

YOU OUGHTA BE IN PICTURES

Grandpa eyed all the dials from the passenger seat of the Jaguar E-Type. Mac watched him out of the corner of his eye as they drove through the outskirts of Aberdeen. For an April morning in the north east of Scotland, the weather surprised him. Sunshine and a gentle breeze caressed the grass on the side of the road.

“So, what do you think? Better than the MGB, eh?”

Grandpa ran his fingers across the top of the dashboard. “Aye, nae bad.” He pointed out toward the long hood of the Jaguar. “Shame it looks like a giant cock at the front, and we’re the nuts inside, hangin’ on for dear life.”

“Screw you. Let me tell you something, Enzo Ferrari himself said it was the most beautiful car ever designed.”

“He’s Italian.”

“So? Sophia Loren’s Italian, and you wouldn’t throw her out of bed for eating crackers, would you?”

“I wouldna’ throw her oot if she took a shite on the duvet and wiped her arse with the sheets.”

Mac couldn’t contain his laughter, and they both smiled as the car roared along, getting admiring looks from the locals.

Sitting at a traffic light, Mac turned to the old man. “Which way?”

“Left. We’re almost there.”

“You really think this movie theatre business is a good idea? We passed two other cinemas already. Looks like the market is saturated.”

“They’ve got no beer. We will.”

Halfway down a fairly rundown street, they parked in front of the Regal. The front tire crunched its way over three empty beer cans that sat in the gutter along with abandoned fish and chip wrappers. Mac got out and looked up at the marquee. The G in Regal had slipped, making it appear more like Renal.

“Well, that’ll have to be fixed,” he said to himself as Grandpa grunted his way out of the E-Type.

“What did ye say?” The old man had managed to extricate himself from the car. “Jesus Christ, a fuckin’ limbo dancer’d have a hard time gettin’ out o’ this bastard.”

“The sign is broken.”

“Big fuckin’ deal. Let’s go inside. They’re expectin’ us.”

Mac watched a seagull swoop down and proceed to tear apart a fish and chip wrapper in search of any leftovers. “They?”

“The owner and the staff. Come on.”

Walking through the front doors, Mac’s first impression of the Regal cinema’s lobby was that it had probably looked pretty glamorous around the breakout of World War Two. Now, it brought to mind Miss Havisham’s front room in *Great Expectations*.

Six people stood at attention in a straight line. A red-faced man with a pencil mustache, and dressed in a tuxedo stepped forward with his hand outstretched. “Arthur Meldrum! It’s been a long time. Ye’re lookin’ well.”

“Aye, aye, Jimmy. Lookin’ pretty sharp yersel’.”

Jimmy’s face got redder. “Always puttin’ our best foot forward here at the Regal, Arthur.”

Grandpa turned to Mac. “This is Mr. Wagner.”

Jimmy grabbed Mac’s hand and vigorously shook it. “Ah, the man from Hollywood. We’re fair excited tae meet ye.”

Mac managed to keep a straight face. “Nice to meet you too. Quite the place you’ve got here.”

“Ye should’ve seen it in its heyday. Stunning. The Queen Mother opened it. Back in— well, it was a while ago.” Jimmy gave a nervous laugh and turned to the others. “Let me introduce you to our staff.”

He cupped Mac’s elbow in his hand and led him across the worn carpeting. A thin woman with a beehive hairdo that Ronnie Spector would have been envious of, and wearing a generous amount of liner around her piercing eyes, was first. She chewed bubblegum. Her lipstick matched. “This is Rita, our head usher. She’s good at keeping order, especially when the kids are in on a Saturday afternoon.”

Mac had no doubt of it. Rita looked like she’d be good at subduing the inmates in a maximum security prison. “Nice to meet you, Rita.” He shook her hand, noticing her talon-like, pink nails. He was certain she had tattoos underneath her uniform.

“Aye.” She smacked her gum.

Jimmy’s hand guided him to the next member of staff. Still wondering about Rita’s methods for keeping order, Mac was shocked to find himself standing in front of a middle-aged man with unruly, gray hair. He wore glasses with one lens blacked out. Wearing an ill-fitting

cardigan over a tartan shirt and green corduroy pants, the man stuck out his hand. "I am Gregor. Projectionist."

"You're not from around these parts," Mac said.

"Soviet Union," the Russian replied. "Is long story."

"And you're the projectionist?" Mac stared at the blacked out lens, and then over at Grandpa, who returned a non-committal smile.

Gregor stood to attention. "*Da*. Best in Scotland."

"Nice to meet you, Gregor."

Moving Mac down the line, Jimmy nodded at a mousy woman with a bubble perm and glasses. She wore a spotless pinafore. "This is Louise. She works the box office, and helps out with the concessions."

Louise gave a little curtsy and blushed. "Ah've nivver met somebody fae Hollywood afore," she blurted out. "Hiv ye ivver met Al Pacino?"

"We move in different circles," Mac replied.

"Ahh. What a business, though, eh?"

"It certainly is. Nice to meet you, Louise."

Next in line, and cursed with a bad case of acne, stood a long-haired, stocky youth. Jimmy introduced him as Kevin. "Kevin cleans the auditorium in between screenings. Does a fine job."

Mac shook the young man's sweaty hand. "Hi. Keep up the good work."

Last in line was a young woman who bore a remarkable resemblance to a young Elizabeth Taylor. Jimmy blushed as he introduced the young lady with the violet eyes. “I’d like you to meet Donna. She mainly sells concessions, and assists Rita once the feature has started.”

