 Twenty-Four Frames A Second

 by VoidVesper

Summary

Rey loves the movies. William McTavish does, too. When she takes his film history class at college, sparks fly like a nitrate fire. Cinephilia meets daddy kink.

Notes

Thank you to Poaxath for generously letting me riff on the excellent fic "Yes, Daddy".
Today I’ll look him in the eye, thought Rey.

The three pages of notes for her first assignment rattled in her sweaty hands as she pounded across her campus’s pavement in time with her overtaxed heart. A crush was its own kind of workout, and Rey’s pulse couldn’t keep pace with the minty, excited, terrified glow spreading across her chest at the thought of seeing him again.

Him. Professor McTavish.

She’d chosen the Introduction to Film Critique course out of genuine interest. It met twice a week in the campus’s vast and ornate Starkiller Auditorium – one session for lecture and discussion, the other for viewing the required feature-length films on the theater’s huge silver screen. The gum-snapping juniors seated behind her on the first day bragged to each other how this was the easiest way to get a pesky English requirement over with – dude, it’s, like, watching movies? For three credits? But for Rey, getting to sit in the theater’s lush red velvet seats twice a week and watch movies was something she’d relinquish credits to do.

There was something about movies that spoke to her in a private, intimate language. Other moviegoers only saw car chases and hot kisses while they dully munched their popcorn. Rey could tune out the noise. She couldn’t help but hone in on every decision the director made in telling a story. Every choice was a whisper in her ear about what it meant to be human. Sometimes, when the movie sang its private song to her, the sheer mastery of it would make her gasp in delight. A dark movie theater was the only safe space to cry, and sometimes, when she did, she could feel as if the movie itself was laying a comforting arm across her small, beaten shoulders.

Seeing a movie had always provoked Rey’s mind. But lately the ideas percolating up after the credits rolled were more than fleeting opinions. They were crystallizing into long chains of thought. Maybe being forced to turn in papers on time would give her the courage to write down the things she’d been rolling around in her head. She’d grown used to swallowing her opinions. It seemed less scary to voice them if there was a professor giving her permission, she reasoned.

But then she saw the professor.

“Call me William,” he told the class as he leaned his looming frame against the front of the auditorium stage. Warm crinkly eyes behind dark hipster glasses. Mussed salt and pepper hair, just long enough to feel good running through your hands. Twice her age, but just as vital. His shoulders seemed to fill the room.

Rey couldn’t breathe.

And she couldn’t follow his opening remarks, either. As he paced the front of the room and ticked off the class’s requirements in his booming voice I know all of you have seen movies before – and that’s great – but we’re going to, uh, do things a little differently here Rey tried to catch her breath. We’re going to talk about some of the things that make certain movies really exceptional – and give you some tools to understand why. He was awkward, and powerful, and grotesquely handsome, and when he raised his thumbs and forefingers in L-shapes to frame an imaginary movie screen Rey gulped at how big his hands were. We’re going to cover Old Hollywood – raise your hand if you’ve seen Citizen Kane? Ok? Not so many people? How about The Wizard of Oz? Ok, that’s better. She couldn’t put her finger on the girlish tickly sensation she felt about him. It was the same delight a small child feels sitting on someone’s lap, thrilled by the attention a grown-up is paying
to you and only you – but it was mixed with something else. Something darker, thicker, more
hungry . . . more adult.

“But don’t think we’re not going to cover some world cinema, too,” said Professor McTavish.
“I’ve got some great films picked out -- Ok? Yes, you in the back?” he said, pointing to a listless
student’s raised hand.

“Yeah, are we, like, going to see, you know, something good?” the student yawned.

*How rude*, thought Rey, glowering slightly.

If the question phased Professor McTavish, though, he didn’t show it. “Well, what would you
consider good?” he answered.

“You know,” he fumbled. “Like a Star Wars movie or something.”

“Excellent point,” said Professor McTavish. Rey noticed how the topic put a spark of alertness in
his already impressive posture. He vaulted up onto the stage with the vigor of a man half his age
and started scrawling on the dry erase board stationed there. “*Star Wars,*” he said aloud as he
scribbled it on the dry erase board in big sprawling letters. The reach of his arm was immense.
“Does anyone know where the term ‘Jedi’ comes from?”

*I know*, thought Rey. She had read it once, in a biography about George Lucas. But she was too shy
to raise her hand. The long muscle in her thigh started twitching with nervous energy and she
pressed her notebook to it to stay calm.

“Jedi,” continued Professor McTavish as he wrote on the board, “comes from the term *jidaigeki,*
which in Japanese means ‘era drama’. Basically, a period drama set during the Edo period – that’s
from roughly the 17th to 19th century. This isn’t a Japanese history class, so I don’t expect you to
know that, ha ha.” His laugh was cringy *and* delightful. Rey blushed a little, overwhelmed with the
adorkableness of it all.

“And they’re often samurai dramas,” he continued, “with lots of swordfighting.” He drew an arrow
from the term and kept writing. “One of the most famous *jidaigeki* directors is Akira Kurosawa,
director of movies such as *Rashomon, Yojimbo, Sanjuro* – anyone heard of those? No? Ok. Maybe
we’ll add one of those to the curriculum, too. In 1958,” he narrated while continuing to write,
“Kurosawa directed a movie called *The Hidden Fortress.* That movie is about two sidekicks – one
tall and one short – who find a treasure. That gets them mixed up in an adventure where a
swordsmen has to rescue a princess – a very headstrong princess, I might add. Does that sound
familiar to anyone?”

Suddenly a wave of revelation washed over Rey. It was suddenly all so clear to her, as clear as that
moment Helen Keller understood the word “WATER” finger-spelled into her wet palm. Every
movie was connected to every other movie, in the same kind of tangled, sprawling, living web
Professor McTavish had scrawled on the board. Every movie has parents. Grandparents. A lineage.
*No movie is born alone. No one is inspired to make a movie unless they love movies. And the only
way to love movies . . . is to know the ones that have come before.*

Before she knew what she was doing, she raised her hand.

The sight of someone showing signs of life in his class sent a charmingly crooked grin across
Professor McTavish’s face. To her horror and delight he met Rey’s eyes eagerly.

“Yes,” he said, motioning to her.
Oh god, Rey thought. If she had any hope of remembering what she was going to say, it was gone now. She hadn’t even been conscious of raising her hand. She’d jerked it upward before the complete thought had formed in her mind, like how you yank your hand away from a hot pan before you feel the burn. And now she was looking into his eyes, those warm brown eyes that glowed with paternal charm, whose undivided attention felt like lapping up liquid gold.

The entire room was looking at her. Her face burned. She could just shake her head and say *never mind*, cringe back into herself . . .

. . . disappoint him.

But something burned in her fiercely, something bigger than just hungering to please a teacher. Never in her life had she met someone who was just as passionate about movies. That bond was so great it didn’t matter if he was her professor, or twenty-some years older than her, or – married? She shot a quick look at his hand. No ring. The observation sent another giddy thrill through her. The excitement of finding one of her own kind overcame her trepidation, and even though her voice shook, she tried to speak as loudly as she could.

“Is *The Hidden Fortress* the only movie that inspired *Star Wars*?” she asked. “Or are there others?”

Rey saw a look wash over Professor McTavish’s face. His gaze clocked onto her, for just one sharp, gossamer moment. And in that moment she felt him measuring her too, just as she had done to him a moment before. Weighing the ways in which they were different, the insurmountable ways that all common sense decreed should erect sensible, rational boundaries between them . . . and reveling instead in the miraculous, serendipitous way they were the same.

“Yes, there are,” he said, regaining himself. “So many. George Lucas saw many films in his years as a film student at USC. There’s the foreshortened title crawl – that’s borrowed from Buck Rogers serials of the 1930s. And *The Dam Busters* – that’s an British war movie whose climax – ” he seemed to choke a little on the word *climax* – “is an RAF mission to blow up a dam with one precise hit. But more than that,” he continued, sweeping a section of the board clean with his eraser and scribbling as quickly as he could in time with his stimulated mind, “Lucas borrowed ideas from everywhere. The King Arthur legends. Chinese and Navajo philosophy, with the idea of a universal force surrounding and flowing through everything. The science fiction novels of E.E ‘Doc’ Smith and Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert. And of course, the writings of Joseph Campbell, about the hero’s journey and how it appears in every human culture, in every story across history.”

“So if *Star Wars* is inspired from all these sources,” said Rey, heart pounding, “including every story written, by *every* human, *ever* . . . doesn’t that make it the *ultimate* fan fiction?”

If the look he’d given her before indicated that she had impressed him, the fleeting expression Rey saw absolutely, unmistakably, right down to her marrow, made her believe for just one nanosecond that Professor McTavish . . .

. . . well, no, he couldn’t be feeling that.

Not about her.

Even if she was feeling it, too . . .

“That’s an excellent point, uh . . .” Professor McTavish stumbled. “I’m sorry, what is your name?”

“Rey,” she said, head downcast in sudden abashment.

“Rey,” he said, lingering on her name like someone tasting a delicacy for the first time. He cleared
his throat and regained his composure. “Like I said, that’s an excellent point. In fact, I invite you to make that your thesis for our first assignment.” The class let out a collective groan as he wrote the assignment on the board. “I want you to write about a movie that resonated deeply with you – good or bad – and explain why.” He underlined the word why twice. “I don’t just want to hear about whether you liked it or not. I want you to look deeply into why you did or didn’t like it. Explain it to me like you’re a doctor diagnosing a patient. Is it healthy? Or is it sick? And if it’s sick, how can you tell? And what’s the cure?”

“How many pages?” someone yelled from the back.

“At least two. More if you like. Ok. Let’s dim the lights and get started. I’ve got some great silent films to start our overview of film history.”

Professor McTavish had carefully curated a gourmet buffet of silent film for them. She could feel the care he’d taken in selecting just the right examples – a nibble of Muybridge’s sequential photos of a horse in mid-gallop, a sprinkle of early motion toy zoetropes and thaumatropes and phenakistoscopes, the rich nitrate stock blacks and dreamlike motion of Edison’s Kinetoscopes. The theater’s immense screen flattered the moving images, giving them an enchanted, almost divine power.

“Modern viewers think silent films are herky-jerky and unnaturally sped up,” Professor McTavish’s voice resonated from the back of the room as the class grew hypnotized by the luxuriant, almost underwater swirls of Anna Belle’s serpentine dance. “Just think, Annabelle Whitford performed forty-two seconds of this dance in 1895. And we’re watching it now. Think of all the dances that were lost forever, in all of human history. And now here, in a tar paper shack in New Jersey, those dark ages ended. Nothing would ever be lost again.” The raw excitement of how Edison’s crew must have felt that possibility sent thrilled prickles up the back of Rey’s neck. She desperately craved to have Professor McTavish’s hands be what smoothed them back down again.

