

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 7 Number 6

Page 1 – THE MACARONI GHOST by Robert Pettus. Mr. Pettus is an English as a Second Language teacher at the University of Cincinnati. Previously, he taught for four years in a combination of rural Thailand and Moscow, Russia. He likes writing, but he never found the time or the courage to try and regularly do it until quarantine forced him into a much more isolated lifestyle. He was most recently accepted for publication at *Apocalypse-Confidential*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Blood Moon Rising*, and *The Green Shoes Sanctuary* online journals. The Macaroni Ghost is one of the stories he recently wrote.

Page 7 – ROBES IN THE ROCK by Michael Fowler. Michael Fowler is a former humor writer walking a new path.

Page 11 – BEYOND THE STARS by Brenden Pontz. Mr. Pontz is an American college student from Connecticut. He is an ultramarathon runner, history major, and lover of all things weird. He has been published before in *Fleas on the Dog Magazine* and the *Freshwater Literary Journal*.



“THE MACARONI GHOST”

by ROBERT PETTUS

One

“I saw it! I saw it again!” squealed Molly, running heavy-footed across the old, creaking wood-flooring of the upstairs hallway. It was the third time she had done this in only the previous five days. She ran to my parent’s room, thumping authoritatively on the white-painted door like a KGB agent looking to search a house:

“Hey!” she screamed, “I saw it again! I said that I saw *her* AGAIN!”

My dad eventually opened the door. I could see him from my bed; I rarely shut the door to my bedroom. It made me feel trapped. He looked tired. He hadn’t shaved in a while, I could tell. He stared red-eyed at Molly, looking down at her in frustration:

“There’s nothing in there,” he said, “Come on, I’ll help you get back to sleep.”

He followed Molly back into her room. No one believed her when she ran around shouting about ghosts in her room; why would they? She was only five years old. Nearly *everything* she ever saw was some fantasized misinterpretation of a much more mundane reality. Lying in my bed, wide awake, I watched my father follow her back into her bedroom. He would sleep in there again tonight, trying, likely unsuccessfully,

to convince her that there were no spirits in her room.

Two

I can’t pretend that she didn’t give me the creeps, though – she did – at least a little bit. In the afternoon hours, when no one was upstairs to see me being so foolish, I would scour her room, looking for evidence of the Macaroni Ghost. That was what she called it – the Macaroni Ghost. There was an old rocking chair in her bedroom, one that had previously belonged to our great-grandmother on my mom’s side. Molly said that each night, the Macaroni Ghost flew in through the window from outside – regardless of whether it was open or not, though Molly said the ghost preferred it open, said she became angry if it was closed – sat down in the chair, began rocking, and greedily scarfed down a bowl of mac n’ cheese. It was such a ridiculous story. I judged myself every day while I was scanning her room like a paranormal investigator. I was so stupid for doing that. A Macaroni Ghost! What a stupid thing! Why would a ghost need to eat in the first place?

Finishing looking under the bed, I checked the closet. Nothing unusual. After that, I opened the door to the attic. Molly’s

room connected to the naked interior of the house – latched itself to its wooden bones. Pulling the string to the light bulb, I continued looking around. Boxes – only cardboard boxes, filled with things my parents didn't need but were afraid to throw out. Throwing them out would be destroying the past; it would be accepting the inevitable reality of age. They would never to that – they didn't want to. I didn't blame them, I didn't want to throw that old stuff out, either.

I saw movement in the back of the attic. Only a shimmer – a blink – momentarily blocking the focused light of the lone, unshaded bulb. I stared with anxiety in that direction. I was afraid of rats. I had never even seen one, but every time I crawled back into some dark part of the house, I imagined there to be rats everywhere. Hungry, diseased ones. Predatory, shark-like, circling rats. My curiosity nonetheless getting the better of me, I crawled into the back of the attic, the ceiling of which sloped downward with the slant of the roof. I told myself that I was brave.

I clapped away the dust my hands had collected from crawling on the floor. There was nothing. No ghosts, no rats – nothing. Only darkness. Darkness and boxes. Anxiously concluding another futile ghost-hunt, I turned and scurried hurriedly from the attic, aggressively yanking the string of the light-bulb. Upon reentering the light of Molly's bedroom, I stared back into the blackness of the attic. It wasn't all that dark – I could still see the light-bulb string waving back and forth from where I'd grabbed

it so forcefully – but it was dark enough. Now released from that place, it seemed somehow more otherworldly, somehow even creepier. I thought I saw further movement from within. More rats, perhaps.

Three

“I saw it,” said Molly. It was the following morning. She was diving into her Applejacks recklessly, splashing milk all over the white table-cloth covering our antique dining room table.

“I saw it again! I see it every night, these days! It never does anything to me – it just sits there and eats macaroni! Sits there staring at me! I told mom and dad; I tell them every night! But they don't believe me! Do you believe me, Ed?”

I was eating my own breakfast; a package of blueberry Pop Tarts – the kind with no icing. I liked that, for some reason. Icing made them too sweet.

“Of course I don't believe you!” I responded, biting into my pastry as crumbs sprinkled onto the tablecloth, “Do you think I'm stupid, or something? There's no ghost in your room! Especially no macaroni-eating ghost!”

“Oh yeah!” responded Molly, “If you're so sure of yourself, why don't you sleep my room tonight?”

“No problem!” I said, “I'm not afraid of your stupid room!”

I started to sweat. My hands were shaking. There were rats in that room, at minimum – their colony was in the attic – and what if there *was* a ghost? I didn't go

searching around the place for no reason; some part of me believed Molly.

Four

Later that afternoon, I began scouring the house for supplies. If I was going to spend the night in Molly's haunted bedroom, I needed to make sure I had everything required for self-preservation. I got my brightest flashlight. I grabbed a Bible, just in case. I scoured the house for every battery I could find. I wasn't going to run out of power; I had seen way too many

movies to allow that to happen. I grabbed a pocket-knife and, for some reason, a canteen, which I filled with tap-water from the sink.

Sifting through an old, black-painted junk-dresser in the kitchen, I came across a tattered, old piece of paper. It was a handwritten recipe; a very old one, dated at 1932. It was a recipe for rice pudding. The paper was soft and crumbled – barely intact. It was signed by Grannie Dean – my great grandmother, on my mom's side. I shoved it back into the drawer and took the batteries I was looking for.



Five

I set up the room in the way that made me feel most safe. I had flashlights in every corner. None of them were rigged to come on, or anything like that, but I still liked having them. I put the bible, the pocket-knife, and the canteen on the bedside table. I would simultaneously gut the rats while reading bible verses to the ghost. That was my plan. I had even highlighted some verses and used post-it notes to mark their places. Hebrews 9:27 was my favorite; it was the one I was going to yell if I saw the Macaroni Ghost:

"...just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,"

It had a double meaning, I subconsciously thought. The ghost needed to be judged by God, but it was also, in that imaginary instance, going to be judged by me, as I delivered the bible verses to it and expelled it from my sister's room.

