

THE VOICE IS THE DEMON

LOUIS MASON

-

When she gets to the cinema complex she buys her ticket and enters alone.

Everyone in the film is dressed like a cleaner version of a raver kid from the mid-90s club scene. And it occurs to her as she watches that there is another film here, submerged beneath the images that play across the screen, stripped down, low budget: a B actor who is also a bodybuilder, dropped from a helicopter into a radioactive desert somewhere in Spain where they filmed Westerns in the 60s and then DnD fantasy adventures in the 80s. There is very little dialogue, and no cities at all that have not been evacuated decades before the events of the plot. The ruins that make up the sets are the rusted out shells of old post-war industrial cities; the bodies that move behind the action are twisted in on themselves, twisted by anxiety or illness; and the monster in the film is the sky that comes down on the actors in silence; it is an invisible thing, felt (the cast become visibly nervous, become blunt and dull, what plot there is begins to multiply and refract...) but never addressed directly, and it will infect the entire film and turn it by soft degrees into a horror story. Or the monster will manifest as a light that burns human shadows into the desert sand. An evil traced out in binary: a body, strong and supple, there one second and then obliterated in three or four frames of pure white and silence.

'This land' the hero says 'is steeped in ancient magic'. His co-star hovers around back of frame, an ambiguous figure slipping in and out of soft focus. Some of the shots switch without warning into POV, as though this everyman that we follow has an HD camera hammered into the front of his skull in place of eye sockets.

Out in the desert the first time he watches planes drop white phosphorus on an apartment building he hears her voice singing it's you it's you it's all for you. They drop incendiaries first to drive anyone in the building out into the open, and then high explosives to kill them once they're exposed. He joined up when he was 17. He never finished high school but the army would put him through university and get him the engineering degree he would eventually use to find a job in one of the power plants that dot the rural country back home. Unlike lots of the other guys he never had a girlfriend to leave behind. The desert is very hot and thirst is something that he has become used to over the months of his deployment. He has yet to shoot someone but once when his squad was on patrol their troop vehicle was ambushed and he was the one who radioed a pair of attack helicopters that levelled most of the township with their rockets.

I heard that you like the bad girls honey, is that true?

Back home less than half a decade ago he and some other boys his age rob a couple at knife point on a cold afternoon beyond the outskirts of the city. The air is clear, they all wear big jackets to hide their thin bodies, brittle bodies that would break in pieces if struck with force. None of them carry a gun. He would end up joining the army when two of his friends get shot trying something similar a week or two later with a woman who carried a handgun in her backpack. 'They were punks' she says later to a press of reporters' tape recorders on some 24-hour cable station, 'they looked like punks, mutt dumb and maybe on steroids, lots of time spent lifting weights'. He has big eyes and is not a cruel person, but he knows cruel people and will not be brave enough to intervene in displays of gratuitous cruelty until much later in his life, until after his three tours, which pass as a nightmare that he returns to again and again, willingly, because they are a framework given to him that makes sense, and because he will not starve (as his mother, without ever saying much about it, had throughout her life) in the army.

White phosphorus burns so hot that it burrows into the skin—it adheres and liquifies at the same time, which propels the burning particles through the body, through flesh and bone. The heat also expands the skin and soft tissues that it passes through, expands the pores, gives those caught in it the characteristic charred and bloated appearance of burnt black maggots. Fuel air bombs form a pressure vacuum so quickly that they can tear the trachea and lungs up and out of the mouth and leave them hanging from the lips of the corpse as long red tubes. The bullet from an M16 rifle comes to pieces inside the body—it is lighter and has less integrity than an AK47 round, and each fragment draws its own path through the body. Exit wounds from these lighter, fragmenting bullets are 10 times the size of the entrance wounds, and bodies are often unidentifiable after perforation without expert analysis.

Rural villages of quiet men and women who give the squad as wide a berth as possible. This is the time just before widespread use of predator drones becomes the norm and these villages are drawn into the flow of hostilities with increasing regularity. For weeks they conduct hearts and minds operations by distributing food, coffee, sweets. The company's engineers help to build up the infrastructure that the villagers rely on, help to proof the generators and water pumps and sewerage pipes against the explosives that come down from the sky, reinforce the windows and walls of tiny stone mosques. The danger is the sky.

The ruins they find out here look nothing like the ruins that he knows from back home. There is no neglect in the villages, exposed concrete is cracked and bright along its edges, pushed roughly apart. Nastiness hangs in the air. Ruins here are also crime scenes and can be read backwards in the same way. There is no forgetting, and there is so much more death. The built-up areas of the city where he was born stunk of lies told over decades, of slow cancer, of water stores rusting out and petrol spilling and flowing over concrete lots, everything overgrown, brick buildings falling in on themselves, failures, the hopelessness of poverty. The small anger of poverty and of humiliation. A state racism that he and his white friends were often glad of and complicit in. Impotence. But not explosive, never that roaring excess of light and air that pulls bodies apart.

He dreams nearly every night that she sits up over the whole sky. The sky is white and the air is frozen and the light is bright and clear and hostile. He can hear her singing for him, songs of home, a white girl with big lips and hips and soft eyes who gives blowjobs for cocaine and who falls in love with older men. Rich but not in college; a body that would surprise you, when you come in closer, with its size and its strength; a body as big as a truck or a building grown on every counterculture myth stretching back from the 60s until now, crooning to perfect lovers, to squatting monsters in dark rooms—a spare motel room somewhere with the windows covered and the monsters grown as composites; of strangers and money and film stars and beautiful boys who die violently; the smells are of alcohol, iron, stripped leather; and the myths grown from austerity and drugs and addiction and dying young in the auto wrecks that dot this wide open country, her man already gone (but not to Afghanistan, not to Vietnam) as she sings her songs and sharpens white teeth, an idol, timeless: sings for the crystal moment of the city's evening when eyes grow hard and teeth become predatory.

