

THE GRAIL

VOL. XVI February 12, 2021 ISSUE I



INSIDE

REACHING OUT TOUCH

On a tactile trip through a Southern mansion, Sophie K. reminds us of the ease and electricity of childhood connections.

PAGE 1

UNTOUCHABLE THE CHASE

Friendly frolicking or beastly brawls, take a gander at Josh K.V.'s photos to be thrown to the wolves or playfully welcomed into the pack.

PAGE 3

OUT OF TOUCH "LOCKED DOWN" REVIEW

Will S. takes Doug Liman's off-base attempt at a pandemic romcom to task in a quick, punchy film review.

PAGE 10

THE GRAIL

VOL. XVI

February 12, 2021

ISSUE I

www.reedthegrail.org

FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Touchin' meeeee, Touchin' youuuuu! Welcome to Volume XVI of *The Grail*, and our very tactile first issue! We're excited to introduce a new board eager to get our hands dirty putting this lil magazine together and into your mitts this semester. In an age where others seem so far away, our ~touch~ issue highlights works relating to all things physical (and meta-physical).

In "Touch," Sophie K. shows us how quickly true connection can be felt, whether that's dissolving, tingling, or all of the above, in a story of friendship (1). Feel the soft touch of rose petals with Michelle's photography and roughhouse in the snow with two coyote's in Josh K.V.'s exploration of wild Yellowstone (3). Then, be sure to keep your flashlight and pumpkin head on hand for the second installment of Allison W's supernatural serial (4). Grab a partner and dance in the rain with Sidney F's image of the Canyon (6) before Priya reminds us to beware Phaedra the Siren and the lure of infatuation (7). Fall in love and wither away as Jules takes us on a journey through the frustrating effects of time (9). Will S. offers a not-so-gentle takedown review of Doug Liman's "hashtag-so-true" heist romcom *Locked Down* (10). And finally, Ema C. shows us it's never too early to start reading *The Grail*, with an absolutely touching portrait of her

newborn son (12). As we continue to keep our (at least) six foot distance from each other, we hope the contents of this issue of Volume XVI touch your heart.

In honor of Black History Month, we'll be skipping our next print issue to make space for Black voices and students of color. In the meantime, please redistribute your money and resources to Black people, in this month of learning and action and always.

XOXO,

Your Spring 2020 Editors

Aislin Lighter Steill, most likely to be sending candy hearts to mushrooms (yet again)

Bahar Tarighi, most likely to send scratch-and-sniff stickers to random mailstops

Erik Beserra, most likely to make bread for himself on Valentine's day <3

Lauren Mondroski, sigma male? more like sigma grail, amirite?

Sophie Halpin, most likely to lounge around all of Valentine's Day

CONTENTS

Touch, 1-2

Photography, 3

It's Not For Everyone Pt. II, 4-7

Phaedra the Siren, 8

The Cranberry Man, 9

"Locked Down" Film Review, 10-11

Readership Starts Early, 12

CONTRIBUTORS

Ema Chomsky
Josh Klein Valente
Michelle

Jules Dubel
Sophie Klingborg
Will Stevens

Sidney Fong
Priya Narain
Allison Wallace

Front cover photo: Copulation by Josh Klein Valente.

Touch

BY SOPHIE KLINGBORG

When I first met Paul, I thought she was a Jesus freak because of her shirt. The shirt was screaming neon yellow, the kind of shirt they give you at camp because you need to be able to find your campers again when you let them loose in a roadside history museum or food court, and it was too big because they only ever make camp shirts in one size. It said “TAG — YOU’RE IT!” on the front, with a big screen-printed cross. It was kind of threatening.

My mom put her hands on my shoulder and gave a firm little push, saying “Go give your cousin a hug.” I went even though I’m pretty sure this was not my cousin (we weren’t even the same race?), but she dodged back before we could touch.

“Gotta catch me first,” she said, and then turned tail and bolted up the stairs. The back of her shirt read “MAGIC MOUNTAIN BIBLE STUDY.” The big lady beside her who had, upon first noticing my mother, screamed and then grabbed her in a terrifying embrace, chuckled and said, “My youngest.” She swept her hand around the room; I twisted to look. “Youngest” implied a whole battalion of Jesus-camp-shirt-clad kids that I definitely couldn’t catch.

“I just have the one,” my mom said, extending an arm to me without looking where I was and pawing the air for a second. “My Joy.”