That fictional scenario gave me comfort, and I fell asleep. Molly had an old twin-bed. It spoke in high-pitched creaks as I tossed around throughout the night, flipping the pillow from one side to the other while half-sleeping.

I dreamt of giant ghost rats, chasing me through a dark forest reminiscent of those surrounding my central Kentucky hometown – hilly, crunchy-leaved knobs. I ran through the woods, trying as hard as I could to avoid tripping on the ancient, slithering roots, or on the brittle downed tree trunks. The rat ghosts pursued. An apparition of my father – red-eyed,

unshaven, and clothed only in his underwear – flew along beside me, telling me that there were no ghosts, that I needed to go back to sleep. He said it monotonously, again and again, as I ran through the woods. I tripped on a root; I fell to the soft, chalky dirt, staring directly into the circular, dark musk of a decomposing tree. Out from within slithered an unusually gargantuan copperhead. It spoke:

"...people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,"

It opened its mouth, a bizarre, ever-widening gullet from within containing multitudinous stars collectively composing the downward-spiraling, tubular center of a serpentine galaxy – its throat. I awoke.

Six

It was windy outside; there was a storm coming. The old tree outside Molly's bedroom window swayed creaking back and forth, the end of its longest branch periodically connecting with the siding of the house, scraping it like the claws of an invading, otherworldly creature.

It was still dark. Using the flashlight by my desk, I checked Molly's circular, pink alarm clock. It read 3:06. I looked around the room. I saw nothing. The house seemed to sway back and forth, groaning like a ship at sea, but that wasn't abnormal – I was used to that. The darkness combined with the strange noises of the old house always gave me that sensation. I shined my light toward the Macaroni Ghost's rocking chair. There was nothing.

The chair creaked back and forth, from the wind blowing in through the open window. I had left it open on purpose – Molly said that the Macaroni Ghost became angry when the window was left closed. The chilly wind blew through, fluttering the white curtains overtop the rocking chair.

“That’s what it is!” I said aloud deductively, “She thinks the curtain is a ghost!”

Laughing, I lay back down.

I couldn’t sleep, for some reason. I tossed and turned. The bed squeaked like a rat. I threw the heavy quilt from the top of the bed to the dusty floor below, now using only the white sheet as a cover. Even that was too much, though, which was strange; it wasn’t at all hot outside, and the window was open, so I let my legs dangle out like bait over the side of the bed.

Something began grabbing at my foot. Finally drifting off to sleep, I didn’t at first notice it, but upon recognition, I leapt atop the bed, clutching the pale green wall of the bedroom with sweaty palms.

“What was that?” I said silently to myself, “Did I imagine that?”

I must have imagined it. There was no way something was grabbing at my foot from under the bed. That wasn’t even what the Macaroni Ghost did! It just ate macaroni! In the rocking chair! Which – upon checking for confirmation – was still rocking vacantly in the wind of the window!

I noticed that I was missing a sock. How did that come off? It wouldn’t have just fallen off; something had to have yanked it! Frantic, I covered myself with the white sheet and leaned in horror over the

side of the bed. A shadow crept slowly from beneath – enlarging like an ever-spreading shadow through the darkness as it revealed itself:

“BOOOOOOOOOO!” came a thundering whisper.

Molly slid out from under the bed, trying unsuccessfully to muffle her uncontrollable laughter – she didn’t want to wake up mom and dad.

“I really got you!” she said softly, “You really believed in the Macaroni Ghost! I saw you in here inspecting the place like you thought you were in one of those Agatha Christie books mom reads! You really wanted to get to the bottom of it! I got you so good! You were so scared!”

Molly continued her laughter. I was so angry at her. I glared at her, my eyes growing larger and redder by the second. I felt like such an idiot.

“You know what!” I began, but I couldn’t finish. I didn’t know what to say. My eyes began watering, just a little. I couldn’t let her make me cry; she would know that she had won, if I did that.

Suppressing the tears, I fell back into the bed, glancing peripherally toward the back of the room, seeing a shape fly in through the window. It materialized in the rocking chair. It had a bowl. It was eating something.

“Look!” I whispered frenziedly at Molly, “Look over there!”

“No way, Jose!” said Molly, “You’re not going to get me back! I’m going to revel in this victory!”

“Look!” I said again. I grabbed Molly’s

head and turned it toward the rocking chair. Upon looking in that direction, her face alit with terror. She jumped into the bed and – as I had – used the white sheet as a reality-shield.

The ghost made no move. It rocked back and forth. It ate its bowl of food. It wasn't macaroni – it didn't look like macaroni, anyway – it was some rice-dish. Rice pudding, maybe. That's what it was!

The smell of rice-pudding quickly, strongly permeated the entirety of the room; that sweet, cinnamon scent, with raisins. As if in response to the new smell, hungry squeaking also filled the room, growing ever-louder, as if the product of surround-sound speakers, though its source clearly originating near the rocking-chair – near the door to the attic.

The chair continued rocking. It was the spirit of an elderly woman. She wore a pale, faded blue dress with white trim. She had brown slippers and long white socks. She rocked back and forth. She smiled at us, her eyes widened. Her rocking ceased. Her non-physical hands gripped tightly the armrests of the rocking chair. She leaned forward as if to get a better look at us. Her eyes then widened in terror. She turned, from her chair back to the attic door. The door was shaking; it looked near to burst.

Suddenly, as if unintentionally, she was swept backward, under the still-closed, though violently rattling door, into the attic. A wet, chomping squeaking noise came from within.

Seven

“We have to go in there, right?” I whispered to Molly.

“What?” she said, “I'm not going in there! You're crazy!”

“We have to! That's Grannie Dean! It is; I'm sure of it! Come on!”

We made our way to the edge of the attic door, which had by this point stopped its rattling. I clutched the unstable, glass-handled door knob, twisting it slightly as if to open it as quietly as possible. Inside, there was only blackness.

“I can't reach it!” said Molly.

“What?” I said, before noticing where she was pointing. I grabbed the string attached to the unshaded lightbulb hanging from the sloping, splintery wood of the ceiling. Taking a step toward the back of the room, I turned on my flashlight.

There were no rats. In the corner of the room lay an empty bowl – remnant, still moist rice-pudding lining its rim. A vacant, faded blue, white collared dress lay innocently on the ground near the bowl. I could hear squeaking from underneath the floorboards – down into the cavernous bones of the house.

“What happened to Grannie Dean!” said Molly, “What happened to the Macaroni Ghost!”

