legally, you understand.” She smiled. “But she said it was okay to talk to you, so here’s what’s going on. She was dehydrated. The doctor thought she might have an infection, a urinary tract infection, which is bad news for someone undergoing chemo.”

“Okay.”

“We’re moving her upstairs. Her doctor wants her to stay overnight. I’ll come get you after we’ve moved her,” the nurse said. “Sit tight, okay?”

“Thanks,” Eddie said. “I’ll be right here.”

“You hungry? Thirsty? Our cafeteria’s not too bad.”

“I’ll be okay,” Eddie said.

The nurse smiled and stood up. “She’s lucky you showed up when you did,” the nurse said.

Eddie smiled back. The nurse turned and walked back through the double doors to the patient area.

They gave Shelly her own room up on the third floor. The same nurse had taken him up there, and left him to sit with Shelly while she slept. She was looking better, less pale. Eddie sat for a couple hours, just watching her. It eventually got dark out, and he started to get really hungry.

The nurse came in. “She’ll probably sleep for a while,” she said. “She tough, though. She was my supervisor down in the ER.” She smiled as she watched Shelly. “I hated her at first.”

“Mutual,” Shelly said, very faintly, then gave a weak smile.

“Shelly?” Eddie stood and went over to her.

“Just want to sleep,” she said, talking slow, her eyes still closed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Eddie said. “Get some rest.” He squeezed her hand.

The nurse motioned towards the hall. Eddie followed her out of the room.

“She’ll probably go home tomorrow,” the nurse said. “Maybe Saturday.”

“Okay,” Eddie said. He still couldn’t read her nametag.

“This is the number to the desk,” the nurse said, handing him a business card. On one side was printed ‘Dr. Romberg,’ and on the back a phone number was written in a girlie scribble. “Someone will be there if you want to check up on her, and they’ll know they can talk to you. Okay?”

“Thanks. Really,” Eddie said. He put the card in his pocket, and felt the extra set of keys in there. He handed them to the nurse. “These are Shelly’s,” he said. “I may not be able to make it back here tomorrow. Gotta work all day.”

“I’ll make sure she gets them.”

“I think I need some food,” Eddie said. “And coffee.”

“The food here’s okay,” the nurse said. “But stay away from the coffee.”

Eddie grabbed a sandwich and the biggest coffee he could find on the way back to his apartment. It was about seven in the evening when he finally sat down on his couch to eat. He left the television off and just sat, eating and listening to the silence in his apartment. He drank the coffee slow enough for it to get cold and unappealing. He dumped it down the sink and went to work choosing a DVD, something to take his mind off things.

After the movie he tried to sleep, but it wasn’t happening. He watched another movie, then late-night infomercials, then part of another movie. He tried sleeping again, this time laying in bed for several hours.

He thought about Shelly, laying in that hospital bed. He felt incredibly relieved that she was surrounded by people who knew her and wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her. He was surprised to realize that he cared so much. It wasn’t love, at least not romantic love. More like family. Shelly was like family. She helped out Dad so much while his mom was sick. She helped with the cleaning and the shopping, sat with Dad at the kitchen table to talk or go over the bills, even helped a bit with Eddie’s homework, all while taking care of his mom’s various medical needs. Eddie didn’t know at the time that she was just a volunteer. Now that he knew the sorts of things she willingly did and saw, all without getting paid, he was beyond amazed, and had tremendous respect for her and her fellow volunteers. It wasn’t something he would’ve been able to do.

He thought about Connor, and imagined him wandering around the Midwest on foot, crossing endless fields of dead soybeans and corn. The likely thing was that he’d gone to visit one of his parents. They both lived in warmer climates. Eddie had no way of contacting them, and if he did, and Connor wasn’t there, they’d be just as worried as he was. This was not like Connor to disappear, but then again, neither was the drinking. Connor had said that he was about the only student in college that wasn’t shit-faced every night. He’d barely touched the stuff. But something had stirred up his thirst. He was the only one among his friends that had gotten a college degree. If Eddie believed anything his high school teachers told him, that degree meant a bright and prosperous future. Connor must not have seen it that way.

Five in the morning. Eddie turned the clock away from him. Four hours until he had to get up. Maybe that would be enough sleep. If he could get to sleep.

