

## ONE

Thursday used to mean Friday was on its way and I could expect to close up shop with a cool five thousand bucks in the safe on Sunday. Weekends were a steady stream of loyal customers from open to close. All I had to do was unlock the doors, keep the shelves stocked, the coffee pot filled, and I would be rewarded with a big pile of wrinkled, greasy cash at the end of the night. Those milk-and-honey weekends are long gone. Streams of customers and piles of cash—nothing but sepia-toned memories now. The place where video stores dream are made.

*Hey buddy, you got that new Mission Impossible? I'm not seeing it.*

*Check the New Release wall. There's a few copies up there.*

*Best Buy's got it on sale for like six bucks. Yours is four dollars just to rent.*

*The closest Best Buy is in Decatur. How about I throw in a box of Junior Mints with your rental?*

*Nah. I'll check the Redbox over by the Walgreen's.*

After a hundred conversations like that, five grand weekends gave way to a mostly empty store, no matter the night. Wednesdays and Tuesdays were worse than Thursdays. Mondays, I won't even talk about. In between Netflix, Redbox, and the collapse of our economy, Thursday nights at North Coast Video became a slow motion nightmare. A big, nasty goose egg. Double zeros.

Truthfully, my customers started drying up and acting squirrely a year or two before the bubble burst in 2008. Well, started acting more squirrely. People have always been weird. Ten years behind the counter of a video store taught me that. Either way, once the recession hit, no

one cared about renting films. Besides my most dedicated regulars, the trickle of new customers I had left just wanted cheap movies.

So, there I sat like a forgotten buddha amongst dusty shelves and row after row of silent DVDs, nothing to occupy my time but a cup of watery coffee and my ukulele. I propped my feet on the counter and strummed out that Santo and Johnny song “Sleep Walk.” You know that song. It’s in a million movies. It’s Hawaiian. *Wah-wah, wah-wah-wah-wah, wah, wahhhh-wah.*

I’d picked up ukulele awhile back to occupy my time and I’ll be Goddamned if I hadn’t gotten pretty good at it. I had a lot of time to practice. Everything from ABBA to Zappa, even some old school Yiddish folk songs my Bubbe sang when we were kids, I played every day. Strumming was better than drinking and it distracted me from the stack of unopened bills eyeballing me from beneath the counter. I should’ve closed the shop early but I preferred an empty video store over an even emptier apartment. Outside the storefront window, Division Street was empty too.

There were no taxicabs or bicyclists, no boozed up hipsters or fancy people in tasteful black coats on their way to wine and cheese dates. I saw not one wailing ambulance, punk, drunk, or pedhead buzzing by on their little motor scooters. Even the winos and surly locals who fed on the crumbs of it all were MIA. The all-powerful director in the sky, the one who holds the universal remote, must’ve pushed pause on the neighborhood. Maybe all of Chicago was on stand-by that night. The absence of life inside and out made the store feel like a tomb.

I shrugged it off as best I could, stubbed out my cigarette, and started “Sleep Walk” from the top. I was halfway through the second verse when the front door chime *ping-ponged* and the solitude I tried so hard to enjoy was shattered forever. Underneath the purple neon *North Coast*

*Video* sign, stood a lanky man in a filthy, tea-colored trench coat. One foot in the doorway, the other on the sidewalk, he looked like a flea-bitten drifter who'd gotten lost somewhere outside of Gold Rush California and wandered east until he hit my store. My weirdo radar, finely tuned from so many years of dealing with the public, wobbled on its axis.

The neon sign flickered, casting fuzzy purple light across his pale, angular face. His eyes were obscured by a pair of John Lennon-style granny glasses. The lenses were dark red. I cut "Sleep Walk" short, set the ukulele on the counter and cleared my throat.

"Hey buddy, how you doing?"

The man cocked his head, as if just realizing there was another human being near by. He eased the door open a little wider, allowing a blast of chilly September air to barge past him. It swirled down the aisles and fluttered across the counter, mussing the tidy stack of blank membership cards I kept next to the register. A faint metallic smell, like burning copper wires, carried in on the tail-end of the wind. I shivered as it blew itself out.

"Something I can help you with? You need directions?" I asked, re-tidying the membership cards.

One boney hand resting on the glass, the other stuffed into the dirty coat, the man stood motionless. He offered no response. The stone statue routine didn't bother me so much at first. I was accustomed to a whole slew of neighborhood misfits and castoffs parading through the store, none of them ever renting a thing, but after a full minute ticked by, the nervous little animal who lives inside my gut, the tight ball of anxiety I called *Morris* began to squirm. *Morris* frowns upon prolonged silences in conversation.