“She’s *such* a little lamb chop,” cooed the lady. “Go on, you can go play with Paulette.” I looked at my mom, who said, “Go ahead.” She beamed at me, beamed at the lady. I could either hang around and watch them clutch each other’s elbows and scream like teenagers, or I could go find Paulette, who I assumed was the kid, but could also be a dog. I followed the stairs upward and found a second level of the house that looked almost exactly like

the first. I’m pretty sure we had just been in the dining room downstairs, but here I was in another dining room. The wall was half windows, which were all like twice my height. No girl, though. Another, different girl entered from the far end of the room, which scared me viscerally because people can just materialize out of nowhere in this mansion, and I really hoped that this was one of the *older* kids and not an entirely different one. “Hiiiiii,” she said, and when she got close she was the exact copy of the woman downstairs, regressed twenty years. Same intimidating height. I had to crane my neck back a little. “I’m Patience. And you’re Joy.” In addition to being scared, I was embarrassed that this girl 1) knew my name, and 2) was also named after a virtue. Maybe she really was my long-lost cousin? She reached out and rubbed my shoulder through my T-shirt. “You and Paulette are the same age. You should play with her. PAULETTE!” she screamed, transforming momentarily from all-American angel into shrieking banshee. “She’s around. Wanna lemonade?”

“Okay,” I said. She walked over to the massive dining table, laden with napkins and crystal glasses for a dauntingly large number of people that I had yet to meet, and picked up a pitcher. She grabbed a glass at random and poured, spilling a little on the nice tablecloth, which I saw now had a plastic cover. I took the glass with both hands, surprised at its heft and intricacy; we didn’t have any crystal at home. I sipped. The lemonade was lukewarm and tasted like sweat, but that was also probably because I was sweating heavily. South Carolina was so much hotter than Boston, and we’d only been here for a day.

Someone moved in the massive drapes. Patience zeroed in on it like a hawk and marched over, yanking

the heavy green cloth aside. Paulette streaked out from under her arm and got clear to the center of the dining room. “Paulette! Go play with Joy. You guys are both eight.”

“You play with her,” Paulette said, inching backward towards the door, keeping her eyes territorially on the two of us.

“I’m eleven. I’m too old,” Patience said emphatically, and smoothed her fingers over her plastic pink headband, her flower print sundress. “There’s toys in the attic.” Paulette remained where she was. Patience turned her back on me, so I set my heavy lemonade down and started slowly moving toward Paulette, trying not to scare her off again. She stood there and watched me approach. She resembled the lady downstairs, too, if she’d de-aged and chopped all her hair off. I wondered if she played basketball. When I got close enough, Paulette put out her palms to ward me off, said, “No hugs,” and hotfooted away. Patience stamped her jelly sandal. “You’re so annoying,” she said to the empty air. “Grammy’s in there.” She pointed to the hallway that Paulette had disappeared down. I guessed that was my cue, so I went.

The hallway led me to a fancy room, bizarrely decorated with an array of burnished bronze pots and pans, which contained one stooped old woman and one kid somewhere in between Paulette and Patience in terms of age and height. The old lady didn’t even register me. The kid looked up and said, “Who’re you?”

“Um, I guess I’m your cousin from Boston,” I said, taking a guess on his identity. He looked me up and down. “We’re not really cousins. Our moms are just sisters.”

I frowned.

“*Sorority* sisters. Kappa Alpha Theta?”

“What?”

He ignored me and made his way over to the old lady. He bent like he was about to whisper something in her ear, or kiss her on the cheek, but then he bellowed, "GRANNY, WHEN'S DINNER? I'M HUNGRY." I realized that the room was actually a kitchen, just bigger than any I'd ever set foot in. Bigger than my whole room.

She twitched slightly. "Twenty minutes, Ronnie-bunny." Quivering, she reached out to pat his hands, which he permitted before pulling away. He pointed at me. "What are you still doing here?" I glanced around, now terrified for my life. I spotted Paulette standing stock still in a niche in the kitchen wall. I looked back at Ronnie-bunny, who was now uncomfortably close. "Hey, what type of Asian are you?"

Paulette shot out of her alcove and, for the first time, touched my elbow. My skin practically fizzled, like I was made of pure nerves where she touched me. "Go away, lame-o. We're gonna play."

"Are you Chinese? There's a Chinese restaurant on Figtree."

Paulette gave my arm another tug, and my stomach fluttered, my skin shivered. "C'mon." I let her lead me out of the room and into yet another maze of rooms. The two of us went through at least two more doors until I was thoroughly lost, and then ended up in a bedroom dominated by a four-poster bed as big as a car. Paulette dropped my arm and clambered up onto the massive bedspread, and I locked my fingers in the wrought iron bed frame and followed.

"Ron's boring and Patience is boring," she said.

Boring was not the word I would have used, but I said, "Okay." Paulette tilted her head back and looked at the ceiling. "Are *you* gonna be boring?" she asked.

