

The Last Drive-In: Wendigo Twin

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1996

“What are they playing tonight?”

"The Last Picture Show."

“I'm so sick of that joke.”

Carla threw the magazine she was flipping through into the back of the Honda, tilted the seat back and stretched her legs across the dashboard. Charlie turned his attention out the window, embarrassed at her irritation.

“I think Tom said that they were going to put on *Scream* again.”

Carla rolled her eyes. Charlie looked away again across the lot towards the concession stand. Dusk was setting in, filling the drive-in with a soft orange haze. He could see the sun hanging just above the horizon. They would start the film in less than 30 minutes.

Charlie glanced back at Carla. She was staring mindlessly at the screen, the monolith catching the last glints of sunlight. She had laughed the first time he had made the Last Picture Show joke and at the running gag it had become with everyone. Charlie

tried to coax a conversation from her.

“I can ask them if they want to put on something different.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“OK.” Charlie got out of the Honda and shut the door, then leaned back in through the open window.

“What do you want to watch?”

“I don't care.”

He tried to lean far enough in to kiss her, but she moved away leaving him dangling awkwardly half out of the car. Shrugging, Charlie pushed himself out of the window and walked across the lot to the projection booth. He tried stepping only on the tufts of grass that had poked through the loose gravel, imagining that the rocks as a lake of lava that he had to traverse. By the second row, the grass had given way to strips of asphalt and gravel, and he had to give up on his game.

The projection booth was a small room on the second floor of the concession stand at the back of the parking lot. There were 36 cars in the lot. Most were empty. Charlie waved to a few people waiting in their front seats for the movie to begin. He walked by John and Amy pulling the battery out of a late model Subaru. Amy was propping up the hood, and John was loosening the ground connection. They had their backs to him and Charlie said nothing to them as he went past.

The concession stand was dark and bare. Most of the bulbs had gone out and one of the remaining ones flickered angrily. The staircase to the projection booth was at the back of the kitchen. He pushed through the door and climbed the narrow stairs. At the top, the door to the booth had been propped open with a stack of old telephone books. Inside, Tom and Eugene stood on the other side of the battered Christie projector. Tom was fiddling with the machine's innards and Eugene was spinning one of its platters.

“Would you knock that shit off,” Tom said irritably. “You’re going to fuck up the take-up tension.”

Eugene, unfazed by Tom's tone, stopped pushing the platter along and watched as it slowed and came to a stop.

“Hey guys. Carla wants to watch something else tonight. I think she's bored of *Scream*.”

Tom kept his attention on the projector, threading the film through the spools and sprockets.

“Jesus Christ, we’re all fucking bored of all these movies. The same fucking movies for 6 months! It's not like we're getting any new ones.”

Eugene looked at Charlie sympathetically. “What does she want to see?”

“I don't know. She didn't say. Just something else.”

Tom had finished with the projector and looked up.

“Well, I ain't going to rethread this. And I have already broken down the other movies and put them in the canisters. So, sorry, but she is fucking stuck with *Scream*.” He slammed the small door on the projectors side as if to prove the matter had been decided.

Charlie watched as Tom checked the threading of the platter's brains and made minor adjustments with an Allen key.

“Hey, have either of seen Alice today?” he asked nervously.

Eugene stared at the floor and said nothing. Tom's face tightened into a grimace.

“No,” Tom said finally.

“Is she gone?” Charlie was barely able to ask, and his voice broke slightly as he spoke.

Neither Tom nor Eugene said anything, and Charlie thought it was best to leave them to starting the film. Back outside, twilight hung like a haze. The high walls surrounding the drive-in deepened the shadows across the lot. The neon caps of the speaker posts shown coldly in darkening evening. Punctuating the gloom with their unnatural glow. They reminded Charlie of death caps, mushrooming between the rows of cars. He sometimes had the impression that more had sprouted overnight, and he had taken to counting them every morning when he woke up. There were 52.

Suddenly, the speakers sputtered with static and the New Line Cinema logo blazed on the screen. Tom no longer showed any previews. He said it was morbid to show previews of movies that would never come and spliced all the trailers out of the film. Charlie missed the previews. On the screen, Drew Barrymore had already answered the phone call from her eventual killer. He hurried back to the Honda.

Carla had moved to the back seat of the car and had turned on the overhead lamp. Charlie opened the car door reached up quickly and flicked the lamp off. Darkness rushed into the car from outside, as if sucked into the vacuum left by the light. Charlie thought that he heard the sudden collapse of night around the Honda.

“What are you doing? We need to conserve the battery. I saw John and Amy pulling one out of the green Subaru in row 4. That doesn't leave very many left.”

Carla didn't say anything, but Charlie could feel her apathy. It irritated him.

“Here, I brought you back a cola. It's warm. Tom's shut down all but one of the fridges now.” He handed her the drink. She took it without thanking him and opened it. The escaping CO₂ hissed aggressively like some snake that had found its way inside the car.

