

Contrived Ending

By

Josh Hartwell

“‘The movie will begin in five moments,’ the mindless voice announced. ‘All those unseated will await the next show.’ We filed slowly, languidly into the hall. The auditorium was vast and silent. As we seated and were darkened, the voice continued: ‘The program for this evening is not new. You have seen this entertainment through and through. You have seen your birth, your life, and death. You might recall all the rest. Did you have a good world when you died—enough to base a movie on?’”
—Jim Morrison

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Act 1 Scene 1

Lights slowly come up on the lobby of a movie theatre, built in the 70s. It is now, the mid-90s. There is a counter up-center, behind which are, of course, a coke machine, stacks of cups, piles of popcorn bags, a nacho “cheese” warmer, the whole scene. Most important is a popcorn machine. NATHAN is behind the counter, wiping popcorn grease from the glass candy case. The carpet is orange, stained, and pretty ugly. Hanging on the walls are one-sheets for cult and/or classic films, like Dr. Zhivago, The Sound of Music, Laurence of Arabia, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Pink Flamingoes, Apocalypse Now, Caddy Shack, Real Genius, Porky’s, etc. Stage right of the concessions, JACK is standing idle at a brass post. This is where he tears tickets, and patrons then enter the theatre behind him. Stage right of JACK and his post is a door; beyond (right of) the door is a small office with a desk, chair, and filing cabinets. LAUREL is counting money in the box-office area, down left. Up-left of the box-office is the entrance to the theatre lobby, and just upstage of that is a door to an office, not visible to the audience. Down-center are two backless cushioned benches. JACK watches dispassionately from his post as NATHAN keeps cleaning, oblivious.

JACK

Why are you doing that?

NATHAN *continues cleaning.*

Nathan, you don’t have to do that.

NATHAN

There’s artificial butter-product-crap all over the glass.

JACK

So, you don’t have to. Who’s gonna give a shit?

NATHAN

It’s better than just standing there.

JACK

No it's not. It's just gonna get greasy again.

NATHAN

Can't you be more productive?

JACK

I'm very productively guarding the door.

NATHAN

From what? The movie already started.

JACK

Did you see that chick with the plaid skirt? Whew. Did you notice who she looked like? Tell me who she looked like. I mean, exactly.

NATHAN

I didn't see her.

JACK

Yeah, you did. Her boyfriend's breath smelled like he gargled with diarrhea. I was trying to get your attention when I was ripping their tickets, but you were arguing with "Limping Guy" about peanut M&Ms.

NATHAN

He told me there were fewer M's in the boxes than there were in the bags.

JACK

I heard.

NATHAN

That's just not true.

JACK

Customer's always right.

NATHAN

He's wrong. We could probably sit here and count 'em if he wanted.

JACK

He probably would.

NATHAN

What were you trying to get my attention about?

JACK

I was making this funny face because of that guy's breath. Will you stop cleaning the fucking counter?

NATHAN

I'm almost done now.

JACK

You're making me look bad.

NATHAN

It's not my fault if you look bad.

JACK

I'll dump cheese on the glass if you don't stop.

NATHAN

Fine.

He stops.

What funny face?

JACK

Forget it now; the moment's passed. You have to just relax here (wanna get me some corn?). There's what they tell you that you have to do when they hire you, and then there's what you really have to do, which really isn't much. I mean look at this fucking dump.

NATHAN

I'm trying to make it less dumpy. We can't let grease and salt and shit pile up.

JACK

I didn't get you this job so you can be one of the management suck-ups, I got it for you so I'd have someone halfway interesting to talk to.

NATHAN

How totally selfless of you.

JACK

I get so sick of these morons I have to work with.

LAUREL looks up from her work in the box office area.

Not you, Laurel!

She goes back to work.

Woops. She has good hearing.

NATHAN

Daryl Hannah.

JACK looks at him funny.

Chick in the plaid skirt. She looked like—

JACK

Right. But from what movie?

NATHAN

Bladerunner. What am I, an ass hole? She might as well have had a black line spray-painted across her eyes.

JACK

Character's name was Pris.

He uses a Daryl Hanna-esque voice.

"I think, Sebastian, therefore I am."

Speaking of morons, you're working with Shane tonight.

NATHAN

Shit. Aren't you?

JACK

I have tonight off. All night—I never work *Rocky Horror*. The whole phenomenon rubs me wrong.

He switches to a different voice.

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe."

NATHAN

That's Rutger Hauer.