"I hope not," I said. The longest sentence I'd managed since I got here. Paulette lolled her head back to me and met my eyes. "Cool."

The two of us sat in silence for a moment, and then she said, "Do you watch TV?" I ran my fingers over the scratchy bedspread.

"No, not really. I read a lot." *Already failing to not be boring.*

"Read what?"

"Uh, do you know *Warriors*? Like the cats?"

Her whole face split into a grin. I got that electric shock feeling again, and grinned back. We discussed our favorite Clans (*Obviously* ShadowClan are the bad guys but they are *also* the coolest), our favorite cats (we agree Firestar's overrated), what our warrior names would be, what role we'd play. "I'd wanna be leader some day," Paulette said, swiping the air. I shuddered. "That's too much responsibility." She sat back on her haunches. "You can be deputy then."

"Why me?" I asked.

"Cause you're smart and cool." She shrugged, and my heart leaped like a cat. "Can I ask something?" I said. I pointed at her shirt; I was feeling bold. "Why does your shirt say TAG?"

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Oh, it's cause my mom sends me to Bible camp? Like every summer. But it's sooooo boring. And last year the theme was "TAG, YOU'RE IT?" And it was like, the Lord tagged you and now you have to go out and tag everyone else. With his love, I guess?"

"Weird!" I said.

"You mean you don't go to Bible camp? I'm so jealous." I opened my mouth to tell her about my personal summer torture at piano camp when I heard a familiar full-throated screech. "PAULETTE!"

"Ugh," Paulette said. "Dinnertime." She slid down off the bed, then suddenly changed her mind and crawled beneath it. "Uh, Paulette? What're you doing?"

"Shh!" she hissed, crouched in the darkness. "I'm hiding!" She seized my wrist. "Hide with me!" I stuffed myself in the gap between the floor and the boxsprings, my side pressed to hers. "Can you call me Paul?"

"Huh?" I said, caught off-guard.

"Instead of Paulette. I like Paul better."

"Sure," I replied, my exhale carrying a dust bunny to her nose. She snuffled and giggled, and I laughed, too, and then she slapped a hand over my mouth and said, "Shh! We're *hiding*," and I couldn't help dissolving into laughter, and then she was dissolving too, and we were

touching. I was a Fourth of July sparkler. I was Coke, she was Mentos. I was PopRocks and she was the mouth. Ew, no. Rice Krispies and the milk? Nothing existed except for this nook under the bed until Paul's dad marched in the room, a mountain of a man bigger even than his wife, and said "WHEEEEEERE'S MY LITTLE GIRL?" and Paul whisper-shrieked "*Daddy!*" and he caught us. We were summarily booted from the master bedroom and slapped into two chairs across from each other at the dining table, still frilled with dust bunnies. My mom saw me and moaned with dismay. "Joy! You're dirty," and my pseudo-auntie just laughed and said, "You know how it is with kids." We were joined by Ronnie-bunny and Patience, and then the stooped old 'Grammy' and a brand new person I'd never seen before, 'Grampy', and served meat in a thick cinnamon-colored goo with glistening yellow cubes of cornbread and wedges of something out of a casserole dish topped with a thick skin of cheese. Thankfully, no legions of mystery people arose to take the empty chairs; they'd been set just for looks.

"It's time to say grace," boomed Mr. Mountain, Paul's dad, and everyone stretched their hand out to the nearest person. Picking up on cues, my mom took my hand on one side, but I had no one next to me. I looked over the table and Paul met my eyes. She winked and mouthed, *boring*, extending her palm. I reached out over the Cheese Pit Dish and grasped it. My body tingled and Mr. Mountain said grace.



The Chase by Josh Klein Valente



untitled by Michelle

It's Not For Everyone

Pt II

BY ALLISON WALLACE

Two figures wind their way through the underbrush of the dark forest, ducking under branches and stepping over the turned mud. The oddly glowing hoofprints they were following faded a half mile behind them.

"It's simply a trade, my supernatural expertise for your haunting finesse," Hollis says to the vague shape trudging before him. If he squints into the shadows cast by the moonlight, he can see where the stained collar ends and the thick coat begins, but not much else. The leaves before him are disturbed by unseen footfalls.

"Temporary allies," Hollis starts again, a little hoarse in this second hour of monologuing. The early morning wind bites through his camera vest. He thinks he sees a warm light flicker in the corner of his eye. It disappears one second, and reappears the next as they walk. The woods in front of them open up into a deer path.

Not moving his gaze from the light, he asks "Is that the horse?" Hollis remembers annoyedly that he probably wouldn't get an answer. He turns ahead to interrogate directly.

