

2,380 words

Phantom's Movies and Scenes

It was one of those mornings, weighty and splintery, the kind I knew could get away from me if I wasn't careful. A dream had me upset and mumbling before I even crawled from the bushes. All darks and shadows, rising up around me, me a bittie bug, bittie bug-like face, buzzing the shelter doors—except these were huge and iron and above each was a glaring gargoyle. Even in the dream I wanted to be shooting, but with wings I had no camera-hand.

I stood, cinched up my jeans, then bent again to re-tie my sneakers and catch a quick glance around the barren lot. The thing about living on the streets—one of them—is that the world can be on you from the jump, so you better get a look at *it* before *it* gets one at you. The humming and mumbling is something I do more for momentum. People are less likely to mess with a mumblor. You can also establish a comfortable rhythm, a certain beat. A good beat can leave behind a bad dream like rock to scissors.

((A quick note on beats versus Beats™. Ten-year-olds these days have fancy friggins' headphones, but that's another story. They strut along as if moving to their own personal soundtrack, and yet their beat is whatever song happens to be streaming, so who's really running things? It's sort of backwards, in my humble opinion. Instead of *beat-feel-see*, it needs to be

see-feel-find beat. See, each day has its own subtle integrity and particular demands. It's the *day* that needs to be honored, we mere vessels. The beat? Well, finding the right beat can be a tricky, complicated challenge.))

Across the street, through the rusty fence of a community garden, I spotted a row of new eggplants, glistening purply. No mistake, I decided. Living purple, color of magic and mystery, sprouted from Bowery rubble. I am steered to a particular song, though at first I can't quite catch it's slippery tail. Something by Marley... and then I have it: *Concrete Jungle*. Not the song, but a specific couple of lines:

*I never know happiness—no
Never know what sweet caress is... still.*

The purpleness of the eggplant was the *Still*: within the tragic, that kernel of unflinching resilience. *Living purple born of Bowery rubble*. I have my beat. I have my momentum. I'm off.

Don't get me wrong, I used to be one of the impressionable myself, someone under the spell of a beat, *whatever* beat—but now I can catch myself, can hold my own. I moved along toward E. 3rd and, right off, caught a glimpse of something that a few years back might have had its way with me. Face up in a garbage can was a *New York Post*: OLD MAN PRESSES GAS INSTEAD OF BRAKE, PLOWS INTO PARADE CROWD. Hear it, the beat? The eagerness to judge? It comes in like perky pop but quickly erupts into a chorus of throaty acid rock: "*Give the old fucker jail time! Lock him up!*"

But Marley, now, is suggesting something else, something more tempered and less flammable: the crushing truth that sometimes there's just no simple answer, no easy fix, so don't

pretend you have one. “Whatever happened to plain, unsolvable human fate?” I called out in agreement. Sure, revoke the man’s license, but who’s to say next week the lonely old fellow doesn’t discover Facebook and finds that his long lost high school sweetheart is widowed and living alone in a condo in Miami? Off he goes again in his daughter’s Prius, seeking salvation. Those eternal ghostly whispers are a rowdy bunch with potent suggestions, “go ahead, try to revoke *those!*”

Outside Muni, the City shelter on 3rd, the cafeteria line was already around the corner. I don’t sleep there, but I’ll *eat* here—on occasion. Just for the fuck of it, as I squeezed into a spot along the wall, I raised my hand and tilted it at forty-five—ANGLE ON chaotic line. ((Note #2, on Bowery homeless: To their great credit these folks are generally NOT so judgmental as the aforementioned *New York Post*-types. These guys wouldn’t put themselves above an old man who mistakenly floored the gas, I don’t think; they’d only shake their heads, sort of vacantly. Bowery folks aren’t particularly judgmental. They live more in the moment.)) Case in point. When he noticed my raised hand, the guy directly in front of me, said, “... Yup, yup. Don’t go to the dance unless you’re willing to pay the fiddler.” But not like he’s bothered. Frankly he didn’t even appear to be talking to me so much as to some long-ago regret.

“You know you got your hand up, Buddy?” This was from a younger, bearded, Puerto Rican guy who had come up right behind me.

“Sure, I do,” I told him. “Of course. I’m getting a camera soon. Be patient.”

At a table inside I crammed myself in amongst the masses and stared at my tray. I took a sip of watered down Kool-Aid and moved stuff around on my plate for a bit. Fridays were the day meal vouchers needed to be renewed, which for me meant a stop by my caseworker’s office,

which always gave me some anxiety. My caseworker could be moody. With caseworkers, you got who you got, no exchanges, unless one of you moved on, or died.

Upstairs, in the atrium, I waited for my name to be called. When it finally was, I walked to the line at Mr. Genoveese's partition without stepping over it. Genoveese was right there in his chair but kept his back to me while he filled out a few forms. I could see from the titles on the forms that they had nothing to do with me. Then Genoveese chuckled to himself and, sort of absently, said, "*Phantom*. What the hell is that anyway? I'm sure you've told me... but, what? ... you some kind of menacing guy? Should I be trembling? Or bowing down?"

"Just your initials will do," I said, lightly, toes still stuck on the line.

"Just my initials," he said, still not looking at me. "Well, why not? I wouldn't want to put you out. Wouldn't want to lay you back on your parents, who must be so very proud."

The last time I stood at his partition, Genoveese had sat me down. It's not his words so much as something in his stare that can throw me off and cause the day to get away from me a little bit. Some stares are deeper than others. Some can really get inside you, cut you, scissors to paper. One time Genoveese gripped my hand, stared deep into me, and whispered, "You're really having a good time with all of this, living on the dole and whatnot, aren't you? *A real* fucking good time."