Golden armour that keeps a window exposed over the cleavage and shows plenty of thigh. A team whose powers slot together nicely, who set up elaborate combo moves on villainous mooks. Witchy girl who can see past and future and uses her power to guide the aim of the big guy with the laser bow. Later she will get him in bed by looking back at a series of his first dates (each is cut in for several seconds as cute retro flashback) and setting up elaborate seductions by tugging on the invisible nerves of his nostalgia. Every power is spelt out, distinct, each has its own internal logics and consistencies, every character will have their chance to save the team, there is no wastage, every love triangle is milked for plot twists. All emotional development is plot relevant. They fight with swords, but swords from the future. Sword guy teams up with the young queer whose power is the creation of force-fields. They fight a monstrous hydra together, and the burning sword slices off heads and cauterises the stumps while the thin and sassy sidekick fends off hundreds of thrusting toothy maws by conjuring invisible barriers. It is physically painful for him. His hands and eyes light up while he fights to let you know that his power is switched on and working as expected. As his energy wanes these lights begin to flicker and go dull.

He is too young to really remember the first late night newscasts, the 10pm images of rocket attacks and jagged night vision and flaring oil wells. In fact, he was born in 94 and has only hazy memories of September 11. She has sung it to him ... a patriot code without real words ... an image of the city obscured by sheets of opaque dust ... faggot Muslims beaten in the streets ... the disciplining of a nation. He can feel the towers falling as a myth that stacked his fuel around him and gave his youth its shape; a plastic image, grown like a mould. Torture becomes a mould too, early on, and no-one that he knows was really very surprised when the first photographs of hooded victims emerge from the state's secret prisons. What interests him and his friends more than these images is the parade of hopeless fuck-ups that have somehow become the state's officials in this procedure, the whining corporals and privates (his bitter hatred of recognition) who immediately begin, via CNN and its competitors, to summon up a type of Freudian psychodrama around their stupidity and their brutality. They are all eventually acquitted of human rights violations. In the aftermath a few end up signing on to do a porn film for \$10,000; and they aren't her but they are somehow of her too—semen lips, summer frocks, naked power, dedicated to the literal consumption of this whole generation of young, angry, racist and bitter men, the blood and stink work of forcing bodies en masse down through steel trap jaws, through the grinders and threshers and breaking rooms of austerity, of pulling all the old state infrastructures apart; and it is a carnival that she sings to him, a production, ritualised and blazing like a beacon, like the crosses on the churches here that light up the night—the killing and eating of the poor.

Witchy girl (Hollywood goth girl shading to lolita too as imaged by the greater frat-boy-cum-nerd imaginary) is casting a binding ritual on a Trump expy. This is, after all, liberal Hollywood. Her power lights up purple, and the design team have appropriated symbols from systems of alchemy and *Kabbalah* (these are the fruits of pre-production, of research and design, of mining content to remix into different aesthetic programs, each one more or less 'accurate', more or less embedded in a historically grounded visual continuum) when it appears on screen—easy to distinguish at a glance from the golden light of the team's primary energy user, laser bow.

She is aware in some distant way that the actors and actresses are really ravenous creatures behind their faces. She studies the way their faces move from the anonymous darkness of the cinema complex, the way that skin stretches across the contours of the skull. The shots are stripped back, sparse and tasteful. Lots of long takes, editing minimal. Colours leached out, big skies, blunt concrete fronts, heat shimmering up off of highways built eight lanes wide, built wider than the towns that they bisect. A type of Marxist sign language that spells R E A L I S M. That this is what it really looks like, these are the abject lives of the people who you pretended not to despise, the secret places of poverty pried open by the instruments of our compassion, our lenses, our filters, our tasteful restraint in editing. The spaces that occlude your properly liberal imagination. The brutalities that you cannot access and that grow out beyond the scope of your small judgements.

This is it: to be taken beyond responsibility for your actions, to cease finally to be the imperial agent bringing death and become instead a blind thing to be pitied, so easy to mislead, not really in full control of your limbs...

Punk boy carries a flick-knife and has a ripped denim jacket. He was the last member of the team to join, a heel-face turn made inevitable when he realised, along with the audience, that the anarchic Big Bad, previously a hero for naive little punk boy, would kill civilians en masse if they got in his way. Or even to make a point. To spread fear. Punk boy is, at the end of the day, driven by an internal sense of justice and so has lent his weapon provisionally to the super-powered state enforcer squad. He quips ferociously at super-patriot sword guy as they fight back to back against swarms of alien terrorists.

In the denouement after the climactic fight scene the tough-as-nails female captain chooses punk boy over both laser bow and sword guy and there is a tasteful sex scene back at the base played for soft comedy. The two snubbed men share a drink in an upstate New York bar with beautiful wood-panelled interiors and raise wry eyebrows at the camera—women eh?

After the credits there is a 10-second scene that shows a field of stars, a figure dressed in flowing white robes, a deep hood, his back to the audience, floating in the blackness, staring down at the planet which to him is the size of a dinner plate. He reaches out towards it, the shadow of his palm blocks the light from the sun, and the screen cuts to black.

She exits the cinema and makes her way across the city and into the suburbs. It is when walking under bridges that she feels most exposed. She can feel them before they come properly into sight, feel the vast, echoing spaces beneath them, darkness under arching concrete and foundation pillars. The air is cold beneath the muted sounds of heavy traffic, it is dark, her footsteps echo, her sense of time is strange, her vision telescopes out behind her so that she can see herself enter the void beneath the gaping concrete mouth, can see the *exact moment that her body will disappear ...*