

Times At the Drive-in

The drive-in on the main route through town, that connects Rockland County to the Hudson River, used to play Disney movies every weekend. Old standby animated ones like *Snow White*, *Fantasia*, *The Jungle Book*, and live-action ones like *Herbie the Love Bug*, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, *Mary Poppins*. I don't remember a single moment of the actual movies. Just the marquee, with the titles spelled out in hand-placed, black and red letters. Wearing hand-me-down pajamas, eating tin-foil wrapped hamburgers bought at the magical structure from which the beacon-like projection beamed its flickering images onto the largest screen I'd ever seen. Walking through the gravel-laden bumps, searching for our green Jeep, the one my father would outfit with a plow in the winter to make some extra cash, hearing the echoes of the hundreds of speakers blaring entreaties to visit the concession stand in a unified chorus. The back of the Jeep open, blankets and pillows laid out for me and my brother, popcorn strewn and just comfortable enough to fall asleep before the second feature started. Waking up in the morning in my bed, realizing I couldn't quite make it once again, but somehow without disappointment.

My wife is away visiting her father, who has been slowing down. The boys and I take the ancient Pontiac he gifted us to the drive-in in Greenville, the more prosperous neighbor of the town we live in. We moved up here for a new start, but my health caught up with me and now we are subsisting on disability. The old metal speakers that clipped to the window are gone, now you tune in to the station on your car radio. I let the boys watch from the front seat, while I watch them from the back. They get along better than me and my brother did, comrades in arms, making videos together on a cheap, hand-held flip camera we got them for Christmas. The older is the ringleader, the younger his willing soldier. They make raps about *Star Wars*, mini-scenes, staged fights to the death, and anything else that strikes them as funny. The movie is *Wall-E*, and it is surprisingly sweet, sad, and touching. I retake my place in the driver's seat,

as brake lights begin to dot the field. I turn the key and the starter clicks futilely. I'm upset and say something about our luck, and the boys console me. "It's OK, Dad. It happens." I make the embarrassed trek back to the magic structure, where they are shutting down the snack bar for the night. A guy walks back with me and a portable battery charger. "Gotta have one of these around," he says. "This happens nearly every night." He's not doing anything to engender it, but I still feel my failure. The car sparks and I thank him profusely. As we pull away the boys are impassive and stoic. They are already accepting their poverty.

The boys are fifteen and eighteen. It's been a year and a half since my wife passed, tragically and suddenly. We have been existing since then, not really alive or dead. We live in the basement of my wife's sister. My oldest stopped getting up and going to High School the last half of his senior year, so the district sent a tutor to help get him through. The night before his graduation, I had a health issue and ended up in the hospital. The next morning was spent frantically making phone calls to family members to try to get somebody, anybody to be there for the ceremony. But there was an all-day rainstorm that kept all of them, one by one, from coming. Days later my son jokes about walking the length of the football field, his cap and gown soaked through, looking for a familiar face that wasn't there. He ended up catching a ride home. He laughs at the memory, using the one useful tool the three of us share against the vagaries of life. I laugh along, because to face the guilt I feel would immobilize me like an ancient insect frozen in amber.

I've tried to get the boys out, buying tickets I couldn't afford to concerts, sporting events, county fairs, that end up unused. I tell them I'm taking them to dinner with a surprise after. It's corny, and they recognize it as such. My eldest is suspicious, the younger willing to play along. I don't want to give them the option to bail. It's foolproof, I think. Seeing *Deadpool* was one of the few positive experiences we all shared in the last year and a half. The drive-in is playing the original and the sequel as a double-feature. We pull up and my oldest says, "Is this the surprise?" He is noncommittal, not impressed, but not willing to hurt my feelings. My youngest is pretending to be excited for my benefit. We find the channel on the radio, and this time I keep the car running. It's a humid night and the windshield keeps fogging up, so I have to turn on the wipers. My oldest can't stand the intrusion,

and I say, “What do you want me to do?” The theater decides to run the original movie first instead of the sequel. “Probably to sell a few more tubs of popcorn,” my eldest says. We stay through the first movie, rewatching it through the condensation and the wipers. My eldest is annoyed but trying. After the first movie ends, he asks if we can go home. I ask my youngest what he wants to do, and he says he’s fine either way. Trying to keep the peace, and mitigate any bad feelings on either side, as he’s always done. A bridge between the islands of his father and his brother. “I did this for you guys,” I say. “Whatever you want to do is fine.” “I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” my oldest says. “It’s OK, you won’t.” “It was a good idea, just with the wipers and how late it’s starting...” “It’s fine.” We pull out, and my youngest says, “Thanks for trying, Dad.” “Yeah,” my oldest says, “thank you.” I have gotten so used to hiding devastation that it’s reflexively easy. There’s a sense of relief on the car ride home. “Can we stop for ice cream,” my oldest asks. “Sure,” I say.

I’m driving from the wake of a friend in Albany, on my way to visit my father in the same town I used to live. He hasn’t been doing well. Maps is taking me a back way that is strange to me. Before my synapses can make the connections, I realize I am coming upon the drive-in in Greenville, the one where we saw *Wall-E* and drained our car battery. I can see the big white screen, like a gigantic, empty canvas, waiting in the summer heat to be painted upon. I don’t believe I’ll ever be able to go to a drive-in, now, without crying. I can see the face of the teenage girl in the ticket booth, confused and a bit frightened by the sight of a 56-year-old man with tears inexplicably running down his cheeks. I drive on, and safely pack that image away for another time and place.