Rey desperately wanted to pay close attention to his next offerings. Even though she’d already seen The Great Train Robbery (“This movie invented the idea of editing”, explained Professor McTavish) or A Trip To The Moon (“Much of early special effects were inspired by stage magic.”), she was hungry to hear his special insights. But this idea about Star Wars being the ultimate fan fiction kept rolling around in her mind. She tried to hush it by immediately scribbling down each thought as it occurred, in the hopes that the overactive idea would settle down enough to let her enjoy a Keystone Kops short and Gertie The Dinosaur.

But there was a third fixation competing for her attention. Right now she was safe inside the dark, in the reflected moonglow of the movie screen. But soon the lights would go up, and Professor McTavish would cease to be a booming, warm voice at the back of the room. He would be standing before her again, at the front of the room. The anticipatory pleasure of looking at him again sent a shivery, Christmas-morning feeling through her body. Not that Christmas had ever worked out so well for her. That’s the holiday of managing expectations, even when they get the best of you. Maybe when the lights went up she’d realize she’d oversold herself on him. Maybe she was only smitten for some strange, pheremonal reason, some hiccup in her menstrual cycle that was prodding her between the shoulder blades and purring mmm, that one, that tall one, he’s a good DNA delivery system, you’ll want to get on that.

But then the lights went up.

And she wasn’t wrong.

It wasn’t his height, or how the plane of his chest seemed perfect for resting one’s head upon, or the near-simian power in arms hidden under the most innocuous of plaid button-down sleeves. It
wasn’t how the myriad asymmetries of his face made a pleasurable, unsolvable puzzle for the eyes.

Rey knew how a movie camera works. To our naked eyes, it looks like the film streams through the projector in one unbroken flow. But really, it’s a slide show in fast motion. The projector locks one frame at a time in the gate.Flashes its image on screen. Then closes its shutter. The film only advances to the next frame behind that dark closed shutter, like a modest lover slipping out of her clothes behind a folding screen. This striptease happens twenty-four times in one second. Your weak human eyes will never see it, but half the time you’re watching a movie, you’re looking at a dark screen.

Rey could see his dark screen. She saw it not in words or proof but in deep somatic prophecies, sensations of where he could and would touch her already inscribing promises onto her nerve endings. Pressure, pain, pleasure. And the deep wants he would dredge out of her in great brutal fistfuls from where she’d buried them, the Pompeii of her heartbreaks and fragile childish hopes and managed expectations. *Oh, daddy.* That Pandora’s box of a craving. Lock it tight.

She bolted upright and stumbled out of her row, knocking her knees on every flapping spring-loaded theater seat as she passed.

“Class . . . dismissed?” she heard his perplexed voice behind her, and the spattering of cruel giggles that tore at her back as she dashed out of the theater.

It was raining. She ran through the needle-prick shower through the quad, past the new buildings, past the deluxe, high-rise dorms, all the way to the forlorn edge of the campus where no one with money goes. A lone concrete barrack of a dorm sat there, dwarfed by sheltering oak trees. The dorm and the trees had the same early ‘70s birthday. One grew impressive and the other was dwarfed by time.

She turned her key in the main door’s lock – no keyswipe here, not for a building destined for euthanasia – and ran down the narrow cinderblock hallway to her dorm room. She was desperate: to write, to hide, to plunge her fingers below her waistband and agree with her body about what this afternoon had meant –

Her room was as meager as they come. Foster children get free state college before they age out of the system. The state pays, but the university pockets the difference. Rey didn’t care if her room was brutally utilitarian. Bed, desk, lamp, chair. It was shelter. She had the small luxury of a typewriter and a mini-fridge. She had the priceless luxury of living alone. Managed expectations.

She threw her bookbag down on the ground and threw herself into her desk chair. Without even taking off her jacket she *zznick-zznick* wound a fresh sheet of paper into the typewriter. Her heart was pounding and the coiling spiral of lust was churning around everything warm and vital below her navel. She pounded out a title

*Blue Harvest*

and cried out, and yanked down the zipper of her jeans and it was never her own hands on her. It was his hands *Call me William*, his tongue against her earlobe, that voice resonating in the seashell folds of her ear, in the finger he’d plunged inside her *Better yet* two fingers, stroking the wishbone yoke of her internal clit, her two sweet spots

*call me Daddy*

and when she came she said aloud yes, to no one at all,
to the dark frame.
The Transition To Sound

Rey didn’t need an alarm to wake up. It must have been four in the morning, the cold bleak hour only known to sleepwalkers and insomniacs. Forget coffee. The caffeinated hope of Thursday made her sit upright, blinking, heart percolating with anticipation. Thursday was the day she would see him again. She had a gift for him, too: her first assignment, neatly typed and sitting in a precise stack on her desk. She couldn’t wait to give it to him, like how a child can’t wait to give a beloved teacher a fistful of the first dandelions of spring.

The experience of writing this paper was so different. Usually assignments prodded her methodical side. Stacks of notecards, a quick outline of her argument, and then careful, unassailable paragraphs with a beginning, middle, and an end. She was good at it, but when teachers told her so with laudatory grades she hesitated to take the praise. It wasn’t anything to be proud of, really. Just laying bricks.

This essay was different. Something poured out of her, something so intimate and passionate she didn’t realize how hard and fast her fingers were pounding the keys of her manual typewriter until the first knuckle of every finger felt like how a ballerina’s feet must feel after a night in toe shoes. No notecards. No outlines. There was only an urgent torrent of conviction, as sincere as a love letter and twice as fervent. When she pulled the last triumphant page out of the typewriter’s roller with a zzzzing! she felt weightless, timeless, spent. She stacked the pages neatly and smoothed the front page before realizing she hadn’t washed her fingers.

She wondered if he would notice.

The shower water was still cold at 4 am. She danced and shivered around the edges of the spray, trying to scrub herself while the lazy pipes took their time supplying hot water for the dorm’s first bather of the day. She didn’t have toiletries beyond dollar store soap and shampoo, but she tried to make the watery lather count.

A sudden wave of self-consciousness wowed up in her while drying off. She did not think much of her body, and did not think about it. But suddenly, seeing a narrow band of her reflection in the streak she’d wiped clean from the notebook-sized bathroom mirror, she saw her lank wet hair and her unplucked eyebrows and felt the weight of hypothetical eyes. Eyes she’d tried to sidestep her whole life with glum ponytails and too-big hoodies and sneakers she could run in, should she need to. “All dolled up” meant Chapstick. She wasn’t used to being seen.

But am I seen? she thought as she pulled her breasts into the utilitarian jogging bra that made them a non-issue to herself and to the world. It seemed like she had been, for one weightless moment. That nanosecond jolt of connection between her and Professor McTavish was water on her parched spirit. Its delirious shock carried her through the rest of Wednesday and Thursday and now Friday morning, when her class would meet again for its second weekly session. And he would be there.

And he would see her.

Maybe vanity made her pick the smallest t-shirt she owned from those she’d neatly folded in her drawer. It didn’t matter it would still be hidden under the sand-colored hoodie she cocooned her torso in every day. She would know she was wearing the small one, the boy’s shirt that could not be called fitted in any way but still clung to her more closely than the usual shirts she swam her body under. Jeans did not have an option. They were the same straight-legged size 6s she wore every day, same crew socks, same quick getaway sneakers. She brushed her teeth with tremendous care and pulled her damp hair into a folded bun at the base of her neck. That was it. She looked in
the mirror. That was the best she could do.

She looked across the room, worry knitting her brow. The sight of her paper in its perfect stack soothed her unease. That was something of value to give him. Something she wanted to give. Here, it would say. This is me. She longed to lay it in his hands.

She would, this morning.

The sky turned dawn lavender. Anticipation propelled her out onto campus, into a morning too cold for wet hair. The student union was just opening its doors by the time she got there. It was the end of the month and her dining card was low. She tucked her hood up around the cold nape of her neck and weighed whether she should chance buying a breakfast. Not that she had the stomach to eat it. The thought of how a warm bagel sandwich tucked into her hoodie pouch would feel on her cold fingers swayed her. Minutes later, a paper-wrapped sausage, egg, and cheese steamed happily against her palms in the belly muff of her pocket. The solid, almost living-thing feeling of it comforted her as she hiked across campus to the theater.

She wasn’t the first student in the theater, but she was the only one awake. A bored TA sat in the seat closest to the entrance. “Sign in,” he said, lifting the attendance clipboard to her.

Rey did. “Where do I hand in my paper?”

“You’re supposed to post it on the class blog. Or email it.”

Rey’s cheeks flushed. Stupid, she hadn’t read the syllabus. She rummaged her paper out of her bag. “I was hoping to give this to Professor McTavish.”

“He’s out today.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“I’ll give it to him,” said the TA. He lifted a lackadaisical hand.

Rey hesitated. “This is my only copy.” She bit her lip. “Where is his office?”

“On the third floor of the Yavin Building next door. I’m going there after class, I’ll just leave it there.”

And you’ll read it, thought Rey. She folded it in half reflexively.

“No, I’ll just take it there.”

The TA looked down at his phone. “Suit yourself.”

Rey walked up the steep theater steps, crestfallen. Suddenly that sandwich felt eminently edible. She unwrapped it and quietly munched. The sagey sausage and gooey American cheese on a toasty, yielding bagel did its best to comfort her as the rest of the class trickled in.

“Oh, listen up,” the TA finally said as he roused himself from his seat. “Professor McTavish is out today, he wanted me to read this.” He scrolled up on his phone and recited an email in monotone. “Hello class, sorry for the late change in plans. I’m not going to be able to make it for Friday’s class due to a last-minute situation.” Rey’s ears perked up. Situation?

“So let’s postpone our planned discussion of the beginning of the sound era for next Wednesday’s class,” the TA continued. “This gives us a chance to bridge the two eras and watch F.W. Murnau’s
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans, from 1927. This is a silent-style movie, released with a synchronized soundtrack of music and special effects. Please take notes and come ready to discuss on Wednesday. If you have any questions you can ask the substitute TA --” – here the TA paused and gave a “that’s me” shrug – “or email them to me later. Again, sorry about the last minute change in plans, I’ll get grades to you on last week’s paper as soon as I can. Thanks.”

The TA put down his phone. “Does anyone have any questions?” There was a grunt in the back that sounded similar to no. “OK, whatever,” said the TA as he bounded up the stairs to the projection booth. “I’ll start the film.”

The lights dimmed and enveloped Rey in a warm velvety blackness. White credits on a black screen. The Man. The Wife. The Woman From The City. This song of the Man and his Wife is of no place and every place, read the intertitle. Life is much the same, sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet.

Even from the first frame Rey could feel it. There was something sure about this movie. It had a muscle and confidence that the other silents didn’t have. Those early, clumsy experiments were feeling out a new medium, tentatively testing its limits. This movie gloried in the uncharted territory of what it could do, and how it could soar. The Woman From The City was bad news in bobbed hair. She blew smoke in the face of the bent crone reduced to polishing her jazz-age pumps. She was unvarnished evil, in its most capricious form: The Woman Who Does, Just Because She Can. And she can, to a simple farmer and his modest, weeping wife. The tragedy of it all tore at Rey, and she was in the thrall of this triangle’s impending doom before even ten minutes had passed.