“I asked Tom and Eugene if they had seen Alice but,” Charlie let his voice trail off.

After several moments he continued.

“I think she's gone.”

In the dark, he could not gauge Carla's reaction. He thought he saw or heard her move slightly. But then nothing. Charlie turned his attention back to the movie, where Neve Campbell was talking to the killer on her cell phone.

Charlie slowly became engrossed in the movie. He could hear some around the lot cheering the killer and others his victims. Periodically, he would turn to glance at Carla, but she seemed to have fallen asleep. As the movie droned on, Charlie too settled into the bucket seat and slept fitfully.

Morning light streamed through the windshield, and streaks of it trickled down the dash into small pools at Charlie's feet. He woke with the strong taste of sleep in his mouth. He reached over for the water bottle in the passenger seat, took a swig, and spat out the open window. He turned expecting to see Carla curled in the back seat, but she had already woken up and left. Charlie was disappointed. He liked watching her sleep.

He stretched his arms out to his sides and arched his back painfully. Getting out of the car, he stretched again and looked around. Some people were already awake and moving about the lot. They looked furtive as they scurried from car to car, like they were taking cover from some crazed gunman.

Charlie made his way to the concession stand. He too kept close to the cars, feeling exposed in the daylight. Tom had turned on the short wave and Buddy Holly's *That'll Be the Day* filtered softly through the speakers.

The inside of the concession stand was lit by the morning sun. Tall, cardboard displays of James Dean and Elvis cast long shadows into the bank of the stand. The display shelves were mostly bare, except for empty candy wrappers. There was a

thick coating of dust on everything.

Laura was waiting outside of the women's toilet. Charlie said good morning, and she smiled. He wanted to ask if she had seen Carla, but no one asked where anyone was anymore. You were scared of the answer. Charlie went into the toilet, relieved himself, and quickly washed his hands and face. He listened carefully to the sounds in the hallway, hoping to hear Carla's voice. When he came out the men's room, Laura was still waiting for her turn. He leaned against the wall next to her feeling awkward.

“Who are you waiting on?” he finally asked.

“Tina.”

Have you seen Carla? But he didn't ask out loud. He walked back through the concession area out into the lot and scanned the field searching for Carla. The day was getting warmer and he had started to sweat nervously.

“She's in one of the other cars,” he told himself aloud.

But he knew. He knew that she wasn't. He knew it as definitely as he knew his own name. He turned quickly and ran back through the building and up the stairs to the projection booth. Tom and Eugene were opening the heavy metal canisters and carefully taking out the spools of film to build up the evening's film. Tom looked up as Charlie burst into the room panting from his exertion.

“We're watching *The Last Picture Show* tonight,” he said with a laugh. Eugene grinned widely at the joke. Charlie paid them no attention. He went to the small window and looked out. The glare of the sun was dazzling. Charlie blinked in the brilliance and shaded his eyes with his hand. To the right of the monolithic screen were the abandoned ticket gates, blocked by two pick-up trucks. A short unpaved drive led to the road which moved off to the north, but the small aperture didn't give Charlie enough of an angle to see to far down its distance.

“I need to get on the roof.”

Tom gaped at him with alarm.

“Why?”

“Carla's gone.” Tom's look changed from suspicious to stark and severe. Eugene looked frightened.

“Charlie,” Tom started, “Why don't you go back downstairs? Talk to some other people.”

“What? No! Fuck that! Carla's gone. She is gone!” He punctuated each word. “I'm going to go find her.”

Tom glanced quickly at Eugene.

“Charlie, you know you can't do that. I know you want to, but.” Eugene hesitated. “But it's not safe, Charlie. You know that.”

“We don't know shit! We don't know it's not safe out there.”

“That's why no one has come out here in over half a year. Because it's safe! That's why we lose people every week and they don't come back. Because it's safe!” Tom's voice was angry and sarcastic. “We don't know what the hell's out there. But I know it's not safe. Here, we are safe. Carla's gone. And the best thing you can do for yourself is go back downstairs. Try to stay calm. Wait for the movie.”

Charlie looked to Eugene, who nodded slowly. Charlie turned and walked back down the stairs. Once outside, he stared blankly at the high fence surrounding the theater. He would race over to it and climb to the top, swing his leg over, and then he was out. He would find Carla. Bring her back safely. Hold her tightly in the back of the Honda. They would make love. She would call out his name. And then they would forget about everything. And just be safe and happy.

The rest of the day passed in a dizzy blur. Charlie spent most of it inside the sweltering Honda. He rolled up the windows. He wanted to die. Suffocate. He imagined climbing the wall again and again. He imagined finding Carla. Saving her from wolves. From men in masks.

The sun had begun to set behind him. He watched in the rearview mirror as the wall secanted the sun. Its final dying arc eventually eclipsed, spilling darkness into the lot.

The neon capped speakers sparked with static. The New Line Cinema logo flashed on the screen. In his car, Charlie cried himself to sleep.

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Johnny Smith eats three square meals a day and loves windy walks on the beach.