I fell to my knees. My face ghost-white:

“She'll be back,” I said, “She has to come back.”

The squeaking, as if the hysterical laughter of a bloodthirsty mob, continued. It continued. ❖

“ROBES IN THE ROCK”

by MICHAEL FOWLER

Our past is memory, our present a feeling, our future surmise, but memory and feeling too are only surmise. Soldiers led me into the burial chamber with ninety-nine others. Laborers, farmers, hunters, cooks, accountants. One of us for each day of our year. Kamen had given us a potion to drink. To ease the passage into the next life, the priest told us. Upon awakening, we would continue to serve Farner, our King, in a perfect world. Perfection too is surmise.

We found ourselves enclosed in a tomb of solid rock. Torches burned on the walls, drawing air from a secret corridor. Farner's magnificent coffin of gold and jewels lay glittering on a stone table. The potion once administered, the soldiers left us, all but those few who stayed to serve Farner.

As I stood immobilized by the potion, Kamen whispered in my ear, his hand removing money from my pocket: “Learned metaphysician, enjoy your journey to the next life, and serve Farner well. The King took the potion before you, two days ago. The potion will bring you to him safely, and these silver amulets. In this way I repay you for proving the Eternal and the Ideal.”

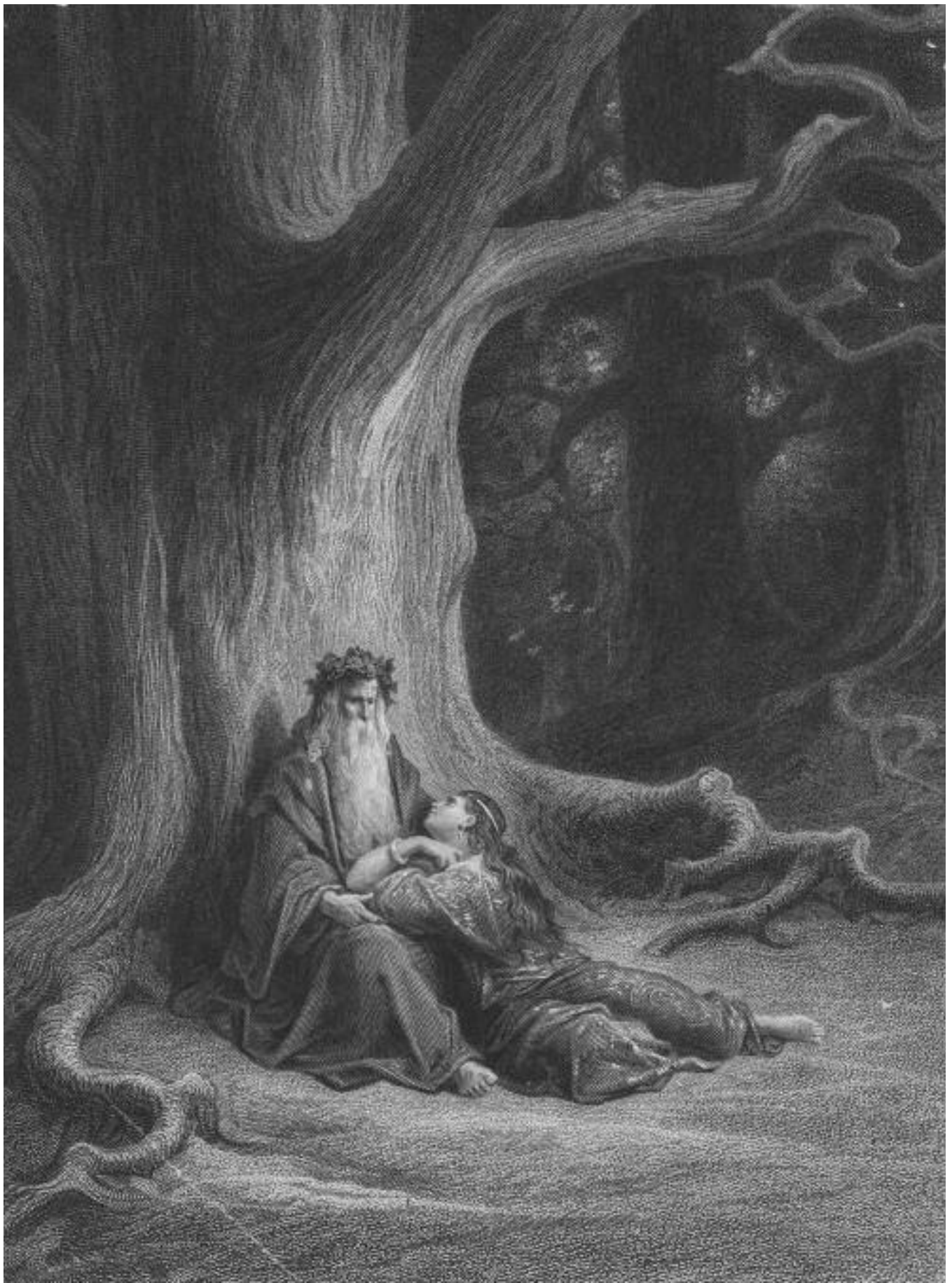
The priest hung charms around my neck and vanished. At the same moment, the corridor closed. The torches quickly

burned out, and the darkness of the blind descended on us. No one cried out to be sealed in alive, not even I, once so afraid of death. The honor was too great, and the potion too strong.

My voice now gone, my body also changed. I felt, but in the dark failed to see my fingers curl and enter the rock, my skin and beard assume the hard smoothness of the walls that confined me. Then I was in the rock but not of the rock, like a fish in black water.

If I believed in a psyche, I would say my psyche dwelt in the rock. But I had studied the atomists, who taught that all was atoms and void. The stone and my body, though both were of atoms, spread themselves thinly in void and did not collide.

The science I acknowledged, but a question remained: was Farner too in the rock? Was passing through stone the sole path to the afterlife, or had the great Farner taken a shortcut, one denied to us menials? The potion would guide me to him, the priest said. But perhaps Farner's atoms had already migrated beyond, and the King stood in the lasting bright sunlight, or in the cool shade by a beautiful blue river, wondering what was keeping the rest of us, and devising punishments owed us for our tardiness.



For I was not the only one held back by the rock. The others sealed in the tomb with me, perhaps all ninety-nine of them, had accompanied me into the thick mass, and I encountered several, touching them as clouds touch.

“It’s cool here,” said the first. I heard her clearly, since it was easy to speak and hear in the stone. She was a comely domestic I knew, Atta her name, who would nurse Farner’s many future offspring. I asked if she’d yet contacted Farner, or knew his whereabouts. Her reply was to draw close to me, her atoms mingling with mine, our bodies two mists. Nearness to His Magnificence brought forth an animal arousal in us both. Afterward we drifted apart, and I met her no more. The rock was immense, and one could flow in any direction.