Each image took her breath away. The Man, his back dark and broad against a gloomy sky set with a madness moon, walking through a swamp that felt like an external manifestation of his sexual obsession. His weakness, wrapped around his blameless wife’s doom, and his last minute contrition. The slow way she and he, with quiet, sincere grace, weighed their love against his sins and chose the better path. Tears welled in Rey’s eyes. How could a director in 1927 make a movie that still hurts so much? And redeems so much about what is good about men, women, love, grace, redemption – being alive?

Someone behind her snickered. Anger burned up in Rey but she chose to ignore it. She didn’t want to disrespect the movie by making more noise. She refocused her attention on the screen but the voice joined another behind her. They were texting, their phones dinging, giggling over some meme, their voices getting louder and louder. Rey was incensed. She hissed “Shhh!” over her shoulder. There was a moment of silence and then two snorting giggles. A spitball dinged against the back of Rey’s head. She jerked her head around.

“I’m trying to watch the movie,” she hissed.

“I’m trying to watch the movie,” one of the girls sneer-mocked back. “Foster kid.”

A roaring, crackling force seared up in Rey. In the dark she had more power. She stood up and wheeled around, the silverlight of the screen behind her coursing around her in a halo of unholy potency. The offending girls’s eyes went wide as Rey opened her mouth and unleashed Pandora’s box –

“SHUT!

UUUUUUUUUUUP!!!!”

The entire class turned in their seats, faces blanched by reflected light and fear reflex. This was not
what they expected at an 8 am movie. They did not doubt for a moment that Rey, fists clenched, eyes burning, hunched forward as if ready to strike the chastened girls, was insincere about that they were going to shut up, and they were going to shut up now. Even the TA looked stunned.

Rey burned a wordless threat into each of the girls’ eyes in turn. They got the message. Rey flung herself around and sank back down in her seat. Only once she had sat down did she feel the shock reflex shudder of that sudden surge of adrenaline decaying in her system. She had never defended herself like that. No. She wasn’t just defending herself. She was defending a movie. It was beautiful and fragile and all it took was one idiot to break its spell for everyone. Beautiful and fragile things do not deserve to be broken. She stood up for it.

Nobody had ever done that for her.

Everyone behaved for the rest of the screening. The rancor in Rey’s veins subsided and she fell under the movie’s spell again with ease. The final shot of the Wife’s opening eyes. Her innocent relief. Their kiss. FINIS.

“Sign the attendance sheet if you haven’t already,” the bored TA said as they filed out. Rey didn’t notice her other classmates giving her a wide berth and askance glances. She was too focused on making a beeline out the door and to the next building over. The Yavin Building. Third floor.

She found his office immediately. It was easy to find it, with the pictures of Lon Chaney and Jean Harlow on the door. Even though the door was open a crack, she knocked on it respectfully.

“Professor McTavish?” she spoke into the crack of the door.

No answer.

With cautious fingertips, she pushed the door open.

Stepping into his office felt, on some level, like stepping inside of him. It was a small office, just enough for a desk and computer and some freestanding shelves bolted to the wall, higher up than she -- or really, anyone not his height -- could reach them. They must have been his addition, and they were crammed with well-loved books. She stood on tiptoe to read some of the titles. Cult Movies. From Caligari to Hitler. Adventures in the Screen Trade. From Reverence to Rape. Story by Robert McKee. Hitchcock/Truffaut. Film as a Subversive Art. The collective works of Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert, Jeanine Basinger, Penelope Gilliatt, Susan Sontag. If she could have reached them, she would have stroked their spines. Maybe he’ll lend me one, she thought with a giddy shiver.

She scanned the clutter of his desk. Scattered administrative forms. Several stacks of videotapes and DVDs. A bold vintage poster for Man With A Movie Camera over his desk, a jaunty flapper caught in saucy mid-backbend as the movie’s title swirled around her in a joyous vortex of Cyrillic letters. A snarling Godzilla toy looming over his computer monitor. A full cup of cold coffee. Abandoned in a hurry, she realized. She hoped he was okay.

There was a framed picture of a boy on his desk, too. It was obvious it was of his son. Same deep hazel eyes, same crooked full-lipped grin. The distinctive nose and ears were whittled down by someone else’s mediating DNA. Same with the unruly auburn curls. It felt too intrusive to Rey to know this was his son. She felt as if she’d made an indelible mistake.

Her guilt reminded her that she’d only intended to drop off her paper, not to snoop. She pulled the paper from her bag and smoothed out where she’d folded it in half to keep it from prying eyes. She laid it carefully across his keyboard. It was here. He would see it soon. He would know.
She swallowed hard.

On sudden brave impulse she grabbed a pen from his desk and scribbled at the top

*I hope you are okay xo Rey*

and instantly regretted it – stupid, *stupid*, too forward, not how you’re supposed to treat a professor . . .

. . . but maybe treat a Daddy . . .

Her want swelled up in her chest. “Yes,” she whispered aloud again, to the room, as if the *yes* would linger like cigarette smoke and he would know its scent was here when he came back.

Before she knew what she was doing, she dropped the heavy anchor of her backpack to the ground and leaped up, knocked a book off the shelf, any book, caught it tight against her chest, grabbed her backpack. The treasure burned her chest as she ran home.
Pre-Code Hollywood

“I got your papers back,” said Professor McTavish, “and, I’ll be honest . . . I’m not happy.”

Rey’s face flushed with doom. This was not a good way to start Wednesday’s class. A few minutes ago she was practically squirming waiting, counting, aching through the teeth-chattering seconds before she got to see Professor McTavish again. It had been too long a wait. Every other class this week was an interminable drone. Every time she squirmed in her seat it became copiously clear how every bit of her slavered for his return.

“First of all, I heard there was an outburst during the screening on Friday. I can’t emphasize this enough: I’ve chosen every one of these films because they’re worthy of your attention and respect. And if you’re not willing to extend that respect, then I will ask you to withdraw from this class. Secondly,” he continued, “I was very clear about the instructions for your first paper. The assignment was to provide a critical analysis of a movie that had an influence on you. I got twenty-four movie summaries with an ending paragraph about whether you liked it. That is exactly what I told you not to write.”

Rey swallowed hard. Something was on edge about him today. The warm avuncular vibe that made her tingle was gone. She didn’t know if it was something she’d done, or something going on in his life that was giving him an edge. It didn’t matter. She desperately wanted to please him, to earn his good graces again. She dropped her eyes in shame. She’d tried really hard to follow his instructions and give him a thoughtful analysis. It wasn’t just the idea of getting a bad grade at a task she knew she could do competently. It was the thought that she’d disappointed him. That made her burn with terror. But beneath the terror was a strange delight, an exquisite horror that enthralled her. He was so perfect, and she was so small. It almost felt deliciously right to have that smallness confirmed, like digging into your gums with taut dental floss until your entire jaw sang . . .

“In fact,” Professor McTavish continued, dropping the stack of papers onto the edge of the stage with an irritated swack, “I got exactly one paper that earned a passing grade. And I’m going to read it for you right now, so no one will be confused about what I want ever again.”

All week Rey had desperately wanted to just gaze upon him again. Now, she couldn’t even look him in the eye. She blinked back the salty beginnings of some tears and took out her notebook with quivering hands. She would take notes on exactly what he wanted, and never disappoint him again.

The entire class was quiet. The feather rustle of him searching through the stack for the one worthy paper reverberated in the shamed silence. Rey could not look up. She focused all her being onto the mote-sized pinprick where the tip of her pencil lead made contact with the rough white of her notebook page. She wanted to crawl inside that infinitesimal dot, be so small the molecules of her shame could not follow her there –

“Green Harvest,” read Professor McTavish in that rich, resonant voice. “The Rise of Skywalker vs. The Disney Machine.” The shock made Rey snap the point off her pencil. That was her title.

_Hers._

Her paper was the exalted one.

A thrilled breathless buzzing filled her ears. Her heart pounded. The adrenalined joy coursing through her almost made her so numb with shock and relief that she couldn’t pay attention to the
words coming out of that wide sensual mouth. But she heard it. He was reading her words aloud, words she’d poured so much of herself into. It was like he was rolling some part of her around inside his mouth. He continued to read, but she only started to comprehend her own words being recited back to her by the time he was halfway through:

It makes no sense to “bring balance to the Force” by destroying one half of a powerful dyad. Lucas may have borrowed the idea of the Force from Eastern philosophy, but by the time his concepts made its way to Disney, the attending concepts of dark and light being complementary, subjective descriptions – as graphically depicted in the yin yang – gave way to a Judeo-Christian dualism, where “good” is a divine absolute destined to prevail over unnatural “evil”.

The moment The Rise of Skywalker could have chosen a more nuanced exploration of its stated theme of “the dark side” (i.e. human’s post-Fall sinful nature) was to courageously allow Chewbacca to die during the struggle to wrest control of the ship. If the filmmakers had allowed that to happen, that opened a place of moral reckoning for the film’s heroine: if my inherent evil has caused pain and suffering, even in circumstances where I operate in good faith, perhaps there is room for forgiveness and empathy for a so-called “evil” character who has done the same? That would open up an ending where symbolically, she would come to acceptance of her own dark side and in doing so destroy its hold over her, and by extension the dyad.

But they chose not to, and so presented us with a movie with no moral courage. Its heroine is not a capital-H Hero, in the Joseph Campbellian mold: she may face travails and challenges, but she pays for none of it with her own flesh. She is given everything: supernatural abilities, substitute family, loyal friends, romantic devotion, and eventual third-act triumph, without a single sacrifice on her part. It is not true apotheosis if, at the moment of death, a hero is resurrected by a more heroic character’s sacrifice. (Was Judas responsible for Jesus’s resurrection? And if he was, who would we believe was the real hero of the Easter story?) She’s a credit card hero, spending any treasure other than her own.

It’s hard to calculate what Disney et. al. anticipated after the release of The Rise of Skywalker. Did they genuinely believe this was the most satisfying ending possible to a saga whose movies have spanned almost half a century, and have captured our collective imagination in a way no other modern phenomenon has? Did they anticipate – or even care about – the tremendous and genuine outcry of grief from an overwhelmingly female fandom over the unjust death of Kylo Ren? Have they witnessed how a staggering torrent of fan fiction and fan art is filling the void, finally voicing the future that was fandom’s hope for the movie’s dyad: love, contentment, family, a future – finally, inner peace? Does that bruise their conscience? Or is their focus so cynical that they follow the axiom that “there’s no such thing as bad publicity” as long as it puts money in the Mouse’s coffers?