JACK

Right, but what was his character's name?

NATHAN

Roy—umm . . .

JACK

Roy Batty.

He does the Rutger voice again. When he goes into characters like this, he doesn't play it for comedic effect; it's just something he does. All the time. He may not necessarily be great at it, but the point is that he believes he is.

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die."

NATHAN

I should have consulted you before I consented to working a triple shift.

JACK

You're on in the evening and at midnight?

NATHAN

Why can't they ask anyone else to fill in?

JACK

Harrison Ford-esque.
“They don’t advertise for killers in the newspaper. That was my profession. Ex-cop.
Ex-blade runner. Ex-killer.”
Because you’re the new guy.

NATHAN

Sucks. Only thing that keeps Shane tolerable is giving him truckloads of shit with you. I could use the money, I guess. And he’s not any more of a moron than I am.

JACK

He’s much more of a moron than you are.

NATHAN

No. He’s never expected to do more than work at a movie theatre. I got out and saw the world, looked like I was gonna be a big shit, and now I’m back here. Coming back is so much more moronic.

JACK

You didn’t see the world, Nathan.

NATHAN

I was out. In the world. I went to Europe.

JACK

Numero uno, you were never gonna be a big shit. And, *dos*, who hasn’t been to Europe? Everybody’s been to fucking Europe. I’ve been to more of the world than you have, and I’m not feeling sorry for myself.

NATHAN

I meant it figuratively. There is a planet outside of this town, and on that planet there are lots and lots of . . . places, ok? And ok, so I didn’t get to see very many of those places—not when you consider all of them, in the great scheme of things. Not as many as you. But you never really left after high school. And I experienced more of what the world is about, just by going away.

JACK

I leave all the time.

NATHAN

Yeah, that’s not the same.

JACK

I’ve been gone the whole time I’ve been here today.

NATHAN

What’re you on?

A. JACK

NATHAN
You dropped acid before work?

JACK
And I am flying.
He starts to laugh.
Whew. Could you tell?

NATHAN
No.

JACK
I hide it pretty well, don't I? Whew.

NATHAN
You're gonna get fired, Jack.

JACK
Yeah, that's a pretty empty threat. It's not like I'm running the projector or anything. Worst I can do is not tear someone's ticket right, or miss a couple kernels when I carpet-sweep. Nobody in the history of this movie theatre has ever been fired.

NATHAN
That makes me feel real good.

JACK
Or not since I've been here, anyway. I've worked my ass off trying to get Shane fired, but nothing. Like he has tenure or something.

NATHAN
Wouldn't you rather be challenged? Work someplace where you can advance a little bit? I mean, do you really ever see yourself supporting a family by working here? Still living with your parents?

JACK
I don't live with my parents.

NATHAN
You live over the garage that happens to be connected to your parents' house.

JACK
Hey, I can be an assistant manager any time I want. They ask me about once a year.

NATHAN
Congratulations. Why don't you?

JACK

Have to work more hours. Deal with money. I hate that shit. You'd be a pretty good assistant manager.

NATHAN

Oh, God!

JACK

And for whatever it's worth, I'm glad you're back.

NATHAN

Thanks.

JACK

I auditioned for *Bus Stop* while you were gone.

NATHAN

Yeah?

JACK

They cast me, but I never showed. Community theatre, man—depressing. I'd be compromising too much. And as it turns out, they only performed at times when I'd probably want to be really drunk or high. Anyway, I doubt they would have appreciated my take on the character.

NATHAN

Jim Morrison as "Beauregard"?

JACK

Val as Jim as Beauregard.

NATHAN

That coulda been entertainment.

LAUREL leaves her box office cubicle and joins the guys. She is in her early to mid-twenties, and attractive. She hasn't given herself completely over to the Goth movement, but she is part-way there. Goth-light, maybe. She wears dark clothes, and Goth-type jewelry, but hasn't dyed her hair black, and is more cheerful than expected.

LAUREL

So. Nathan. What do you think so far?

NATHAN

It's fine. Not much to report yet.

LAUREL

Are you coming to the Christmas party tomorrow night?

JACK
Holiday party. Nate's a Jew.

LAUREL
Oh, sorry.

JACK
But yeah.

LAUREL
Not you. I know you'll be there.

JACK
I know you know I'll be there. I was answering for him. You're coming to hear me sing, aren't you?

NATHAN
I guess so.

LAUREL
We're all pretty much supposed to come.

