EXTRACT

Communion in the dark

a play

By

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Characters

CHRIS

CHRIS: *“He slimed me.”*

I’m six years old and I’m sitting on the floor of the Church Hall at my primary school, St Judes, Scoresby, East Melbourne. Very suburb. Sort of place Kath and Kim would downgrade to.

Next to me Brad, my older brother, and on the other side Dad. Maybe another 50, 100 people.

I’m wearing my pyjamas. Long pants, long sleeves, heavy cotton variety. And as kid I was very blonde. In a word - cute.

It’s summer, night time, weekend – 1986 - and before my previously virgin eyes images are dancing on the grubby brick wall. A man and a woman – talking, moving - alive.

"Your girlfriend lives in the corner penthouse of spook central."

The man I will come to know as Bill Murray, the woman – Sigourney Weaver – and the movie - Ghostbusters.

It is the first film I’ve ever seen. Not such a great place to start I know ... but my eyes are glued. I’m transfixed, entranced, transported. It’s just me and the people on the wall.

The build up had been very exciting. A notice on the school bulletin board : “Free screening of Ghostbusters – bring your kids and pyjamas. Saturday night.”

Getting there had also been exciting. We lived quite close to the school so it was a short walk for my brother and my dad. A quite long one for me.

"Generally you don't see that kind of behavior in a major appliance."

For a six year old kid School after dark is not the same as it is during the daytime. It’s a place of mystery, mucking around, discovery.

When we arrived there was already lots of people in the room. Sitting, lying on the floor, illuminated by sickly green fluoros. What were they doing ? Waiting … but for what ?

We took our spots on the floor, faint smell of BO. And then the lights went off. A flick of a switch on the ancient projector from Father McKay and soon Dr Peter Venkman and Dana Barrett were living large fifty feet high on the back wall of St Judes Church Hall.

"You are so odd."

The strangest thing was that although this was the first time I had ever seen a movie – and it was in an old Church Hall in Far Eastern Melbourne - it seemed like I had been here before.

Watching those fifty feet people fighting ghosts in New York was the most natural thing I could do. The film didn't transport me anywhere. It brought me home.

I understood exactly what this ritual, this communion in the dark, was all about. At the ripe old age of half a dozen years I had been introduced to the wonder of a movie and I put out my hand to welcome a long lost friend.

Kids have a very uncanny way of accepting where they belong, what they know. Well I knew this.

It was like sometime in the past I'd been whispered dangerous secrets, curious understandings, magical incantations – breathed to me while I was half asleep – preparing me for something to come, a great event that was about to unfold.

And now the moment those incantations had spoken about – had arrived - and a life long obsession, love affair – was about to begin.

But it wasn't the movie itself that I found so wondrous. Actually that was pretty crap.

Even at six years old I was seeing through things – I was a very precocious kid. The whole set up was a bit amateurish. The projection, the sound, all a bit shoddy really. A puny arse projector up against the back wall of a Church Hall.

It was the act of people coming together to watch the movie. That was special. The experience of cinema - excited me more, stayed with me longer, than Ghostbusters ever would.

But I do remember certain parts of the movie and a first taste of that popcorn movie staple - self induced fear.

The most frightening part of Ghostbusters is the librarian scene – I thought twice about going back in to the school library after that.

The Ghostbusters get a report of a ghoul in the city library so they check it out.

There's an old lady standing up reading a book and you can tell she's a ghost straight away – she's half transparent. They keep talking among themselves, pretending they don't see her.

Then she "ssssshhs" them but they just keep talking.

She suddenly turns around aggravated and now she's this very scary mother fucking ghost – not sure if those are the precise words I used as a six year old but you get the gist.

Later I remember the Stay Puft Marshmallow man – that was fun – but the moment that stayed with me was not big cuddly white giant – it was that moment of being scared shitless.

It wasn't real – it was a long strip of flickering celluloid being projected on to a dirty brick wall of a School Church – but to the eyes of this six year old it was the realest thing I had ever seen.

And another part when Rick Moranis is being chased by a demon in Central Park.

He finds this restaurant – this beacon of light – and it's full of all these really wealthy people, dining on really expensive dinners, sipping French champagne - behind these huge glass windows.

And Rick is being hunted by this huge angry Gargoyle with razor sharp teeth - so he throws himself against the glass, desperately trying to find a way in.

And all the people in the restaurant slowly just turn and look at him, then go back to eating their roasted spatchcock and braised fennel.

So Rick starts running through the park – past trees, off paths - and he finds himself in a spot that's quiet and dark.