"Ghost?" There is no one else in the clearing. *I tracked a ghost out to the middle of nowhere*, he thinks, sighing a great sigh. *Great ghostly ally.*

Hollis's weekend outdoor survival class instantly kicks into gear. He realizes he left his satellite phone and space-blanket in his car. He looks up and all the stars look the same. In one of the four directions was the coast, he knows. The warm light still shines in the distance—it isn't a very far one either. Still surveying the area for any headless shoulders, Hollis makes his

own way through some ferns. The light grows into a rectangle when his left foot is snagged back. He yelps and jumps away, stumbling, his camera bag hitting his back. The faint ambient light reveals he had caught his boot in a snake burrow. Breathing again, he continues on a bit slower.

To his vast relief and deep embarrassment, the light is a bigger clearing with an orange tent illuminated from the inside by a small lantern. Two pairs of boots sit outside the zippered door.

How do you knock on a tent? Hollis asks himself. *They might have a satellite phone.* Two diffuse shadows lay prone, one is still and snoring, the other turning and rustling around. He steps forward to enter the clearing and opens his mouth with his name when a twig snaps under his foot. The restless figure shoots upward and turns to the source of the noise. Hollis pauses but his mind continues. It reaches a conclusion that makes him smile. *A perfect opportunity for an example of professionalism.* The ghost still isn't around as far as he could see, but it would sure hear two terrified hikers.

Hollis whispers, "After all, grandfather always said that a leader should fight his own battles." He stops himself from reaching for the Velcro of his pants pockets for something to throw. Instead, as silently as possible, he picks up a fallen branch. He crouches down and creeps forward within reach of the tent. Raising the branch, he mildly hits its roof.

"Get up! Wake up, there's a bear!" the voice cries, reaching and opening a shadowy lump in front of them that sounds like a bag.

"There are no bears in New Jersey," the other body

turns over and sighs.

The voice whispers, rushing in anger, “Then it’s a serial killer. Get up, *I am not dying on a Wednesday*.”

Hollis silently pivots around the rear of the tent, picks up a small stone on the ground, and throws it at the back wall.

The figures spring up and twist away, issuing a medley of curses. The front zipper opens, letting the two scramble out into the dark. Hollis quickly steps back into a shrub, wincing when branches stab his arms and neck, half-obscuring his vision of the camper’s backs.

“Racoons, it was racoons,” the half-asleep camper looks at the other, who faces away following their friend’s gaze into the treeline. In the distance, the moon is setting, an orb framed by bark and leaves. Outlined by that cold light is the headless horseman, the reins to its horse looped over one arm and its tiny candle cupped in the other. The burning eyes of its steed shine behind it. It steps into the diffuse light of the clearing and lunges at the campers.

Hollis can’t tell if their hair stands on end, but the camper’s shouts carry near and far. The two pitch themselves across the clearing, two blurs pushing each other back, forward, and forth down a narrow path Hollis had not noticed before.

Hollis turns back to the spirit and walks to the tent. “I got them out of here. If it weren’t for me they’d never have noticed you.” He points at them and at the abandoned camp. “You need me, ghost, and I need my career back.” The unearthly horse snorts, and Hollis imagines it sounds like the first clod of dirt thrown on a new coffin. He represses a shudder.

“Deal?”

The ghost angles its torso like it’s glancing at the ruined tent. The candle in the ghost’s palm gleams more steadily. It clenches a fist, and gives a slow thumbs up. A car engine howls somewhere beyond the forest.

Jane stares at the treetops flickering past her side of the backseat of the family station wagon.

“Well, Suzie, I don’t know what to say.” Mom is on the phone, “The production must go on. Child Number Four will have to be replaced. You can’t airbrush away the chickenpox. We still have time for the understudy.” Behind her is Little Julia in a tall car seat.

In the seat in front of Jane, Dad has one airpod in. His eyes occasionally flick down from the road to his phone mounted on the dashboard. It reads “*13 Rules from Ancient Rome for Side-Gig Hustlers: Chapter One - From Zero to Nero*.”

The car window is half-open on her sister’s side, just down to where the child-lock stops it—enough to let in a chill.

This morning, Jane has insisted on wearing only her one-layered coat with kittens on it. When Jane’s little sister Julia opens the window on her side of the car, she is not cold. Jane is sure her sister has dutifully submitted to wear her huge parka earlier to spite Jane. Between Jane’s seatbelt and her carseat is one of her favorite babydolls. Jane considers an old, favorite game, “I’m not touching your dolly,” and she hovers her hand above the toy. Julia sees this and opens her mouth to return the favor, loudly. The first pinecone hits the car window on Julia’s side with a meager dink. Jane and Julia scan the passing forest, and Mom spares a glance also. Nothing interesting appears on the outside. The kids return to their game of chicken.