If they really cared, this is how the movie would have ended: Chewbacca died. Rey has a clarifying moment after coming to grips with her own culpability. She joins Kylo in the final battle. Their dyad is a strength, not a weakness, and it defeats the Emperor. The cost is that both die, in each others arms. But in that moment, every sentient being becomes Force sensitive. The “balance to the Force” is not a balance between dark and light: it’s a balance between it being something focused in a select few vs. in all living things. A newly Force sensitive cadre of rebels come to Kylo and Rey’s aid. They use their collective powers to
revive them. The final scene is as it stands, with Rey burying the lightsabers in the desert, symbolically ending the war that had defined Star Wars. The fecundity of this reborn world is symbolized by her being pregnant.

The loss of this much more satisfying conclusion is not just sorrowful for women. It’s deeply insulting. There was much ballyhoo over the sequels having a heroine at their focus. “What a big day for women,” the thinking went. But is Rey a woman? She is female, that’s certain. But is she matured emotionally, psychologically, sexually? Does she live with overlapping, urgent contradictions in her wants and needs that frustrate and confound even herself? Is her experience of life rooted in a body that makes her vulnerable? Does she possess the lurid, edgeless, full untamed power of a woman’s sexuality?

It’s not a surprise that Star Wars is not ready to create a heroine who’s actually a woman. It is a universe that is suspicious and fearful of sex, marriage, and motherhood. Padme’s downfall begins with marriage and ends with death in childbirth. Jedis must choose celibacy. Han and Leia divorce. Their son revives the Dark Side. There are less than nine passionate kisses in over 22 hours of cinema, and no mention of any human sexuality other than Padme’s declaration that she’s pregnant. (Even Anakin was a virgin birth.) In short, nothing good comes of eros in the canon world of Star Wars. This is where fan fiction has filled a gaping and hungry gap.

Disney thought they could make women happy by giving them a movie about a stunted little girl. It is the ultimate in condescension. Women deserve better than The Rise of Skywalker. And Kylo – brave, noble, abused, undeserving Kylo, the only character capable of truly loving someone body and soul -- deserves a better movie.

He stopped reading, and exhaled, as if the act of reading it had done something subtle and profound to him.

“There’s thought,” he finally said “There’s care. There’s focus.” He looked down at the paper again. His Adam’s apple tightened, as if he was carefully swallowing some of what he wanted to say. “Extraordinary,” he finally spoke, and placed the paper gently on the top of the stack.

There was absolute silence in the theater. Rey couldn’t breathe.

Then he clapped his hands together. “Let’s move on. Pre-Code Hollywood.” He leapt up onto the stage again and uncapped the dry erase marker. “Who can tell me the movie ratings currently in use? Yes?” He pointed to a raised hand in the back row.

“G,” the student said.

“G. Right. For General Audiences. Give us another one, someone else.”

“R.”

“R. Restricted. Yes,” he said, pointing.

“PG.”

“PG. And PG-13. Yes?”

“X,” said someone in the back. The class snickered.
“X,” Professor McTavish wrote on the board. “And XXX, used only for hardcore pornography. We’ll get back to that later.” Rey’s cheeks flushed at the casual way he said that. “One more.” The class was stumped and silent.

Professor McTavish wrote it on the board. “NC-17.” He drew a circle around X, XXX, and NC-17 and stepped back. “What do these ratings tell us?”

“What bad stuff is in movies,” said someone.

“Whether a movie is okay for kids,” someone else said.

“Yes, and yes. But there’s one more thing – something that has changed over time. What is it?”

The class was silent. Rey racked her brain. The firefly of the answer was hovering inside her, a tantalizing something that she couldn’t quite trap between her hands. She bit her lip and looked up –

-- and Professor McTavish was looking directly at her.

Her heart caught in her throat but she forced herself to boldly return his gaze. There was something sly and encouraging in the look he was giving her, a shared joke. Come on, it said. I know you know this. Dig deep.

The firefly --

Rey raised her hand.

“Yes,” Professor McTavish said. His eyes shone with the same bold wink.

“What a culture believes is right and wrong,” she said.

“Bingo.” He pointed an arrow to the circle corralling the three forbidden ratings. “And what American culture believes is wrong is most often contained inside these three. So what is wrong?”

This time everyone knew the answer but no one wanted to be the first to say it. Rey included.

“Sex,” answered Professor McTavish. “Explicit sex. Sex between partners other than a man and a woman. Specific sex acts.” He stabbed the circle with his dry erase marker. “Sex that values women’s pleasure.”

Rey’s clit flushed with excitement at the thought of Professor McTavish valuing her pleasure. It was not a concept that she had experienced much of in life. The only time she truly felt it was in her own explorations of her body. This had been a banner year in that regard. Alone, in the quiet shell of her dorm room, she’d gotten to know the secret delights of her anatomy in a way that hadn’t been possible before – not in crowded foster homes or under the thumb of repressive caretakers.

She’d learned not only how fiercely rubbing her clit could pump out breath-holding, foot-clenching orgasms. She’d learned the subtle infinite nuances of all the secret dots of pleasure tucked into her folds. The way how less is more, how she didn’t need to assault the clitoris with hard pressure, how it would rise to meet the softest touch with more eagerness. It even had an underside that was just as sensitive, and she could find that space under the arch of it in a soft, rocking pinch. And the ways she could touch herself: tiny Morse code taps on that sweet 11 o’clock spot on her hood, sliding the V of two wet fingers low in the gully on either side of it, even gently flexing her pelvic muscles so that the hard true nub of her clit could rub itself on the plump hood that contained it. She’d gone to bed many nights like that, softly rocking her body against itself as she rolled her fingers around her nipples, imagination aflame with thoughts of Professor McTavish and what he
looked like under his clothes, how his kisses tasted, how his mouth would feel on her doing everything she was doing to herself. She couldn’t imagine these things with concrete detail. These were things no man had ever done to her. But what she lacked in accuracy she made up for with imaginative longing, and the sweet coruscations they rewarded her with were the stuff of contented sleep.

Professor McTavish pointed to the X. “The X rating was created in 1968 to give accurate content warnings to movies like Midnight Cowboy and A Clockwork Orange. But unlike the other ratings, the MPAA neglected to trademark the X, so any film could self-apply it rather than have it applied by the ratings board. That led to the X being adapted by pornographic filmmakers, who eventually mutated it into the XXX rating. That caused confusion,” he said, drawing arrows between the X and the XXX, “between serious-minded movies with explicit content and mere pornography. So in 1990 the MPAA created the NC-17 rating,” he said, drawing an arrow, “as a way of distinguishing content.” He capped his marker. “How long have these ratings existed?”

Someone raised their hand. “Like, forever? Because old-timey movies are like, tamer than the movies today?”

Rey knew that was untrue because of her own sin. The book she’d knocked down from Professor McTavish’s shelf was Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema. Any residual regret she felt from taking it from him got lost while devouring it cover to cover over the weekend. She didn’t know that, between 1930 and 1934, American movies were explicit and amoral in a way that wouldn’t return until the social changes of the late 60s. It was hard to believe there were four hidden short years in American movies where anything was possible: sexually voracious, scruple-free heroines, violent gangsters, a glamorous black-and-white world where crime pays and sluts win and everyone’s thrilled in the end. All tucked away inside a forgotten pocket of Hollywood. The Pre-Code years are the clitoris of film history, she thought.

“Think about that answer while we watch the next movie,” said Professor McTavish as he dimmed the lights. “We’re going to watch Baby Face – and we’re going to watch the original uncut version, as it originally played in theaters in 1933. I think you might be surprised at what ‘old-timey’ movies can get up to.”

The luminous movie started. But Rey couldn’t concentrate. She was too worked up, thinking about Professor McTavish’s wink and how he spoke of women’s pleasure and her own XXX explorations on the X of her clit. She wanted to slip inside the gorgeous pearl-grey screen of Baby Face and imagine what kind of a life she could have inside it, slut triumphant, awash in a world where a willingness to fuck was coin of the realm and she was sitting on a treasure . . .

From her perch in the theater’s upper rows she could see the outline of Professor McTavish’s salt-and-pepper hair lit up in a silvery corona by Baby Face’s light. Barbara Stanwyck, Erie slattern, fending off pinches and catcalls from dirty day laborers in her father’s beer hall. Pouring coffee on the hands of grabby men. Then the one good thing any man has ever given her placed in her hands: Nietzsche’s Will to Power. If you stay in this town you are lost, warns its lender. You let life defeat you. You don’t fight back. A woman young and beautiful like you could get anything she wants in the world. Her force awakens.

Rey focused all her attention on that corona of light around the eclipse of Professor McTavish’s back. No classmate was in a row higher than hers. No one would see. The madness and wrongness of what she was about to do sent a pounding thrill through her. She laid her notebook over her lap and shifted in her seat to disguise how she separated her knees. Her breath was tight as she crept her right hand under her notebook with a snakehandler’s incremental care. She could place one finger right on the double-folded knot of denim in the dead center of the crotch of her jeans. If she
crooked the fingers above and below it, softly, softer than how you’d scratch behind a cat’s ears, the thrumming flesh of her pussy could feel its tiny footprint of pressure just fine.

Something about the microtingle of sensation each stroke percolated in her clit reared up bold thoughts about what she’d like to do to him, with him, on him. The vital heat of her cheek pressed up against his back, feeling his cattle-sized ribs expand with each breath. Her arms creeping around a waist that was unpaunched but still girthed too wide for her arms to touch at his navel. The small of his neck, and the fine hairs there in thick skin. And his face against the back of her neck, too, that formidable profile nudging her with every plush kiss, just as firmly as what nudged her between her thighs laying beside him. She imagined parting those thighs, feeling the drag of his hard cock between their tender insides, shifting her hips to offer him where she was wet and molten, that shocking gasp as he penetrated her, her ass pressed against his hard-boned hips as he rocked torturously into her . . .

He turned around and looked towards Rey’s dark quadrant of the theater.

Rey’s heart did a backflip. It was as if her want had called him.

It was hard to see if he was looking directly at her. Rey didn’t stop. Her finger kept crooking at the sweet spot beneath her jeans. Knowing he might be looking at her sent involuntary clenches up inside her, like the dancing violet zap of a Jacob’s Ladder.

She spread her knees just the tiniest brave bit open. Her pupils adjusted. She could see the whites of his eyes now.

He was looking at her.

With all the courage she could muster, she returned his gaze. Connecting stare to stare for one, two, three weightless, bold seconds. Could he see her? See what she was doing?

She slid her notebook one coy inch back on her lap. She didn’t know to what extent the light of the screen reflected against her, if she was more visible to him than he was to her. The thought of being on display to him thrilled her. As if he were commanding her stroke yourself. Let’s see it. Don’t pretend to be shy, you darling little slut. I know you do this. And now you’re going to show me. You’re going to do your naughty little secret right in front of me. That’s right. Spread your knees so I can see everything. Get that pussy wet for me.

I have plans for you.

Slowly, Professor McTavish turned his head back to face the screen. She saw his wide shoulders rise and fall with the smallest tight sigh. Then he was still.

The End. A Warner Bros. Picture. The lights came up. The class filed out. Rey hugged her notebook to her chest as she filed out past him with the rest of the class.

