

Red Curtain

A fiction by Brennan Militello

It was an expressionless day. The headline of Quarry Maine Theater lay in a newspaper rack beside the theater itself, a frame which appeared as if it seated still throughout the last theater's devastation. Dusty and dented, the sheets of newspaper, glossy inside, were off-putting next to the muted grey rack that held them. Tyler Brown had just set his bike against the pear-painted wood siding of the theater's walls. He glanced back at the virtually empty parking lot before lifting open the tainted glass lid from its frame and grabbing the first paper down.

"QUARRY. SUNDAY MORNING. NOVEMBER 13, 2005-TWENTY PAGES: QUARRY MAINE THEATER REOPENS AFTER 6 YEAR RECONSTRUCTION," it read. Below that, "Seven years after the burning of Quarry Maine's movie theater and nearly weeks before the anniversary of Ben Martin's untimely death, the cinema is back in business once again." He paused and contemplated curiously at the text on the title page. He'd heard about it many times before, the fire at Quarry Maine Theater. It was an exciting story, so much so that it challenged his idea to work in the first place. Tyler wished he had seen it. He was young, merely fourteen, and already had his first job operating the concessions at Quarry Maine Theater. Of course, not necessarily for the work, no. Many different motivations came to his head first. Tyler was not the active type; it is to be noted. A job was an opportunity to get away from school: his "real work."

- and the chores at home. Tenth grade was not treating him the way he wanted: more work, more studying, more stress, more more More—

He got stressed just thinking about it. A bit timid. A straightforward job like this was a chance for him to lay back for a bit. Even have a little fun, considering the disparity of employment. Tyler saw himself getting away with more than he could anywhere else. Besides, "What a story, right?" he stammered to someone walking in. They wore clothing identical to Tyler himself: a black shirt, jeans, and shoes.

Tyler's were skate shoes, however. They were similar in looks as well. Not too tall, not so brief, with fair-ish hair curling over their forehead. Tyler, however, didn't wear square glasses. And his hair didn't bow quite as much. Walking past him and into the theater, Tyler wasn't sure they heard what he said. Likely, he concluded, considering Tyler didn't have the most expressive voice. He was somewhat introverted, actually, ironic in the light of his ability to annoy anyone around him for more than a few minutes. Tyler didn't have the most audible voice in the room. He lacked principle as well. He wasn't hyperactive; however, he was attention-deficient. Perhaps this is what deemed him so undoubtedly unnerving to be around, something his colleagues would discover as Tyler's first couple of hours commenced after walking through the theater's windowed entrances.

"You're just that stubborn, aren't you," Olivia muttered as he perched his body against the sturdy wood counters of the concession stands. Tasked with training the boy, Olivia had worked some years before the original cinema's cessation, although she left many months before it.

"You'll barely hold this job if you're bugging out every second."

"Bugging out?"-Tyler stammered. His mannerisms were sarcastic, but his voice was somewhat genuine,

"Wish that had burned down with the fire--what you just said."

"Tyler, get up and fill the ice trays. Fill the ice trays and shut up. Why don't you?"

It's worth noting that there were about five other workers in the theater, all relatively silent, as most didn't know what to do or say. They hardly had any preparation time before the theater's reopening, as it opened almost promptly as it was rebuilt. There was a level of uncomfortableness already brewing within the hall, may it be the sorry number of townsfolk shimmying through the cinema's stanchions on its floor. One of the untrained employees crudely displayed the stanchions hours ago. The one Tyler met before walking in. He thought he recalled someone shouting the name "Pete" while he drank a graveyard by the pretzel warmer. Was his name "Pete"? Oh, what did it matter? He didn't care to ask. He came to sit. And sit he did.