No doubt by fate, I bumped into the crafty priest, he who had drugged us all and laden me with his trinkets. I recognized his odor. “Kamen,” I said, “you here?” I heard a grunt, and Kamen replied that he had failed to quit the tomb before being sealed in. “Then you make one hundred and one of us, and it serves you right,” I said. “Those silver amulets of yours fell away when I entered the rock, which wouldn’t admit their cheap metal. I feel a plain homespun cloak around my shoulders; otherwise, I’m unadorned and barefoot, with even my scholar’s cap gone.”

“Don’t complain about my metal, scholar, when your paper hat too was found unworthy,” Kamen replied. “We are all arrayed in simple homespun now, as any of

us can affirm. We are robes in the rock. And if you were a true scholar, you would know how to pity an unfortunate priest.”

“Pity you?” I said. “By chance you make the greatest of all journeys, and manage to dip your hand in my pocket, and I should pity you? But tell me, how did you enter the rock?”

“Once trapped, I gulped down the potion when the torches went out and the soldiers abandoned us. After that I prayed to quit Farner’s vault, with this unexpected result, beyond the power of my potion to achieve. What now? Do you know the way to Farner?”

“Go east,” I said to mock him; wasn’t his potion supposed to bear us to the King? “East is the royal direction.”

“And which way is....”

I floated away from him, unsure of east myself, and soon trembled in the presence of a being who, even within the rock, cast an aura to rival the sun’s: Farner himself.

“Who are you?” the King asked me. His voice was unmistakable, and his tone amiable, as if we two sat in chairs at his palace in the green valley, discussing triangles. I identified myself as one of his scholars, a student of the geometers.

“I remember you,” he replied. “You were always so clever with diagrams, you in your pointy cap and gray beard. Can you show me the way to the perfect afterlife, or is this it?”

“No, Majesty,” I replied. “This is not the perfect afterlife, since silver and marks of scholarship are not permitted here. I suspect your own gold crown is missing also,

and that is highly imperfect. At present we inhabit the rock of your burial vault. I believe it is only a step along our journey.”

“Will we arrive soon?” he asked. “The priest said it would only take a moment, but it’s been more than a day, if I guess right, and I would like a bath.”

“Very soon, Majesty,” I replied, and while he no doubt dreamt of a tub of warm water and soap-wielding servant girls, I slipped away, devising a plan.

I would move in a straight line until I felt a warm undersurface of rock. On the other side the great sun would shine, bringing heat to the stone, and light to the bright afterlife. Here I would enter. I would encourage any others I met to do the same, and to communicate their findings. But the line was uncertain, the rock deep and everywhere cool, and meetings rare. The journey would be long. ❖

“BEYOND THE STARS”

by BRENDEN PONTZ

Hollywood Daily

Your online source for movie news

Star-Struck? Spielberg producer aims For sweeping sci-fi epic

By Michelle Yan
August 27th, 2020

George Lucas, special effects producer and director of 70s teen comedy *American Graffiti*, announced on Tuesday that he'll be directing an upcoming science fiction film. Titled *Star Wars*, Lucas describes the film as a “Action-packed adventure story, about a young farm boy saving the galaxy from an evil Galactic Empire.”

In a Zoom interview with this reporter, Lucas claimed that the script for *Star Wars* had been written since the late 1970s. But due to a lack of studio interest, Lucas set the script aside and pursued his career as a pioneer for CGI special effects. Though Hollywood will likely never break the tradition of using practical effects, Lucas's CGI can still be seen in the works of cult classic director Steven Spielberg.

When asked why he decided to revisit such a long-forgotten project, Lucas claimed that “Well, the world right now is in desperate need of optimism. People have been feeling trapped since the start of the pandemic, and I'm hoping that *Star Wars* can take them into this big, exciting world and offer some sort of hopeful escape. I

grew up watching characters like Flash Gordon, and my aim is to give people that same sense of awe and wonder that I had.”

Star Wars is scheduled for release in the summer of 2021. It will be produced in partnership with Disney Studios, and released on Netflix, Disney+, and in socially distanced theaters.

More Movie News

[Tom Cruise looks back on 11 years as Iron Man, talks post-MCU career plans](#) -by Andrea Kelley

[Speech Sounds director Alex Garland gives behind-the-scenes look at Oscar-winning film](#) -by Stephen Underwood
[Inside President Trump's Twitter war with Hollywood](#) -by Jacob Frazier

Michelle stared at her laptop screen, re-reading her article for what felt like the dozenth time that day. Rationally, she knew that there were no spelling mistakes, misquotes, or grammar errors. Yet as her first major article for *Hollywood Daily*, it had to be absolutely perfect. Everything, from her years of pursuing a journalism major to the stressful move to LA, led up to this single moment. This would be the foundation for Michelle to launch her career, the bedrock that she could build upon until she reached her goal of making it to the red carpet. Granted, it wasn't the biggest story in the world. George Lucas

hadn't been in the director's chair for decades, and his idea for *Star Wars* was met with little fanfare from audiences. Yet Michelle told herself to take what she could get. One does not make it big overnight, after all.

Finishing her latest re-read, the Chinese-American woman tore her eyes away from her laptop and reached for the cup of coffee to her right. As she took a sip, Michelle took a moment to look around her cramped, barebones apartment. It was painted a soft gray hue and kept fastidiously clean, a consequence from a year of COVID and a lifetime of OCD. Here and there were scattered mementos of Michelle's childhood in Rhode Island: pictures of her parents, her framed degree from URI, and vacation photos with her high school friends from their trip to Ogunquit. The apartment certainly didn't feel like the upscale office Michelle imagined herself working at, but the same could be said for countless others forced to work from home.

Sighing, the young reporter turned back to her laptop and began drafting a follow-up email to George Lucas. She hoped to secure another interview after Disney finished the casting process and script editing. Though Michelle didn't think Lucas' idea was half bad, she wondered how the higher executives at Disney would take it. From the rumors Michelle picked up, they were cut from the same cloth as the heads of *Hollywood Daily*; the stuffier, uptight sort who wouldn't give a no-name, East Coast girl like her the time

of day. Hollywood was a true urban jungle, a place where survival-of-the-fittest ruled, and opportunism was prized over all else. You had to be quick and tenacious, lest your career gets torn to shreds like a lion mauling a gazelle. And the execs at Disney certainly fit the bill for lions. As Michelle hit 'Send', she pondered that both herself and George Lucas would need all the hope and optimism that they could get.

Twitter Thread, September 8th, 2020

Disney (@Disney) Sept 6

Get ready for George Lucas's #StarWars, coming to Disney+ in the summer of 2021! Witness the battle to save the galaxy!

