

This Local Cinema

He was on his knees when the lightning struck. He was praying, only he wasn't. He was more than hoping though. He was trying to get the door shut. The wind and the rain pulled against him. There was something in the way. Something someone had put there to keep the door open. He was on his knees prying at the rock jammed in there under the crack of the door. C'mon rock c'mon door c'mon door c'mon c'mon. That's when the lightning struck. He watched it hit. He covered his ears with his hands and trapped the sound of it. Sound and light mixed up with that other almost prayer stuff.

He ate a piece of chocolate. When he spit on his dick, his spit was brown.

The window was open. The neighbour's music: *boom boom boom*. The steady beat of rain. He imagined the rain falling on his belly, beating on it.

A breeze danced in the cold drops.

The mosquitoes could not get in when it rained. Otherwise, yes, the mosquitoes would get in. Then he would have to decide: Was it better to be hot or be bitten?

When he finished, he finished big.

What if he walked out of his apartment and down the stairs and out into the street? Why not wash it away, all the brown and stickiness?

She went with him to the place where he was going.

They got there. The sun was gone.

He made motions to sit.

He sat.

He spoke in a loud voice:

“If I say to someone who is my friend, someone like John, if I say to John, John, I love Taylor, I am saying that, but really I am saying something else, something I don’t know how to say.”

She stood where they were. It was dark.

What is interesting is not the way he sees. Not even what he has gone to see.

He closes his eyes. The worst happens.

The camera keels and screeches and the worst happens.

He eats popcorn by the handful, then has to shit so bad he can barely make it home.

He does get home. Arms out to his sides he pushes the night through. The movie is different for him now that he is alone. Almost everything he thinks is leaving him alone.

Lines

He had a hard time recalling.

“C’mon,” somebody said.

“Just spit it out,” another said.

“Something about a droopy eyelid,” he said.

“And?” somebody said.

“So?” another said.

“There’s more,” he said. His eyes were watching the ceiling. Lines of light, cars passing, lies on the open street. “Something about her condition,” he said. “She said: ‘they think it can be controlled.’ No. Something else. She said: ‘It can probably be controlled.’ ”

The room got dark.

“I’ve sat next to people like that,” somebody said.

“I’ve felt them crying very near me,” another said.

He put his head in his hands. He couldn’t see through his hands. The room was getting darker.

The next thing he knew, he was holding on. She was shaking.

Suburb

He puts his fist up and hits the boy. The boy falls with a thunk. The head rolls slowly away from the body. We'll glue it, his father says, squeezing his shoulder. Certainly there are things that can be done. Once a girl came to his room and let him lick the top of her breast. He needs air. He smells old people.

He has taken to borrowing their health problems. A jar of antacid sits on his night-table. He empties five tablets onto his palm. Chalky dust covers the snapshot next to his lamp. He picks the picture up and blows on it. His grandfather smiling at his grandmother. They hated each other. She died neglected. He kept snapping pictures.

And You?

I remember being on the sidewalk, outside the store. It was one of those days. It was so cold the streets were white. He made us wait outside because he didn't have enough money for ice creams. He knew we'd want ice creams so he made us wait outside. We waited outside. He bought us popsicles. I think he spent his last dollar on popsicles. People looked at us, standing outside on the sidewalk sucking popsicles. It was minus fifteen. The wind was blowing. I was happy.

I had this job delivering bundles. Every month, the people were different. I got used to a man and the next month that man was gone. It felt good to get out of the house in the morning.

Sometimes I turn on my computer. Lately, I've been having difficulty clearing my throat. I make a loud noise. It scares people in other rooms.

I'm not worried. I figure it doesn't matter. The hardest thing I ever did was keep from trying.

When Next I've Fallen Home

She calls and he picks up the phone. He wants to say: What, are you crazy, calling me now, with squid ink all over my hands? His hands are wet, slippery. She is crying. It sounds like she is crying.