The Black Friday crowds at the theater started off slow, but picked up quickly. Eddie had bought a big bag of coffee grounds on his way to work, and made good use of the coffee maker the managers kept in their office. He stayed in the booth for most of the first part of his shift, only coming out for coffee or handfuls of popcorn from the concession stand.

When he had a break, he went downstairs to call the hospital. The nurse that answered was not the same one from the day before.

“She went home this morning,” the nurse said. “She was feeling a lot better. You did a good thing, bringing her here.”

“Thanks,” Eddie said. A good thing, maybe, but that’s not why he did it. Christ, he’d never been so scared in his life. He hung up and dialed Shelly’s house.

It rang ten times. “Hey.” she said.

“Good to hear your voice,” Eddie said.

“Yeah. Ana brought me home. And cleaned up your mess.”

Eddie remembered the groceries. “Sorry about that. Tell her I said thanks.”

“So you’re at work?” she said.

“Yeah, all day. Black Friday.”

“Listen, I’m sorry I ruined your Thanksgiving.”

“Don’t worry about it. I still owe you a delicious meal, though.”

“Any time you’re free,” Shelly said.

“Sounds good,” Eddie said. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks. I think I need a nap, though.”

“You and me both. Get some rest. I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. Bye, Eddie.”

“Bye.” Eddie hung up, smiling and relieved. He sat at the break room table. His joints hurt, his head ached, and his stomach was upset from all the coffee. Still, he couldn’t remember being happier.

Things got really busy after six, and by then Eddie was struggling to stay awake. He had somehow managed to avoid making mistakes up in the booth, and he tried to help out as much as could downstairs. He couldn’t leave the booth for very long, though.

After helping Stacy and two other ushers sweep up their biggest house after a show, he walked out into the lobby. The place was packed. There were lines a dozen people long at the box office and the concession stand.

Connor was there, standing off to one side of the concession stand. He didn’t look good.

“What the fuck, man?” Eddie said. He found he was more angry than relieved to see him.

“Good to see you, too,” Connor said. He sounded drunk.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“Let’s go outside,” Connor said. He led Eddie down one of the hallways towards one of the side exits. He pushed through the door. Eddie went out after him, propping the door open with the little broom.

Outside, it was raining and warm, an odd piece of weather in November. “So talk,” Eddie said, staying near the door and out of the rain.

“I don’t know what to do,” Connor said. He paced out in the rain, unfazed.

“About what?”

“Life, I guess.”

“Life?” Eddie couldn’t believe it. “You fucking kidding me?”

“My parents went to college,” Connor said. “They got married, they got shit jobs they hated, they got divorced and moved away and got more shitty jobs they hate. That’s what I have to look forward to.”

“Maybe,” Eddie said. “But I didn’t go to college. I don’t particularly love my job either.” Which wasn’t entirely true. Not entirely.

“So what’s the point?”

Eddie stepped towards Connor, out into the rain. “Ask Shelly what the point is. Ask those poor fucks in the Trade Center. Ask my mom what the fucking point is.”

Connor stopped pacing. “I’m not talking about-”

“You want purpose? You want a point?” Angrier now, Eddie had his hands balled into fists. He was ready to punch some sense into his friend. “Go ask Shelly what her purpose was. She can’t work now because of the goddamn poison they have to pump into her just to save her fucking life. You were there. You saw all the shit she did for my parents. For my dad. You think she deserves this?”

Connor just stared.

“You disappear for weeks and show up talking about ‘points’. You’re talking crazy is what you’re doing.”

“Maybe,” Connor said. “Maybe I’m crazy.”

Eddie took a few deep breaths. “I’m too goddamn tired to try to talk any sense into you. Come on. Let’s go inside.”

“Inside?”

“Yeah. To dry my clothes. And to dry out your fucking head.”

Connor stepped towards the door, but stopped to give Eddie a hug. “Sorry, man.”

Eddie put his arms around Connor. “It’s okay. Shit’s rough, I know.”

They hugged a for a moment longer, then Connor let his arms fall away. “I’m drunk.”

“I know. Let’s go.” Eddie led him inside.