35 Replies 653 Retweets 2k Likes

| **NoobSlayer** (@CODPro69) Sept 6

First TV, now Twitter? I'm sooo sick of seeing ads for this movie. Seriously, who cares about sci-fi? It's all artsy, elitist BS.

| **HufflepuffQueen** (@Potterhead458) Sept 6

Idk, I'm not a big sci-fi fan either, but this looks pretty fun. It sounds like that old TV show Star Trek mixed with Harry Potter; definitely something I'd get Disney+ for.

| **Mark Hamill** (@HamillHimself) Sept 7
(Replying to @Disney)

Sounds like a blast! I'll be the first to see it!

| **IAmTheNight** (BatFan43) Sept 8

So the Joker likes Disney movies? Okay, this is officially canon!

Star Wars hit with Production Delays

By Michelle Yan
September 14th, 2020

George Lucas's plans for a sprawling space opera have been put on hold while the script undergoes a period of editing. According to Disney exec and *Star Wars* producer Kathleen Kennedy, it needed some "Slight changes", such as cleaning up the dialogue and downsizing the scope of the story. Lucas, who is scheduled to offer this reporter his own comment in the coming week, reportedly wanted the film to be much more CGI-heavy than what is technologically feasible.

Yet for audience members excited for *Star Wars* who fear drastic changes, Kennedy assures that Disney will "be preserving as much of Lucas's vision as we can." The changes are expected to delay the release date for *Star Wars* by an estimated two weeks.

"I'm sorry Mr. Lucas, but could you repeat that?" Michelle asked, "You got disconnected for a moment." On the other end of the Zoom call, George Lucas waited a moment for his computer to reconnect before speaking up again.

"I said they're changing everything. They're just taking my idea, and ripping it apart." The director threw up his hands in frustration, like someone had just told him to rewrite his whole script from scratch. Michelle winced slightly, realizing that

something massive must have gone on behind the scenes. The last time she spoke with Lucas, the white-haired, bespectacled man had been rather awkward and introverted, stumbling over his words a little like he wasn't used to being interviewed. The only time Lucas seemed to come alive was talking about his idea for *Star Wars*, yet now he seemed ready to light their whole set on fire.

"Um, what do you mean by everything?" she asked.

"I mean it'll be my movie in name only. Take Luke, the main character. I wanted Luke to be played by a young guy, right? Someone relatable?" Michelle gave a quick nod. "Well, I was all set to get Tom Holland as Luke. When I approached Kathleen Kennedy about this, you know what she said?" Lucas leaned forward in his chair, like he was about to reveal some dark and terrible secret. "She wanted Bradley Cooper! Said something about Luke being more 'grizzled.' That's ridiculous! Then Kathleen wanted the plot changed to be more 'relevant', so it can focus on 'fighting modern injustice', or something like that. Well, what's more relevant than fighting an evil empire?"

The question didn't seem aimed at Michelle. It felt less like he was talking to her, and more like Lucas was using the interview as a way to vent his anger. Even over a Zoom call, it made the young woman feel nervous and uncertain. She didn't know where other reporters found the confidence to talk with Hollywood personnel on a casual level, let alone calm

one down. She quickly switched tabs to look at her pre-written list of questions. “So, what are your thoughts on Ms. Kennedy’s statements to *Hollywood Daily* then?”

“She was downplaying her actions to look good for the camera, pure and simple,” Lucas replied, making small chopping motions with his right hand to drive home his point. “Kathleen was trying to minimize the behind-the-scenes issues so she doesn’t hurt Disney’s reputation. But let me tell you, Miss Yan, people deserve to know. The real reason Kathleen shot down my ideas wasn’t anything to do with the scope of my story, it’s because executives like her are afraid of change.”

At this, Michelle felt a spark of inspiration break through her anxiety. This could be good material for a new article. “Would you like to elaborate on that, Mr. Lucas?” she questioned.

“Gladly. Look at what Kathleen said about not wanting to use CGI. It had nothing to do with the budget, I mean, Disney has enough money to buy half the world! They just don’t accept anything that doesn’t fit their mold! The whole sci-fi genre is like this, it’s the same reason why I couldn’t get *Star Wars* off the ground in the 70s! Critics want sci-fi movies to be mirrors, they want commentary about our world. But sometimes people want to be taken to other worlds. Audiences want to believe in something better than what we have here. They want to be heroes like Luke and save a galaxy or get the girl. Most importantly, they want movies to be *fun*,

not serve as a reminder of all the awful things out there. Folks like Kathleen Kennedy are against this kind of thinking, but I’m going to fight for my vision of *Star Wars*.”

Lucas paused, “Could you make that last part my official quote?” Michelle nodded, and the director slumped back into his chair. Lucas readjusted his glasses with a tired hand, his speech having drained away all of his fury and energy from before. He looked crumpled and debilitated, like Lucas knew that his mission was equal to grabbing a slingshot and lobbing a stone at Goliath. Yet he clearly wasn’t going to back down. It made Michelle realize that she and Lucas weren’t too different; they both bit off more than they could chew in their efforts to make a name for themselves in Hollywood. The jungle was indeed harsh, yet interviewing Lucas made her realize just how nasty it could really be. Michelle felt her nerves flare up, and her red-carpet dream started to look a bit less desirable.

As Michelle wrapped up the interview, Lucas assured her that he’ll be available to take any further comments about the production of *Star Wars*. “Disney isn’t going to like what I’ve said here, but I can’t let their voice be the only voice.” The director’s newfound passion for interviews came off as a small surprise, yet *Star Wars* was clearly Lucas’ hill he’d prepared to die on.

“Thank you, the Daily’s always ready to hear an update on this story,” Michelle reassured. The statement was purely her

attempt at professionalism; deep down, the reporter wondered whether the rest of the magazine cared that she existed. “Oh, and Mr. Lucas,” she blurted out, “Uh, good luck with what you’re trying to do.”

For the first time in their whole discussion, George Lucas gave a small, tired smile. “Thanks,” he nodded, “I’m going to need it.”

The day after writing and submitting an article about her interview with Lucas, Michelle decided to take a risk and go food shopping. Stores were primary hotspots for COVID, but she was running out of things to eat, and unlike a select handful of LA residents, couldn’t pay someone to shop for her. She spent the whole affair masked-up with an oversized bottle of hand sanitizer in her purse, cringing internally when other customers ignored social etiquette and walked past her closer than six feet apart. It was the worst possible time to be a germaphobe, and by the time she reached the checkout line, Michelle had sanitized her hands more than a surgeon on an operating table.

