

Fake Butter

The line of people stretched all the way around the block. Brad and I had gotten there pretty early so we could find a good seat. "You gonna grab the popcorn while I find us a spot?" I asked him as we bought our tickets. "Yeah, I'll meet you in there," he replied.

The movie was some braindead summer blockbuster, but we weren't here for the movie anyway. We were here for the experience, that communal performance with a hundred strangers. All part of the same adventure. The audience reacting in real time to the reflection of humanity on the screen. All the seats were bolted to the floor, no risers. You had to get a good seat in the middle or you'd be too far away from the screen, or even worse, craning your neck. There was only a very slim in-between. I stepped over stale popcorn and candy wrappers to try to navigate to a seat. I had to squeeze past a couple in their early 20s. "Excuse me," I said as I moved further into the middle of the row. The air smelled of old fake butter and carpet that hadn't been sufficiently vacuumed in years.

I was turning 17 this weekend, and looking back I already felt old. I was going to graduate next year, and I had no idea what I was going to do. Brad was going off to Northwestern. I may never see him again, even though he claims I will. This was our last summer together. I'd known him since I was in first grade. I never had a brother, but he was as close to one as I could imagine.

"Hey Brad. I'm over here, man," I yelled at him across the theater as an older man walked up to me. "Hey, this seat taken?" the older man asked. "Uh....yeah...I got a buddy coming," I said. "Listen boy, you can't be saving seats. This theater is full. I got no place to sit," he responded a little annoyed. "Sorry, Hoss. Move it on down the line. Seat is taken," I said, looking him dead in the eye with a smirk. He muttered something under his breath and moved along to the seats further down the row.

Brad finally made it to his seat, popcorn and sodas in hand. "You mix my cola like I like?" I asked him while grabbing my drink. "That stuff is nasty dude. You got the regular stuff. I'm not ruining a good drink by mixing it." I laughed and threw my feet up over the seat in front of me and kicked back a little. "You get any airheads?" I asked. "What you think I'm your mommy? You want that, you go get it yourself bud," Brad replied with a smile.

The lights dimmed and the FBI anti-piracy warning hit the screen. I made the motion of pulling out a camera to record the movie and we both laughed. The theater was full. I bet you there wasn't an empty seat in the whole place. It was a good location to have a little anarchist mischief. Just loud enough for someone to overhear I said, "Hey man, you got the tape. We gotta get this filmed so we can get it out on the street! Bootleggin ain't easy, but it sure is fun!" We both laughed and looked around to see if anyone had heard us. Nobody seemed to care.

I grabbed a handful of popcorn and shoveled it down, followed by a gulp of pure sugar. "In a world....." blared over the loudspeakers as the trailer for the newest Hollywood trash trickled through the projector. Brad and I were into movies, but we were more into the artsy stuff. The

stuff that made you think long after the credits rolled. We wanted to be moved, but we also knew most people weren't like us. Most people needed escape, and sometimes even we needed to escape ourselves. This was our stage for the night.

There was a girl I knew from class a couple rows up. I grabbed a piece of popcorn and pegged her in the back of the head. Before she could turn around and see me, I slumped down in my seat so she couldn't see my face, giggling the entire time. Brad looked at her and shrugged like she didn't know what she was looking at. When she turned back around, I leaned back up and pegged her again with another piece of popcorn. "Now that's it! Who is doing that!" I heard her say from the vantage point of being slumped down in the seat. I peered through the space between the seats to see her face. She looked annoyed, but knowing her, I figure she liked the attention. She waved over an usher, and I heard her talking to him. The usher started moving his flashlight over the seats in my vicinity. "Hey man. I gotta hit the bathroom. Too much soda!" I quickly moved past the infinite knees to reach the end of the row. I heard the usher say something behind my back, but I was in too big of a rush to notice.

I actually did use the restroom. As I washed my hands, I noticed a glittery "Happy New Year 1999" sticker slapped in the corner of the washroom mirror. New Year's had been six months ago. I was surprised the defacement hadn't been scraped off by management yet. I dried my hands off and heard the roar of laughter from one of the theaters. I heard a boom from a different one. The bathroom itself felt strangely empty as I tossed the paper towel in the trash. They were packed into their seats like sardines in the room next to me, but I was alone in the den of pipes and flushes.

I walked out of the restroom and into the lobby area. I grabbed the payphone, dropped a quarter in, and dialed the theater phone number listed below the signage above the ticketing desk. "Jones Multiplex, this is Kayla," I heard over the receiver. In a fake high-pitched voice I said, "Kayla, this is Debra Dunning. My 17-year-old son Brad is there watching a program. I need to speak with him. Could you try to find him and get him on the line? It's important." "Do you know what movie he is seeing?" she asked. "No, I'm not sure. I just know he's there." I covered the receiver so she couldn't hear me snickering. "Well, it could be a few minutes. I'll send someone to try to find him." I dropped the payphone handset and let it hang there, slightly swinging in the empty lobby.

As Kayla moved into the theater connecting hallway, I followed. I showed my ticket stub to the half-asleep elderly ticket taker as I passed by. I saw Kayla move into the first theater, one which was not the one Brad was in. I hurriedly shuffled to the theater I'd originally come from and headed back to my seat. "Dude, what took you so long, you must have really had to go," Brad laughed. "That usher was kinda peeved that he couldn't find you." I took a look around, just to see if the usher had left. He had. I was safe for the moment. "Hey, we gotta go," I told Brad. "You got a little scheme cooked up, don't you?" he said back with a smile. "Grab your popcorn. Let's jet," I said. He grabbed the popcorn, and I grabbed my watered-down drink and we headed out of the theater.

I could hear Kayla in the theater next door calling out, "Is there a Brad Dunning in here? Brad Dunning?" I heard a middle-aged man yell out, "We're trying to watch a movie here! Whoever it is ain't here!" I couldn't help but laugh when I heard that. "That you?" Brad looked at me with a face of fake shock. "Oh yeah...." I said with some satisfaction. I ate a couple more pieces of popcorn and took another large slurp out of my drink. "This just ain't it man. I told you to mix it. Half and half," I said jokingly looking at Brad. He threw his hands up like "what you gonna do?" We both laughed and walked out into the lobby.

About that time, I saw Kayla come back out. I rushed over to the phone, now hanging still. I picked up the receiver just in time to hear "Mrs. Dunning? Are you there?" I got back into character. "Yes, sweetheart. I'm here. Did you find my boy?" Brad leaned up against the outside of the payphone, watching Kayla at the counter. "Uh....no ma'am. I was not able to find him. Are you sure he's here?" Kayla said. In the high-pitched voice I squeaked, "What do you mean am I sure he's there? You saying I don't know where my child is. What are you trying to say, that I'm a bad parent!!!" Kayla fell silent. Brad started laughing, and I had to cover the receiver. "Dude, shut up. You're gonna ruin this," I said with a smile and a wink. "Ma'am, I'll try to go look for him again. Give me a moment," Kayla finally said. "No, listen here you ticket jockey. I wanna speak with your manager! You get your manager on here right now! No one is going to insult my parenting skills!" I said in an exaggerated way that was almost comical. "Yes ma'am. Give me one moment and I'll get my manager," she replied. I saw Kayla put the phone down and walk to the back office. I dropped the phone and we went out the entrance doors. I looked back to see the manager picking up the phone to say "Hello."

Summer had just begun.