He touched her shoulder. She stopped, wide-eyed. Standing next to him, the closest she’d ever yet been to him, she saw the top of her head barely came up to his sternum.

“Rey, I need to talk to you,” he said. “Not here.” He pointed to the soundproof room in the back of the theater, all the way at the top. “In the projection booth.”
“I know you took that book,” said Professor McTavish.

They were standing in the projection booth at the back of the theater. It was a tight, cosseted womb of a space, filled with humming black racks of DVD and Blu-Ray and VHS decks and two different projectors: 16mm and 35mm. The slate-grey berber carpet that blanketed walls and ceiling and floor trapped the warmth. The basket-weave soundproofing foam hung across the back wall ate all the ambient sound. It was so quiet she knew he could hear her shallow inhale as she tried to breathe.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Mortified she crouched on the floor to unzip her backpack. She pulled the purloined book out and held it out to him in her shaking hand, too ashamed to return his gaze.

He didn’t snatch it back. He took it from her grip carefully and laid it on the counter beside him. She noticed stacks of DVDs and Blu-Rays piled up nearby, presumably for future classes.

“You know I would have lent it to you,” he said. Then, after a beat: “What did you think of it?”

Rey swallowed hard. “I thought it was interesting,” she finally choked out. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Tell him what you really think. That you smelled the pages while you read it. That it made you feel giddy to have a part of him. She did read it. It was interesting. But how could she describe the way the lawless landscape of the Pre-Code movie feel? Like it was giving her permission to do bad things . . .

He didn’t say anything. He looked out the booth’s wide one-way windows, as if parsing his thoughts. He turned back to her.

“Your paper was excellent,” he said.

Rey blushed and bowed her head. “Thank you.”

“You think about movies differently than anyone here. What are your future plans? Going to Hollywood?”

“I guess I never really thought about it,” she confessed.

“What’s your focus here, at school?”

“I don’t really have one. I just . . .” She trailed off, trying to think how to explain the next part without sounding pathetic. “I thought it would be a good idea. And I needed somewhere to go.”

Professor McTavish’s brow furrowed. She swallowed hard and continued.

“I . . . I’m a foster kid. And if you age out the state pays for college. And if you don’t have anywhere to go . . .”

“. . . They get you housing, too,” he finished her thoughts.

“Yeah,” she admitted, exhaling shakily. She hated telling this part. It just reminded her of how no one wanted her. “It’s just . . .” Something broke loose in her, a secret she’d been aching to tell someone, anyone. “When I’m writing about a movie, or even just being in a movie, in the dark of the theater, I just feel powerful. Like I’m free, finally . . . and I can do anything I want.”
This time it was Professor McTavish’s turn to swallow hard. She saw his Adam’s apple jump with the effort.

“I saw what you were doing,” he said.

Rey stiffened in shame and horror. She closed her eyes and wished to drop dead.

Neither of them said anything. The soundproofed absolute silence of the projection booth hummed with the taut electricity between them.

“I don’t want you to write a paper on Baby Face,” he said, slowly and carefully. There was a timbre to his voice she’d never heard before. It was not the voice he used to speak to the class. Even though he stood two feet away from her it was a voice that insinuated itself into her ears as if his mouth was almost against them.

Rey ducked her head to the side, as if slapped. She still couldn’t look at him, or speak.

He reached for the stack of DVDs and shuffled through them. He handed one out to her.

“Take it,” he whispered in that demonic timbre.

She took it with trembling hands.

Belle de Jour.

“I want you to write an essay about this,” he said, with great and pointed care. “And I want you to be very clear about what you think about its themes.” His dark eyes bored into her with an unambiguous clarity. “I want you to explain it to me so I absolutely know your position on it.”

“How many pages?” she whispered.

“As many as you need,” he answered. “Due the next time I see you.”

“I’ll do it,” she nodded, swallowing hard.

“Good girl.” Something about the way he said that watered a long-withered flower inside her. She needed to wind her hands against each other inside the pocket of her hoodie to restrain them from reaching out and touching him.

“You need to go now,” he said with a stern finality. She knew in a flash that it was because he was thinking the same thing.

She whirled around, turned the doorknob, and flew down the auditorium stairs.

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How am I going to watch this? thought Rey. Thursday afternoon the undergrad library was chockablock with computers, but Rey felt a twinge in her conscience as she scanned the endless tables of beige monitors. She didn’t know what was on this DVD. It felt like a betrayal of Professor McTavish’s instructions to watch this in a public space. He’d assigned it to her specifically, to no one else in the class, and his instructions -- I want you to be very clear about what you think about its themes -- had a very pointed, heart-pounding subtext.

Rey clutched the DVD a little closer to her chest. I’ll protect your secrets, she promised.

A librarian wearing a fluttery beige blouse and kind smile approached her. “A/V booth?” she
“I’m sorry?” Rey blinked.

“Do you need an A/V booth? For your movie?” She waved to a back corridor with the words MEDIA STUDIES hung over the door frame. Rey had never noticed it before.

“Oh,” stuttered Rey. “Yes, I guess I do.”

The librarian smiled and lifted a jingling ring of keys from under her desk. “Follow me.” She sashayed through the doorway, Rey close behind.

Rey gasped as she realized where she was. There was an entire wing of the library devoted to moving images. She had no idea this was here. She followed the librarian through a twisting labyrinth of towering shelving racks of obsolete video formats, decks, reels of film, VHS tapes, DVDs, Blu-Rays, Laserdiscs, every imaginable format. Their collective presence had a very particular scent: dusty and nostalgic but slightly vinegary, a perfume hovering above the same warm static electricity smell of a just-carpeted room.

“I knew there was a Media Studies department here,” she gasped. “But I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.”

“Oh yes,” the librarian smiled sweetly. “I’m in love with this collection. We’ve got some rare gems here. Back in the ‘70s,” she continued, “when I was a student, we had a Film Society here. It was a very powerful voice on campus. It’s gone by the wayside – everyone wants to watch movies alone at home, not sitting on the campus green, sharing a joint and a big outdoor screen with everyone you know on a warm summer night.” She winked. “I plead the Fifth about the joint, by the way.”

Rey smiled. “That actually sounds heavenly,” she said. Not that she would know what to do with a joint if someone passed it to her. But sitting out under the stars, your head in someone’s blue-jeaned lap as you absorbed the trippy finale light and color sprawl of 2001: A Space Odyssey…

The librarian unlocked a closet-sized room for Rey. Chair, decks, monitor, headphones. “What have you got?” she asked, craning her neck. “Oooh – Belle de Jour. Enjoy,” she said with a wink. “If you need help, my name’s Joy. I’ll be at the front desk.”

“Thank you,” said Rey, and settled into the seat, the door clicking shut behind her. The Blu-Ray machine swallowed the chrome disc. She clapped the heavy padded headphones over her ears and waited.

A carriage rides through the stately European countryside. The tumble of horses’ hooves and the chiming of their livery. And a divine blonde, possessed of a precise beauty. She looks how women imagine themselves in their happiest fantasies. Shall I tell you a secret, Severine? says her suave husband as he kisses her hand. I love you more every day. The footmen drag her from the coach. They escort her roughly through the woods until she falls, her stockings tearing upon her flailing legs as they drag her on hard forest floor to where she will be bound. Her husband strips her, gags her, ties her hands like a slave. He relishes the slap of the coachmen’s whips against her bared shoulders and her betrayed yelps and pleas almost as much as she does. What are you thinking about, Severine? says her husband as he turns out the bathroom light, interrupting her fantasy. She snaps out of her dream state and half-lies to him. About you.

About you.

Rey’s pulse pounded so hard in her flushed cheeks it almost felt like a sunburn. The screening
room was small and quiet and soundproofed and no eyes would have seen what she chose to do to herself inside its confines. But that was not his instruction. His instruction was to watch, and think, and explain to him, in perfect detail. Even as her heart thrummed at the tremendous surrogate relief of Severine’s debasement, her greater thrill was knowing she was carrying out his directions. In unambiguous absolutes. In a way that would please him.

Oh, please let it please him.

She took no notes. She didn’t need to. This movie threaded itself into her muscle and marrow and soul. It was a part of her now. The box and its mysterious buzz. Marcel’s gold teeth. The cruelty of his eyebrows and sleek leather coat. Mud flung at an angel. Her thoughts knitted themselves together furiously. By the final scene – thinking of you, Severine – they were an unfurling tapestry of long-unvoiced wants and pleading needs.

That night the paper poured out of her in one long prayer. She did not touch herself as she typed. She denied herself even squirming on the hard seat of her chair. Professor McTavish had not said that giving into her arousal was part of her task. Her fingers were assigned only to type every secret thought and that is what they did, pounding hard inky letter dents into each sheet of paper with masochistic, jackhammer speed. When it was done she suddenly gulped a great lungful of air, like a surfacing drowner, not realizing how she’d been holding her breath in the sprint of its creation.

She fell into her bed, delirious, in the witching hour. Everything below her navel clenched in stagnant want. A quick satisfying exploration with her fingers would relieve the cramp, unlock the subtle tender muscles that had stayed plush and hot and ready for too long. She closed her eyes and furrowed her brow. The paper was complete. She had fulfilled his instructions without veering off into erotic distraction. Surely she was free to enjoy her own body now . . .

Due the next time I see you.

She bit her lip. That had been her instruction. She looked over at her desk. There the paper sat. Not with him. No assignment is complete until it’s in the teacher’s hands.

The frustration was causing her genuine distress now. It would be more possible to sleep with a migraine. But something in her stayed her hand. Maybe it was watching Severine, and the thrill she found in debasement. In denial. In surrender.

She flipped over, trapping her hands under her chest, and willed herself to sleep.

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The shriek of her alarm stabbed Rey awake. She sat at the edge of her bed in yesterday’s clothes, nodding out, heart pounding. It took all her willpower to shake off her interrupted sleep cycle and ready herself for class. There wouldn’t be time for breakfast in the cafeteria. It’s the end of the month, thought Rey. I don’t even know if I still have money on that card. There was an apple and a stick of string cheese in the mini fridge. She tucked both into her bag. One would be for breakfast and one would be for lunch. Supper might just be more sleep.

She made it to the auditorium on time and waited in the same cattle call line of drowsy students turning in their papers. She tucked her face down into the stack at the edge of the stage before climbing the stairs to her usual high perch seat.

Professor McTavish came in only a few minutes late and predictably, her heart jumped at the sight of him. Today he wore a well-loved black cable knit sweater over the usual plaid button down, its collar peaking over the knitted neckline. It looked absolutely stunning on him – sinister and cuddly
at the same time – and had the added bonus of making the silver in his salt and pepper hair sing. He had a coffee in his hand and – Rey noticed with relief – the crow’s feet twinkle had returned to his eyes. Whatever mysterious crisis had troubled him last week must have resolved itself. He caught her eye briefly and the sly, crooked, unabashed grin he shot her for just one tasty moment made her shiver with pleasure.