The person in front of her was a middle-aged white woman with a bob haircut, who had gotten into an impassioned rant about politics to the cashier. She wasn’t wearing a mask. The cashier in question was a tall, lanky teenage boy, wearing gloves and two masks, who looked like he’d rather be anywhere but here. “And I told my cousin that Biden doesn’t deserve to run for President,” the

woman exclaimed, acting like she alone decided how elections went. “He’s too old, too corrupt, and supports whatever Fauci’s doing with the vaccine! Can you believe that?”

The boy didn’t look up from the register. “No kidding. I can’t even vote yet, so I don’t see the big deal.” His voice had the deadpan tone that belonged only to long-suffering, minimum wage workers.

“Well, the big deal is that he’ll ruin America!” the lady shrieked, “If Trump won again, he’d-”

Michelle’s cell phone rang, sparing her from having to hear more. As she fished it from her purse, her eyes widened. The caller was none other than Stephen Grant, editor for *Hollywood Daily*. Michelle hadn’t spoken to him since he hired her, so Grant taking the time to call her was either very promising, or a sign that she seriously screwed something up. The reporter carefully moved outside the checkout line as she answered the call. “Hello?” she asked, a small knot of fear in her stomach, “Mr. Grant?”

“Yan!” a gruff male voice practically screamed on the other end, “You know that article you wrote?” He sounded furious, but then again, Michelle got the impression from the last time they met that rage was his default state. Stephen Grant lived up to all of the stereotypes about newspaper editors, he was a gray-haired, hard headed, loudmouth who wouldn’t feel out of place demanding incriminating pictures of Spider-Man.

“Um, the one about George Lucas?”

“No, I mean the one about Betty White! Of course, I mean that washed-up, space opera nut!” he thundered. “Have you heard what everyone’s saying about your article?”

The knot in Michelle’s stomach wound tighter. What did he mean by ‘everyone’? Was it something good or bad? She decided to play it cool and hope for the best. “I’ve been meaning to, Mr. Grant, but I’ve been busy running errands.”

“Errands? What am I paying you for? Look Yan, your story has been all over the Internet for the past day!”

Michelle’s jaw dropped, like Grant told her she had just won the lottery. “It has?” Her own voice sounded distant, like Michelle’s brain was still trying to process the good news.

Evidently, her boss didn’t care. “Yes, and don’t make me repeat myself! No one cared about this shitty little movie until *you* revealed all the drama behind the scenes! Now people are eating it up! It’s like I always say: controversy sells! Anyway Yan, I want you to do a follow-up about this *immediately!* Contact Kathleen Kennedy or one of her people and get their rebuttal.”

Michelle couldn’t help but smile despite Grant’s attitude. “Right away Mr. Grant. The second I get home, I’ll send out a call or an email. Oh, I’ll see if I can land another interview!”

He gave a short, impatient grunt; his version of showing approval. “And remember Yan, we need to make our stance in this situation very clear. Though all the neckbeard, bottom feeders online might be

siding with the director, the *Daily* is going to pitch its tent with Disney.”

At that sentence, Michelle’s good mood hit a wall; like a song giving way to the sound of a dying, scratched-up record. “What?” she asked after a beat or two of silence. “But Lucas said they were the ones messing with his script.”

“And that matters why?” Grant snapped. “We can’t risk our reputation by siding *against* one of the biggest companies in LA. Think, Yan! If the *Daily* writes a piece criticizing Disney, then we’ll lose profits, and the bastards at *Entertainment Weekly* will eat us alive! I don’t think I have to mention whose job would be at risk if that happened.”

“I understand,” she muttered, feeling anything but understanding beneath the surface.

“Good. Call back the second you finish the next update on this story. Whatever happens from here, I want you to be the first reporter to find out.” Satisfied, he hung up, leaving Michelle still listening to the dial tone. She let out a long, slow breath of frustration as she put the phone back in her purse. Each step back to the checkout line felt slow and heavy. Michelle began to realize that her life had reached a crossroad: she could side with Lucas or keep her career. But how could she keep being a reporter if she had to act as cutthroat as Grant?

Lucas Fired As *Star Wars* Director

By Michelle Yan
September 23rd, 2020

A spokesman representing *Star Wars* producer Kathleen Kennedy states that George Lucas will be replaced as director of the upcoming sci-fi flick. Though the official statement from Disney claims that Lucas was dismissed due to “creative differences” with Kennedy over the content of the film’s script, rumors have spread that the director’s on-set behavior is to blame.

In several interviews with this reporter, Lucas revealed that he butted heads with Kennedy over the course of production. He responded with hostility towards all of her ideas for the film, and demanded Disney change as little as possible about his plans for *Star Wars*. This perfectionist attitude likely made him very hard to work with, explaining why he was cut loose.

Lucas will be replaced by Neill Blomkamp, director of *District 9*, *Elysium*, and post-apocalyptic thriller *The Machine Stops*. Disney’s spokesman claims that Blomkamp is “very excited” to be working on *Star Wars* and wants to take the film in a “darker, more complex direction.” To further signal this fresh start for the creative team, they will be proceeding with a version of the script overseen by Kennedy.

The spokesman also teased the casting choices. Bradley Cooper will be playing the film’s main character, Luke Skywalker. Other actors that Disney plans to get on board are Anthony Hopkins, Angelina Jolie, Robert Downey Jr, Jeff Bridges, and Tyler Mane.

More Movie News:

[SNL comedian Carrie Fisher opens up about life after rehab, plans on returning to comedy after 4-year absence](#) -by Andrea Kelley

[Director Harrison Ford reveals plans for Iraq War documentary: “We must call attention to our country’s mistakes”](#) -by Derrick Hill

Michelle couldn’t help but feel disgusted looking at her article. She did exactly what Stephen Grant wanted and took Disney’s side like a good little reporter, throwing Lucas under the bus while she was at it. Though her reluctance to go against her previous support for the director was strong, in the end, Michelle’s pragmatic side won out. She simply couldn’t afford to lose her job at this point. Between the newfound complications with traveling and super expensive plane tickets, returning to Rhode Island now would be a nightmare. Besides, as much as she missed the calm, familiar nature of home, she couldn’t leave LA with her career just starting to take off, right? These thoughts had been circulating in Michelle’s head from the moment she wrote the story, but deep down, they felt like excuses. The worst part was Grant’s insistence to defend Disney at all costs. It meant that if Michelle was put in a similar situation sometime in the future, then she’d have to do the same thing again with different companies. Was this all there was to being a reporter, looking out for a big name’s influence? The divide between this and the visions of glitz

and glamor that Michelle had in her college days felt wider than the ocean.

As she took one last look at her trusty laptop, the soft, electronic light bringing out the newfound stress lines on her face, Michelle had her first pang of regret for signing up with *Hollywood Daily*. It was a new, uncomfortable feeling, but one that she'd have to live with. After all, her inner pragmatism had a point. If she didn't want to end up on the street, then she had no other choice.