Another frosty blast whirled through the open door, slapping the man's shaggy blond hair against his expressionless face. Finally, as if invited inward by the arrival of the wind, he released himself from the stone statue pose and stepped through the partially opened door. The wind died down as the door hinged shut behind him.

Swiveling his head from side to side, surveying the different sections, he stood in the store's entryway like some kind of ice-man-cometh. While I tried to remain casual, Morris raised an eyebrow. Most new customers beelined to the NEW RELEASE wall, but he simply stood rooted in the one spot. After a minute of strained silence ticked by, he snapped his head toward the FOREIGN section. Ignoring the new releases, he walked with a sense of purpose toward FOREIGN. On that account, I can't blame him. Our FOREIGN section was absolutely killer at that time.

We had everything—Japanese anime, Bollywood, Italian art-house, Cuban vampire flicks, Russian mobster movies, even some off-the-wall psychedelic musicals from Malaysia. Granted, most of those DVDs were museum pieces, growing a thicker coat of moss with each passing year, but a handful of die-hard regulars were passionate about the section's cultural depth. The guy, the trench coat drifter, he came to a stop in front of the modest, but respectable Russian selection. I admired his ambition. Russian films could be a slog. He leaned in closer to the titles and ran a thin finger along the spines of the DVDs. After browsing through them for a moment, he glanced up at me. I shifted my eyes down, pretending to organize the membership cards again. Nothing in that section seemed to pique his interest so he moved on.

Gliding through DRAMA without so much as a glance, the man rounded the corner and ended up in COMEDY. He ran the same pale, skinny finger efficiently over the alphabetized rows until pausing at the letter *S*.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

He beat out a 1-2-3 rhythm with the tip of his finger. Even from behind the counter, I recognized the spine of the DVD he'd landed on.

*It's going to take more than just the power of love to conquer all. John Cusack and Ione Skye star in—Say Anything.*

What a classic. I knew every line in that movie by heart. He slid it out, flipped the case over, and scanned the back. Please rent that one. John Cusack is from Chicago too, you know. That's what I would say to him when he brought it to the counter. It'd be a good ice breaker. I rolled the tape in my head:

*Great choice, man. I love this movie. John Cusack is from Chicago too, you know. Born up on the Northside, in Evanston. Next time you're out that way, they got a pretty good donut shop up there. Okay, enough with the Cusack trivia, let's get you signed up for an account. You'll need to fill out a membership card. You can keep the North Coast Video pen. Say Anything is a four-day rental, due back on Monday but don't worry if you can't get it back by then. By the way all new customers get a free box of candy. Take your pick. I recommend the Junior Mints.*

He moved *Say Anything* up to his face and sniffed the area of the box near John Cusack's head. The store was so damn quiet. Why hadn't I put on the stereo?

“Anything particular I can help you find?” I called out. There was a noticeable warble in my voice.

Scoffing at either my question or the smell of the case, he slid the DVD back onto the shelf and continued browsing. He bypassed the CLASSICS section, but froze in front of the *Labyrinth* poster that separated HORROR from FANTASY. While he glared at David Bowie from behind the little red glasses, I was able to get a better look at him.

A wispy, cornsilk beard hung from a sharp, jutting chin. Well over six feet tall, his body was rigid and taut, like a bow pulled to the max, ready to loose. Two large stains, shaped like a pair of misshapen wings, ran the length of the dirty trench coat. He could’ve been one of my more eccentric regulars dressed like that, a down-and-out Keanu Reeves type, but it was only the end of September and a wool-lined trench coat was overkill. He placed his palm in the center of the *Labyrinth* poster and cracked his knuckles. Bone popped on cartilage. With only the two of us in the store, the *crick-crack* sounded obscene; a voyeuristic ritual I did not ask to be a part of.

“You live in the neighborhood, or...”

I noticed a thin sliver in the poster’s glass as he stepped away. Pausing in FANTASY for a beat, he rounded the corner and skulked up the HORROR aisle, heading toward the front counter.

Morris sunk his teeth into my lower intestine. Morris hates confrontation. I stifled a queasy belch. The man kept coming. Well over six feet tall was an underestimate. This guy would’ve been the center of the Bull’s offense. The burning penny smell drifted up the aisle ahead of him, wafting into my nose before he reached the counter. As he saddled up to the register, he placed his palms on the counter, flattening his long fingers down only a few inches from my sneakers. With the toe of my shoe, I moved the ukulele away from his hand before

letting out an awkward, feminine-sounding chuckle. He seemed to grow taller as I shifted off the stool.

