

“Would You Like To Try a Large  
Popcorn for Fifty Cents More?”

a Memoir

# Preface

Started: August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000  
Ended : ???

Hi.

Just to let you, the reader know, that I'm not crazy.

I wrote this to remember a very special time in my life. This is to remember a place, and a moment in time, and not just specific people.

It has been written for that purpose, and not because of specific people. As such, everything is subject to my memory and reinterpretation.

Damn, how I wish you could have been there. You would have had a blast...you like popcorn, right? And movies? And closefriendswhowillstickbyyoursideforeveror-atleastthesummer?

But I digress to my preface.

I don't need to thank anyone really, except for the people who are contained within. You brought a lot of joy to my life, and I hope that some was returned to yours. We should get together again sometime...hows Saturday for you?

I digress again.

Thanks for reading and enjoy.

Matthew DeMizio  
8.10.2000  
(on one of his rare days off.)

# Chapter 1

Lester: "I'm just a regular guy with nothing to lose."  
-*American Beauty*

There was a small theatre out in the middle of nowhere.

Well, maybe it wasn't that small. It was *modest* in this age of cinema building. It had its 12 screens, its two box offices, its long and intimidating projection booth, its concession stand with all of 12 registers, (of which 3 were almost perpetually down for maintenance) and even an elevator (of course, the slowest possible model on earth, constantly filled with the strange odors which the staff brought to it.)

And really, I should take back the "middle of nowhere" comment. The theater was near several big cities, and a major metropolis was twenty minutes down the nearest interstate. In fact, lets call this theater "suburban"

So we have this *suburban*, modest theater, which to you dear reader probably sounds like your local multiplex. It has the same overpriced Coca-Cola™ products, same salty-as-hell popcorn, and same surly teenage staff.

Of course, I'm kidding about the staff. The staff here wasn't the same as your local multiplex. Up to a point, the staff here was family. Although not related by blood, they were united by a friendship forged by a common occupation and title: movie theatre usher. These were the people who sold you your tickets and popcorn, who rushed into action when you spilled that popcorn seconds later, and who were grudgingly brought in when a patron lost his lunch midway through the newest summer action flick featuring jerky, hand-held camera maneuvers called artsy by everybody except for this poor kid cleaning up the mess. (These people may not even be wearing a red vest at your multiplex. They did here. Just change "red vest" to whatever the uniform may be near you: carnation sweater, black jumper, or beige jumpsuit are pretty good changes.)

The title even generalizes the job to a degree. I'm talking about the red vest – the pimple-faced high school kid working on the weekend in the stained white shirt and faded tie, wearing the company supplied red vest. One encounters him or her at the box office, the snack stand, the cinema your movie is in, or anywhere in between those locations. The specialties for the red vest are few, but are worth noting here.

There's the hawker. The hawker is that loud kid selling popcorn and soda from his cart that he's wheeling around. The hawker is loud because he is making money directly from your purchase – he's actually pulling in a commission off of people like you. The best hawkers have the personalities of showmen, for that is 90% of their job – making you want to purchase from them instead of the stand which is just steps away.

There's also the permanent usher – the one person that for some reason or another will ALWAYS be pushing a broom and dustpan cleaning up popcorn. Some permanent ushers are that way from fear of handling money, but nine times out of ten, the permanent usher is generally incompetent.

Everyone's favorite is the permanent concessionist. The permanent concessionist is the perky go-getter who took your candy order and helped you at the stand. They

artfully suggested additional items that you politely turned down. The real secret behind the permanent concessionist is that they hate their job. No shift is a mystery, every shift is monotony, standing behind the counter, taking and filling orders, listening to complaints that customers throw at them about the prices which that they did not set and do not want to charge. The day is rare when a permanent concessionist is downgraded to ordinary usher status due to the utter chaos that would take place at the concession stand in their absence.

One of the senior positions is of course, is the “box boy” – the one who has been fated to the front lines of the theater, the box office. The box boy sold you your tickets and gave you the theater number for your show (which you quickly forgot.) The box boy is considered a senior position because there are many subtle nuances to box office, one generally has to make change without the aid of a computer coupled with doing ten to twenty times the amount of business of a concession drawer. As box boy, one may be able to slack off to a certain degree when there are no lines and talk to the fellow box boys, who happen to be a very close-knit group of people.

Even above the box boys are the projection team: the cherubim and seraphim of the entire theatrical organization. One step below management, the projection team isn't even a red vest. They can rebel by turning their vests inside out to become...BLACK VESTS. They are the only ones who really need to be at the theater and they know it: usually a projectionist possesses a coolness that only Steve McQueen was able to possess in his later films due to this fact. Projection is a highly technical position giving the operator the ability to work with a vast array of interesting gadgets and gizmos, tools and paraphernalia, all with little blinking lights flashing on and off at what seems like random intervals to all except for the projectionist who can interpret them in the correct fashion and discern what needs to be done.