Tyler noticed a rather lofty man carrying a giant old film projector as he sat. He wore a cheerless blue button-down shirt, long on his frail body, and raven workwear pants, practically bell bottoms, covered almost entirely what looked like dusty black timberlands on his feet. His hair, somewhat grey, was deliberately cut too short for his wrinkling head. Tyler sought his gaze on the man's face, quite hollow and pale. He gathered the man had been on a smoke break in the back, as he hadn't seen him one time before now. The man paced forward down the narrow hallway, long and blue, in a frantic shuffle. Glowing poster frames lit through the man's soft skin, illuminating him as he trudged past like a jack o lantern-no- more like the headless horseman whose head only glowed in contrast to his body. His projector was dented, with visible film strips hanging out the spools. The lens was dirty and smashed, seemingly dropped at some point in its long life. He wriggled out a bronze key from his back pocket and scurried up what appeared to be the projectionist staircase; only Olivia was yet to hand him a tour. Tyler glared solemnly as it closed with a slow creak. Not an instant later, the floor manager emerged out of thin air in front of him—

"What are you staring at, Tyler?" A quiet and menacing whisper left his mouth. Tyler jumped negligibly, making a quick recovery to compose himself. He coasted his left hand through his curled bangs, not for any practical reason but compulsively.

"Don't you have a theater to clean? Olivia is down in two by herself while you've been over here standing on counters doing god knows what?"

Tyler only glared at Gene before muttering,

"I'll grab a butler," reluctantly, although nothing was in question.

Tyler's first impression of his manager came just after concluding his interview a few weeks ago; Gene had walked past the sizeable empty lobby as Tyler signed his papers, only giving him a death stare as he went past. He reminded Tyler of Severus Snape in spirit, only with George Lucas's hair and beard. While Tyler wanted this job to be his escape, Sundays and Tuesdays were when Gene Ernest worked as floor manager. Tyler had to work Sundays and Tuesdays. He thought about how much of a chore that would be as he scrambled over to Theater Two,

"Just down your right hallway," Olivia trained him to say, although he never felt the need to say it himself. "There are signs right at the beginning of the hallways. Why should I have to

hold their hands?" he had asked Olivia, but at that point in their short training session, she had already had enough and told him to shut up, previous to the second time. Tyler grabbed his butler.

On his walk towards Theater Two, he settled to throw in a little tour for himself as he glanced back for a clear coast before wising past Theater Two's sizeable black door. There was a set of theaters down the right hallway, beginning at one and two, then jumping to seven, leading up to eight. The rest of the theaters remained down the left hallway. Theater one was the largest, Olivia told him. However, he hadn't seen it himself. Theater Eight was the smallest, of course, with less than a hundred and fifty seats inside. Tyler briefly peered into Theater Eight as he strode down the right hallway. The theater doors had a surprising weight, taking somewhat of a forceful pull to open. He felt it similar to tug-of-war, how the door seemed to pull itself back into its frame to keep Tyler out. Tyler peered into every theater down the right hallway, shuffling against the muted purple rug to hide his sound, to not disturb viewers within the theaters he joined. Not that they would hear him, although he felt a need to be sure. He examined the movie in Theater Seven. It looked like some horror movie. He couldn't make out a definite plot, only truly deciphering his supposition based on the ear-piercing scream of a woman on the projection. She was in a house, fishing around the timber floor for something; Tyler didn't know, only that she was hysterical and anxious.

Tyler headed back to Theater Two. There wasn't much down both hallways, only theaters and bathrooms and miscellaneous doors that Tyler didn't have a key to. He understood one of them was the stock room and one of them a bottle room filled with water and soda and tea. And there was the projectionist room, or what Tyler had assumed to be. The one that man had stumbled up, that strange man. He wondered what that man was up to, possibly fiddling with that film projector he was hauling, positioning the next set of movies, or maybe having another smoke break indoors. As Tyler two-handedly pried open Theater Two's door to meet Olivia, who was most likely done cleaning at this point, he was reminded of the woman frantically struggling and screaming on Theater Seven's movie screen. He thought of how that strange man seemed to blunder around in the same worried way, and he wondered what the man had seemed so uneasy for. Just then, Olivia encountered Tyler at the door, having swept the entire theater independently. She glared at him angrily but didn't say a word, walking back into the main hall. Tyler didn't get to see inside Theater Two as Gene called a whisper in his direction that seemed to reverberate through his ears.

