

# LIFE IN THE MOVIES

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This is the backdoor to life.

You mess around for a few years, sowing the old wild oats, dreaming the impossible dreams and then watching them fade away like bad film stock as the years go by. Suddenly you're forty, and there's no steady job, no family, no house in the suburbs—just a beat-up Ford Fiesta and a crappy efficiency apartment. No pets allowed, so you don't even have a dog or cat to kick around when you need to vent.

Your last girlfriend, if you could call her that, is now pregnant with another man's child (she made sure to let you know that it couldn't *possibly* be yours), and she still wants to live with you in the closet you call home, because "Jimmy ain't got no place I can stay." Worst part is, you agree, just to keep the silence away. She doesn't even clean up after herself, and there's no sex, uh-uh, you're just *friends* now; so you pick up after her and pretend this is a relationship.

The bar you frequent, well, *frequently*, the place where everybody knows not only your name but your political and religious views, your past history, hell, even the size of your package, thanks to a mouthy drunk—that bar is a place you wouldn't have been seen dead in ten, no, *five* years ago. Now the regulars here know you better than your parents (who you haven't spoken to in five, no, *ten* years, probably.)

There's a Rexall drugstore right around the corner from the crappy, collapsing apartment complex where you live, and whenever you pass by it you ask yourself —*what drugs do they have, non-prescription, that I could swallow enough of and end up taking the dirt nap?* And you almost feel it, you nearly understand the desperation of the hopeless. You don't own a gun, and there's no way you could

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just open up your veins, but pills might work. Sure, they claim it's a woman's way to end it all, but what do you care? You won't have to listen to anyone's smart-ass comments later, will you?

And you'd do it, maybe you would, if it weren't for that one thing. You know that thing, that *special* thing, that you can do so well...

"C'mon, Henry! We need you!"

Henry Clark rubbed his eyes, pushing himself back into the here-and-now. His latest Amaretto Sour, his drink of choice, was now a watery mess before him. Popping it down in a quick gulp, he sat up from his eternal slouch. "It's always nice to be needed," he muttered. There was a time when he would have signaled for another drink, but he was known here. Marcy already had his next Sour set up, and, as usual, someone had already paid for it. Same-old, same-old...

He knew the scene. Red would be there, since it was Red's voice Henry had responded to, and at least a couple of the regulars—probably Pete and Cutter Bob, since this was a Wednesday—and someone Henry had never seen. Some poor schmuck with a big mouth and a fat wallet, most likely, a visitor to the bar who knew nothing about Henry's 'gift'. *How long did it take them to reel this one in*, he thought. The boys tended to work on the newbies, a sort of mental gang-bang. Sooner or later, Henry was pulled into the rape.

Henry turned away from the bar and walked slowly to the 'shady table', as the regulars called it. It huddled under a burned-out neon sign for a beer that was no longer produced. Red spoke up, doing his little song-and-dance for the victim. "Henry," he announced with an obvious wink-and-a-nudge, "this is Oliver."

Henry sat down at the table, a bit clumsy but still in command of his senses. "*Oliver*. Best Picture, 1968. People are still laughing about that one." Oliver blinked, utterly at a loss.

Red laughed, but he shot a warning glance Henry's way. *Don't scare the mark*, it said. Henry nodded slightly, suitably reprimanded. He held out his hand. "Henry Clark, Oliver. Pleashed," he slurred, exaggerating his level of drunkenness to throw Red a bone, "uh, *pleezed* to meet ya." Oliver shook hands hesitantly, like someone expecting a joy-buzzer; Henry could also tell, by the way Oliver fought to focus on the transaction, that the mark was well beyond tipsy and close to falling over.

Cutter Bob played his part. "You're in trouble this time, Henry! Ol' Oliver

here, my boy Oliver came up with a tough one. I done told him, ain't no way you gonna get this one, ain't that right, Oliver?" He slapped Oliver on the back, not hard but with enough force to convey a sense of camaraderie. Oliver ate it up, just like he was supposed to. He turned to Bob and gave him this half-assed little drunken grin—*we sure got him now, don't we*, it said. Henry was a master at reading the 'subtle' signals of the well-and-truly soused.

"What's the bet?" Henry tried to look disinterested, but he knew where the money-tree grew. Red smiled and motioned surreptitiously with one hand: *go slow, go slow...*

Oliver straightened up in his chair. "Twenty dollars." He said it like he was passing out free money to the lowly masses.

Cutter Bob spat, disgusted. "Twenty bucks? Damn, Ollie, I thought we was friends! I sit here and tell you everything you need to know to take King Henry here down, and you throw out twenty bucks? I thought you *trusted* me! Down in the foxholes, buddy, remember?"