The second pinecone doesn’t even come close to any part of Julia’s *Sofia the First* brand puffy coat, pants, or flashing sneakers. It lands directly onto the car floor. Seizing an opportunity, Princess Julia locks eyes with Jane and bursts into tears.

“Janeway-Peony Allen, what have I said about hitting your sister?” Jane’s mother swivels in her seat. “I thought we weren’t going to do this today. We agreed.”

Jane starts to protest by kicking the driver’s seat when another pinecone, covered in mud, flies through the window and hits the headrest of the driver’s seat. It splatters bits on the seats and Mom’s hair. Dad makes

a sound of alarm.

Mother had already been turning back, and did not see the trajectory. She flips back around; her hand in her hair. “How *could* you? *What* will your Grandmother say, after the pie incident of last year? George, pull over.” Julia stops crying, sensing trouble.

“Look Flora, I’m doing sixty on a slippery country road with no curb. We’ll stop after the bend.” Dad says.

“You know my mother can see the road from the house, she’ll send someone out to see what’s wrong. It’ll be my cousin, or—” Mom grimaces and fails to hide it—“second cousin.”

“Oliver’s not that bad—” Dad counters.

Jane looks out the window again at the shadowy equestrian form still riding to the right of the car, just behind the first line of trees. She gives the rider the most hideous, ulcerous stare she’s ever mustered, before or since, worse than the face she pulled when her ex-best friend accused her of stealing the best piece of cake at a birthday party. Jane’s sister looks out the window, and starts blowing raspberries in the figure’s general direction. Mom’s voice does not interrupt the children. “Julia, stop that. Face me, Jane.” Her mother follows Jane’s stare out the window as well.

“What, are they trying to ride on the road now? That’s illegal.” Mom turns around and tries to observe the rider in the side-mirror. Dad makes a questioning noise.

The Horseman falters in throwing another pinecone, and doesn’t look ahead until too late. Its steed, about to gallop into a tree, panics and overcorrects to the right, almost hitting another, smaller tree and forcing the Horseman to shift wildly to the left with nothing to hold onto the horse’s bare back. In the scramble for purchase, the ghost pulls too high on the reins to re-exert control. The angry beast turns and kicks like a wild horse. The rider flies, careening into the wagon’s windshield. It sloughs off the car hood and tears off a windshield wiper before its prone form is run over. The car doesn’t lift up and down over the spiritual body, but it does burn rubber through the dead leaves.

Relieved of its burden, the horse trots daintily a few yards away from where Hollis is hiding behind a wintering tree. The station wagon is gone, out of sight and sound.

Hollis walks out and stops by the ditch beside the road. He calls out, “You gotta get your head in the game, champ!” The ghost lays there on its side and doesn’t move. Pinecones have spilled out of its pockets and all over the road. Looking both ways, Hollis steps out on the roadway, stooping over the ghost. “So we’re in beta testing. You really gotta give it 120% of your grit.” The ghost turns to face Hollis (or at least, turns its torso). “If we’re going to do this, we gotta agree to take ownership of this society—I mean—haunting. We gotta agree to excellence—” The ghost shoots out its arm, hooks Hollis’s ankle, and pulls.

Hollis leans over with elbows on knees, sitting in concentration. “Okay, brainstorming.” He leans further forward. “Storming the castle of intellect. Marshalling our brilliance for haunting...” Hollis tents his hands in front of his face for effect, but after a few seconds it does not command his grey-matter as expected. He glances at the information-web that spans the wall above the twin bed, the wall with the doors to outside and the bathroom, and the wall behind the TV and bureau. It does not clarify anything. His brainstorming chair in his motel room isn’t as comfortable as he expects, either.

He looks over at the ghost, sitting slumped on the suitcase-stretcher by the TV. “So how do you land exactly? If you can be thrown, can you jump, or...?”

The ghost starts to slowly wring its gloved fists. The transparent leather creaks like aged rope. Hollis shuts up. He takes his laptop and notebook off the bed and opens both of them.

“That’s *three* eerie venues now off the list.” He sighs. “We could go back and try those woods at twilight?” The rider flourishes an arm, slashing vigorously to say, “*Not bothering.*”

“Great. I’ll just look for *other* locations in a two-horse

town with high foot traffic and high ambiance.” He turns to the lists in his notebook, until he feels a light kick in the shin. The ghost is standing. It points to its gruesome mess of a neck with one hand and the naked lightbulb in the ceiling with the other.