"Popper! Popper!" A girl shouted from one end of the stands. No one seemed to be paying an ounce of attention or sense of smell as dust black popcorn came rushing out of the machine. Its scent was rotten as if someone had been fuming plastic over a campfire. Tyler was sitting on the counter again, and only he was fixated on the sun setting outside through the massive glass windows in the front entrance and the ridiculous lack of customers lining in. The girl on the other end came barreling down the stand, nearly misstepping on the butter-stained floors on her way. Gene, troubled by the girl's utterance heard in his office, came a creeping hunchback to witness the matter. Being the nearest to the popper, Tyler had the culpability on his hands for the mess on display.

"Did you do this, Sara?" Gene asked the girl at the popper, and she gave him a disappointedly dismayed gaze.

"No, of course not. It was Tyler who left the popcorn burning for minutes. He was sitting right next to it and didn't even do a thing!"

"That's not true," Tyler interjected solemnly.

"Are you really gonna try and B.S. this one?" Sara threatened. And she had a point. Tyler was right there, directly next to the popper, the entire time. From the moment Gene strode his grey hair into the floor manager's office to when he flung the door back open. There was no getting out of this one.

"Tyler, I think I've had enough of this," Gene stated, his bushy eyebrows so low on his forehead that Tyler barely could see the death stare he was assumably showing him, "You're cleaning the popper tonight." If there's one thing Tyler did learn from Olivia, it was that cleaning the popper was just about the worst task that a manager could allocate to you. The popper was an ancient machine, similar to the one in the old theater, in that it barely ever worked properly. Rusted on multiple edges of its steel shell, it was rather elevated up to Tyler's hips and near impossible to clean. One must thrust themselves into the machine to scrub the farthest corners inside, crushing their ribs in the process. In addition, one must spray and clear the musty-yellow tinted windows and deep-clean the kettle where the popcorn is popped, a long and arduous process to the already lengthy approach. In short, it was a task best avoided.

"What? Are you kidding?" Tyler stammered, staring up at Gene, "I can't clean that. I'm way too short. I'd hardly do an okay job. You're taller anyway and much more experienced than me." He pointed at Gene, "Isn't there anything else I could do instead?"

"Fine then. You can do an add-list. But it would help if you got everything on there. Including butter, cups, and lids." An add-list is the gathering of candies and items that need to be restocked. It was another long task, but at least one that would allow Tyler away from Gene... Anything to separate him from Gene.

"Got it," Tyler said.

Counting up the candies, Tyler stared at the projectionist room again. He never noticed that man leave the room and wondered if he was still up there. He had the interest to go up there himself. It was an itching sensation. Tyler felt a compulsion to do what he desired. Suddenly, he didn't want to do the add-list anymore, and for a moment before, he had. Tyler noticed a set of keys inside Gene's left-back khaki pocket. Gene, as a floor manager, got to wear what he desired. And he decided on a plaid shirt and khakis, Tyler thought to himself. It was somewhat lame to him. Tyler would've worn something more relaxed. As he checked off the number of candies he needed on each of the three stands and the number of cups and the number of lids and butter and what have you, Tyler plotted to steal Gene's key. Tyler stood up and held his notepaper by his side. Keeping his composure and attempting not to slip on the various butter spills on the slick floor, Tyler crept down the stand aisle, eying Gene's pocket as he dug his face into the popper's tub. Tyler went for the pocket.

"You'll need the keys if you're going into the stockroom," Gene spoke, startling Tyler. He jerked his hand back by his side.

"Oh, right. Yeah, of course," Tyler stammered." Gene stood up straight out of the popper and confronted him.

"Here ya go-wait," Gene reached behind his back, snagging the keys from his pocket and handing them to him. Oh. Tyler thought. He glanced to his left before walking out into the theater hallways. Sara was on the stand with Pete, helping a couple of customers. Olivia was

refilling the butter dispensers. She was using the last of the butter they had on the stand. Tyler made his way to the right, down the hall. At this point, it was predominantly dark outside.