Connor sat against the wall next to one of the projectors. The lamphouses put out a lot of heat. Eddie got him some water from the concession stand.

“Drink it,” Eddie said, handing him the cup.

“Thanks.” Connor drank. “I kept thinking I was gonna do something crazy, you know? The whole time I was gone.”

“Where’d you go anyway?”

Connor shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

“If you say so. Listen, I don’t know much about anything, but crazy’s no good. Maybe you can channel that crazy into something creative. Take up piano or something.”

Connor laughed. “Maybe.”

“I gotta get back to work. Just take it easy, okay?”

“Thanks again,” Connor said. “I owe you.”

“I know.”

Eddie’s shift finally ended at about one in the morning. Connor had fallen asleep in the booth, so Eddie woke him with a light kick. They left and walked over to Eddie’s. By then,

Eddie had gone way past exhaustion. Just staying awake was painful. No amount of coffee would have kept him going. Still, he thought briefly about calling Shelly, but didn't because of the time.

Connor sat on the couch, kicked his shoes off, and laid down. "Cool if I crash here?"

"Yeah." He thought about offering him the bed, but he looked comfortable enough. "You want a blanket?"

"Sure."

Eddie grabbed a spare blanket from the closet and threw it over Connor, who was nearly asleep. He shut the lights off and went into his bedroom. He pulled his shoes off and collapsed into the bed, still wearing his uniform.

Eddie didn't hear much out of Connor for a few days after he came back. They did talk over the phone, but all he'd say was that he was working on something. Eddie was relieved to hear it, but he didn't ask for details. Best to just let him work.

He'd stopped over to see Shelly one morning about a week after her visit to the hospital. She was tired but they hung out for a little while, watching a DVD Eddie brought over. After the movie she was ready for a nap, so Eddie said goodbye and headed home.

He found Connor waiting for him on the steps outside his apartment. "Where've you been?"

"Shelly's," Eddie said. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's great. You hungry? I'm buying."

"Sure."

"We have one stop to make," Connor said. He smiled big.

Connor had replaced his smashed-up car with something very similar. His new car was a different color and, according to Connor, a year newer, but it was the same make and model, even the same body style. None of that meant a whole lot to Eddie, but he liked the car. He played with the radio while Connor drove.

"This is it," Connor said. He'd stopped in front of the Salem, the old movie theater. "You're gonna love this."

"Okay." Eddie watched Connor reach in the back for his backpack. "What's in there?"

"Let's go." Connor got out, clearly excited.

Eddie stepped out and followed Connor. He walked up to the front of the Salem where a man in a shirt and tie was waiting. They shook hands.

"This is Eddie," Connor said. "He knows theaters."

"Jeff," the man said, and offered his hand.

Eddie shook it. "I know theaters, apparently."

"Let's get started," Connor said. He reached into his bag and handed Eddie a paper mask and a flashlight. He took out a mask of his own and offered one to Jeff.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll wait out here while you guys look around," Jeff said.

"No problem," Connor said. He took a flashlight out of the bag.

Jeff produced a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the front door. It scraped against the frame as he pulled it open.

"Mask," Connor said. He pulled his on, adjusting the elastic.

Eddie looked into the darkened theater, and could smell the stale, dusty air coming through the door. He put his mask on.

“Let’s go.” Connor led the way, dropping his backpack on the floor inside the door. Eddie followed. Jeff let the door close behind them. Eddie turned to see him standing outside, his hands in his pockets.

“What the hell are we doing?” Eddie asked.

“Looking around,” Connor said.

“And Jeff?”

“He and his brothers own this place. It was their grandfather’s.”

“Ah.” Eddie’s questions weren’t getting answered. “Smells like asbestos.”

“Asbestos has no smell.” Connor walked further into the theater and flicked on his flashlight. Eddie switched on his own and looked around. They were in the lobby. Tile floor, poster cases along the wall, high ceiling. The lobby was big, and full of junk. Piles of chairs and cardboard, building materials. Everything was covered in dust and cobwebs. The counter of the concession stand ran along one side, and looked intact, though there were no fixtures.

“Not bad,” Connor said. “Lobby’s pretty big.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, walking over to the concession counter. The front was all glass, the top some kind of formica or something. More junk was piled behind the counter. “So much junk.”