Dark beetles of ink running down his arms. Her on the phone having an emergency. Not an emergency: A crisis.

Next door someone is learning English.

"Fazze," he hears somebody say. Words through an accented silence. "Eyzzs. Nozzs. Erzzs."



"Stop it," he said. "Can't you stop it?"

He turned back to the computer screen. He started to type. He stopped typing.

"Didn't I ask you to stop it? Didn't I?"

She dropped her arms to her sides, closed her eyes, held her breath.

"Don't do that now," he said. He got up halfway, slumped down. He sighed. He punched the wall.

"I can't work," he said. "Fuck. Fuck."

She opened her eyes, her hands fluttered over her chin, the thin break of nails against her teeth.

"Fine," he said, "Don't stop. I don't care. I don't care what you do."

Just her nails, bitten shells. She took her hands away from her soft lips, her face exposed, her chest pulling against the air. She picked up the book next to her and opened it. She put the book down, spine spread, pages flat against the comforter. Her hands, poised, uncertain. He stopped typing, scowled over at her.

“Don’t leave the book like that,” he said. “Why do you have to put the book like that?”

She looked up at him.

“Don’t cry,” he said. “Why are you crying?”



He wakes up, goes to the bathroom, takes a wet shit.

He comes back to the bed. Early Saturday morning, a thin light through the curtains.

She’s asleep, but when he gets up to go to the bathroom she moves, stretching out and stirring a little – a groan, a sigh, the echoed howl of an articulated dream. He looks at her. He looks at the light welling up against the sheet, pressing to get in.

Maybe it’s because he loves her so much.

Maybe it’s because his asshole still burns.

Maybe it’s the terrific fragility of morning, and her, part of it, just lying there, more asleep than he could ever be.



He was standing there. His basket, empty. The fruit in front of them, pyramids – a cascade of colours, textures. He couldn’t seem to step away. They would all come rolling down.

“When the flesh gives, it’s ripe,” she said. She was smiling. She was holding it in her hand.

He felt the metal handles of the basket, grooves in his palm.



He got home. He pulled off his boots. He tried to find somewhere to put them. They smelled, his boots. He wanted to put them someplace. He couldn’t find a place to put them. He left them in the back hall. He started to pull off his sweater. He got stuck in the middle. His nose scratched the old wool, his eyes pressed into stretched light, the space between shadows of fabric, this sweater really smells, he

thought. All around him, nothing. His head in the sweater. A silence trapped in the noise of the day. Next door, someone said: "If you don't get into the shower right now I'm gonna kill you." He got the sweater off. He took a deep breath. The stench of boots.



The next time he thinks he is falling he closes his eyes and tries to just plummet.

Bottom, he keeps thinking, and the way he thinks that word, as if the bottom is a soft chair with arms to hold him while he slumps.

The black behind his eyelids: After images, moments that had happened, moments that were, horribly, irretrievably, happening.

The Two of Them

Rena said: “You think you can’t, and then you can’t.” It was really a question about the inevitable. That was after the surgery, but before they knew he would get better.

Rena said she was going to leave and Morts said:

“No, don’t leave, where are you going? Please don’t leave.”

He knew she was just going to work. She was only going to work.

She said: “Quit being a baby.”

She said: “Stop it right now.”

He was still in the bed. He could not get out of the bed. He felt the covers on him like a thick skin. He had healed by then. It was the first time she spoke to him that way. After she left, he touched himself under the sheets. The silence was hard, horrible.

He had always thought he was a man of action. But they lived enormous lives, lives spread across the possible distance.

She came back.

“If we get married, I’ll die,” he said. She looked at him with her huge brown eyes, specks of green out of the earth. Her pupils orbited. He thought: It’s true. Then the moment of triumph. It’s true.

What gave him the idea that they would marry? Rena, meanwhile, knew that she could leave at any time. People are always leaving. Her mother used to tell her father, even after they had been married for twenty years, ‘You watch out. One day I’ll just pick up and leave’.