“Thanks for your papers,” he said as he took a sip of his coffee. “I’ll enjoy reading them this weekend. Just wanted to make a quick announcement: tonight there’s a one night only screening of one of my favorite movies, Gun Crazy, at the Bijou Theater in Finsville – not too far from here, if you drive. It starts at 7 pm. I’ll be going, and if you choose to I’ll be happy to accept any extra credit papers from you about it. Don’t think you can cheat by streaming it at home, though.” He wagged his finger. “I’ll know if you were there. A movie like this, you have to see in the theater.”

Yes, thought Rey. I’ll do it. Never mind that she didn’t know how she was going to scrounge up the bus fare to get to Finsville. There had to be a way.

“And that’s perfect,” said Professor McTavish, “because today we’ll be starting our discussion of film noir.” He went on explaining how film noir meant “dark film”, how it wasn’t just detective movies lit from behind venetian blinds, that it was an entire genre of cynical, brutal movies reflecting post-war pessimism in dangerous chiaroscuro. But Rey wasn’t paying any attention. Her thoughts were dancing ahead to tonight. Maybe, if the other people in the class weren’t crowding around him, she’d get to sit in the same row as him. Maybe he’d have something complimentary to say about her paper.

Maybe something else might happen.

She swallowed hard. The pulsing tension coiling around her frustrated pussy was almost as tender as a bruise. And the paper was in his hands. Or on the stage, near his hands. So she could let go. The lights would go out soon, so he could show the clips he’d selected. No one would see her.

Only him, if he were looking.

But something in her wouldn’t let herself do it. She watched him from the audience with the alacrity of a herding dog waiting for the quick flick of a command from her handler. She didn’t even know what that command would be. But she kept her eyes on him hungrily, hoping to spot it when she saw it, hoping she’d even know how badly she needed it –

He paused mid-lecture and looked at her. There was an entire paragraph of information in that burst of eye contact. The devil was in those charmingly crinkled eyes. I know the permission you are looking for, the look said, and I deny you. I deny you in the very worst way. You have no proof that I have read the want in your eyes correctly. Which I certainly have. Because I want you tender and swollen and aching and I want the next release you feel to be under my touch and none other. But try telling that to the judge. So I will let you ache and bite your cuticles and second-guess yourself about whether I have been clear about my wishes. But just try and touch yourself. The guilt will overwhelm you.

If I don’t overwhelm you first.
‘That’s all for today,’ shouted Professor McTavish as the lights came back on and the students shuffled out. ‘Remember, a two page biography of a film noir director of your choice, and Gun Crazy at 7 pm. See you there?’ he said, casually lobbing the question to every student in the room in a way that deflected its real target. Rey felt the question land squarely where it belonged. Its impact made her feel naked. She nodded nervously, head ducked, anxious to get out of the room and out of his company before she did something rash. She felt the heat of his gaze subtly track her before another student interrupted him to plead her case for a late paper.

Yes. Of course she would go. But how? Either anxiety over the question or the cold through her thin hoodie made her teeth chatter as she hustled across campus. It was the last day of the month. Her meager stipend wouldn’t respawn until the 1st. Can you walk to Finsville? Can you hitchhike? Even if she had a car, she wouldn’t know how to drive it. Getting your license: just another life milestone that gets lost in the shuffle when you’re shuttled to caretaker after caretaker. When every eight months you start from the bottom as someone else’s problem. And even if I made it there, she thought, where’s the money for a ticket? If you have a student ID, do they just –

Pzing!

“Ow!” yelped Rey. Something horsefly-sharp had just bitten into her cheekbone at high velocity. Low brutal laughter behind her. She instinctively touched her face for blood. The torturous zink-a-zink-a-zink-a-zzzzrrrrrrrrr! clatter of a coin spinning with increasing suspense on the concrete below her.

He’d thrown a coin at her. The boy with the square jaw and the trust fund smirk and the date rape guffaw had just winged her with a quarter at a velocity perfected on the football field. His friends laughed. The girl Rey’d silenced in class was one of them. They sputtered with glee and held onto each other at the sight of Rey blinking away the pain.

“Oh, shit, shit, see if she picks it up,” one of them hissed. “Feeding time for the poor little charity case.”

The hurt and humiliation seared up in Rey. This never changed. The faces changed and the tactics changed but the daily spearing by fate . . . The heads up quarter mocked her, fat and shiny on the sidewalk. It seemed like George Washington and his pathetic little ponytail were egging her on, too.

A quarter.

Raining from heaven.

Rey set her jaw. She stooped slowly, never breaking eye contact with her tormentors as she scooped it up from the ground. It singed like a torn muscle to watch them explode in chimpanzee glee at her self-debasement. She never looked away.

Come at me, she taunted to herself.

“Dude, hit her again.” Rummaging deep in pockets. “Shit, try a penny.” That hit like a hard flick below her collarbone. She picked it up with the same defiant gravity.

“She stooped for a fucking penny, did you see that?
“Didn’t know she was Jewish.”

“Do it again, do it again.”

“I only have quarters.”

“Doesn’t matter, dude, do it!”

A whole fistful this time, a cluster bomb of spare change aiming for the eyes. Yes, yes, she thought. The bullet smack of each coin against her flesh felt good, purifying. She would suffer anything to see Professor McTavish tonight. Pain alchemized into something closer to ecstatic martyrdom inside her. Let them rain cruel metal down on her. Every sting and humiliation was a step closer to tonight’s grace.

She chased down every spinning jumping bean coin and scraped them up in her fist. Students walked by, absorbed in their phones, their comforts, their own petite dramas. Many saw her but no one helped her. She stood her ground. She jostled the metal in her palm and weighed its worth. Finnsville felt closer.

_Come on._

_Almost there._

“Yo, got a squaw.”

“Toss that bitch.”

A glint of gold. Incoming.

The Sacajawea dollar caught her under the eye. Its english cut a throwing star nick out of the soft skin there. First blood.

Bus fare.

Rey grabbed her bag and ran at rabbit speed, hard enough to taste blood in her lungs, fast enough to outrun the stench of their laughter. She willed the sobbing tightness in her throat down into her muscles, burned up the calories of her hurt like rocket fuel. By the time she got to her dorm’s front door she was ready to vomit from exertion. The tickle that rose up in her throat was instead laughter, a sudden peal of effortless relieved joy.

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Finnsville was two bus transfers away. Rey lay her head on the chill window glass of the final ride and closed her eyes to the lavendering dusk outside. Her stomach calmed enough to allow her to eat her cheese stick. It distracted her stomach for 45 minutes and then the familiar famished gnaw started again. What shut it up was the clenching butterflies of how she would see him again. In a theater. Where anything is possible.

She thought about her paper, what she’d written to him, the assignment she’d fulfilled as explicitly as her good sense would allow. Its words rolled around in her head as she dozed off . . .

_But despite Belle de Jour’s status as a high water mark for BDSM in film (miles above the Fifty Shades of Grey franchise and on a par with arthouse exemplars The Night Porter, Blue Velvet, and The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant), Severine is a curious role model for women with dark sexual tastes—if she can be said to be a role model after all. In many ways, she is a_
tragedy – someone who is doomed, and dooms everyone around her, with the cruel thanotic eroticism that powers her search for debasement. Indeed, the fantasy sequence at the end, where she imagines her paralyzed and blinded husband as whole, healthy, and adoring of her once more, is the least consistent with Severine’s character. The guilt and horror she feels over how her infidelity and perverse impulses have utterly destroyed a good man emotionally, professionally, spiritually, physically is what triggers the ultimate masochistic high she has been yearning for – a high her conscience ironically cannot permit her to enjoy, instead retreating into a fantasy of absolution.

But perhaps Severine’s tragedy is not the usual trope of the “fallen woman” receiving her just desserts. If it is, in fact, a cautionary fable, it is not one told from bourgeoisie society’s point of view. Severine is debased, desecrated, and destroyed because her desire is leashed only to itself. The tautological impossibility of a woman’s desire for submission being satisfied by binding to itself is like curing hunger with hunger, madness with madness, need with need – a swallowing, futile ouroboros. Mainstream mores tout the cure of redevoting herself to her husband and ignoring her desire, subsuming her masochism under the duties of respectable wifehood. But that is a joyless and impossible existence whose only consequence will be despair over a wasted, unlived life.

Critics never mention this briefest of inserts: Severine knocking over a bottle of cologne in the bathroom. Severine sitting down in sudden shock. And then, without comment, her childhood memory of being fondled by a grubby adult man. Who knows what she has endured in her girlhood? Where was her father to protect her? Or, more sinisterly, was that her father? The firm paternal hand that Severine craves has its genesis in that moment, and her tragedy is that she never finds it – not in her bland vanilla husband, not in the boorish louts who leer at her, poor lamb, not in brutal Marcel, and not in her final servitude to her invalid mate.

But what Severine needs – a prescription for satisfaction perhaps beyond the bounds of even an imagination as feverish as Buñuel’s -- is spelled out in the very beginning, in the opening fantasy of her husband’s hand-kissing adoration before he supervises the bondage, flagellation, and rape she craves. A woman like Severine doesn’t need a secret life as a prostitute, or the obsessive attention of a dangerous criminal, even though in her aimlessness and confusion that’s what she gets. What she needs is the firm hand of someone who truly loves her, who sees past her surface sheen in a way no one else does (not even herself), who understands the contradictions and subtleties of her convoluted desires more completely than she ever could, and who is willing to undertake the hard work of excavating her full capacity for passion and pleasure.

If she’d had a lover who would have indulged her fetishes because in his wisdom he knew how to autoclave her true capacity for ecstasy out of that starting point, maybe she would not have come to her unhappy end. If he’d found her, and saw her truth, and if she’d had the courage to speak her desire aloud and submit to his trustworthy carnal will, she would have found happiness, and in that the fertile planting ground of true love.

There is nothing she wants more.

The bus hissed to a stop and Rey awoke with a jerk. “Finnsville,” bellowed the driver. “Last stop.” Rey shouldered her bag and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Two blocks down, the curlqued neon
of the Bijou’s antique marquee glowed like an Art Deco oasis.

*And he is here.* Standing in front of the theater, under the starburst of light bulbs on the marquee’s wide underside. Crowned by a rakish tan fedora, reading a folded *Cineaste*, sipping another tall coffee.

Alone.

Rey hastened her steps without meaning to. She neared closer and closer to him, praying for that electric moment he would lift his head and see her and greet her with that crooked, guileless grin – and then he did

and it was even more lovely than she’d imagined.

“Rey,” he said, genuine delight sugaring his baritone. “You made it.”

Rey nodded furiously, cheeks hurting from the smile she couldn’t suppress. “I just really wanted to come tonight,” she said breathlessly.

“Have you seen *Gun Crazy* before?”

“No. But I’ve read about it. I hope it’s better than my imaginary movie—“ she started, realizing she was going to have to explain herself.

He spoke first. “—Where when you finally get to see a movie you’ve read so much about, it’s got to fight with the movie you were imagining for so many years?” He chuckled. “I’ve got those too.”