Suddenly he's far away from the lights and sound of the big city, a long way away from the camp fire.

And now I wasn't scared for him anymore. I was scared for me.

What if I too couldn't find the door into the safety of the restaurant ? What if the people inside wouldn't let me in ? What if I found myself far away from the campfire ?

I cuddled in closer to dad.

LIGHTS CHANGE.

All my life I've been going to the movies. And for me – movies have been so much. Best friend, lover, teacher, guide – even at times – enemy.

I can map out the important moments in my life, my stages of growth, through the movies.

You know how for certain people a special song will bring up memories of a person or a time or an event – something important in their lives. Well that's the same for me – but it's not songs. It's movies.

I'm never more comfortable than when I'm sitting in the dark watching images on a screen. Whether it's a church hall in Scoresby or the latest cinemaplex in Chadstone.

Movies have been my parents, siblings, husband, wife. And they taught me all about life.

It began with Ghostbusters – that taught me about fear. Robocop gave me an understanding of violence, a friend's porno taught me about sex and Moulon Rouge about love. Okay – it wasn't a great education.

But there were moments – Good Will Hunting taught me not to give up, Raging Bull taught me about acting and Amadeus taught me to listen to my own instincts.

So much given, so much gained from people so far away who I've never met and probably never will.

So many of the big lessons in life – I've learned from them.

BRIEF DIALOGUE FROM **ROBOCOP**

I'm eight years old and I'm in my living room at Wantirna South - centre of the known universe. Well, my universe. Dad and mum have split by this time and I'm living with dad. But he's not home now. It's just me and Brad - who's 13.

Dad was kind of liberal on what my brother was watching at the time but I'm not sure he would have approved of him watching a movie like this. And he certainly wouldn't have approved of me watching it.

I'm not sure how Brad got his hands on it. Maybe somehow he was able to hire it at the video sore or maybe he convinced Dad to hire it: "It's not that violent"

So when Dad was out my brother popped it in our ancient VCR.

My bother was very independent. He had a great intelligence and initiative to start things up from nothing. Any sort of hunger he felt - he found a way to feed. Any thing he felt he had to do or could do - he would. Usually just for the experience of it – to grow from it. And because I hung around him a lot I shared in those experiences.
He had weird kind of enjoyment about sharing his mischief with me. I was the guinea pig for experimentation – with power, rebellion, corruption – you know… big brother stuff.

But this was more about him than me. In those days it was just Brad, Dad and me. It was a very masculine charged house – and my brother quite literally was wanting to become a man.

And an important part of becoming a man it seemed was watching Robocop. This was self initiation for my brother and I was along for the ride.

Prior to this I did have an understanding of violence. Controlled violence, in the form of combat – I'd been doing karate since I was seven.

But this was graphic, unbridled, celebratory violence – an eight year old boy should never watch a movie like that.

Detroit - in the future. Crime spreading through the city. The people need a saviour, a god like kick up the butt – so technology or OCP intervenes and creates a supercop. And then people start getting killed – in gorier and gorier ways.

Blood, explosions, bullets, death, blood, murder, injury, human bodies ripped limb from limb, blood, blood, blood. Pretty tough stuff for eight year old eyes.

At the start of the movie Murphy, before he becomes Robocop,is showered with bullets.

As a kid I can't stop looking cause it's so surreal. Decimating everything I understood to this point about goodies and baddies, right and wrong, life and death.

I thought humans were quite fragile. That's what other movies had taught me. If I ever got a punch in the face from a cowboy "Look out, I might die."

But then I see 100 million bullets going into this guy. I see the violence that one human can administer on another human. I see what really bad shit can happen

to you in this world. And then he gets up and walks away. As a Robot maybe – but he was still alive.

For an eight year old kid - it set a benchmark on how much violence can be produced by human beings. I realised the atrocities this world and its inhabitants can commit.

Also I now had the power to imagine myself committing that kind of atrocity. Or worse still - someone committing that kind of atrocity on me.
Violence had entered my consciousness and the possibility of those kind of acts was now alive and well in this eight year old's mind.

My world perception had changed. It was the end of innocence. The first steps along the path to growing up. If growing up was something I still wanted to do.

But something sustained me, got me through the 100 minutes or so of non-stop gore. The film did have one greatly redeeming quality. It was cool.

A man turning into a robot and kicking baddies arses. This to an eight year old boy was ultra cool – because you could pretend you were Robocop – maiming, dis-membering, butchering - and still feel like you were doing the right thing.

Robocop still had a heart, had memories or at least emotional recall – he still had his human side but when it came to the crunch, the bullets just bounced off him.