Morts joked about her closet full of sweaters, but

Rena knew they were meaningless garments woven together by poor women in other countries.

Morts liked the idea of playing hockey more than he actually liked playing hockey. When he talked about getting the boys together to play some hockey, Rena nodded cheerfully and thought: This is our life.

Is it so horrible, to think: This is my life?

Morts was a man who did not know what to do with his body. Rena wondered if she should see someone, just to tell them what she was thinking about. But they didn't believe in that, the two of them. She went to her gynecologist for a check-up.

"I'm depressed," she said.

"I am too," her gynecologist said. For some reason, this was a story she felt she could tell Morts. She told him and he was nice to her for the entire weekend.

They lived in a house converted into three apartments. They lived in one of the apartments. It was very quiet when no one was home.

We eat ourselves up, Rena thought, looking at him that time when all he could do was drool. We have our real lives inside us. We feed our bodies to our real lives.

"Will we still fuck when we're eighty?" Morts said, the restaurant around them like a dream. He gulped from a bottle of beer. "The thing is," he said, "is that I don't want to be buried next to you. I don't know why. I just don't."

Let Me Show You To Your Seat

He was drowning. I'm drowning.

There were mirrors.

On the way down the stairs he was thinking about the train, about the subway going North. He was thinking about the subway so hard he ran into the mirror on the wall. His only vision was of himself.

He walked by his house. He had to stop on the corner and think about things. Already, he was questioning himself, thinking: Hey wait a minute – What about when we get old? What about that?

The knees are next to him.

When he licks the first time they are glossy and prescribed. Things must be protected from the air by a thin sheet of fabric tight on the bone. Also such things should consider a certain resistance to mucus and the warm seep of abundant fluids. At the theater he is sitting next to her, and her knees are making up the story. Oh god if the knees could be close together or spread far apart instead of this endless sense of timing, a space, a gap between her knees – he wanted to touch it, but it was nothing. He isn't very efficient himself. He knows about gaps. She thanks me for something I never did. The tickets, I got them for free from someone, I told her I bought them for us.

All through the performance I was drowning. I grabbed for a leg, felt the lump of her knee and slipped off the gentle bend.

How come you always want to do it after we eat? she said. I need to digest after we eat.

It's not swimming, he snapped.

Well maybe it is, she said.

Don't let go of her hand, someone said.

The phone was ringing, disturbing the performance. The knees, the beautiful knees. A plot is a series of lies arranged in conducive order. He spent three days afraid to open his eyes. In the crowded rows of seats he was squeezed between people – knees, he kept thinking, feeling the bend and sway. He was horrified by people. People might talk to him. Suddenly he went cross-eyed. There were twice as many people in the room. None of them whole. Excuses, he said. Pardons. They made room for him to leave, but not to get back in. He had to push. Another time, he saw spots for an entire day. They spread around the peripheral edges of his vision, drapes of light breaking through the brackish green of a lonely pond. He kept his eyes closed not thinking about what might happen if the phone suddenly rang or if he went to open up when he was already at the bottom.

I wanted her so bad I had to pretend not to know her. The play refused to end. He had nowhere to put his hands. His arms stuck out at angles. An uncomfortable shift. They say it takes years to fully adjust. Is this my date? You can only be as desperate as your itinerary.

He said things he regretted, whispering into her ear in the middle of the performance. She shifted away and refused to listen. He tried to put his arm on her armrest, thinking there was room on the padded blue velvet for both their arms to be side by side. The full length of his white pressed shirt pushed against the changing colour of her sleeveless limb. Her arms were naked. She crossed them across her body. The knees pressed together, exclamation points punctuating what he was trying to say. It's going to hurt he kept insisting, or it might have been her to him. Over and over again, whoever it was. They were in group session. There were only the two of them. It's going to hurt. Just the two of

them. It's really going to hurt. When the spine is soft they give you something for the pain, then sample your fluids with a hot water tap. They give you something for the pain, she says, but it doesn't do a whole lot. It's going to hurt? he asks. He throws himself into the water. The last thing he sees are her knees, pointed twins gleaming in the night sky.