What was once blinding rays of sunlight bleeding through the glass and reflecting on the dust was now a wall-less abyss. And a stare, which appeared to be a full moon. It seemed to be snowing a little bit as well. Glimmering flickers of white particles simmered to the floor outside the large blue and orange hall. Tyler fixed his gaze once again on the projectionist door. Then he glanced back. Gene had his head in the popper again, its red neon lights brightening the dimmed room. Then he glanced back at the door. It'll only be a minute. He thought as he stuck the key in the hole and turned the knob.

Tyler shut the door behind him. It was dissimilar from the theater doors. This one had no weight to it at all. It simply opened and closed with the give of a large feather. It also had a bright red "employees only" sign on the front. Immediately as Tyler faced opposite the door, he was met with a narrow staircase lined with rubber. There were about ten steps until there was another door without a lock. Tyler opened it. Inside the second door was a large room. Dark and damp inside, with only the lights of the auditoria gleaming divinity rays into the long hallway, he could only make out the projectors, some bookshelves, and film strips on the floor. Tyler entered the room. He gawked about, somewhat stunned, shuffling through the carpeted floor until, to his left in the far corner, he spotted the film projector the man had carried up to the room hours prior.

Tyler studied the projector. It was curious. Very filthy and very burnt, he thought, if it was a projector from the previous theater, or potentially even before that. What was more curious was the film itself. It seemed to be completely transparent, as if there was nothing on the strip of film at all. How could it have been made that way? He thought. He picked up the piece of film, and out of curiosity, Tyler spiraled it up in the old projector and set it up on Theater Eight's screen, which had already had its last movie go through. It took more than a few minutes to get the whole thing set up concerning his thoughts of Gene and Gene's thoughts of Tyler. Tyler still couldn't see anything on the film strip as he did this, and his curiosity was only built from there. What built up inside him, as the lamp turned on inside and light flashed onto the screen outside the glass wall, was a gut feeling. It wasn't a good one, he could tell. It was a feeling that Tyler, in this circumstance, might be going too far. But he was already here. So he didn't back out. Then he saw a room on the screen coming from the projector.

It was the room Tyler was standing in. It looked almost identical, apart from the man in the room replacing Tyler himself. It was the man Tyler had seen walk into the projectionist room. Only he didn't look as frail and sickly here. He looked more restorative and younger. His hair was brown, his clothes pristine, and his skin a peach color, although tinted from the film grain. The man stared at the camera, then at someone behind the camera. The film flashed, and static ribbons of white darted and flared on Theater Eight's screen.

The film came about. It was the room again, and the man was there again. Only the room was engulfed in bursting red and orange flames. Once dark and dimly lit, the entire room was now overwhelmingly radiant. Tyler could hardly see. But what else he did witness was the man ablaze. He was entirely on fire. And what Tyler could hear were screams just as radiant and deafening as the flames themselves. The man was roaring, yelping, and reaching his hand out as he lay crushed under large pieces of cinderblock and wood. Tyler couldn't glance away from the screen. He wanted to yell or even cry with the powerless man in the footage. But he

couldn't, despite feeling like he was standing there with him. Tyler just watched with his eyes as wide as a Margeret Keane painting. Then he heard a man on the other side of the camera yell to the man in the fire multiple times.

"BEN! BEN! BEN!" That man was Ben Martin. Tyler knew. The man that died- The man who died in the fire six years ago. Tyler was watching a real person die. Just then, Tyler couldn't look anymore. He threw himself away from the film and began to cry, still unwillingly attending to Ben Martin's screams.

Mewling desperately to the projector or whoever was watching him, he remained stuck under the pile of rubble. The screams were louder and more piercing until Theater Eight's screen became so blindingly white and red that the film projector practically gave up, and the entire room plunged into pitch black.

Tyler had curled into a ball on the floor, expressionless, with tears plastered to his cheeks. He had no idea how he witnessed what he had just seen. Before Tyler could even collect his thoughts, his thoughts drifted. The man he had been watching from the stands was Ben Martin. But Ben Martin was dead.