

Unhinged

A Micro-Read

By

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For Jan, Nicole, and Scarlett

Isn't it funny that when talking to others about something scary, everyone has a story of their own? Last night at our weekly social outing, my friend Jerry shared his haunting experience with me...

Jerry and his buddy, Nick, were 14 years old at the time when they were propositioned for a temporary job by the manager of the local drive-in theater – The Bel Air on Eight Mile Road (Eminem's famed song – the east/west boundary between Detroit and its northern suburb of Warren, Michigan). Van Dyke Avenue was the closest major intersection, the six-lane thoroughfare running north/south roughly a quarter mile to the west.

The manager claimed the clean-up crew would be short handed the following day. If the boys helped clear the lot of trash from the night's

viewing, then he would allow them to sit up front and watch the movies with complimentary soda, hot dogs, burgers, and popcorn. Without blinking an eye, both quickly agreed to the deal.

Saturday was “date night”, the busiest night of the week, when patrons, mostly teens, hung out until after the third movie showing. The additional two hours resulted in more trash compared to the amount normally generated on a weeknight. The boys still considered it a great tradeoff for a few hours of work. Their first time seeing a movie at a drive-in, in addition to free food, was well worth the effort.

The following day, Jerry and Nick joined four other youths waiting outside the office at the rear of the concession building. A beautiful mid-July Sunday, cloudless blue sky, temperature in the eighties; a slight easterly breeze and light humidity made it seem almost cool. Since they planned to stay through the late movie, both newcomers wore blue jeans, colored t-shirts, and tennis shoes. The

other four older teens opted for shorts, wife beater tank tops, and boots – the standard uniform for permanent employees.

Promptly at four o'clock, the cigar-chewing heavyweight manager supplied the cleaning crew with work gloves, large plastic bags, brooms, shovels, and thin poles with a six-inch nail sticking out from one end. Those allowed the crew to spear garbage and larger pieces into the bags without bending down. After some basic instructions, the team split into pairs and headed towards their assigned sectors.

A mix of concrete and cracked asphalt with small weed encrusted dirt mounds separated each aisle. When parking a vehicle for a movie, drivers positioned their front wheels on the mounds so each car's occupant could see the screen over the vehicle parked in front of them. Pickup trucks usually filled their beds with chaise loungers, blankets, and coolers, so they backed into the spaces.

In the compound's center, a medium sized, single story square building stood awkwardly, its rooftop no more than five feet above ground level. Several large windows spanned the north wall, allowing waiting patrons in the snack bar line to continue watching the movie while ceiling speakers kept them all in sync. Both restrooms and the projection booth entrance lined the back wall.

Nick and Jerry's assigned area was a metaphorical pig sty. Partially filled barrels stood like sentinels next to the speaker poles at every fourth parking space, yet it appeared moviegoers simply tossed everything out their windows. The spears helped with paper products but proved useless against half-eaten hot dogs and hamburgers, which the boys had to pick up by hand. Popcorn littered the ground like sowed grass seed, but thankfully flocks of seagulls helped with that clean-up.

They worked hard the remaining afternoon and into the early evening. It was just after eight o'clock

when they finished, but the manager required they stick around until the garbage truck arrived to take away their waste.

A half hour later, they tossed the last of twenty overflowing trash bags onto a stake truck driven by a permanent crew member. Job done, both moseyed over to the central building, placing their issued gear next to the office door then headed to the restroom before collecting their food and drinks. Starving, they looked forward to the meal.

Embracing their reward, Jerry and Nick wolfed down the dogs and burgers within minutes. Sated for the time being, they left the building carrying large buckets of popcorn and sodas, walking casually toward their assigned watch area. Dusk would not come for another hour, so they waited patiently, watching the scene unfold around them.

Vehicles paraded along the entrance road running adjacent to the property. Once inside the complex, individual cars splintered away from the caravan, turned into various aisles, and homed in on

their favorite spots. Families chose areas in front, near the play area or concession stand, while couples chose more secluded spots toward the rear of the property.

The first movie was called *Night of the Living Dead*. They knew little about the film but heard of its scariness from others. Cannibalistic corpses roamed the countryside, killing the living and turning them into zombies (a term not used at the time). New to this movie genre, the idea of a scare excited them.

The boys sat on the ground, leaning against a mound in the first row just beyond the playground. Luckily, parents whisked several loud, screaming adolescents back into their cars, quieting things down before the movie started.

A pole speaker hung to their right, just above their heads. Tinny circus music echoed from the silver box while the screen displayed a fixed advertisement for the snack bar. A countdown clock

indicated five more minutes until the movie began. They were pumped!

The screen finally came to life, opening credits playing to an eerie, sci-fi tune in the background. The immense screen contributed to the realistic scene, almost like being a character in the movie. Captivated, both teens smiled broadly.

Thirty minutes later, screams echoed from vehicles behind them; the shrieks were mostly women, but a few men howled too in response to the movie. The boys considered this film uncharted territory, as previous horror movies like *Godzilla*, *King Kong*, *The Blob*, and *The Mummy* seemed more fake and humorous rather than scary. This movie though, terrified them, as they both genuinely believed something like a zombie apocalypse could happen, even at the drive-in. Their anxiety levels spiked as the sounds of car doors locking and windows closing diminished the volume of scared screams from other patrons. Both felt extremely vulnerable out in the open.