“I thought I was the only one,” she said, amazed and relieved.

“Which exceeded your expectations and which weren’t as good?”

“Erm . . . I don’t want to admit this, but . . .“

He cut her off. “*Citizen Kane*, right? Not as good as you thought?”

“Actually, I was going to say *The Godfather,*” she confessed. “I like Scorsese better.”

“What do you like about him?”

Rey thought. This was a hard question. He took a sip of his coffee and let her think, waiting patiently as she worried her lower lip in her teeth, trying to distill a feeling into something she could explain. Never taking his eyes off of her.

“People trying so hard to be good,” she finally said. “When obsession is making that impossible. And finding penance in bloodshed. And pain.”

“In a sinful world.”

“*God’s lonely man,*” she quoted.

“Yeah,” he said softly.

For a moment Rey’s cheek tingled, as if anticipating he might reach up and cup it gently in his hand.
He cleared his throat and looked at his watch instead. “I’ll give everyone else five minutes.”

Rey blinked in surprise. “No one else is here?” That giddy Christmas morning feeling in her heart again.

“You’re the only one.” He smiled warmly. “Come on. Let’s go inside. I need another devil juice.” He raised his coffee sheepishly. “It’s my last remaining vice. Do you drink coffee?”

“No really.” A last bit of business burned at her. “I feel bad for asking this, but . . .” She hesitated. She hated telling people about her financial state. Or asking for help she’d learned never really came. A little quiver of courage wriggled up in her. You can trust him, she said. He’s your --

“Did you cut yourself?” he said, alarmed eyes zeroing in on the coin-width slash beneath her eye. In sudden impulsive action he wiped his middle fingertip gently on the tender skin. She froze, thrilling to the subtlest of touches. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head and wiping the spot herself. It was a reflexive lie and she hated herself for making it. But the comparative weight of what she needed to ask suddenly was positively buoyant compared to that grave truth. “I’m okay. I was just wondering if I could borrow money for a ticket. I don’t get my stipend until tomorrow and I’m –” Flat broke, she thought. “A little short,” she fudged.

“Don’t even worry,” he said. “I’ve got budget money to burn before the end of fiscal year. Everyone’s ticket was going to be on me anyway. And besides,” he said with a conspiratorial smile, “if no one else shows up, let’s blow it all at the concession stand. Bonnie and Clyde the popcorn bandits. Come on”. He grinned and offered her his elbow in a gesture of ironic chivalry. She suppressed a giggle and took it. He was too tall for her to do more but hook her hand over his forearm like a monkey, but it felt good.

Cinderella couldn’t have felt more grand walking into her ballroom than Rey felt walking inside the Bijou. It was an exquisite movie palace, built during the Golden Age of cinema and lovingly restored by a non-profit whose membership forms were on display all over the inside. They’d taken pains to preserve the celestial mural spangling the high-arched lobby and the gilded detailing scrolling around the walls. The people who’d come out for a movie tonight weren’t sodden slobs munching their way through the latest blockbuster. They were from all walks of life, but the snippets of conversation Rey caught as they walked through the lobby were the kind of conversations she’d yearned to have her entire life. Who do you like better, Eisenstein or Vertov? Vinegar Syndrome’s doing a release with a 4K transfer and it’s going to be ballin’. I don’t even want to talk about Afrofuturism if you’re not bringing Crumbs into this conversation. You gotta come next week, we’re all going to Pather Panchali together. Did you hear they found a complete 35mm print of Greed in a vault in Sierra Leone? And it’s pristine nitrate. I almost cried when I heard the news.

Rey’s delight over her surroundings was quickly interrupted by the growling in her stomach. The buttery, toasty smell of fresh popcorn jolted her hunger back to awareness like a startled junkyard dog. The theater offered the usual mix of Raisinets and gummy worms, but also had an array of gourmet chocolates. Some were pure single source chocolate, the sleek wrappers displaying their cacao percentages as if proclaiming karats, but some were whimsical flavors like birthday cake or maple bacon. Rey stared, mouth watering. She didn’t treat herself to chocolate often, especially – oh my God, was that actually the price? To her they looked like ingots of gold.

A young woman with spattered eyeshadow and hair like a glowing ombre sunset smiled pleasantly at them from behind the concession counter. “What can I get you?”
“Medium popcorn, butter, no salt,” said Professor McTavish. “And a large coffee.” He turned to Rey. “What would you like?” he said.

Rey didn’t say anything. Want choking on her tongue.

He followed her eyeline.

He bent down as if to look at the chocolate with her. His mouth near her ear. Sotto voce. “Ask for it,” he whispered. An easy, amused command, the sound resonating not in her ear but in the center of her body. A tickle of arousal flared over her skin, like iron fillings enthralled by a magnet.


“And a hot dog,” added Professor McTavish, handing the cashier his card as she handed Rey the treats. The fat movie theater kielbasa was tucked into a fragrantly yeasty white bun, sleek with grease over its taut natural casing skin. Its garlicky, smoky, slightly singed sizzle smelled primally comforting. She took a bite and felt the casing snap under her teeth with a gush of salty, porky flavor. Constant hunger creates a tight stricture of fear that thrums low and ominous under everything you do. Now it was gone. She involuntarily closed her eyes in relief.

“Better?” he said softly, almost tenderly.

“Thank you,” she whispered as graciously as she could through a mouthful.

The theater was almost empty. It wasn’t a huge house, but of the hundred-some seats only a few dozen people had come for this show. “I thought there would be more,” said Rey as she squeezed into her seat. The theater was old enough that the wooden armrests polished by generations of elbows didn’t have cupholders – a fact that thrilled Rey immensely. She sat down, but he stayed standing.

“Sit tight,” said Professor McTavish. A slight tension was tightening his face. “I’m just going to go out and check that no other students are waiting outside.”

Oh, thought Rey. That’s right. There were other students invited. It had been a delicious six minutes as the sole focus of his regard. It wasn’t guaranteed to last.

“Oh, sure,” she said, nodding her head as nonchalantly as she could. “I’ll be here.” He hustled up the aisle.

She was alone in the hushed space of the barely full theater.

The old Rey would have accentuated the positive. The old Rey would have sighed, let go of hope, Pollyanna-ed the good parts. He bought you a hot dog and two bars of chocolate, he dabbed at your cut, he paid for your ticket, he offered you his arm. That’s more than you ever dreamed of. Be grateful for that.

The old Rey would have said that, and swallowed her want.

But her want was too big to swallow now. Those small kindnesses had fed it and it had grown much too big to fit down her throat again. It wasn’t a demanding anger, focused at him. It was a crack in her sky that she now realized was only the small ceiling she’d lived beneath her whole life . . . imagine believing all that time that it was the sky, when the sky is vast and infinite
The last time she ate away her suffering was that breakfast sandwich she devoured to comfort herself, that day he hadn’t shown up for class. She rummaged in the pouch of her hoodie and pulled out a chocolate bar. Raspberries and cream. It felt substantial and rich in her hand, more than any drugstore chocolate bar could. Even the wrapper was printed on heavy toothed paper. This bar knew its worth. This was the most deluxe food item she’d ever held in her hands, and she had it because she’d asked for it

She disrobed the bar from its paper shell and tore off a corner of the rose gold foil. The good white chocolate snapped satisfyingly like a stick of chalk. She placed it on her tongue. It was like eating his command ask for it, transubstantiating the thrill of his dominance into the late summer floral tang of raspberries and the unctuous melt of cocoa butter. She could swallow this. This would yield on her hot tongue and go down her throat easily. It would become a part of her. Thread some of him inside her.

just how I want it

She closed her eyes and rolled the dulcet chunk around her palate until it evaporated into a faint dairy memory. Its absence was its own kind of thrill. She folded the bar back into its wrapper reverently and closed her eyes. She could wait

wanting is its own kind of getting
if you allow yourself to want it

“Hey.” That baritone, a little breathless. Rey snapped her eyes open.

“There’s no one else here,” he said. Something in his breathlessness was a little more than just from rushing back to her seat.

“There’s no one here from school?” said Rey. That question voiced something in the spaces.

“No one here from school,” he repeated. The look in his eyes saw what lay in the gaps.

Something subtle shifted in the air. Rey could feel it. The tumbler in some lock turning, the wind shifting, the air growing low and dark in that mute birdsong-less space before the hurricane begins.

“Do you want to change seats?” she squeaked, gesturing to their wide empty row stretching all the way to the wall.

As if by unspoken consensus they moved all the way down the row. Rey on the outside, Professor McTavish against the wall. He put their bags on the seat on the other side of her. Another wall.

The lights were dimming. She took one last look at him before they went down the deep dive of movie space, her mouth open with want and hope and tender fear. The animal look he bored into her was unlike any she’d ever seen.

“I read your paper,” was the last thing he spoke, and then all was dark.
Gun Crazy

The movie started in a sudden klaxon of noir fanfare – credits, falling rain, the words “GUN CRAZY” zooming up close enough to taste. The tick-tick-tick pluck of pizzicato strings. The white noise of rain. A teenage boy, his gaze rigid on the six-shooter in the hardware store window. Licking his lips. He wants that gun. He’s willing to break glass to get it.

Rey sat stiffly, cocooned in the blackness and her own jitters. What comes next? Isn’t a theater’s dark where first kisses happen? There’s a hundred movies about it: two novice lovers on a teenage date. The lights go down and both sit anxiously, hearts pounding, waiting for the other one to make the first move. The boy gives a theatrical stretch and drapes his arm over the back of her seat. Or she touches his hand reaching into the popcorn bucket. Rey bit her lip. Kisses happen so magically, so inevitably in the movies. But she was delirious with uncertainty about how to tip that domino in life, force that sacred intrusion, make the crossing of that rubicon as real as the six foot-and-change object of all of her hope filling the seat next to her.

Professor McTavish tilted his bag of popcorn towards her. “Have some,” he whispered calmly.

Her ears pricked up. She heard the test in his words. It wasn’t an offer. Obey this small thing. Show me you’re willing. Because if you prove yourself . . . there will be more.

Rey reached out and took as large a handful as she could. She plucked it into her mouth one kernel at a time from the trembling nest of her hand. He watched her out of the corner of his dark eyes and said nothing. His eyes flicked back to the chiaroscuro screen. Uh oh, that bad boy’s got himself in trouble now. A parade of character witnesses plead on his behalf to the judge. I’d never hurt anyone, your honor. I just gotta have a gun in my hand. It makes me feel good.

Rey chewed the last morsel and wiped her buttery hand absentmindedly against her jeans. He took her by the wrist and lifted her hand off the denim.

“No,” he said.

Her hand looked absurdly fragile in his astounding grip. He squeezed her wrist, just hard enough for her to feel the blood throb in her fingerprints. She felt the gem-sized bones inside her wrist click in protest as he took her hand to his mouth and kissed the meaty swath near her thumb. His grip twisted, compressed the tight point in that meat with his thumb and forefinger, made her fingers splay in shocked pressure as he rubbed it with powerful care. Then he let her go.