“You want a flashlight.” The ghost shakes its fist and points to the stack of red solo cups in the bathroom.

“Oh yeah, your candle. I forgot it in the car.” Hollis looks back down to his laptop.

The rider throws itself out of its seat and out the closed door.

Hollis calls after it, “Statistically it’s safer for a lifeforce in the car than in here. 35% of household accidents happen in the living room, and 80% in the bathroom.” He starts typing something. “That makes motel rooms the most dangerous places in America. More dangerous than the wet leaves and pumpkin guts you had when I found you.”

The door slams open, the rider holding a red solo cup half outstretched and half cradled in its arms. It closes the door slowly, and reclines on the suitcase stand like it was an antique, the cup secure in both hands. Hollis continues talking, “Can’t we replace it? It looks a little feeble.” The tiny spark of a tallow candle sits in the bottom. When it trembles from the jostling of crossing the room, the ghost flickers in and out of visibility.

“Did you need to take the stairs, or did you fly down?”

The clear ghost gingerly places his red solo cup on the TV bureau, far out of casual danger from elbows. The rider turns to Hollis and pretends to throw something, aggressively miming a shot put, and points to its neck again.

“Alright,” Hollis grumbles, “a pumpkin.” He starts to look up grocery stores.

Sent November 2nd, 20XX to: FThorburn@ACS.org

To Supervisor Thorburn of the Physical Hauntings and Manifestations Department,

Investigation #7389 Status Report: The manifestation has been identified, and I can confirm its designation as Danger Level 7. The haunting has caused three incidents of brazen property damage and general mischief since I first sighted it the night of October 31st. Please see my last Status Report (11/1/20XX) for my fierce battle with the spirit, and the attached screenshots from *The Busy Piper* online edition for corroboration of the lawless events which only I managed to defeat. It is more powerful than previously recorded by our analysts. For example, Twenty-Three can gallop at a rate of sixty miles per hour, and is capable of throwing multiple kinds of possibly injurious projectiles. I will fill in the analysts and library staff on the capabilities it exhibits when I return to Headquarters.

Using my investigative experience and the skills learned in the Inquiry Seminar given at the Society’s 2017 convention, I have collected data that all points to the manifestation’s epicenter. I have already inspected the populous area and coordinated a plan of attack, in accordance with classic Aspen Chalice strategy. The Trapping & Decoys seminar from 2015 will be handy, as will our trademark *Book of Banishment*. Very soon Manifestation Twenty-Three will be banished from this earth, and the Tarrytown area will be safe from evil. I look forward to filing in the paperwork at my new desk.

Signing off,
Junior Agent Hollis Fabron

It is the coldest part of the night and dew hangs in the air, in suspense by the languid light of the moon. Hollis had already drawn the thin blinds and gone to bed, declaring the ghost on “scare patrol” hours ago. The road is quiet, and the streetlights damp.

The Headless Horseman walks into the parking lot after “haunting” all the forest within strolling distance. It had not found the specific spot where a potential benefactor lay waiting. Its horse stands in a motel parking spot, grazing nonexistent grass. The ghost takes the reins and vaults up, settling awkwardly without a saddle. It walks the horse into the copse of trees across the road from the motel then spurs it into a gallop.

Phaedra the Siren

The superficiality of infatuation

BY PRIYA NARAIN

Phaedra lulls at sea, draped in satin that melts when touched by water, perched on the rocky coast. Temptress by night and day, Phaedra represents desire, impulse, and risk. Her voice and beauty make any man surrender to her grasp. Sirens, half-bird and half-woman, possess an unmatched level of sultry that allures any man that crosses paths with them. She wades in the waters with urgency and impetuosity. Phaedra lulls on, hoping that she is in proximity to an incoming feast.

Men sail by, victim to infatuation, and in their demise they become Phaedra's feast. Ship destroyed, men consumed, Phaedra continues her conquest. Her feast is a product of infatuation and lust.

Infatuation as a psychological phenomenon entails a constant state of arousal and demonstrates a variant of 'love at first sight'. After infatuation comes a more serious passion—romantic and consummate love. Both infatuation and love are powerful states. Infatuation can result in impulsivity, as depicted in Greek Mythology where men fell victim to the allure of a Siren's lulls. This hasty lust contributes to this impulsivity and the urge to itch that attraction and lust. The gratification that sailors felt when falling into the arms of Phaedra is short-lived, a symptom of infatuation.

Ultimately, love, infatuation, passion, lust, and other states associated with attraction are an enigma. These states are complex and can be attributed to suffering and heartbreak, but can also be utterly beautiful. Romantic love is a testament to the strength and tenacity of one's bond with another, and can ultimately be made stronger or break.