NATHAN
I don't know much about it. Just that there is one. Is it pot-luck?

LAUREL
"Pot luck." No. They buy us pizza. You have to come as a movie character though. And it has to be a movie we've shown in the past five years.

NATHAN
Good God, we have to dress up too much here. I can't afford it.

LAUREL
It's just *Rocky Horror* every Friday, whatever we have featured on Saturday night, and then parties.

NATHAN
That's too much.

LAUREL
Didn't you guys do plays together in high school or something?

NATHAN
Yes.

LAUREL
Then I would think you'd look forward to the dress-up aspect of this job.

NATHAN

I don't.

LAUREL

I bet you can go back to the school and the drama teacher would let you raid the costumes.

NATHAN *and* JACK *both laugh.*

What?

JACK

He'd rather eat his own mouth.

LAUREL

Why?

JACK

You can't imagine the shit we used to give those losers who used to visit the school after they'd graduated.

LAUREL

I went back.

NATHAN

Really?

JACK

A few times, yeah. I had this science teacher that I had a big crush on, and so I went back to visit.

JACK

Did you have sex with him?

LAUREL

Her. No. I couldn't bring myself to actually go through with the lesbian thing, although it seemed reasonably cool. She invited me to her wedding though.

NATHAN

That's sweet.

LAUREL

No. It was kind of devastating, really.

NATHAN

Oh.

LAUREL

But I'm over it. It was a phase. Anyway, if you need help coming up with a costume, I'll help you out. I like doing these things.

NATHAN

What are you wearing?

JACK

What do you think?

NATHAN

Of course. But aren't leather pants cold in December?

JACK

They are perpetually freezing cold. Unless they're burning hot. I'm not going for practical though.

LAUREL

He stuffs 'em.

JACK

It's true. I do.

NATHAN

What's the point of stuffing if everyone knows that's what you did?

JACK

Authenticity.

NATHAN

Who are you dressing as?

LAUREL

Winona in *Beetlejuice*.

JACK

Festive.

NATHAN

So we just sit around in costume and eat, then we go home?

LAUREL

No. We have a movie going in the auditorium. You can watch it, or not. Jack will sing, pay attention to him, or not. Mr. Vincent talks about the year, and the year ahead—no one will care. Someone usually brings booze, but it can't really be official since some of us are underage. You'll have fun.

NATHAN

What movie?

LAUREL
Hunt for Red October.

NATHAN
Again, I don't see the—

LAUREL
And *Scrooged*.

NATHAN
Oh. That works, I guess.

LAUREL
Is it ok if I just hang out with you guys?

NATHAN
Sure. I wouldn't peg you as much of a party girl.

LAUREL
What else am I gonna do?

JACK
Not much of a Christmas girl either.

LAUREL
I like pizza.

JACK
Touche.

LAUREL
Last year Chris and Charlie—you don't know them, they're off at college—they planned out this big elaborate fight sequence. Chris dressed up like Jesus, because of *Last Temptation*, I guess, and Charlie dressed up like Santa Claus because of . . . I don't know, any movie that has Santa in it. Anyway they—

NATHAN
Fought over the true meaning of Christmas?

LAUREL
Oh. He told you?

NATHAN
No, I just guessed. It's not really all that original.
(*Beat*)
I'm sure it was funny though.

LAUREL
It was.

NATHAN
They were, like, punching each other? And . . .

LAUREL
It's ok.

NATHAN
. . . And kicking?

LAUREL
You don't have to pretend to be interested.

NATHAN
I didn't mean to mess up your story.

LAUREL
You didn't. Nice of you to care though. You have a nice way about you, Nate.

NATHAN
Thank you.

LAUREL
Sharp smile, too.

NATHAN
I do?

JACK
He does?

LAUREL
Yeah, your whole face scrunches up towards your eyebrows when you smile. Like a dog.

NATHAN
Very nice of you to say.

JACK
Sure, "you look like a dog" is virtually Shakespearean in its splendor.

LAUREL
You ever see a dog smile?

JACK
No.

NATHAN

Sure.

LAUREL

I don't think dogs are bred for it. It's not in their nature or anything, won't win 'em a medal, but if you get a smart, adaptable one, who likes being around people, and if the people around tend to smile a lot, then the dog kind of learns how to smile. And it smiles when it's happy, just the same as people. But when a dog smiles, his whole face smooshes up, and his eyelids roll back. Almost like it's painful to be smiling. Painful but worth it.

NATHAN

That's cute.