Even above the projectionists are those that have graduated from the whole two-color vest structure to blazers. This level is of course known as management – who at the highest levels at this individual theater don't even wear their blazers. Management is the never-reachable-by-phone-or-walkie-talkie, always hiding, group that punch in and proceed to hide in the upper offices, not to re-appear except to announce their departure for Wal-Mart, or the local Food Court, or whatever.

Then, there are the red vests like myself who don't fall into the other groups. We are some of the best types of workers due to the fact that we don't hate all the customers. We only hate you once you make a nuisance of yourself. We are the ones who were blessed with common sense, with initiative, with the desire to lead and more importantly, the desire to learn. We generally start out as “box boys” and work up. You could call us management, however, I can't lay that term on all of us because not all of us are able to work our way there – some are perfectly happy on the floor, doing exactly what we were hired to do without wanting to leave the safe cocoon we have on the floor.

Unfortunately, we are the ones who do a lot of the work that is required. For some reason (some blame genetics, some blame parents) we cannot sit idly by and watch the place go to hell. We come in when we don't have to be there, we stay after our shifts and hang out. Our friends work at the theater, and we see them as often as we can. For many, our lives revolve around the theater (not that this is a bad thing. You get to see a lot of free movies for one, and drink a lot of free soda.)

We are the building blocks of the family talked about earlier, and there is a little bit of us in every single employee who has ever shoveled popcorn or torn a ticket.

Of course, there are many exceptions to the above groupings. There are many managers happy with helping on the floor. Some permanent ushers are actually red vests in my group. And then there's me. I'm not really a red vest anymore, (although I enjoyed the title while I held it) having been promoted to management recently.

I'm writing this because I want to remember. This place has been a significant structure in my life and I fear for the human memory's fragility, especially mine. To move on with my life I need to write this out so it will always exist as I want it to exist, free from shades of forgetfulness or future emotion.

There is however, one reason especially for writing this down now. A dear friend has decided to leave this place behind to pursue his dreams.

The dream, as many have it, is for acting. Following up on old Shakespeare's adage that "all the world's a stage; men merely players playing many parts" he has decided to move quite far away and pursue this dream. The best place for this dream is far away, in a big city, far from this family that has been created, in many instances around him.

I have not been able to figure out exactly where the family at the theater began. Some would say that it started among the youngest staff members and worked up, but I subscribe to a different approach: that the family had to begin at the highest level of management.

The man that was leaving was, of course, the general manager, the veritable demigod of the theater. The show times at the theater depended on him. What cinema played what movie depended on him. Everyone's job depended on him. With one word, he could up your pay rate or take your job. From our general manager's general demeanor you wouldn't know these things. He was one of the nicest men that I've ever met.

It wasn't company policy that employees could drink the soda for free; it was the GM's. It wasn't company policy that employees could eat the popcorn free while watching movies; it was the GM's. Company policy said nothing about after-hours movies, but on every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night, the newest movies were premiered for staff and friends after-hours. As long as the work was getting done satisfactorily, employees of this theater had a very easy job.

Of course, the GM chewed people out from time to time, but it was only those people who needed the mastication (for you vocabulary-disinclined, that is to say, he only chewed out those who needed the chewing out.) If the theater was busy, and people were being served quickly and friendly, the GM was in a good mood. For the most part people had the utmost respect for the GM, and the respect was returned to the staff.

The GM's leaving, has of course, risen in me shades of sadness and happiness. The happiness stems from the ability to see a friend take the reigns of his life and attempt to realize a life-long dream. The sadness of course, stems from having to watch him go and to have to work at this job without him.

I was hired as a normal red vest in May of 1999. This was about 7 months after the opening of the theater. I wanted the job. I enjoyed the job. I wanted to do the best I could at the job and I did. Promotions and pay raises happened at least 5 times in my first year and a half. Training upstairs for projection happened over July and August. I was the youngest projectionist the theater had seen. By September, I was running shifts in the booth by myself. After I turned 18, I was quickly promoted to management, again, one of the youngest managers ever promoted.

It was he who first believed in me, who promoted me each time to help me make it at the theater. It was he who introduced me to the joys of late night movie watching. It was he who introduced me to the even greater joy of watching late night movies aided with sustenance from the local 7-11.

I of course had no idea that a friendship between him and me would ever take place. When I was hired, I had no idea who the GM was. I avoided him for the first few weeks, only because he was my boss, and this being my first job, I looked upon my bosses as evil. But a friendship flourished, partially fueled by an interest in film and somewhat by a shared interest in the art of theatre: his passion acting, mine, stagecraft.

And so, this memoir exists because of the sadness and happiness that has arisen in me due to one friend leaving and my desire to remember this time of my life as it was so I can look upon it years from now with joy, and relive the experiences all over again.