There is no love between Phaedra and the men she feasts on. It's rather symbolic of human nature and their ability to fall prey to infatuation, lust, and short-lived passion.



Dancing in the Rain By Sidney Fong

The Cranberry Man

BY JULES DUBEL

He lay sprawled across his lecture hall's carpet and imagined the clock, white as a piano, black as a piano, bloated with all the hours she'd ever eaten, wiping a second hand across her maw, mired with minute shavings, coated permanently in a layer of missed red deadlines like lipstick. She's absolutely pregnant with meaning, his metaphor, for all the gestating ideas that spend hours dissolving and regrowing in all sorts of academic push-pin heads, they live inside her, taking up Time. He wonders what it takes to have your work leave a stretch mark, wavering and staticky, on the greedy abdomen of eternity. He'd certainly never seen one come from his glassy-eyed class.

He had assumed at first glance for her to be an unconditional glutton, why else assume less than an hourglass figure? But upon checking his watch, a stout yet slim, mustachioed fellow with the personal camaraderie of an uncle passed down second hand, he knew it to be false. She was merely an unfortunate sponge, saturated in days only somewhat willingly forked over. She ate their time like the institution ate their money, and the discovery of an uncaring world ate away at their optimism, ate away at their souls, all while the college students ate nothing at all. It was a job, no more, no less, and in that, he found similarity.

To fall in love you need three things:

1. that similarity, a sense of sameness, any glue that could piece together two or more radically different ideas, the molecular equivalent to bonding chemically in a dark abyss, endless and tumbling, being sewn together to make sweat-pants.

2. At least one of you needs a physical form. I don't make the rules, that's just how they work, and

3. Most of all, Love takes Time.

And she did!

Oh my god, she did!

He bolts upright from the classroom floor to find there is hardwood now instead of emerald carpet. His legs are shorter than they'd used to be, clad in long khaki shorts that show shriveled monkey limbs from the knees down. No. No, no, no! His hands are shriveled like the prunes he'd so often associated with old age, thick white hairs curling off the backs of them, follicular steam. Where had she gone? The clock on the wall has been replaced with a trim, digital bitch, glaring at him through cyberpunk sunglasses. He runs to a bathroom mirror only to find thick Einstein glasses and just the memory of hair. His voice catches like gravel seeds in a throat that no longer feels like his own. Where had the Time gone? Frantic, he checks his watch, the jovial man who hasn't aged a day but now sits immobile, fishing seconds from folds of hourly fat, mustache still trimmed and neat. Now he rushes out of the bathroom, pained at how frail of a body he possesses, how shaky his fingers feel, and how awfully, awfully skinny he'd become.

Was that what she did to him? Was that what Time did to everyone? He clutches his chest in romantic longing and arterial pain, sunken to now arthritic knees. Was that all she did? Sap everyone's life away until the idea of baby chub is laughable for them as her inflation remains unfettered? Until a human life is reduced to but a wisp of a wisp, emaciated and clinging only to this world by a merciful gravity? Time takes your body, she takes your ideas, she consumes everything in you and to what end? To become the behemoth blimp he saw before him now? Oh, lord approaching! Her more than ample bosom, an infinite expanse of plump hours, her pale torso covering endless continents, infinite time zones, why it's enough for anyone to get lost in, he could see it now. His knees give out, same as his heart, and eternity eats at his vision until all he can see is white as a piano, then black as a piano.

"Locked Down"

Film Review

BY WILL STEVENS

Locked Down is a movie that wants to be a lot of things. Written and filmed entirely during the pandemic and released on HBO Max earlier this year, it wants to be a cute romcom, an emotional and relatable look into life during the pandemic, and a stylish heist film. Unfortunately, it doesn't hit the mark on any of them.

The first thing you notice about the movie is its desperation to be an honest portrayal of life in quarantine. With constant references to Zoom, government health guidelines, and life in lockdown (but suspiciously not a single reference to what might be causing it), this film needs you to know its characters are just like you. However, a lot of these attempts at relatability come across as hollow and even stressful at times. There's no reason a character on a Zoom call needs to have their audio echo through the other person's speakers, except to get the audience to say, "Hey, sometimes my audio echoes on Zoom through the other person's speakers!" I don't need to hear Ben Stiller talk about how great his AirPods are, and I don't need their Phenomenal Noise-Cancelling Feature used to set up a joke about kids interrupting a work Zoom call. (On a related note, I firmly believe movies as a whole should be banned from using the default iPhone alarm sound).