Henry knew that little ruse. Cutter had been in Vietnam. His big ability, his *gift*, the way Henry saw it, was to buddy up to a complete stranger and, by the end of the night, convince him that, had they been in the 'Nam together, they'd have been blood-brothers, man, attached at the hips, *you could watch my back anytime, buddy, I trust you*. The '*semper fi*' was optional.

Cutter threw down two twenties and a ten from his own wallet. "Sound off like you got a pair, son! I'm laying down fifty, I'm so sure you got him!"

Oliver wavered a moment, taking a drink to bolster his buzz. Then he matched the pot. "Right. Fifty bucks. You got it." He flashed a sickly smile Bob's way.

The preliminaries now done with, Henry crossed his arms, looked at Oliver without a hint of emotion, and said, "What you got for me?"

Oliver focused his attention on Henry with a visible effort. "Um. Oh, yeah." He grinned triumphantly. "Orson Welles, *Touch Of Evil*."

Henry shrugged. Not a bad choice, he thought, although it would have been more surprising if the movie hadn't been overhauled and re-released a few years ago. Still, not as obvious as most of the challenges he'd heard lately.

As the small crowd around the table watched in increasing awe, Henry closed his eyes and muttered silently to himself, as if he were going through a script in his head. His shoulders slumped, and his face beaded with sweat. Nothing changed about him physically, but he held himself differently, slumping like a man who was carrying far too much extra weight, his lips puffing out and his cheeks seeming to

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fill out in the shadows of the bar. When he opened his eyes, they seemed smaller, piggish and cruel.

“Thirty years...” he growled, his voice coming from a well of loathing and viciousness, the voice of a fat, corrupt small-town cop named Hank Quinlan. In Henry’s mind, Quinlan’s thoughts roiled venomously, *damn wetback, damn dirty Mexican with his little white slut of a wife, thinks he can try to face down Hank Quinlan on my own turf, thinks he’s got the huevos to pull something over on me*, and his voice came back, stronger, brutal. “Thirty years of pounding beats and riding cars, thirty years of dirt and crummy pay. For thirty years, I gave my life to this department. And you allow this *foreigner* to accuse me. Answer, answer, why do I have to answer him? No sir!” Henry was on his feet now, his face flushed red, spittle flecking his lips. “I won’t take back that badge until the people of this county want me back!” There was no badge on the table, but the others had looked just to make sure, because when Henry was on, he was *on*. Oliver was especially slack-jawed, his eyes open so wide they almost bulged from their sockets. Henry wasn’t just doing an Orson Welles impression, he *was* Orson Welles—no, he was Hank Quinlan, all four-hundred pounds of the man, and he was *pissed off*. The atmosphere at the back table seemed hotter, as if the whole group had been transported, for just a small eternity, into the sweltering summer heat of some shabby border town in Texas.

Then Henry sat down, his face relaxing back into its proper form, and it was all over. Henry seemed a bit tired, and his hair hung lankly across his forehead, plastered down with sweat, but he was otherwise unchanged. Emotionless. Bored.

Red scooped the money up from the table; Oliver didn’t even notice. Cutter Bob made a show of being upset, can’t believe he got that one, who’d thought, but it was all for effect, really. He’d get his money back later, just like always, after he and Red split up Oliver’s money. Henry never took any of the money, but he rarely paid for his drinks, either, so it seemed like a fair trade to him.

As Henry turned back to the bar, Red whispered, “Man, you ought to take that act on the road.”

Henry sat at his regular stool, trying to keep his hands from shaking with exhaustion. *On the road*, he thought as he ordered another drink, his heart still pounding with Quinlan’s rage. *Yeah, right*.

You walk home from the bar because you can’t afford a drunk-driving arrest,

even though you're not drunk now, not *really*. What the hell, your apartment isn't far from the bar, and it's not a bad night. There's a beer or two in the fridge, if Janice didn't drink them yet; just enough to ease you into the remains of the evening.

You think about the little show you put on back there, remembering the faces of the stunned and amazed, and you still can't believe that they never ask any questions, they never try to figure out how you do it. No curiosity left—maybe the brain cells that demand satisfaction, the ones that wonder how a magician does his tricks, say, are the first ones killed off by alcohol. Or maybe folks still like to have a little mystery in their lives, who knows?

Whatever. You know it's just a parlor trick, really, just a side-effect of your true talent. If you could feel anything right now, it would be the need to laugh at the irony of life. Of course, if you could laugh at life you wouldn't be spending your evenings dragging your liver through Purgatory while playing the performing monkey for a bunch of rednecks.

No laughing for you, pal. No crying, either. What did that one doctor call it when you were a kid? *Flat affect*, that was it. No highs, no lows, just a dull plodding through the middle-ground. Life sentence. Some people take drugs to get where you are naturally, though; you should feel blessed, right?

Hell, at least the drinks are free...