“Alright, let’s get you signed up for a new account,” I said, stealing a glance at his hands.

Splayed out like a couple of massive snow crabs, his hands were covered in hundreds of tiny black and blue tattoos. Jagged and sharp, like scratch marks made by an animal, the tattoos snaked up and down his fingers and across his knuckles. He caught me staring. I turned my eyes toward the candy rack, mumbling something about free Junior Mints with his first rental. The neon sign over the front door hummed and then popped. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the *rip-rip-rip* of Morris’ claws against my intestines. A hint of a smile showed on his face. The man sucked his teeth and then dipped an enormous hand into the dirty brown trench coat.

This was it.

Lights out, Lou.

I was going to die.

Cursed, threatened, flashed, proposed to, propositioned by dozens of women and a handful of men (even a Green Bay Packer once), I’d cleaned up human shit in the KIDS section, performed CPR on a junkie who flatlined in the bathroom, made love to a handful of ex-girlfriends in the break room, but never in the ten years as owner of North Coast Video, had I stood face to face with my own mortality. There were no grand visions or highlight reels from my past. The only thing that flashed through my mind was the small stack of porno DVDs one of my regulars returned earlier that day. My body lying behind the counter, gunshot wound in the center of my forehead, my Ma comes in to ID me, sees the stack on the shelf and thinks her baby

boy was some kind of pervert. *They help pay the bills, Ma! They help pay the bills! What do you want me to do?!*

He pulled his hand out of his pocket.

I shut my eyes.

Morris erupted.

“I’d like to rent this,” I heard him say.

I opened my eyes.

No gun, no knife, no cudgel, there was no weapon of any kind in his hand.

Between his skinny, tattooed fingers was a copy of Russian director Andre Tarkovsky’s most revered film, *Stalker*.<sup>1</sup>

“Have you seen this?”

The question floated out of his mouth like dry ice from a metal bucket.

I never saw him pull the movie off the shelf. Did he have a copy in his coat? Was it some sort of totem he carried with him on the streets? *Stalker* is a real acid trip of a movie, a masterpiece really, and it solidified Tarkovsky as the genius filmmaker he was, but with the exception of the occasional film student, hardly anybody rented it. Nine times out of ten, my customers would’ve rather watched *Look Who’s Talking* and I’m not saying that’s a shit movie<sup>2</sup> but *Stalker* is life-altering cinematic art.

“Yeah, no problem. *Stalker* is a fantastic film. One of my favorites, actually. Interesting you’d pick that one,” I stammered.

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<sup>1</sup> STALKER

<sup>2</sup> LOOK WHO’S TALKING



He set the DVD on the counter.

“Interesting? How so?” he asked.

“I don’t know, man. Just, I didn’t think you’d pick that one.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t mean anything by it. Let’s get you signed up for an account.”

Ignoring the blank membership card I slid across the counter, he held the movie up to my face and pointed to the image on the front.

“I’m curious, have you ever been *inside* this movie?”

His delivery, the way he said *inside* was sneering; a taunt; like he knew I knew what he meant by *inside*, and he also knew I’d never been there. I’ve lived in Chicago my whole life. I was used to all kinds of people saying all kinds of ridiculous shit to me, so his question, while not exactly apropos of nothing, was more than just off-putting.

“No, man. Can’t say I’ve been inside that one. You been there, inside it?”

The quiver in my voice was more pronounced.

He rubbed his chin, twirling blond cornsilk between his fingers while he examined me from behind the red glasses.

“Many times. But you haven’t. You’re...uninitiated. Would you like to see what’s inside?”

“I’m good, buddy. I got the store to run and Cub tickets for next week. Could be our year, right?”

A blatant lie.

He continued stroking his chin.

Seconds dripped off the clock without a word between us.

“Listen, man. I’m not sure what I can do for you but it’s probably best if you just go.”

He held up a finger, requesting silence.

“There is a single, inescapable fact of human existence,” he said as he took off the small, round glasses and dropped them into the side pocket of the trench coat.

He turned his eyes on mine. They were red. Not like he’d been on a bender or hadn’t-slept-in-days type of eyes, these eyes were God-given, blazing maraschino cherry eyes. My insides turned to ice.

“Fact is, truth has a way of finding you, no matter how far or fast you run,” he remarked as he took my chin between his fingers. He tilted my face side-to-side, studying my eyes with his eyes. “It’s entertaining to watch people try to squirm away from truth. More often than you might imagine, truth finds someone only seconds before death. A little light in the eyes clicks on before —*click-clack*. Then, gone forever. That is something to witness. From my point of view, truth has an astonishing sense of humor.”

