

The Cracked Limelight by Paul Blake

The camera swept across the white linen and champagne bottle covered tables in the glittery hall as the stage was being rearranged after the previous musical act had finished, it had been the latest flavour of the month, all show and no substance, so fitted in well with this audience. The camera picked out dazzling peacocks in their designer penguin suits as they conversed, flirted, and talked down to the exquisite creatures beside them. Dotted among the fabulous were little pockets of comparative ugliness. The directors, producers, and writers whose work behind the lens allows those in front to shine. The ceremony had been going strong for the past two hours and some guests were more lubricated than others. The show's director chose to swap from the overhead camera to one being held by an operator milling around the tables. The operator focused on a circular table away from the stage, near the edge of the inner circle of the hall's grand floor. The table's location carefully chosen to maximise the walking time for the most-likely award winners without making it drag on too much for the viewing public.

The camera operator pointed to the red light on the front of his camera with his free hand, doing his bit to notify the table guests that his camera was 'live', no one at the table noticed. Their attention was taken by an interaction between one of the guests and a waiter. The waiter, a young Hispanic man wearing a dazzling white shirt and black tie, was calmly explaining to the guest that the champagne bought in for the night had run out so they were distributing bottles of the finest American sparkling wine instead. The guest, K. T. McQueen was considered to be the best movie director of his generation, responsible for several of the highest-grossing movies of all-time and the winner of twelve award statues, tonight was widely expected to be the thirteenth.

“You expect us to drink this swill? This is unacceptable. Quite frankly we were treated better at the Golden Globes last month and everyone knows how cheap they are...” McQueen said, finger-pointing at the waiter.

In the studio, the show's director quickly flipped to another camera as the discussion continued.

“... not to mention the quality of host they have,”

Beside him, DC Wright-Hammer, the most commercially successful actor since Arnie in his prime, laughed at the waiter's misfortune. On the other side of McQueen, was Rachel Kent, the current hottest female actor, and star of McQueen's latest film, Six Shots at Sundown. She was gently pleading with McQueen to let the poor man get on with his job. He didn't control the buying of liquor for the event, and he's clearly getting minimum wage. She was careful though, you never outright told McQueen he was wrong, not if you wanted to work in this industry again. Forced to take schmaltzy Hallmark straight to the bin crap, or even worse... television roles. The director's rant continued as the orchestra started up to recommence proceedings.

On the stage the host walked out to applause, the audience buzzed with excitement, it was time for the final four awards: directing, actress in a leading role, actor in a leading role, and best motion picture. The host cracked a couple of jokes about the length of the program and warned the viewing public to expect slurring and the occasional drunken grope during the upcoming acceptance speeches. She introduced the man and woman who were due to announce the award for best directing. They entered from the back of the stage, a rock star whose best days were far in his past, buried in a drug and underage groupie haze, deep crevasses in his cheeks and an obvious black long-haired wig that failed to hide the ravages of time. To the left of him was a waif-like model, achingly beautiful, and utterly attainable for the right price. They walked to the podium, the rock star's hand caressing the model's Instagram perfect behind. She held an envelope in her left hand, her right hand behind her back as she gently, subtly, guided his hand down inside the backless dress. She was looking for a bumper payday and he was her target. A quick marriage and kill him fast with a whirlwind blaze of drink, drugs, and sex. Who doesn't wanna fuck a rock star. She'd be set for life. They reached the podium and started to read their lines from the auto prompter. His words came out in gasps as his fingers delved deeper, her words were delivered with an icy coolness. After a few moments of awkward, scripted flirtation they announced the nominees and finally the winner:

“The... award goes... to,” he announced as he struggled to open the envelope with one hand, she reached across and helped him, brushing herself closer to him.

“The King of Cowboy movies, Mr K. T. McQueen,” they said in unison. The orchestral music started up in a fanfare, the audience erupted in applause. No longer the focus of attention, the model’s hand dropped to the rock star’s groin and gave it a firm rub through the leather trousers he habitually wore.

At the table, the director was still berating the waiter. DC and Rachel stood up to congratulate the man. DC bent down and spoke into K. T.’s ear. McQueen stopped for a moment; his face changed on a dime from anger to pleasure. All smiles he stood up and hugged DC and Rachel. He shook hands with others around the table and started the walk to the stage. There was minimal swaying or bumping into other tables as an usher beside him guided him through the throng. People shook his hand and clapped his back as he passed hoping he’d recognise their attention at a later date, for a future role, a future paycheck. McQueen didn’t even see them; he was so focused on not falling over. He reached the stairs to the stage and made his way up. Midway up he swayed precariously, his hand reaching for a handrail that wasn’t there. The usher took a step forward, but McQueen found his feet and took the remaining few steps in the graceful manner of a rhino. He bulldozed across the stage towards the podium. The rock star held out his arms for a manly congratulatory hug. The model had one arm around her prize for the evening, the other held the gold-plated statuette. McQueen took the hug from the rock star, it was the done thing, after all. Did he have an erection? McQueen thought as he accepted the statue and a chaste cheek kiss from the model. He stepped up to the podium, his free hand grabbed at it, reducing the stationary lateral movement of his body.