The phone still ringing.

We don't have to, he says.

But you want to, she says.

Not if you don't, he says.

You could just come over, she says.

But if I – But I would want to, he says.

It's okay.

No, no it isn't. I'll want to do it. I don't want to do it if you don't want to do it. You don't sound like you want to do it.

I do now, she says.

Really?

Yes really. All this talking about it...

Well I'll come over.

Come over.

You're sure?

Is it going to hurt?

He said he wanted to now but she said I have to go to the library maybe after when I get back from the library.

He thought if he sucked her breasts, which were bigger than usual. So he did and then she put her breasts back inside and got her coat.

Finally, then, he slipped down into the crack of his seat. He watched the proceedings. The play was a famous one. Everybody knew the story. The main characters were the woman and the gas furnace.

The phone in his pocket is ringing. People are looking around. He stares boldly ahead, leaning his body forward as if to catch the dialogue over the sound of this inconsiderate bleat. People around him touch

sharp objects they keep handy. Extra large bobby pins, metal combs with spikes, retractable toothpicks. He leans further forward. Knees touching. The sound of shifting blades.

Angela: Hello? Hello? Who are you? Why are you calling me? What do you want? What do you want from me? Do you want me? Are you watching me? I know you're watching me. If you want me, you can have me. Anything. Just stop calling. Here! (Angela rips open her shirt.) Do you like them? Come and get them. Who are you? Is this what you want? Is this it? Do you like this?

He notices certain deviations from the original text. In the original, Angela does not bare her breasts. Rather, she pulls at her skirt and offers her rear portions. In the original, her tormentor, the gas furnace, responds quite gentlemanly and explains his predicament in the kind, upper class accent he picked up from his last owners, a fading dynasty of former plantation purveyors who rarely required his services on account of their Southern locale.

This is a modern version, he whispers to her, disgusted. Her seat is empty.

In this modern reenactment the furnace has to gradually acquire language. He calls and calls, but cannot communicate his need – more gas – until it is too late and he is already deeply and tragically in love with Angela. The furnace's side of the conversation is recreated by recordings of actual gas furnaces going on and off. He finds these dialogues disarming. The long creaks and groans of the hot desperate metal sound to him like the slow shuffle of a dying old man. Where is she? The gentleman sitting in front of him flicks open a straight razor.

She's missing the best part, he says.

Quiet!

She's missing the best part.

He cries at the sad parts. He cries when the gas

furnace reveals in his torturous bass vibrato of furniture shifts and winter rhythms that he started calling her because her number had once long ago been the number of the gas company. The furnace was designed to call the gas company automatically as soon as he went empty. For years he had been calling, never getting an answer. It was automatic. After he heard her voice, the voice of fuel, the plaintive hysteria of warmth – well his was a grilled sweet sheet metal heart, but did that mean he couldn't love? Even though he had only called to get more gas, he fell in love, and his calls became more than desperate notices that service was required. Oh god, Angela cries, sinking to her knees, rending her clothes to reveal both her bosoms and her bottom as she twirls in the agony of revelation, yes! yes! She also loves the gas furnace.

He was drowning.

How about staying down there until I'm finished?

He was trying to put it in.

She tightened her legs.

He looked at her, her legs locked around his body.

How about that?

He picked a hair off his tongue.

Someone was trying to contact him. To think, out of all these people, someone was trying to contact him. He dropped the phone.

Bravo! Magnifico! Encore! they yelled. He felt proud. The phone sent up ripples. He supposed he was drowning, because he thought of his mother, the way she used to touch him in the afternoon when he was a baby. He grabbed the phone long after it stopped ringing. Then, as if in a cartoon, he realized that he was drowning.