The film is set very early in the pandemic, with characters seeming largely unaware of basic mask etiquette. They barely wear masks for a good chunk of the film only to then take them off randomly when entering public locations such as a bus or store. I know it seems like a small thing to focus on, but, given the amount of attention the movie gives to pandemic culture, it's

worth pointing out how short it falls.

The real meat of the film, however, is the romantic comedy. Chiwetel Ejiofor and Anne Hathaway star as Paxton and Linda, a couple on the verge of collapse forced to stay together in lockdown. She's a hardworking, no-nonsense business woman, and he's a motorcycle-riding, poetry-reading, bad-boy-turned-sensitive-artist delivery driver. They both feel out of control of their lives, and want to do something that feels real again. Ejiofor and Hathaway do a fine job, but there's not that much under the surface of either character, or anyone in the movie for that matter. At its core, there is a worthwhile idea here of two people that have grown apart, locked in a single location and forced to confront their future. This idea has been explored at great length by countless playwrights, who famously just *love* to spend three hours with two people shouting at each other in a single location. The movie does feel very theatrical in this way, with long confessional monologues and a great deal of time spent with characters just staring at each other, or out a window. It's also worth noting that outside of the basic setup and the hashtag-so-true humor, the pandemic really has no effect on the story or characters, and this story might actually be improved by taking it out. There are plenty of other reasons to shove characters in a single location for the length of a movie, something that screenwriter Steven Knight has actually explored in a previous (and far better) film, *Locke*.

At this point, you may have forgotten that this movie is also supposed to be a heist, just as I did watching the movie. While you get hints

that Paxton's boss (Ben Kingsley, whose performance is just plain weird) might be into some shady business early on, it isn't until just past the halfway point that Linda brings up the three million dollar diamond stored at Harrods, the department store where she used to work. Linda is tasked with supervising the valuable stone due to her vague, high-level job at a nondescript fashion company. Conveniently enough, Harrod's is also where Paxton's next delivery job happens to be taking him. Linda claims that stealing the diamond would be her way of getting back at the buyer of the diamond, who was an asshole to her at a business convention a year prior, but the thematic undercurrent of the film makes it feel much more like this is one last attempt for the two of them to feel like they're in control of their lives. It's also not as if they need the money—Paxton may just be a delivery driver for a sketchy company, but Linda does have her gig at Large Fashion Company Inc. and indeed gets a promotion about a third of the way into the film.

The heist itself is about twenty minutes long at the end of the film, and there's not much to say about it. I am a noted fan of capers, cons, heists, and the like, and the film is directed by Doug Liman, who created the Bourne franchise and directed classic romcom/spy action movie *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* so maybe I went in with hopes too high. The heist feels far too truncated and anticlimactic to be what the entire film was supposedly building towards. There's only one or two hiccups in their plan, and both of them are solved almost immediately and leave no space for improvisation, which is typically the most fun and engaging part of these types of movies.

I'd also forgive the boring heist if it worked to resolve or progress the relationship conflict, but the resolution kind of makes it seem like they could've just gotten into watching *Tiger King*

or doing jigsaw puzzles and their relationship would've worked out in the same way. Those last twenty minutes do get the only truly funny moment of the film, with Mark Gatiss as a former employee of Fashion Company Incorporated who, like Paxton and Linda, just wants to feel he's in control of something. While a great moment in the narrative, it did make a poignant (if unintentional) statement about how useless and meaningless this film is.

During this pandemic in which over two million people died, *Locked Down* seems to think that the biggest problem facing the world is upper middle class couples with no children who are bored in their two-story London homes. It says a lot that this movie chooses to follow an executive who is tragically forced to fire people during a pandemic, and not someone who is fired in a pandemic and has to then use their skills and knowledge from that job to pull off a heist. Maybe that might give the movie a sense of stakes, urgency, or much of any reason to care at all.

Which brings us to the point: you really don't need to watch this movie. Everything it's got has been done better somewhere else, and this unique combination doesn't do enough with anything it's given to justify itself. If you want to watch an intense single-setting relationship drama, go see *Locke*, or *Malcolm and Marie*, or any Tony-winning play from the last eighty years. If you want Covid-era content that doesn't make you incredibly stressed out, check out *How To with John Wilson* or even *Borat: Subsequent Movie Film*. If you want a heist with a great heart, I can't recommend *The Brothers Bloom* enough, or honestly even *Ocean's Eleven*. Just... you don't need to watch this movie. It's not even fun to make fun of. Trust me, you don't need this extra combination of stress and boredom in your life. I'm sure you have enough as it is.

Readership Starts Early By Ema Chomsky



*This issue is dedicated to Craig Lauder,
whose many years of printing service, knowledge, and aid was
greatly appreciated and will be greatly missed.*