“The King of Cowboy movies? I’ve been called much worse,” he said into the microphone attached to the podium, his voice only slightly slurring. He looked at the statue and smiled. “My lucky thirteenth? What can I say? I’m honoured. I know people dream of having one of these, all I can say is I still get the same feeling holding this one as I did the very first time. To my other nominees who are just as, if not more, worthy of this as me. I’m sorry I have hogged all these. You’ll get your chance in the future as Six Shots at Sundown is my final movie, for at least a while.”

The audience, as a collective, gasped at this news. There had been no hints in the gossip pages and websites, McQueen had even started directing his next film. What the hell was going on? Why is he being so magnanimous?

“I feel the time has come to hang up my viewfinder. I have had the most wonderful career over the past twenty years. Worked with some of the greatest names in the industry, two of which were at my table this evening. Rachel and DC take a bow, kids. You deserve it.” He saluted them with the statue and continued, “Especially you, Rachel. I wouldn’t be holding this tonight if it wasn’t for you. Such an incredible actor. I look forward to seeing your future films and watching your star shine so brightly—”

McQueen rocked backwards as the bullet entered the top of his skull, brains and blood splattered the rock star and model who were standing a few feet back and to the side. They too were taken down as the bullets continued. The audience stood stunned then the sound of the machine gun assaulted them and the panic began.

Chairs and tables were uprooted as the guests moved as one towards the exits at the back of the hall. The occasional straggler cowered on the richly carpeted floor as the shots continued. Actors, producers, writers, costume designers, all fell alongside each other as bullets sprayed the fleeing glitterati, the shooting random and indiscriminate. DC and Rachel hid underneath their table, the white tablecloth covering them. DC flinched with every gun retort. He kept up a constant litany of ‘oh shits’ until Rachel smacked him to shut him up. She was busy tearing a slit in her dress with a steak knife to allow greater movement. The red kimono she was wearing looked amazing and had been a great hit on the red carpet, but it was far too constricting. Her heart was playing thrash metal in her chest but her hands were still and focused on their task. The serrated knife caught on every thread of the dress. What is this made of, adamantium? Come on already.

The rate of shots outside in the hall lessened. Rachel could hear the screams and crying of the wounded, it was muffled due to the tablecloth and obscured by DC’s whimpering but the firing was slowing. There were single shots rather than the rapid-fire burst from machine fire. Could we get out of this?

“DC, pull yourself together,” she hissed. “They’ll hear your crying.” She didn’t know if there was a they or if it was a single gunman. She hoped it was the latter.

She could hear a voice close to the table, “Fucking snowflakes, fucking lefties, we sure showed them, didn’t we, Dad? Fuck Trump? Fuck you.” The voice was American, young and excited.

“Shut up and keep looking. There’s more here, I know there is, start lifting the table covers,” another voice said. This one was older, with a gravelly smoker’s rasp to it.

Rachel saw the heels of a pair of cowboy boots poke under the tablecloth. They were rough with age and use. She snuck forward closer to the boots, still holding the steak knife she put a hand round each of the boot and stood up, pulling with all her strength. Her back lifted the table. Her arms lifted the man. He flipped forward, his head banged on the edge of the table next to Rachel’s and he collapsed to the ground. Rachel’s and DC’s table also flipped, crashing into the table next to them. The man dropped the handgun he was holding. Rachel clambered over his prone body and started stabbing him with the knife. Quickly, she noticed he was wearing a combat vest and the knife was not penetrating. She moved up the body and stabbed him in his exposed neck, just below the ragged grey hairline, again and again. The knife slid in as it did to the prime rib steak she’d nibbled at earlier. She saw the man’s gun on the floor and kicked it back to DC.

“DC, pick the gun up and shoot the other fucker,” she shouted, still stabbing.

Behind her, DC felt the gun hit his shoe. He heard Rachel’s cry and the muscle memory of a dozen action movies made him pick up the gun. His hand slipped around the grip and his finger in the trigger guard, he raised the gun, which was heavier than the ones he’d used before. His finger pulled the trigger and shot Rachel in the back of her head. She fell on the man she’d been chopping into, her bloody blonde hair fanned over him like a shroud. DC dropped the gun like it was a snake, it bounced on the carpet in front of him, between Rachel’s Yves Saint Laurent heeled legs.