LAUREL

That's sorta how you smile.

(Beat)

You guys wanna go smoke a clove with me?

NATHAN

No, I gotta stay out here. In case someone comes out and wants popcorn, or . . . Don't I?

JACK

Yeah, you should. I'll have a clove with you.

LAUREL

You sure you don't want to Nate? I don't think anyone will come out. And if they do, they can wait a minute. Everyone needs a break.

JACK

He doesn't smoke.

LAUREL

Oh. Well alright then.

JACK

Will you watch the door for me? Thanks.

As JACK and LAUREL exit to go smoke, WENDY clicks into the lobby area from her office, up-left. She is in her late thirties, wears high heels, a tight skirt and wide-shouldered leathery top. Her spikey, poofy hair is bleached almost to the point of neon, and she has a Melrose Place kind of aura. This is not a costume. This is how she dresses. This is how she is. As much as that seems like a caricature, she is real, not camp. She stops on her way across the lobby.

WENDY

Oh, hey Nathan, I don't remember if we told you, but could you wipe down the candy case? It's policy. All that grease and salt gets on there and it just gets so nasty and gross.

NATHAN

Sure. I already got it off there for the most part.

WENDY

Great. And could you Bissell too?

NATHAN

Bissell?

WENDY

Yeah, the carpet sweeper? It's in the storage closet by the bathroom? You just move it up and down the carpet, and the little twirling brushes inside scoop up all the little white kernels.

NATHAN

Of course. Bissell.

WENDY

It's a lot easier than trying to get everything up with a broom and dust pan, and we couldn't use a vacuum cleaner, of course, 'cause it would make way too much noise. You're closing up tonight, right?

NATHAN

Yeah, that's what Jack told me.

WENDY

Well, have Jack show you how we clean the popcorn machine every night.

NATHAN

Ok.

WENDY

It's really, really important because it has to look nice, of course, but there are certain cleansers we can't use because they're poison.

NATHAN

Ok.

WENDY

Better yet, have Shane show you when he gets here? Do you know Shane?

NATHAN

Yeah, we all went to school together.

WENDY

Right. Super. Just have him show you how to do the popcorn machine. He's a lot more thorough than Jack is. I'm sure you can imagine, having gone to school with them both. A lot cleaner, too.

NATHAN

Well, it's all relative, right?

WENDY

Right.

She continues on her way across the lobby.

Oh, and um . . .

She moves closer to him.

Was Jack on time today, or was he a little bit late?

NATHAN

He was here right on time.

WENDY

She looks him up and down, trying to, and perhaps succeeding in, catching him in a lie.

Well, super. He's got tendencies towards tardiness. I'm sure you can imagine.

And she turns, finishes her journey across the lobby, goes into the up-right office, and closes the door behind her. She is still visible in there; she sits at her desk and works. As soon as she closes the office door, NATHAN goes to an unseen closet up-left of Jack's post, and comes back in with a carpet-sweeper. He starts running it up and down the ugly carpet. MR. VINCENT enters from outside. He is a big man in his late 50s or 60s, not particularly well-kept.

MR. VINCENT

Is Wendy here?

NATHAN

I think she's busy in her office. Can I get her for you?

MR. VINCENT

No, I can get her.

NATHAN

Um, sir? She's over here.

MR. VINCENT

Ah. That's my office. This is Wendy's office. No problem; you'll catch on. She must have just hired you. I'm Mr. Vincent.

NATHAN

Ok.

MR. VINCENT

I own this movie theatre. I'm the man who'll be filling your little pockets with dough.

NATHAN

Yes! Yes, you are. My name is Nathan.

MR. VINCENT

You need a nametag, young man. How's the audience?

NATHAN

It's not that impressive. About fifteen or twenty people in there.

MR. VINCENT

Hm. You'll learn. That happens to be a superb audience for this time of day. Some Friday nights we don't even get that many. Everyone in this town's out holiday shopping, more interested in blockbusters, running down the street to the multiplex to see *Braveheart* again, don't give a shit about classics or cult films. You a film-buff, Nathan?

NATHAN

Yes, sir. I guess I consider myself—

MR. VINCENT

Quick. What's your favorite movie?

NATHAN

Umm. I don't know, I have a lot of favorites.

MR. VINCENT

That's no good. You're in the business now. You should know your favorite movie. You should know your top five. At least. Should be able to rattle 'em off if a customer comes in and asks you your favorite. I can rattle off my top twenty. Want to hear 'em?