Rey swallowed hard. Some invisible yoke was knitting itself around her throat, placing a jeweled bit in her mouth. In its breathless chthonic bite she felt an exhilaration saints never know.

He tilted the bag towards her again. He didn’t even have to say it this time. Rey followed his wordless command. This time she ate the popcorn out of her fist and didn’t lick the sheen of butter from her fingers.

Take two.

His eyes were still on the screen but she saw his lip curl in the slightest pleased flicker of what she knew now as the smallest quantum of that incandescent grin. Good girl.

He leaned close to her and said, in a growl that she could feel in her pulse points, “You like to touch yourself in the dark.”
Rey’s mouth went dry. She swallowed hard and shuddered out a nod.

That growl became an amused purr. “Show me.”

It dawned on her with an erotic shiver why he’d ordered popcorn, butter, no salt, and made her get it all over her hands. He wanted her fingers slick and easy upon all her softest parts that were now alert and eager under the thrill of his authority.

But how did he want her to do it? Like she did it in class? Why have greasy fingers if he just wanted her to rub the hard knot sewn at the crotch of her jeans? But he couldn’t possibly have meant reaching into her underwear. The other moviegoers scattered around them stared dumbly at the screen, unaware of what was happening in the empty row she and he shared. Unaware for now. That could change.

Rey looked up at him. His eyes had that same encouraging twinkle she’d seen in class. Only his slightly flared nostrils and the increased rise and fall of his chest laid bare his hunger. She didn’t take her eyes away from his as she reached down to the radiating locus of pleasure practically burning through her jeans and stroked her fingertip on the denim over her clit, just like how she had that time in class he’d caught her. That day she had to content herself with only the silhouette of his back as inspiration. Now her heart rate tripled instantly at the pleasure of taking him all in – that plush mouth, that deliciously irregular face, those fathomless coffee-black eyes boring into her through his glasses – while stroking herself. Slow, languorous shudders of gratification started percolating in her at a faster pace that ever before.

He exhaled deeply – was there a hint of exasperation in it? – and stretched his arm over the back of Rey’s seat. Just like in the movies. But no matinee Romeo ever rested the flat of his palm over the nape of her neck like this, massaged the stiff tendons there, just for one comfortable moment, and then constricted his wide-spanning grip over the entire back of her neck. Like a tiger’s jaws. Holding down his mate.

He slid down in his seat and casually leaned into her ear again.

“You know what I asked.”

The meaning was clear: you won’t get away with cowardice again. She balked. He can’t really be making me do this, she thought. But that twinge of weak modesty died quickly in the crescendo of what she really wanted.

Rey lifted her hand. She could feel his just-past-comfortable grip pulsing at the back of her neck as she got the top of her jeans undone. She pulled down her zipper. “Lower,” he whispered, stroking her neck, fingers playing and twisting at the downy baby hairs at the very edge of her hairline. Eyes never leaving the screen. That gun-mad kid was a man now. He was prowling the midway with his chums, their leers wide at the hoochie-coochie dancers and snake charmers and Ladies and gentlemen! the famous, the dangerous, the beautiful, the darling of London England -- Miss Annie Laurie Starr! And a dangerous blonde bursts into the frame gunshots-first, blam blam blam, a succubus summoned from Cupid’s underworld in a cloud of gunsmoke. Aphrodite on the shell casing. Rapturous applause.

The blonde lowered her gun and popped off a playful bang! in the audience’s face at the same moment Rey shoved her jeans down to the tops of her thighs and spread them as much as the waistband let her. Her pink underwear was the prettiest she owned but its age made it easy to dive her fingers past its slack elastic. Her index finger found her grateful clit quickly. That Technicolor flesh-on-flesh feeling made her suck in air through her teeth at the sweet wrongness of it. The dark of the theater, his hand on her neck, the slow even panting of his animal-like breath audible to her
even over the midway gunfire on the screen. Every twitch of her knuckle paid dividends unlike anything she’d ever done to herself before. He squeezed the tight muscles at the back of her neck in time to each subtle and delicious rotation she lashed around her supercharged flesh. When he took his hand away from her neck she didn’t stop. She had a sudden sense memory of a milestone that never happened for her: a dad teaching a daughter to ride a two-wheeler. Pushing from behind, exhorting pedal, pedal, pedal, that’s it, letting go without her realizing, propelling herself forward on her own power and courage, just like he knew she could.

She didn’t stop stroking herself as he reached leisurely into the popcorn bag. There was that pile of their bags and coats in the next seat shielding her. Maybe someone in the theater could see her hand stirring inside her pink panties. With wanton revelation she realized she didn’t care. Maybe whether she was doing something they might see wasn’t up to her. Maybe the egg white blot she might be leaving on the velvet seat below her drooling cunt was an exquisite souvenir. Miss Annie Laurie Starr the carnival sharpshooter was now taking challenges from her midway audience. Shoot out the matches on this crown of fire I wear and win the prize. She was a black widow blonde fifty feet high on a silver screen and in this brazen moment she was Rey’s tigress mirror. In that surge of liberation she leaned over to him and made a wish on a coin in the fountain of her want

*I want to be a slut*

but it left her tongue, into his ear, “I want to be your slut.”

He shifted in his seat and nonchalantly rubbed his buttery palms together before reaching into her lap. The whisper he placed in the ticklish nook behind her ear sealed it:

“You decided that two classes ago.”

His fingers nudged the elastic open.

When his finger landed on her clit her eyes rolled up in sanpaku delirium. Nothing in her entire life had ever felt this good. Every other part of her clenched up in sudden orgasmic reflex, underused muscles now almost painfully ready to grip and milk something tight. Her shaking hands clawed the armrests as he pinched and rolled and slid, his sharp appraising gaze never leaving her. His man-sized fingers were blunt objects to her own familiar pinprick touch. They touched wide swaths of real estate in her cunt but their aim was true. He watched her intently, noticing every subtle movement and creasing of her eyebrows and hard squeezing of her eyes. Drawing his mental map of what felt good where. Cartographer of her untouched euphoria. He slid his thumb down and found the dot of space under the arch of her clit, an anatomical morsel he could oh so softly pinch and rock. When he did that a single glittering strand of saliva fell in a quick gossamer snap from her lower lip and she didn’t even notice.

“Hold onto my arm,” he whispered and she seized it, wrapping her arms tightly around the tree trunk of his biceps and clinging to it like a shipwreck rescue. She couldn’t see the screen from behind eyes closed in ecstasy but she heard it. Gunslingers of the noir savannah on the stick-up prowl. Bonnie and Clyde the popcorn bandits. In their tense pre-heist banter she heard the same unholy arousal that coursed through her own body. It felt good to have a secret with a partner in crime. It felt good to have someone who loves movies as much as you did slide the first two knuckles of his finger up and down the smooth swollen gully between your labia and nudge your clit with the blunt pressure of the third, all under the moonlight of a silver screen. He hit some undiscovered sweet spot with such certainty that in sudden deranged reflex she threaded one arm under his and touched the rigid arch pulsing against his fly. Stroking its zipper-bound curve felt heart-poundingly good under the heat of her palm. It made something inevitable and delicious boil over inside her with unprecedented momentum. She bit into his arm to stifle the squeaking gasp
spiraling out of her throat just in time before everything inside her exploded in a bloodrush of pleasure. In her haze she heard him suck in his breath too

the weightless space of the orgasmic

When the smoke cleared soft cathartic tears unconsciously welled up in her eyes. *He saw me. He fed me. He gave me everything I wanted.* Tears of gratitude set free by bone-shaking ecstasy glittered her vision.

He didn’t say anything about her tears. He stroked her back in long caring, languorous drags and unzipped his fly. Her hands followed to touch that sordidly engorged cock that filled her grip, stout enough that her fingers and thumb couldn’t form a closed loop around it. He wrapped his big warm hand in hers and sleeved her grip up and down for a dozen slow strokes before letting her go. She thought it would be like touching a waxed banister pole. The velvety give and stretch of its skin over the swollen core was a pleasant surprise. His strokes against her back got carelessly firmer until her was gripping her shoulder in a great clawing squeeze digging into her collarbone. She could feel his pulse. A saltwater dot of wet suddenly slickened her fingers –

He pushed her head towards him. Urgency in his hiss.

“Stop now or put your mouth on me.”

Those words put on the brakes inside her. She wanted very badly to please him. But a nauseous, forgotten something flickered up inside her . . . Her eyes darted as she searched for the answer. Her hand kept stroking up and down in nervous ambivalence while she racked her brain for what she should choose –

He grabbed her hand. “I mean it,” he said, voice ragged with effort.

She looked up at him. He must have seen the confusion and pleading in her gaze. His own face softened.

“It’s all right. You’re not ready,” he said.

He unpeeled her hand from his cock and stuffed himself hard back under his fly.

Rey was horrified. Had she done him wrong? But her worries evaporated when he shuddered out a deep get-ahold-of-yourself breath and pulled her close to plant a butterfly-light kiss on her forehead. Its blink of sensation sent a tingle through her entire body.

For the rest of the movie she nuzzled into his chest, sighing deeply. One of his arms enfolded her. With the other he grazed his knuckles gently back and forth against the now humid cotton crotch of her underwear. Not enough to come again. Just enough to send a delectable hum through her contentment. The lovers onscreen met no good end at the movie’s conclusion. She didn’t notice.

THE END. Lights up. The other moviegoers gathered their coats and shuffled up the aisle. Rey quickly wriggled back into her pants, red-faced, and scanned the faces of the other departing patrons nervously to see if she’d been caught. Professor McTavish was unconcerned. He took a last handful of popcorn and licked what she knew was not butter from his fingers.

“Goodnight!” chirruped the ushers holding brooms in the lobby. The woman with the ombre sunset hair was scouring out the popcorn popper with a pungent vinegar spray. Last show of the evening. Rey didn’t want to leave, didn’t want her coach to turn back into a pumpkin, have her mice footmen scurry away. With bittersweet joy she bid farewell to 90 minutes where her every wish came true. The chocolate bars were still tucked into her hoodie pocket. They felt like a handful of
stolen fairy dust, meant to sustain her in her fall towards the cruel real world.

Professor McTavish didn’t say anything to her. They had assumed their public faces now: teacher and student, older and younger, nothing between them but a respectable two feet of personal space. The delight of their secret garlanded her like diamonds. *There are consequences for what we’ve done*, Rey realized. They both knew the rules. Rey wondered what he thought of those rules. She already knew they were insufficient to address the magic of the current situation.

They stood under the marquee outside. The rows of egg-shaped electric lights blinking across its undercarriage were the stars of their sky.

“You taking the bus home?” he asked.

There was the slightest upturn of worry in that question mark. Maybe worry about her safety.

Maybe more than that.

For the first time ever in her life Rey was grateful for her poverty.

“I don’t have enough for bus fare,” she said truthfully.

The flicker of a smile polished his face for a moment. But his dark eyes gave nothing away.

“Then come home with me.”

*To be continued . . .*

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