Mac shook her hand. “Has anybody ever told you—“

“Aye. They used tae call me National Velvet at school.”

“Well, it’s good to meet you. Good to meet you all,” he said to the assembled crew.

“We’re just here to have a look around and see what’s what.”

While Jimmy dismissed the staff, Grandpa walked over to Mac.

“What the fuck?” Mac hissed at him. “Hollywood? They think I’m Steven Fucking Spielberg.”

“Ach, nae harm in pumpin’ it up a bit.”

“The only thing you’ll be pumping up is the price.”

Jimmy walked over before Grandpa could answer. “Right, gents, let’s take a wee tour of the facilities, but first, maybe you’d like a wee refresher in my office, eh?”

Grandpa’s eyes lit up. “Lead on, Macduff.”

A threadbare, red velvet curtain next to the concession stand concealed a narrow, rickety staircase. At the top, Jimmy, wheezing from the exertion, waved an arm at a doorway. Grandpa and Mac walked into Jimmy’s private sanctum.

A row of metal filing cabinets completely dominated one wall, many of their drawers half open, with papers and folders haphazardly sticking out, as if small explosive devices within had detonated many years ago. A large wooden desk, piled with more papers, took up most of the

remainder of the office. Jimmy motioned to a small couch, then eased his body into a high-backed, leather chair.

Grandpa jostled with Mac for room on the sofa. “Cosy,” Grandpa said, patting the cushioned arm. “This must be the casting couch, eh?”

Jimmy gave them both a wink. “Aye, if that thing could talk...”

It’d say, Clean me, Mac thought to himself.

“That’s stories for another day, though,” Jimmy said as he pulled open a drawer in his desk. “Let’s have a wee belt, and then I’ll show you boys what you’re in the market for.”

After two nips of whisky each from two small glasses and a cracked teacup for Mac that had the evaporated remains of something very dark brown at the bottom, they carefully made their way back down the narrow staircase. A familiar smell hit Mac’s nostrils as they descended. As soon as they pushed through the velvet curtain, Louise stood in the lobby with two bags of freshly popped corn in her arms. She held one out for Mac. “Freshly made, Mr. Wagner.”

Mac took the bag and stuck a handful in his mouth, nodding his head in approval as he chewed. Louise beamed with delight, then offered the second bag to Grandpa, who waved it off.

“No thanks, pet. Gets caught under ma dentures. It’s murder on the gums.”

Louise’s face fell.

Mac swallowed, and grabbed another handful. “This popcorn is really good. Best I’ve had since I left the States.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Wagner. It’s my own, secret recipe.” Louise winked at him.

Jimmy cleared his throat. “That’ll do, Louise. Off ye go.” He put his hand on Grandpa’s shoulder. “Mair stairs, Arthur. Let’s go up tae the projectionist’s booth and see where the magic happens, eh?”

They went through a door marked private, and ascended another set of narrow stairs that wound around on itself, emerging onto a wide low-ceilinged room dominated by two massive film projectors, their fans humming away. Empty film reels hung on the walls, held there by large nails. Old film posters filled in the gaps.

Gregor, with his back to them, was hunched over the big machine, threading film through a labyrinth of sprockets and shiny little cylinders. They watched in silence as the Russian finally pushed the film leader into the empty, take-up reel at the rear of the projector. He blew on the lens, then stood, wiping his hands on a rag.

“Not interrupting, are we, Gregor?” Jimmy said in a loud voice.

The Russian’s shoulders jerked up, and he whirled around. “*Nyet*, I mean, no. I am just —” He pointed to the bag of popcorn Mac was wolfing down. “No fucking popcorn. This is clean room. Pieces get sucked into fans.”

Mac immediately rolled up the bag and looked around for a trashcan. Gregor motioned to the back corner. “Next to desk.”

“Sorry,” Mac said. “I never knew.” He walked over and dropped the offending item on top of several empty vodka bottles.

Grandpa nodded at the projector. “What’s that film ye’re gettin’ ready tae show, Gregor?”

“Not film,” the Russian answered, “Is coming attractions. How you say in America, trailers?”

“Oh aye?” Grandpa peered at the reel. “What’ve we got tae look forward tae, then?”

“Film coming at Christmas time. Called,” he picked up a sheet of paper and scanned it with his index finger. “*Da*, is here. *Star Wars*. Science fiction crap, like Buck Rogers. Will be disaster.”

Back in the E-Type, Mac pushed the start button. After the engine fired, he looked across at Grandpa. “Ever heard the expression motley crew?”

“Course.”

“Well,” he jabbed a thumb at the Regal cinema, “if they ever make a movie with that title, that mob would be on the poster.”

With a grunt, Grandpa lifted his ass off the seat, rearranged his genitalia, and sat back down. “Ach, they’re fine, jist a bit strange.”

“You can say that again. A half-blind projectionist? And he’s a commie. My dad must be spinnin’ in his grave.”

“Nothin’ says we have tae keep ‘em on when we buy it. We could sack the lot of them if we wanted to.”

Pushing in the clutch, Mac selected first gear. He looked in the wing mirror, waiting for a break in the traffic. “Not National Velvet, though. I’ll bet half their business comes from schoolboys buyin’ candy just so they can get a whiff of her and look down her pinafore.”

As they pulled away from the curb, Mac turned to see the whole staff of the cinema had been standing on the sidewalk all along, patiently waiting for them to leave. He gave a little wave as the Jaguar roared off.