I didn't know if he wanted me to speak or not, I truly didn't. "No, sir," I said. But when he didn't seem satisfied, I added, "Well, you see..." But the truth was that sometimes there's no simple answer, nothing to pinpoint, no easy fix. "No, sir—it's not really. What I would call a good time, I mean."

Later that day, of course, I racked my mind for what I might have said to Genoveese while he gripped my hand and stared deep into me, or what I could say next time, to get him to cut me a break. If the problem was the nickname, that he thought it was too hardcore, I wondered if I should let him know that the coining of it, back in middle school, had actually been really harsh, and led to a bunch of other stuff happening that I couldn't quite put into words... that when I'd first been given the Intake forms by Muni, I'd only used the name as a way to try and overcome it. But, anyway.

This time Genoveese didn't even turn toward me, but reached back with his pen so I could hold my voucher underneath it. The signature was indecipherable, but still a relief.

Except—just the strain of worrying about a thing can get inside of you, cut you too sometimes, even when that thing doesn't happen, know what I mean? Well, either you do or you don't. But as I scuttled back down the pissy stairwell, I didn't feel too good. A sort of a suffocating feeling is what can hit me. Sweaty hands and neck, a feeling that I need to keep moving for awhile or perish. Some afternoons go more rapidly than others. Rapidly, but at the same time they feel like they're taking forever. ((Note to self—*IMPORTANT*—try to shoot at least one scene, sped-up, at least 2x.))

There comes a time late in the day, when light and dark are balanced to either side, poised there, and in the gulf there emerges a sort of sigh. By day everyone is chasing something, by night they're trying to escape, but there can be a point during the transfer when Nature steps in and makes you settle down for a minute.

On the sidewalk skirting Tompkins Square Park I stopped and leaned against a parked car. A group of NYU students passed by in a tight, chatty clump, off to do whatever successful college kids did on a Friday evening. The brick building across from me was bathed in a nice pink light. Everyone searches for that serene pinkish light, I thought, though for some—((NO. NOT A TIME TO DRIFT INTO SENTIMENT. DOESN'T WORK DRAMATICALLY. STICK TO SCENE!))

Anyway—I'd wound up in this exact spot before. The building could be soothing, people resting on windowsills, etc. On the second floor a Chinese kid ran his race car along the rim of the window box while his grandmother stood watch over his shoulder. On the floor above them, an Indian woman sat braiding her daughter's hair.

On the first floor, right across from me, sat a guy who was maybe in his mid-twenties, about my age. He had long hair slicked back and tied into a ponytail that reappeared on his front shoulder. His eyes were dark and steady and kind of Mediterranean. He could have just gotten home from work, or maybe he was a bartender relaxing for a moment before he set off.

I took a deep breath and raised my hand again, angled it upward. "You know, I'm gonna shoot up this building someday," I said, just to be friendly. "Don't worry—I mean *film* it."

Then I said, "You're lucky, you know? I mean, there's the wide angle of the building, but then you have the reverse angle, the pov shot of what you, safe in your window, are seeing..."

Then, due to that sigh of the day, or that pink texture of light, or maybe it was the almost-full can of beer I'd picked up that one of the NYU students had left along the wall, I guess I let it roll a little bit. Could be I mentioned something about the old man who'd pressed the gas instead

of the brake, and maybe I went into the whole issue of soundtracks that could either mask or reveal the intricacies of life's scenes. I was just having a little fun.

Along the sidewalk, slowly, came this old dude from over by the shelter who everyone knew. It brought me back. He was slow, and well known, because wherever he went this particular old dude dragged with him all his earthly possessions in two big burlap sacks. He couldn't manage both-together, so it was forward with one then back for the other; his entire life proceeded in increments of twenty paces.

Finally, both bags reached me and stopped. The guy had a huge belly, huge dark jowels, and very sincere, moony yellowish eyes. He looked at me, then at the building, then back at me. Then, real friendly, like we were roommates or something, he said, "Brother—you do know it's only a picture, right?"

I gathered myself, took another moment to take in the scene. "Yeah, no shit." And to prove it I raised my hand, tipped it toward the guy in the window, then down at the obvious metal sign beneath him. CLOSE ON sign:

Health and Human Services's *Project Seal-Up* sponsors local artists to paint the portraits of random NYC residents, emblematic of our city's wide-ranging diversity. The murals, transferred onto aluminum sheets, seal abandoned structures for safety while they await redevelopment.

He nodded agreeably, relieved I guess, and said, "That's ok. Lemme tell'ya. There's a gal up 'oan that fourth floor I wouldn't mind talking to. Wouldn't mind talking to for *awhile!*"

I shrugged. "Someone poked holes in his eyes—who knows what's going on in there?"

The old dude didn't listen to a word, but suddenly he had all the time in the world. "Yup, I'd *dream* 'bout that fourth-floor gal my damn old eyes could only see her better."

“Well, I was just taking a little break. I better get going,” I told him. “We stare too long, next we’ll think we can join them.”

He shrugged then nodded a few times. “Cain’t argue with that, Brother, cain’t argue with that. But where would the harm be in that, am I right?”

We hung there a moment, he between his sacks, me leaning against that car, together taking in the sights, maybe a few random associations.

“What harm. *Hmm*. I guess I’d have to think about that one,” I told him.

He bent and picked up the first sack, began his next twenty-pace drag.

Where would the harm be in that? It didn’t seem like a light question. I mean, I really did need to think about it. Take the old man in the *Post*, if he actually did steal his daughter’s Prius and point it toward Florida, seeking salvation. I said you couldn’t revoke those eternal ghostly whispers, but that doesn’t mean they’re harmless. They can drive you completely off the road, or along a razor’s edge, where if you slip, you’ll fall forever.