A tiny *what the fuck, dude* seeped out of my mouth.

He sighed before releasing my chin from between his fingers.

“I should’ve known this approach wouldn’t work with a guy like you.”

He set *Stalker* down, raised his arms over his head, and slammed the full force of his fists into the countertop. The plywood beneath the formica counter snapped. DVDs wobbled along the shelves and spilled off the walls. Before I could scream, he snatched the collar of my jean jacket and wrenched me into the air, knocking my shins against the wooden stool. Morris shrieked and tore into my esophagus. I felt his fingers dig into the meat of my shoulder, forcing muscle into

bone. Sneakers dangling, he pulled me closer to his face, examining me as if I was a disappointing fish hooked on his line.

“Listen, movie man, I didn’t ask to be here. The Stars commanded me to find you.”

I clawed and scratched at his fingers. He tightened his grip.

“The Stars have ordered you into the darkness. I am to show you the way inside but the decision is yours alone. I cannot make it for you. The choice is up to you.”

“Let go of me, please!” I croaked.

In response he swept his free arm across the candy shelf, sending boxes flying through the air.

“I’m gonna pass out...”

He shrugged and just like that he lowered me back onto the stool. Clutching my throat, I flopped off the stool and collapsed.

From the floor behind the counter, I wheezed, “I won’t call the cops. Just get out of here. I don’t want any more trouble.”

“More or less trouble is up to you,” he replied while he bent over the counter, plucked me off the ground as if I weighed nothing. He set me back onto the stool.

“If it were my choice, I’d simply drag you inside and toss you. But, I don’t make the rules, no matter how ridiculous I judge them to me.”

As he spoke, he re-positioned me on the stool, moving my torso until it was squared with his. Then, he whipped an open hand into my face. My glasses shot off my face as my head snapped. A white hot pain sizzled through my cheek. Gasping for breath, I clenched the sides of the stool, trying to remain upright. He snickered. As quickly as the pain entered my body, I felt it

drain away. Strangely, I felt alive; energized even. He continued ogling me. I passed my eyes over the baseball bat I kept underneath the counter.

“Believe me, weapons are useless.”

“Whatever’s in the register, you can have it,” I whispered.

“I have no interest in money,” he scoffed.

He leaned across the counter and peered into my eyes in a way that felt like more of a violation than the slap across the face. Overhead, the fluorescent lights seemed to expand, washing the store in their pale, milky light. As he drilled into my eyes, the burning copper smell enveloped me. Morris erupted, emptying the contents of his belly into mine. I was on the verge of passing out.

“If it we're up to me, movie man, I'd rather not go anywhere with you. But, the choice is not mine to make. Rules are rules. We all have our bosses, don't we? The Stars,” he briefly took his eyes off mine and glanced toward the ceiling, “are in charge of everything. Myself included. You can come with me or you can stay here and...,” He swept his arm out over the wrecked store, “And watch your world crumble. But know this, once I take you inside, the life you've known will be rendered meaningless. Do you understand?”

“No, man. I don't,” I wheezed.

He snorted.

“It doesn't matter. I could never explain it to you anyway, not in any language you'd comprehend.”

I made a high-pitched squeaking sound.

“Good point,” he nodded. “It’s only fair to give you time to make up your mind. I’ll give you a night and a day to decide. Know this, others will come. They won’t be as diplomatic as me. You’ve been marked. Apparently, the world is waking up from a long, long sleep and you have something The Stars need to keep it awake.”

He slid the red, round glasses back over his eyes.

“Oh, I would like to rent this,” he said, thrusting *Stalker* into my hand.

Muscle memory took over.

“You’ll need to open an account.”

The tremor in my voice was absent.

“Fine,” he responded.

I slid the blank membership card and a North Coast Video pen across the counter.

“I’ll need to see a drivers license, or...a utility bill would work, too...”

He glared at me and clicked the pen. With a few efficient strokes, he filled out the card and slid it back to me. The writing on the card was identical to the tattoos on his hands.

“An invitation. That’s my one and only gift to you. Don’t squander it.”

After dropping the DVD and pen into the pocket of his coat, he scooped a stray Sour Patch Kid off the counter. His tongue flitted his tongue across the top of its tiny head.

“Disgusting.”

With the flick of a finger, he shot the Sour Patch Kid toward me. It bounced off the bridge of my nose and landed back onto the counter.

“A night and a day, movie man.”

Like a lifting fog, he drifted back amongst the aisles. He strode out the door, turned right onto Division Street, and vanished into the empty night.