Michelle fiddled with the hem of her dress and did one last check to make sure the microphone in her hand was working. She turned around to face the cameraman, a heavysset black man named Marcel. "The cast is due to arrive in five minutes," she said, "Is the camera set up?"

He nodded, "All set. Just tell me when, and I'll hit record."

"Perfect, thanks."

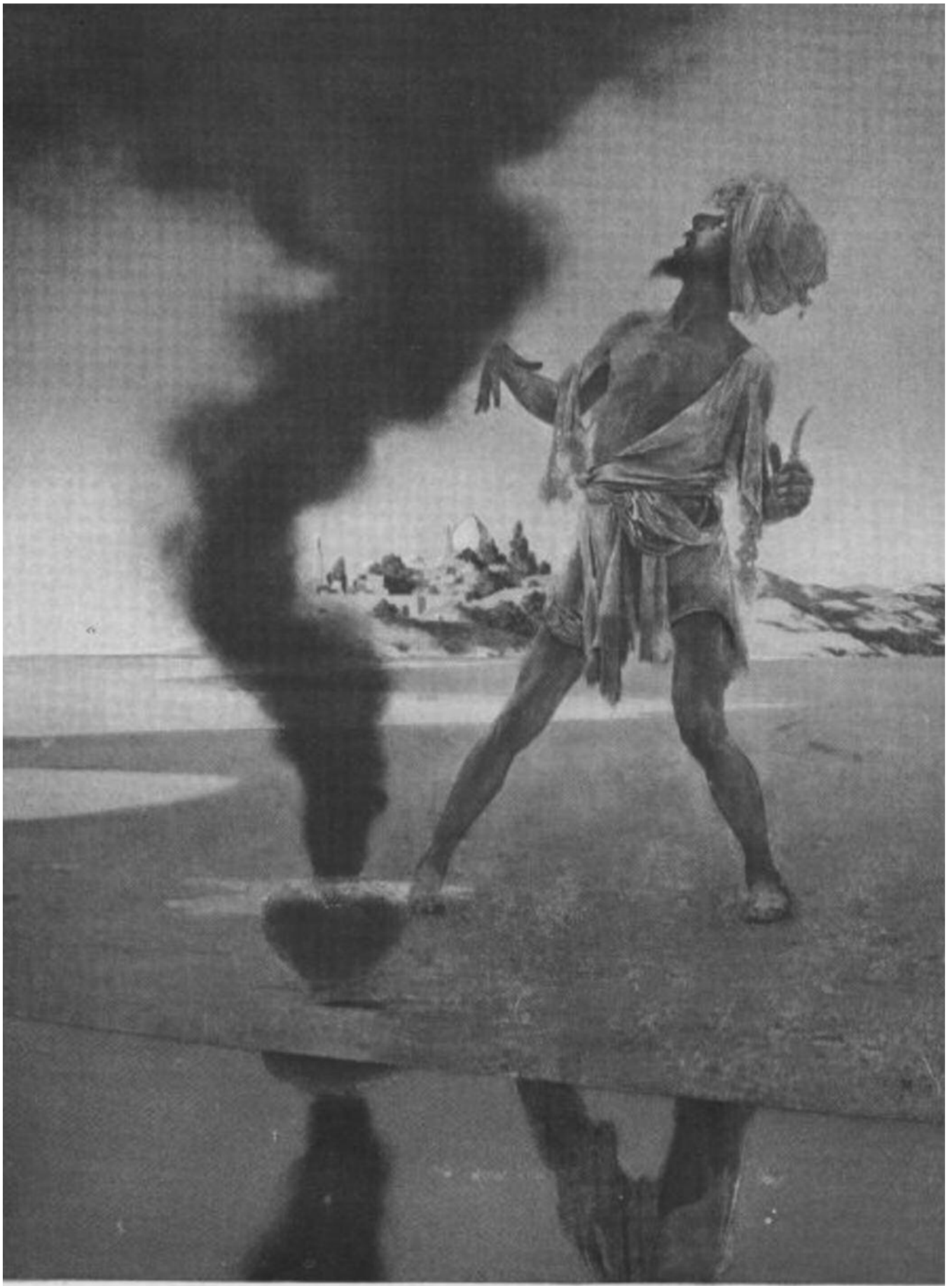
Today was a moment that Michelle's younger self would've killed for: It was the summer of 2021, and *Star Wars* was set to premiere at its first ever theater. Somehow in December, the world's doctors had pulled through and created the first ever vaccine for the coronavirus. LA was one of the first major cities to get shipments, so Michelle had to get used to doing interviews in person as Americans started returning to movie theaters. Politicians, including the new President, raced to claim credit for the shot, but the reporter couldn't have cared less. Being vaccinated

meant she could do more than just Zoom interviews, and the career boost she got from the Lucas story opened new doors to bigger and bigger opportunities with higher profile stories. The rumor mill at the *Daily* singled her out as a new, up-and-coming employee, one who could really hit the big leagues. And here Michelle was, back where it all started. Finishing her first ever story on the red carpet, surrounded by flashing lights and pricey suits. Decked out in a black dress and a haircut more expensive than her college degree, she looked every inch the poised, professional reporter that her old self wanted to be.

Michelle knew that she should be happy, her parents and her old friends would certainly be proud of her, yet it still didn't sit right. Most of the articles that she wrote were cut from the same cloth as the one about Lucas's firing, and every time she smiled for the camera, Michelle felt like a cheap sellout.

The reporter's train of thought was interrupted by several limos pulling up next to the theater. As a tuxedo-wearing Jeff Bridges stepped out, signaling for the press to get the cameras rolling. Michelle flashed a thumbs-up to Marcel, and as he hit record, she slipped into autopilot and rattled off her script. "And here we have the cast of *Star Wars* ready for the premiere! Let's see if we can get a word with them! There's Angelina Jolie, looking stunning as usual..."

The interviews went by in a blur of glitter and flashbulbs, with a host of



reporters swarming the stars like ants to sugar crystals. Michelle smiled, laughed, and asked questions mechanically like a glorified Barbie doll, going through the motions while keeping up an air of charm and excitement. The world beyond Marcel's camera disappeared outside her focus, like the theater was part of a ritzy snow globe. Before she knew it, the cast was filing into the building with a handful of crew members and a few reporters coming along for the ride. Michelle, thankfully, was one of them. She and Marcel were escorted behind Bradley Cooper's entourage, after being told to turn off their camera. By the time they got to the press section of the seating, Michelle finally allowed herself to relax a little and collapsed into her chair.