He was a legitimate superhero that you could pretend to be - half machine, half human. You could kick baddies arses and you were indestructible.

And in the tradition of all great action flicks of the 80s he was witty and creative in the way he despatched the villains and often with a super cool one liners:
"Looking for me ?"

Young boys play with lego and transformers. They want to find a bit of an edge towards their own failings that they instinctively recognise as part of being human.

They get grass burns, fall over on asphalt – they bleed, they hurt. In a little kids' way he wants to toughen himself up –and who was the toughest of all - Robocop.

If there was a Robocop action suit I would've bought it – the helmet, the metal plated thigh with hidden gun compartment. Plus you got bragging rights at school – "I saw Robocop".

But deep down something had changed. Somewhere inside me a gash had been carved and the real world was flooding in.

I'd had my first taste of pornography. The pornography of violence. It would be nearly ten years later before I would experience the other variety.

LIGHTS CHANGE.

So what had movies taught me so far. Ghosts are running around Central Park in New York and when you get shot a hundred times – you don't die.

This bruised eight year old soul needed an antidote. Some spiritual healing. A rebellious teenager called Daniel LaRusso and the eternally wise, Mister Miyagi.

The Karate Kid came out when I was very young. I must've seen it on video when I was 4, because I mentioned it at kindergarten.

I bumped my head on a horizontal metal bar on some of the play equipment. I came back the next day sporting a bandage around my forehead, a la Karate Kid. I then proceeded to assure all the kids that I am a-ok and that I am Junior Karate Kid. Mainly to avoid the embarrassment of having a silly looking bandage on my head.

Now in the post Robocop world I turned to Karate Kid for salvation.

To me the Karate Kid represented all that was good about life - honour, discipline, focused energy, patience and Elisabeth Shue. It's actually spelled E-l-i-*s*-a-b-et-h – like you care ! The whole romantic subplot hooked me in and would reverberate in other key moments in my life. More of that later.

But even TKK – The Karate Kid - had its negative side. Now, the baddies were terrors of a new kind for me. They weren't ghosts or beasts or baddies with big guns. They were – other kids.

They went to your school, walked down your streets, ate at the same McDonald's, hung out at the same milk bar you buy your lollies - went to the same movie theatre. They represented a much closer threat. Something a kid growing up in the suburbs can experience all too much.

These kids can catch the same bus as you, be in the same maths class, watch your every move. They can plot to hurt you, because they know of your activities, your movements, your physical weaknesses. They can sabotage personal events – anything from stealing your basketball (because they knew where and when you would frequent the local court), to making you look like a dickhead in front of others (in the case of Daniel, he winds up with spaghetti all over him because he thinks Johnny and Elisabeth Shue are a couple).

I experienced this to a certain degree with my brother – but in the end there was a limit. He's my brother – he isn't going to hurt me that bad. But other kids – they were more menacing. There were no limits.

So when my mum asked me, when I was 7, if I'd like to take up karate, I thought, "Wow! Hell yeah!" I started fly-kicking around the house at once! It was like asking a kid if he'd like to become Batman.

Everything I learnt at karate lessons, echoed what I had seen in TKK. With the exception of the Crane Kick, the old Japanese recluse teaching me one-on-one, the laying on of 'healing hands', the Hollywood-style tournament that is the climax of the movie – everything else was exactly the same.

I translated, in my head, what I saw on film to what I did nearly everyday. I transformed the American suburbia from the screen, into my daily life. The accent was something I accomplished with aplomb.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't start talking with an American accent full-time or think I went to Valley High and start wearing Terminator sunnies. I was (and still am) an Australian, but I did begin to think I had supernatural powers.

Which Daniel La Russo doesn't actually have – he's just very good at karate - but I wasn't that good at karate so I needed something more !

I began to think I could make patterns on my bedroom wallpaper move, just by staring at them long enough. And they did! Of course, I would discover much later that it was an illusion from not blinking for 4 minutes straight.

I did the same thing when I stared at the sun for the same amount of time - it began to dance. Probably explains why I wear glasses now…

But there was a universe around me, and I seemed not only apart of it, but could also float through its dimensions and alter its ever-changing and growing states.

I would need all these magical powers if I was to survive the combined enemies of movie land who were now gathering in my imagination to attack me.

I would also need help from a certain gentlemen by who lived in a chocolate factory.

SCENE OR SONG FROM **WILLY WONKA** (*Pure imagination*)

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory is of course the story of God. Or a traditional anglo-christian god. Don't laugh.