He heard a voice scream 'Dad' and an anguished cry. He looked up and saw a man, barely past his teenage years, about ten foot away. He wore a black combat vest over olive and tan army camouflaged fatigues. A machine gun was strapped to his back, a handgun in his hands. DC scrambled for the gun he'd dropped. The boy rushed to his father. He tripped over DC, not seeing him, the machine gun he was wearing hit him in the back of the head. He grunted in pain and looked to see what he'd fallen over. DC had reached the gun and turned over, the boy's legs still covering his. The boy saw the gun and raised his own, twisting as he did. They fired at the same time. Both missed.

Come on, DC, you've done this a thousand times, no bad guy has ever beaten you, DC's inner voice told him. But this isn't the movies and this is a real gun, it continued. They fired again and again. DC caught a round in his shoulder, the man in his foot. DC's gun dry-fired as he ran out of bullets, the boy's gun did the same. DC threw his gun at the boy, it bounced off the combat vest. The boy grabbed at his side and unclipped a hunting knife. He scrambled to his feet as DC shuffled backwards, hands slipping and slicing on the crystal fragments from all the fallen glasses around him. The boy stalked him, the hunting knife in his fist catching the light from the hundred chandeliers overhead. DC backed against a body, he glanced behind him, it was his agent. Bullet hole in his forehead. DC looked at the boy. There was a madness in his eyes, a tremor in his hands. Running on adrenaline and hate. He leapt at DC knife first. DC pushed the boy's arm as it neared, adjusting the trajectory of the strike, instead of DC's chest it struck deep into the thigh of his agent. The boy's weight landed on DC; the boy's forehead hit DC's. The boy's hands closed around DC's neck and squeezed. DC tried to remember the martial arts training he'd received for his role in Shanghai Bodybag as his body panicked. He bucked and twisted but the boy's grip only tightened. DC tried with his left hand to claw at the boy. He couldn't see, tears flooded his eyes, blood joined in from his forehead. His right hand groped around him for a weapon. His fingers touched the heavy base of a bottle and made it spin. He flailed his fingers to grab the neck. His chest was burning from the lack of oxygen, his body slowed it's moving about, his arm deadened. He felt the neck of the bottle hit his palm and he grasped it. He swung the bottle at the boy. It hit him on the head with a deep thunk sound. DC swung it again as the grip around his neck loosened. He lay there gulping in oxygen, the boy on top of him not moving. After a few seconds, DC pushed the boy off him and laid there.

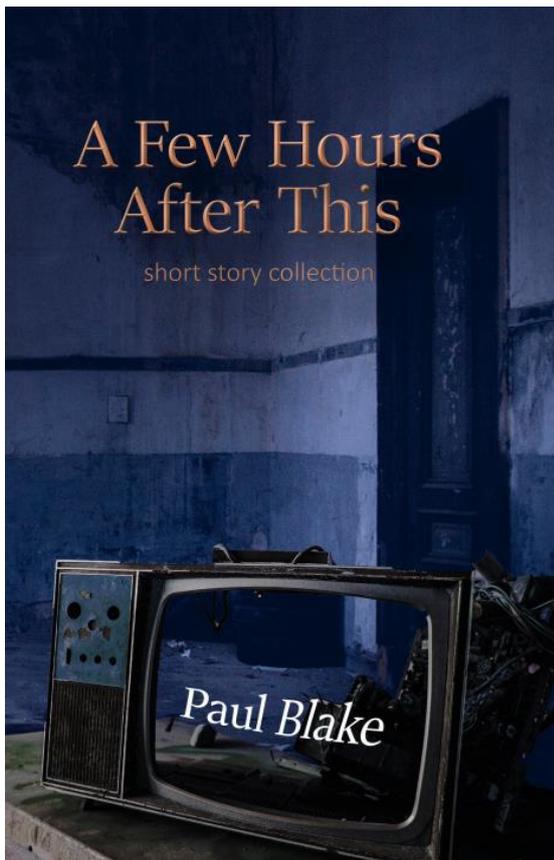
He heard shouts from the back of the hall, the crackle of radios. Great, the cavalry has arrived. “Over here,” he croaked. He looked at the bottle in his hand. The label stating it was ‘America’s Finest Sparkling Wine’. How patriotic, he laughed and then vomited all over himself as the shakes began.

END

Author’s note.

I hope you enjoyed this story, thank you for taking the time to read it.

Twenty-seven of my other short stories can be found in my short story collection *A Few Hours After This* on Amazon - mybook.to/FewHoursEbook.



Paul Blake, London 2020