NATHAN

Well, you know. I don't want to take up my work time—I have, you know, floors to sweep.

MR. VINCENT

Citizen Kane, Dr. Strangelove, Apocalypse Now, Ben Hur, Blazing Saddles, Gone With the Wind, Patton, Arthur, Godfather II, Hoosiers, Bonnie and Clyde, Glory, Jaws, Midnight Cowboy, Empire Strikes Back, Dances With Wolves, The Exorcist, The Way We Were, Godfather I, and Reds.

NATHAN

That's great.

MR. VINCENT

And that's in order from first favorite to twentieth.

NATHAN

Yeah, that's great.

MR. VINCENT

Have you seen all of those movies?

NATHAN

I think so. I didn't catch all of them, you went through 'em kind of fast.

MR. VINCENT

Wanna hear 'em again?

NATHAN

(Overlapping as Mr. Vincent repeats the list)
Actually, no. Thank you. I think I got a sense of them. I really should finish sweeping up the—

MR. VINCENT

Citizen Kane, Dr. Strangelove, Apocalypse Now, Ben Hur, Blazing Saddles, Gone With the Wind, Patton, Arthur, Godfather II, Hoosiers, Bonnie and Clyde, Glory, Jaws, Midnight Cowboy, Empire Strikes Back, Dances With Wolves, The Exorcist, The Way We Were, Godfather I, and—?

NATHAN

And what?

MR. VINCENT

Name it?

NATHAN

Reds?

MR. VINCENT

Exceptional! Here's an assignment for you. I want you to see all of those films I just mentioned, if you haven't already. I'll print out the list for you.

NATHAN

Ok.

MR. VINCENT

Rent them. You can get 'em at any video store, but I would prefer you get them at a mom and pop's type store, instead of one of the chains. In fact, that's part of your assignment. No chains. Get them at the mom and pop's store over on Francis Street. I don't remember what it's called, you know the place?

NATHAN

Sure, I used to go there all the time. Actually I think it's called Mom and Pop's Video Store.

MR. VINCENT

I expect employees at my theatre to have seen the greats. The classics. If nothing else, we can talk about 'em. Shane's seen 'em. He's a good enough kid, you know him?

NATHAN

Yeah, we went to—

MR. VINCENT

Jack's seen 'em too. God damn, that kid's like an idiot savant when it comes to movies. Mostly just an idiot about other things, but he knows everything there is to know about the biz.

NATHAN

Yeah. We're best friends. Or . . . I mean, we were.

MR. VINCENT

That how you got this job?

NATHAN

Yeah.

MR. VINCENT

Hm. Well, don't tell him I called him an idiot.

NATHAN

No, I wouldn't dare.

MR. VINCENT

How are concessions sales?

NATHAN

Not bad. Lots of corn and drinks, couple nachos, snowcaps.

MR. VINCENT

Well, I'll let you get back to your task. I have to meet with your manager.

NATHAN

Ok. Nice to meet you.

MR. VINCENT

Yep.

He starts to head into his office, but then turns back around.

Here's another assignment: I want to know at least your top ten—be able to rattle 'em off—by . . . the Christmas party.

NATHAN

Great. I'm pretty sure I can manage that.

MR. VINCENT

Hm.

MR. VINCENT *enters his office. He and WENDY greet each other and are talking, but we can't hear what they're saying. Nathan starts to clean a little more, then gets himself some nachos from the concessions area, sits on one of the downstage benches, and reads a movie magazine. JACK and LAUREL come back into the lobby.*

JACK

It's a complete and utter disaster begging to happen. Nothing positive can come from it, and if you're unable to see that, then it's only because you're still wrapped around his finger. And he won't allow you to feel any differently.

LAUREL

He doesn't have any power over me. He never wanted power over me. That's not who he is.

JACK

That's just his influence talking, too.

LAUREL

We get along. What's wrong with getting along with somebody even after you break up?

JACK

The transition. It can't work. You might think you're only friends now, but I guarantee that he doesn't. And the minute he invites you to hang out with him and his new girlfriend, whenever he gets one, the "only friends" thing will go right down the crapper.

LAUREL

How would you even know? You don't know him. You've met him, what, three times? Said five words to him?

JACK

And, nobody's gonna ever want to date either one of you because they'll see the two of you together and assume that you're still a couple.

LAUREL

I'm not looking for a relationship anyway.

JACK

That's good, because you already have one.

LAUREL

We're broken up.

JACK

What did you do last night?