“Let’s check out the auditorium.” They headed deeper into the theater. Dust hung in the air, turning the flashlight beams nearly solid. Connor pushed open the door to the auditorium. The space beyond was utterly dark. Connor stepped inside.

They could easily see the screen, which was massive and seemed to reflect the light of their flashlights. They made their way towards it, scanning the walls and seats. Everything looked filthy.

“We’d have to replace the seats,” Connor said.

“Why?”

“They used to show porn here, dude,” Connor said. “You even have to ask?”

“No, I mean, why would we replace them? What are we doing here?”

“We’ll get to that,” Connor said. There was a little stage up near the screen. Connor climbed up. “The screen is curved.”

“Makes sense,” Eddie said. “Screen that big, the edges would get distorted if the screen wasn’t curved.”

Connor peered behind the screen. “Ugh. It’s a mess. But I see speakers.”

“That’s good.”

“Let’s check out the booth,” Connor said, jumping down from the stage.

“Lead the way,” Eddie said.

“I don’t know the way,” Connor said. “But we’ll find it.”

They walked back out to the lobby, found a door with a stairway behind it. They went up, picking their way past piles of papers and junk on the stairs. They came to some kind of office, oddly the least cluttered part of the theater they’d seen. Past that was the projection booth.

“Found it,” Connor said.

Eddie looked around. Bare concrete walls, metal shelves, empty film reels. There were two identical projectors, one upright, one tipped over and resting against the wall. It didn’t look damaged. “A changeover booth,” Eddie said.

“What’s that mean?” Connor asked.

“Movie plays one reel at a time, switching back and forth between projectors.” He looked at the lamphouses. “These use xenon and not carbon arcs, so that’s good.”

“Why’s that good?”

Eddie shrugged. "I don't know shit about carbon arcs." He opened a door on the side of the projector. The sprockets inside were dirty, but everything was there, and the layout looked familiar.

"This the audio gear?" Connor was looking at some components set in a metal rack.

"Looks like," Eddie said. "Amplifier, power supply for the exciter lamp. Shit looks old."

"Can you work with it?" Connor asked.

"Can I work with it? To do what?"

"If you had to, if you wanted to, could you make this stuff work? Could you show movies here?"

Eddie looked around again. "I could figure it out."

Even with the mask, Eddie could tell that Connor was smiling.

They'd thanked Jeff and got back in Connor's car.

"So where to now?" Eddie asked.

"Dinner," Connor said.

"I feel like I need a shower," Eddie said.

Over dinner, Connor laid out his plans for the Salem. He had papers that he showed to Eddie, though none of that stuff made much sense to him. He focused on how excited Connor was, who seemed to be unable to stop smiling. His enthusiasm was infectious.

His plan was to turn the theater back into a respectable, working cinema. But his plan also included something special. During the day, the auditorium would be roped off and the lobby would become a full-featured coffee shop.

"That's brilliant," Eddie said. "I love coffee."

"Exactly. And that lobby would be perfect for it."

"So here's my question? What's my part in this, and how're you planning on paying for this?"

"That's two questions," Connor said. "You're gonna help me run the place. If you want to. And we can get a loan to pay for it."

"Someone's going to give you a loan?"

"No, someone's going to give us a loan. I had a guy at the bank run our credit."

"How'd you run my credit?" Eddie asked.

"Just needed your birthday and social security number."

"Creepy."

"Also, I can put my house up as collateral."

"Your house?"

"My dad gave me the house."

"Jesus." Eddie thought it over. "I don't know what to say about all this."

"It's a lot to take in, I know," Connor said. "Take your time, think it over."

"I want to talk to Larry about this," Eddie said. "He actually knows theaters."

"Good idea." Connor sat back. "Let's put it up for now and celebrate."

"Sounds good," Eddie said. "Beer?"

"Absolutely." Connor was still smiling.

"That's not a bad idea," Larry said. Eddie had been telling him about Connor's movie theater proposition. "You say it's a changeover booth?"

“Yeah. The projectors look old, but I think all the parts are there.”

“You get model numbers?” Larry asked.

“No. I was only up there for a few minutes.”