The Narrator's voice faded into the background of Henry's mind when he reached his apartment. The Narrator was always there, spinning a constant voiceover to Henry's poor attempt at a life, trying to make sense of every insignificant detail, trying to find the script that would make everything *fit*. Another side-effect of the talent, and Henry was as accustomed to the Narrator as he was to his ability to mimic any actor he'd ever seen in a movie. The Narrator, on the other hand, served a higher purpose, when the time was right.

The Narrator's voice sounded like Fred MacMurray's in *Double Indemnity*. Henry had no idea why. He was just glad it didn't sound like Peter Lorre's, or Michael J. Pollard's, God forbid.

Henry entered his apartment quietly, expecting to find Janice passed out on the couch, the light from the TV screen flickering aimlessly over her body. The couch was empty.

As was the rest of the apartment. Empty of Janice, and her clothes, and her makeup, and her damned pile of romance paperbacks. Janice had packed up her few

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meager belongings and deserted him. He could almost see her balancing cardboard packing crates on her distended belly. Maybe the kid kicked every now and then when he got poked in the head by a box corner.

*Guess Jimmy finally found a place for her to stay.*

Henry knew he should be feeling something at this juncture. Rage? He wondered if that would be an appropriate response. Relief? Longing? Despair? He just didn't know. What do you feel when you lose someone that was once a lover?

Even the Narrator was silent. Waiting for Henry to find the answers.

Janice had left the beer in the fridge, amazingly enough. Henry uncapped a bottle and drained half of it in a gulp. He walked back into the living room, passing the threadbare couch and the cheap 13-inch TV-VCR combo sitting on an orange crate across from it. The far wall of the apartment was lined with bookshelves, each of them overstacked, not with books, but with videos. Hundreds of them, store-bought or bootlegged, many copied from cable channels, AMC and TCM predominantly. At first glance, they seemed utterly without order—alphabetically disarrayed, chronologically challenged. A cryptogram without the right key.

Henry was the key. He ran his fingers along the video boxes as if he were blind and they were encoded in Braille, taking an occasional sip from his beer as a mantra of hope issued silently from his lips. "Show me what to feel," he whispered, "please show me what to feel."

His hand worked as a separate entity, brushing the videos lightly, stopping, moving on. It wavered finally, torn between choices, then plucked a selection from the shelves, satisfied. Henry didn't even look to see if he'd made the right choice. He pulled the movie from its cover and inserted it gently into the VCR; the TV turned itself on automatically.

"Why don't you get a DVD player?" Janice had asked him several times. He tried to get her to watch movies with him, but she rarely agreed, and when she did eventually succumb to boredom and join him, she would gripe and moan about it continuously. *This looks like crap, the sound is fuzzy, who are these people?*

"Just watch the movie." His only comeback. Her voice would finally become nothing more than background noise, and then she'd fall asleep somewhere along the way, and Henry would slide off the couch and let her lie there undisturbed while he mouthed every line of the film to himself, perfectly. He didn't need a DVD—the films were engrained in his memory. They lived in his mind, in full-color and surround sound. He *knew* what everything looked like, sounded like, knew the

smells, the tastes, the tactile sensations felt by each character in every movie. It was all part of his gift.

Henry settled himself on the couch as the FBI warnings ran across the television screen. Within seconds, his eyes glazed over; the beer bottle slipped from his fingers, unnoticed. Henry's breathing slowed along with his pulse, nearly stopping; in less than a minute, he reached a state of physical oblivion that even a yogi would envy.

As the grey moors of Yorkshire appeared on the screen, the room darkened; as a disembodied voice described the house, the storm, and a stranger lost in the bleak landscape, the temperature in Henry's apartment fell several degrees. The air turned humid, almost foggy, and the walls faded into some other plane of existence. The scents of Henry's life—the stale smells from the carpet, the subtle undercurrents of body odor and cheap perfume—dwindled and disappeared, replaced by a rich, earthy breath of lush greenery tainted with the subtle miasma of decay. The image on the television wavered, disappeared, and Henry's apartment was gone: he sat at the heart of a dark mansion, filled with shadows and the memory of grandeur.

Time for the Narrator to do his job...

The man bursts into your sanctum, demanding shelter. You would like nothing more than to send him fleeing back into the blackness he came from, but there are Rules that must be obeyed, ridiculous notions of hospitality that must be honored. You can feel that your wife agrees, as well she should. She, too, knows what it is like to be unwanted.

So give him a room for the night. Tell Joseph to take him upstairs, this Mr. Lockwood, and let him sleep in the guest room. Give yourself back to the silence of the Heights.

Then your name is called in the night, your presence *demand*ed by the fool upstairs, and he is frightened and as pale as if he'd been touched by Death. "There's someone out there in the storm," he whimpers. "It's a woman. I heard her calling. She said her name! It—Cathy, Cathy, that was it!" And the man keeps talking, sputtering, but you push him from the room, for now you can hear the echo across the moors.

*Heathcliff*, she calls, and you run to Catherine yet again...