

## The Parade Of Innocents

This city is like a carnivorous plant to the innocents. Fragrant, fleshy, full of nectar. They don't come back. They drift here in their thousands, beautiful and young, filled with the electric fizz of hope and enthusiasm - filled with a pure and passionate zeal for their great silver God, their pantheons of matinee idols, offering up heartfelt prayers to the Stars. They leave husks. If they leave. Still beautiful, still young, often still passionate - but husks. Something secret stays here. When they go back to visit the folks on the farm, back to that little apartment, back to the suburbs, back to the brownstone - wherever - it stays here. It never goes back. Those poor innocents, they never saw it coming.

I, thank god, was inoculated against it. I didn't drift in on a cloud of adoration. Instead, I spent a solid ten years getting good and jaded in colder, uglier places before I succumbed to the call of the dream-factory. I'd like to say it doesn't make me better than them, that having my childish innocence long suffocated in a deep tar-pit isn't better than having it wave around in the fresh air for a few precious seconds before it's bitten off and swallowed by the demon Showbiz - but it does. It makes me better than them. I have something that they do not. From the childish acolytes up to the greater celestial bodies. I can look on them with pity and contempt. Often I can't help it.

Which is not to say I don't like them. I'm fascinated by them. I love them all. I love especially to see what grows in that little scooped out spot in their souls, what creeps in to replace that thing that was chewed out of them in the early days. I love to see how it blossoms and flourishes, and what monstrous thing it eventually becomes. I confess, that is my obsession. From the single drop of venom on the tip of the tongue of the wardrobe assistant still barely half way through its teens, up to the studio exec's insatiable hunger for underage flesh.

No, I will not be giving away the juicy particulars of places and names (or how literal the hunger). If you want that stuff, go read my column. -- He says as he elegantly raises the critical finger of one hand - "Read My Column". I have two columns - magazine columns that is - if you knew me by both my names. Day and night, light and dark. One for the starry eyed neophytes looking for a little tickle, and one for the twisted veterans who want to know if they can still be appalled (they can). It is this latter you'd want for the serious stuff - the salacious, surreal and sinister. Old left hand hate. Read my column.

I'm driving across town now - a process that invariably calls upon the use of that critical finger - on my way to the hills. I'm going to find something good out there, something real good, something that will scare me even probably, something real weird. Its voodoo or some expletive. Right there, all wrapped up. My friend is usually right about this stuff. She may look like she's jazzed out of her mind at all hours - in fact she displays qualities I'd associate with a number of different narcotics, but I have no idea what kind of cocktail you'd need to attain that kind of round-the-clock wall-eyed blissed-out extra-conscious laser-focus, and I've never dared ask - she knows stuff, though. I caught the glint of a seam of pure gold within the folds of the obscure

bilge she reels and reels out. So now I'm reeling and reeling in. Holding my breath and crossing my fingers for a big stinkin' fish. Wind, reel and print.

I don't expect them to thank me for it, but I will insist that it's a service I'm doing them. They all, top to bottom, try to make themselves so dull. So clean and picture perfect. It's a town of pictures after all, a town of surface. Everything that exists here, exists to make a picture. Take, for example, the properties department. Say there's a movie, say that movie has a scene where some drunken dolt comes barrelling in and knocks over a vase - SMASH! - priceless vase, now smithereens. So our director, or more likely some art department menial, figures out just how they want this vase to look - dimensions, pattern, curvature, colour - and the thing is made, or more likely several identical ones. Then roll camera and smash smash smash smash. An item, with weight and dimension, with function (should someone wish to rest their bouquet), and made with delicate craft to resemble a priceless objet d'art - but what is its purpose? Certainly not to hold flowers, and not to be looked at, at least not in three dimensions, not directly. Its purpose is to reflect light from carefully placed bulbs into a lens, to form a detail of exposure on the celluloid. The prop is not complete until that film is developed and the *true* item is seen on the big screen. What we thought was a beautifully completed vase, was in fact just a step along the process towards the creation of this final immortal object, smashing again and again, forever. The image is the object. The object itself was just an echo of the thing it would be.