Larry thought it over. “I think I’ve got something that could help.” He stood up and walked through the booth, leading Eddie to a metal shelf piled with old movie trailers. On the lowest shelf was a cardboard box, something Eddie had seen many times and never gave a second thought.

“Grab that box, will you?” Larry said.

Eddie pulled the box off the shelf and set it on the floor. It was fairly heavy. “What’s in this?” He knelt down and pulled the flaps open.

“Whenever I worked somewhere new, the first thing I’d do is check the booth for manuals.” He gave the box a kick.

“Jesus.” Eddie reached into the box. It was stuffed full with operating manuals and parts catalogs, some Xeroxed and stapled, others printed and bound by the manufacturers. Eddie pulled a few out. Projectors, lamphouses, automation systems, sound systems, lighting, speakers, lenses. “Wow. You just took these?”

“If they had duplicates. If not, I just borrowed them long enough to get copies made. Some of them came from old projectionist friends of mine.”

“So you just kept this all here?”

“Sure,” Larry said. “Why waste the storage space in my apartment?”

“Good point.” Eddie packed the box back up and stood. “So you think I should do this?”

“Already sounds like you want to,” Larry said. “Right?”

“It’s a good idea, at least in theory. I don’t know shit about business, though.”

“Your friend, he’s got some kind of business degree, right?”

“Yeah.”

“There you go. Leave the business to him. You just focus on the booth.”

Eddie nodded. “Just like that.”

Larry smiled. “You’ll be fine.”

Eddie nodded again. “It’ll be a few months before we’re ready to open.”

“If you’re lucky, it’ll be just a few months. You can work here in the meantime, save some cash.”

Eddie nodded and stared at the box at his feet.

“It’s a good plan, Eddie.”

Eddie and Connor spent weeks just cleaning the place out. There was so much junk that didn’t belong, stuff the previous owners had dumped there, that they had to rent a big dumpster, and Connor had to get special permissions from the city to park the dumpster on the street, since there was no room anywhere else. Once they had the lobby and auditorium cleaned out, they started working out the details, sketching on graph paper and taking measurements. Connor had arranged to talk with several general contractors, along with a team of electricians, plumbers, theater supply reps, and city officials. Connor was busy, and seemed to be loving every minute of it.

Eddie wasn’t present for most of the decision-making. He left that all to Connor. Eddie worked his shifts at Plainview, and divided the rest of his time between hanging out with Shelly and cleaning out the Salem. Eddie would show up one day to find that Connor had ripped out all the seats in the auditorium. The next day the carpet would be gone. Then the walls would be

scraped down to the bare concrete blocks. Connor wasn't kidding around. And not surprisingly, Eddie would learn that Connor had been doing much of the work himself. The contractors would only be called in for installation.

For Eddie's part, he spent most of his time at the Salem in the booth, working to restore the equipment. It all needed work, and some of it needed replaced. Larry's manuals were extremely helpful. He would try the phone numbers in the manuals to order parts only to find that almost none of the numbers worked anymore. He asked Connor's theater supply people for help, and soon he had boxes of replacement parts. Connor bought him a complete set of tools for the booth, and Eddie worked slowly and carefully, dealing with one piece of equipment at a time.

Connor came up one night as he was working. It was well after midnight. "I sure hope that if we end up crunching the numbers later, we won't find that it would've been cheaper to just buy new projectors."

Eddie had his head inside one of the lamphouses, scraping at an electrical contact with sandpaper. "No chance. Parts were cheap, we just needed a bunch."

"How do you know how to do all this stuff?" Connor asked.

"I don't," Eddie said.

Things moved along steadily at the Salem, and Eddie took a day off from both theaters to rest and visit with Shelly.

"I wanted to be a doctor, growing up," she said. "My parents pushed me, made me work hard in high school. I was valedictorian, did you know that?"

"I don't even know what that means," Eddie said. He was sitting on the couch next to her. He'd brought drinks from the coffee shop, tea for her, something strong and dark for himself.

"It means I had the highest class rank."

"Oh."

"Once I got to college, I felt drawn to nursing instead. My parents were so disappointed."

"Why? Every doctor I've ever met is a jerk," Eddie said.

"How many have you met?"

"One, maybe."

Shelly laughed. "That's a strong sample set."

