

1. Exterior, Toronto, night; hanging moon above Queen Convenience. There's a pale blue light bleeding onto the road through the broken window of our convenience store-turned-studio. The same glow pours out from the old coffee shops and clothing stores, the decaying ruins of Queen Street where the other Filmmakers are up late, like us. Someone scales a flipped streetcar for a quiet place to sleep. A cracked, throaty howling breaks over the high rises in the east, cutting through a dark crystal sheet of stars. There is no wind and no flyers blowing across the sidewalks.

A painted sun with a smiley face sits above the window of the store. Yellow on grey brick, it was part of the store's cheerful curb appeal back when it still had customers, before the Fence went up, before everyone left. This juxtaposition of sun and moon underscores the duality of the two men sleeping inside: The Bum and Buster.

The Bum is dreaming in linear narrative, a full-colour romantic comedy. He is at dinner with a stunning brunette and her parents. The girl has bright green eyes and olive skin and she smiles at The Bum, framed in soft focus. She keeps reassuring him that he's doing great, but The Bum, in his awkward, lovable fashion, can't stop staring at her father's lazy eye. The dream is largely non-symbolic.

Buster's dreams are non-linear, black and white, abstract. He smashes a mirror and eats the broken glass, sees several shots of himself sitting in a corner, gets smacked by a nun. And then an image of a dead sparrow. And then another. And another. All of this represents his deep-rooted desire to kill

me.

The Bum sleeps by the window, wrapped in a wool blanket, lying on a bed of sun-bleached tiles. He sleeps in the same nylon jacket we met him in. His sparse blonde beard curls upward in a smile. The spot used to be home to an ice cream cooler, now it gathers dust along with the other unused rooms of the studio. He yawns and scratches his face, moved in his sleep by the howling in the distance. Since we've started filming he's refused the cot we've offered him, so the others crowd around it nightly, taking turns lying down.

Buster, my old right hand man, sleeps on the cot while the others spend their time in the screening room. His nose is bent up around its metal frame; a rope of drool drips from his round cheeks. His black sweater is riding up, exposing a pale belly. He's not like the rest of my team, the ones faithfully cataloguing Pasolini's *Salò*, sitting in the screening room for me like bright-eyed children. They write camera movements, shot compositions, dialogue, and obscure notes from old films into the

booklets that litter the floors of my study. With these notes I further my own artistic lexicon, and we can keep up with the references and inside jokes of the other Filmmakers. The rest of the studios on the strip have already finished watching *Salo*, and Buster's disinterest leaves us falling behind. I'm hopeful that my film will make up for it but we're all fighting to know the most and make the best, each one of us. This is what we do.

2. Interior, The Bum's house, day; my team is setting up, each of us dressed in black. Hitch extends the legs of the tripod, points the lens and asks me what I need from her. The Bum giggles, but Quentin and an Extra quickly disable his laughing with cold, silent eyes. I'm sitting in a chair in a sweater and jeans, paying little attention to them, watching Buster, his eyes fixed out the window.

I take a sip of my coffee. Buster is mouthing something, staring out onto the wet grass of the parkette, the nucleus of The Six. We've been filming

across the street from the Art Gallery of Ontario for days in the only one of the six townhouses still inhabited. This would make it—and The Bum, its owner—legendary, if anyone were around to notice. The artists that lived in the other houses moved out a long time ago.

Our five thick, muscular Extras mind the doors for security. One of them scratches his armpit and shifts his weight, wondering if I'll need to use him. I won't.

“Buster?” I ask, testing his attention.

“Yes Mr. Lau?” he replies with a slow turn and a flat smile. From his left hand dangles the bag of fresh bagels we've been snacking on. His other hand is gone, lost in a grip accident a while back.

Part of me wants to bridge our distance, but Hitch, brushing the matted, dirty hair from her face, calls sternly: “*Condopocalypse*, scene 3, take 6. Action!” The scene from my film starts taking shape and I become enveloped. All I can think to do is hold out my coffee. Buster takes the mug, transferring the bagels to the floor.

Flash-forward to early tomorrow morning: Buster has me in a basement, tied up and duct taped and I'm shaking, sweating, afraid of dying. He's locked the door and gone off to tell everyone that I "just kind of disappeared."

Present day. The Bum drags two bags of garbage past us and up his stairs for a shot. Hitch has him repeat this three more times and he returns to us, dividing his attention between the camera and the personal effects on the ground. A few piles of clothes, an empty bed frame and a lump of blankets lay on the warped wooden floor. He has the thin face and tired eyes of an organics merchant, with his scruffy blonde neck and scrawny body folded into a nylon jacket that reeks of asphalt and cigarettes. He wears an orange toque that says "Cheez Houze," with more sandy hair growing out of it in thick blades. There are holes in his grey canvas shoes and he smiles a lot and hums some song in between takes.

Quentin is next to me, reading my narration, my questions, and holding the boom with his long,

spindly arms. He's been the voice of my films since we met: he enunciates clearer than I do. He's taken over the boom job with pride and zeal—as Buster has found it too difficult to hold with one arm—and each time he grabs the skinny microphone he wrings his hands around it and smirks, his high hairline wrinkling with the pull of his grin. He thinks about how much closer he is to me, how much he's gained my favour over Buster.

“Now when did you buy this house?” Quentin asks The Bum, deeply, pensively.

“Late, ah, late 2-12 I think,” The Bum stutters back. His green eyes are intense. He's smiling.

“And how much did you spend?”

“Geez, around a grand?”

Quentin pauses and offers a moment for the words to sink in. I'll cue a sound effect later. “You bought this whole house for \$1,000 in late 2012?”

“Yeah that's—“ The Bum starts but Quentin interrupts his reply.

“Terry, I'm sorry, that's a bit expository, isn't

it? Or over-explanatory, at least.” Quentin’s voice is high and mousey when he’s not reading, but he scarcely talks back confidently. He barely knows the difference between expository and explanatory but he’s the only one allowed to call me Terry. His eyes search for mine. Buster stares out the window, still moving his lips.

3. Exterior, Yonge-Dundas Square, one year ago; I’m alone, shooting the opening scenes to a post-Italian-neo-realist, live-action documentary short called *Writers are Stupid*. From above the square the condos block out the sky in every direction. Empty shells tower over me, a hundred storeys high, leaving pillars of daylight pouring down at noon. Lifeless signs and billboards hang above the square in the muted colours of dead neon. I do most of my shooting here, in the largest undeveloped clearing in The Core. It has the most light.

The last of the local shop owners have been moving out their belongings over the past week.

Since the evacuations in January they've been relocating to houses outside The Fence and finding jobs in bigger Suburban stores. The criminals followed them to where there were things to steal and people to sell to. Artists are all that's left in The Core; Writers are the only ones that work in this clearing now. Writers and me.