Are the actors any different? The directors? The producers? Our wardrobe assistant with her venom or our exec with his hunger? Our art department menial or our deja-vu afflicted potter? Each of them exists to make an image of themselves, and yet they will go out of their way to keep the most interesting, most human part of themselves hidden behind closed doors. They seem determined to present only their dullest surface to the light, and create a picture which will be yawned into oblivion before their more transient bodies are even cold.

Well, thank god for me. I will sniff out the lush, corpse-smelling chimera that is sprouting in all the colors of the rainbow from their fallow souls, and set it on your windowsill. This business is a collaboration. This digging and retrieval is my contribution to this final image we're making. Exposure.

At times the digging can be demanding, hence the rope, bolt-cutters and telephoto lenses in the back of the car. I suspect one or more of these things may be useful tonight. As I ease out into the hills, the lights get fewer, but every now and then you get a glimpse of them spread out down below in the city. It's carnage down there. That's one thing I love about the nights here. You know that during the day they were talking about social responsibility and political oppression (beauty and truth), or they were talking about box-office receipts and target demographics (buying and selling), or they were talking about 7-year exclusive contracts and vertical integration (fame and fortune). But as soon as the sun goes down, and the lights go up, they all press together, up against each other, flesh on flesh, I would say like animals but this carnival is unique to our rubbery-skinned alopecic species, drawing each other on, trading partners, twisting each other down, using everything they've got to get what they want, in a

glorious city-wide wrestling match, until you can't tell one from another, let alone who has any kind of upper hand. At times like this, driving, at night, the city becomes like a labyrinth. I have to take care. Focus. I'm scared I'll take a wrong turn and get right out of it, never find my way back in.

The house, one of the mansions, is mostly dark. I see no security. That could be a bad sign, mean there's nothing here. Then again, I've seen clandestine meetings where they thought that silence and darkness were the best cover (they were not). Those were some of the worst ones. Terrible abuses, snarled meshes of blackmail and coercion, desires felt so deeply and denied so consistently that they could only ever be expressed through acts of violent and destructive excess. Real page turners.

The back of the house is dark too. Mostly. A little light around a curtain. Flickering. No convenient gap for a prying eye. But if I get close, right up to the window. Let's hold our breath and cross our fingers for that fish. A penknife blade through at the jamb - needs must - and a little twitch...

It's flickering. There are people. A good crowd. Quite a gathering. All ages, I think, but mostly young. Mostly young. And yes, various states of undress, and they're... what are they doing?... With that? Or what is it doing with them? I don't know what I'm looking at. Is it a machine? Or an animal? Surely it can't be human. It's light and shadow. Reflection, projection, exposure. It must be a demon or a god. And no sweet metaphorical flight, but flesh - if that is flesh - and blood - if that is blood. I've seen people indulge in all kinds of perversion, vulgarity and cruelty on each other, on themselves, on hapless victims in a few cases, but this... I can't bear to see, can't bear to think, can't bear to know.

It is luck that I meet no cars coming back up the hill. It is worse luck that I do not find that turning that will bring me out of the labyrinth, never to find my way back in.

The door of my apartment seems as flimsy as a sound stage simulacrum. It could not withstand an ordinary knock. An ordinary knock from an ordinary human hand. I can see it quailing just from the weight of my gaze. But I'll sit here, and stare at it. In the dark now. Keeping my darkness behind my closed door. I'll sit here and stare at the weak door until they come and open it. It will not be an ordinary human hand that knocks. I know they are coming because, when I saw - what I saw - the normal rules of looking and being looked at - were not operating. I still see them. An after image etched into my retinas, but shifting. Animate. Alive. Through the door, through the darkness, through the streets of the town of images - which are themselves, it strikes me now, so rarely photographed.

To become like them. Whatever is left of me afterwards. I'll get what all the innocents long for, and what, I pray for their sakes, they never achieve. To be made immortal. I can run no further, and as for hiding - the idea no longer has any meaning. I am exposed. Over exposed. Blown out. Irreversibly seen and imprinted. Full of nectar for them. I will be with them soon.