"And you guys all seem so nice," Eddie said.

"Doctors make more money," Shelly said. "And there's a status thing my parents wanted for me, I guess. Or for themselves."

"Ah."

"Your parents didn't expect too much from you," Shelly said.

"Ouch." Eddie smiled.

"You know what I mean. They would've been happy with you whatever you turned out to be, right?"

Eddie thought about it. "My dad pushed me towards college, but I think with my mom being gone, he didn't push too hard. Maybe he just wanted me to be a kid for a little while longer."

"You ever think about going to school?"

"Not anymore. Got something else going on."

Shelly nodded. "I miss them, my parents."

"Did you ever tell them you were sick?" Eddie asked.

Shelly didn't say anything. She just stared at the blank screen of the television.

"You didn't, did you."

Shelly shook her head, slowly. "Our last conversation didn't go so well," she said.

"When was that?"

She shrugged. "Five years ago, maybe."

"Jesus."

Shelly's eyes were wet. She blinked, then wiped at her eyes. "I just didn't want them in my life, not at first. Then too much time passed. How would they feel if I called them now? 'Hi, I have cancer, I was diagnosed six months ago, sorry I didn't tell you.'"

"I see what you mean."

She buried her face in her hands. Eddie wanted to put his hand on her leg, for comfort, but thought it might be misread. He put his hand on her shoulder instead.

"I just wish none of this-" she stopped. "I just want this to be over with."

"I know." Eddie squeezed her shoulder. She felt so bony. "How did your appointments go?"

"Blood counts were borderline. I start radiation soon."

"Is that good?"

"The good news will have to wait. They did a PET scan, and the preliminary results were good. It'll be a few days before the final results are in."

Eddie nodded, though what she was saying didn't mean much. "You want to watch a movie?"

"I just want this all to stop," she said. "All of it."

Eddie withdrew his hand. The anger and frustration in her voice had set him on edge. "I'm sorry."

"Eddie," she said, looking at him, tears on her cheeks, "you're the only thing that's made this bearable."

Eddie hugged her, and she cried harder. "It's gonna be okay," he said. "I don't know enough about what you're going through to say exactly when, but it will."

"Okay," she said. She held on to him for a little while longer, and sat back, wiping her eyes. "I'm so tired."

"Let's get you to bed." He stood and held out his hand.

She took it and pulled herself up. "I haven't slept in my bed for a while. Been crashing on the couch."

"Well, this will be good for you, then." He helped her to the bedroom, where she laid down slowly. He pulled the blanket over her. "Get some sleep, and I'll check on you soon."

"How's your theater coming?" she asked, turning on to her side. She looked up at him, smiling.

"Almost done. Connor's been working his ass off."

"Can't wait," she said.

"Get some rest, Eddie said. "I'll see you soon."

Connor had indeed been working his ass off.

By the end of February, the Salem had brand new seats, numbering over five hundred, along with new carpet on the floors and the walls of the auditorium, new speakers, a freshly-cleaned screen, new lights, and whole bunch of new fixtures for the concession stand and coffee counter.

Eddie had the booth nearly finished. While they didn't bother painting the walls in the booth or replacing the ugly linoleum on the floor, the booth looked much better. Both projectors were cleaned and functioning, the new audio equipment looked great in the metal rack, and all the new

wiring tacked to the bare walls made the place look like something from a sci-fi movie. They'd named the left projector 'alpha' and the right one 'beta.'

"We're ready to test," Eddie said.

"What're we testing with?" Connor asked.

Eddie held up a reel. It was about two-thirds full of film. "I spliced together a bunch of old trailers I swiped from Plainview."

"Let's do it."

Eddie laced up the alpha projector. He'd spent the last few hours running test loops through both projectors, fixing the alignment and adjusting the lenses. He'd already run audio test loops to check the sound. With any luck, they both should just work. "You want to go downstairs for this?"

"Fuck yes," he said.

"I'll start it on your signal."

Connor left the booth, and within a few seconds Eddie could see him in the auditorium through the porthole. He took a seat near the middle and gave a thumbs up.

Eddie pressed the start button.

A little focal adjustment was all that was needed. Eddie left the projector running and went downstairs. He could hear the trailer music; it sounded great, very full and loud. He joined Connor in the auditorium, taking a seat next to him.

Connor had tears in his eyes. "This is awesome."

"Yes it is," Eddie said.

April 12th was the date they chose for opening night. Connor had advertised in the local paper, playing up the improvements they'd done, particularly the new seats. They'd hired a few students to work the concession stand, and trained them the week before the opening. The coffee bar wouldn't be working yet, since they hadn't hired a barista, but that could wait a few days. Connor was insistent they work out the kinks of the movie theater side of the business first. Eddie was fine with that.

That morning, Eddie got out of bed after a restless night. His stomach was knotted, and he had trouble finishing his cereal. He spent a long time choosing his clothes, then headed out for coffee and to visit Shelly.

There was no answer at Shelly's door. He knocked frantically, then tried the knob. Locked. He ran downstairs and banged on the the building manager's door.

"What is it?" he said. He looked tired and annoyed.

"Shelly's not answering her door," Eddie said.

"Shelly's not there," the manager said.

"What do you mean?"

He followed the manager back up to Shelly's apartment. "She left yesterday, went up to Chicago to stay with her parents." He unlocked the door.

Eddie stepped inside. The place was cleaned out. The furniture was still there, so it probably came with the apartment, but all of her stuff was gone.

"She said I could let you in," the manager said. "Eddie, right? She left something for you."

The manager picked up an envelope from the kitchen counter and handed it to Eddie.

Opening it, Eddie found a handwritten letter:

Eddie:

I called my parents. They were happy to hear from me, at least until I told them about the cancer, which caused them to want to drive down here and move in with me. I didn't think that would work, so I decided the best thing would be for me to move back to Chicago and stay with them while I finish my treatment. I need to be with them. I may even stay up there and find work. I don't know. I just wanted you to know that I'm actually glad your friend crashed his car and you ended up finding me in the ER that night. I don't think I would've been able to do any of this without you, and I'm sorry I had to leave like this. I really wanted to be there for your opening night, but I knew that would only make it harder for me to leave. That sounds selfish, I know, but please believe me when I say that this wasn't an easy decision, and I'm really going to miss you. If you find yourself in the Chicago area, please come see me.

I love you.

-Shelly Ackers.

Eddie read it again. He felt an ache in his throat, and his already upset stomach knotted even tighter. He took a deep breath, then another. He thanked the manager and left, heading nowhere in particular.

He arrived at his theater at about three in the afternoon. They'd finished the sign the day before, and this was the first time he'd seen it. 'Caffeine Cinema.' Perfect name.

Connor was inside, checking and double-checking every little thing. Eddie stopped him long enough to tell him about Shelly.

"She's from Chicago?" Connor asked.

"Apparently."

"Well that's not so bad," he said. "You can visit her when you go visit your dad."

"That's what I was thinking," Eddie said. "I'm gonna miss her, though."

"I know you will."

"So where are we?" Eddie asked.

"We'll be ready," Connor said. "You gonna be okay?"

Eddie nodded. "Yeah."

Connor gave him a quick hug. "Come on. Showtime's in three hours."

The auditorium was filling up. People had waited outside for an hour to get in after Connor unlocked the door. They bought plenty at the concession stand, where Eddie was helping out. The staff didn't handle themselves with much grace, bumping into each other, spilling things. Eddie knew they'd tighten up eventually.

Connor had been working the box office, selling tickets and answering questions. He drifted away from that and into the middle of the lobby, laughing with customers and making sure everyone was having a good time. Connor himself seemed to be having the time of his life. It made Eddie smile to see that.

A few minutes before showtime, Connor and Eddie stepped into the auditorium to survey the crowd. Everyone seemed excited, and Connor was beside himself.

"I think I'll say a few words," Connor said. "What do you think?"

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll start it on your signal.”

They shook hands. “Thanks for coming along for the ride with me,” Connor said.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” Eddie said.

Connor walked up to the front of the auditorium, and Eddie walked up to the booth. Through the porthole, he could see Connor talking and gesturing. The crowd eventually applauded, giving off a noise Eddie could easily hear up in the booth. Connor looked up and gave a thumbs up.

Eddie pressed the start button.

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