Her cameraman noticed her discontent. "For what it's worth, I think you nailed it out there" Marcel spoke up. "And don't worry, premiere interviews get less crazy the more you do them," he said with a grin. She smiled, grateful for the support. But the feeling went away when Michelle glanced over at the main seating, where Kathleen Kennedy sat surrounded by crew members. The short, brown haired producer looked like Sylvester after finally eating Tweety, with the satisfied smirk to match. It brought forth memories of George Lucas's failed crusade, and the first person Michelle kicked aside for her career.

As the last guests made it to their seats, the screen in front of them lit up, and the movie started to play. Apparently, you didn't have to sit through previews if you were rich. The audience fell quiet as the

film's title appeared on the screen in large block letters. Slow, foreboding orchestral music began to play, and white expository text appeared on the screen. "IN THE DISTANT FUTURE, THE GALAXY IS RULED BY THE TYRANNICAL GALACTIC EMPIRE. TATOOINE, A CRIME-RIDDEN DESERT WORLD ON THE EMPIRE'S BORDER, IS A POLITICAL POWDER KEG WHICH THREATENS THE MIGHT OF THE EMPIRE."

The film cuts to a dingy scrap yard filled with the rusted corpses of old spaceships and land vehicles. Michelle sees Luke Skywalker, Cooper's character, scavenging an old ship for parts. He's a grizzled, unshaven man wearing an unwashed military uniform. As the film's introduction continues, the audience learns that Luke is a bitter, jaded veteran from a conflict known as the 'Tusken War' and was left jobless after returning home from deployment. He's heavily in debt to Han Solo, a ruthless crime lord played by Robert Downey Jr, and has to collect scrap metal as his only source of income. Michelle couldn't help but note that this was exactly the type of character that George Lucas didn't want the hero to be. The new director seemed far more on-board with a darker protagonist.

Luke takes the money from selling the scrap to Han, only to be told that he's still behind on his payments. Han warns Luke that he will get three days to make up the rest of the money, or Luke would have to deal with Chewbacca, Han's massive, hairy

enforcer played by Tyler Mane. “Think of it like a bank, except we break your legs instead of lowering your interest rates,” Downey’s character quips. Michelle had to admit, for an actor who hadn’t been in any major films since her parents’ day, Downey gave a surprisingly good performance.

After being threatened by Han, Luke finds Obi-Wan Kenobi, his old commanding officer played by Anthony Hopkins, waiting for him at his meager house. Kenobi reveals that he’s joined the Jedi, a rebel group who wants to make Tatooine an independent planet. He requests Luke’s help in decoding a microchip that contains the Empire’s newest battle plans, citing Luke’s skill with machines during the Tusken War. Luke refuses, rudely brushing Kenobi off and saying that he’s “sick of fighting.”

Three days later, the Empire’s soldiers find Skywalker at the scrap yard. They try to arrest him for scavenging, and he barely manages to escape in a harrowing chase scene. The Empire then issues a warrant for Luke’s arrest, forcing him to hide out in a seedy local cantina. Chewbacca tracks him there, and Luke kills the enforcer in a brutal fight by beating him to death with a bar stool. Forced back into a life of killing, and faced with no other options, Skywalker finally seeks out Obi-Wan. The fight scene with Chewbacca had a level of violence only found in war films or slasher flicks, and Michelle couldn’t help but cringe. Seeing the movie’s hero bash a man’s skull in with a metal stool until his brains splattered on the floor would’ve

traumatized the original intended audience.

The scene shifts to a military base, where Imperial soldiers dressed suspiciously similar to Nazi SS officers attending a speech made by Emperor Palpatine, ruler of the Empire. Palpatine, played by Jeff Bridges wearing an obviously fake toupee, is rude, belittling, and enjoys using hand gestures. His favorite words are “huge” and “wrong”, and he stresses over and over that the Empire will “make the galaxy great again.” Not a single person in the theater needs to be reminded who he’s based on. After the speech, Palpatine holds a meeting with Darth Vader, a shadowy figure who secretly controls the Emperor’s every move. Vader, played by an uncredited Russian man, asks about the progress of their “new weapon.” Palpatine reassures him that everything is going according to plan, speaking like a villain in a Saturday morning cartoon. Though Bridges is clearly giving the role his all, his performance comes off as unintentionally funny due to the writing quality.

The film thankfully cuts back to Luke Skywalker, who reunites with Obi-Wan and officially joins the Jedi. He meets Leia Organa, the rebel’s leader played by Angelina Jolie, who poses as the Empire’s representative to Tatooine. Luke successfully decodes the microchip, which reveals that Palpatine plans to unleash a bioengineered disease on Tatooine then blame the ensuing deaths on the rebels. It will be delivered on a spaceship meant to look like one of the Jedi’s X Wing fighters and be given the name the ‘Jedi Flu.’

Michelle swore she saw a couple members of the audience cringe at that sentence. Next to her, Marcel covered his mouth to hide a surprised chuckle, the look on his face suggesting they were watching a comedy.

The Jedi select Luke to shoot down the spaceship before it can disburse the disease. Luke initially rejects his role as their planet's savior, claiming "I don't want to play the hero," but Obi-Wan tells him that he's the best pilot that they have. He has no other choice but to accept. Later on, Luke overhears a conversation between Obi-Wan and Leia which implies that the Jedi are drawing power from the Force, a supernatural abomination that lives beyond the galaxy. The Force granted the Jedi mind manipulation powers, which Leia hopes she can use to become Tatooine's newest dictator after the Empire is thrown out. Disgusted by the Jedi, Luke flees the rebel's base, only to be attacked by Han Solo and his men. The film's level of violence cranks back up to slasher movie levels as Luke breaks bones and bashes skulls in an attempt to escape.

He's finally overwhelmed, but not before cutting off Han's hand with a piece of old scrap metal. "You know, I would make a one hand clapping joke if I wasn't so royally pissed off," Han seethes as he clutches his bleeding arm.

Luke passes out from his injuries. By the time he wakes up, he's being held at gunpoint by Han's men, about to be executed. Above him, he sees what looks like an X Wing, priming itself to distribute

the disease. Though he refuses to be made the Jedi's puppet, Luke realizes that he can't let the Empire destroy his home world. In a last-ditch effort, Skywalker closes his eyes and calls out to the Force, offering to make a deal. As the executioner raises a gun to Luke's head, a thousand voices speaking as one overwhelms his mind, demanding his soul in exchange for unimaginable power. The Force tells Luke that he has the potential to become godlike, someone who decides his own future instead of being neglected by the Empire and played by the Jedi. Luke accepts. His mind is flooded with a torrent of pain, and when he opens his eyes again, Luke uses mind tricks to make the executioner let him go.

Escaping Han's clutches, Skywalker steals a ship of his own and personally flies up to confront the fake X Wing. After mind-controlling the enemy pilot to stop releasing the disease, Luke successfully shoots down the Empire's ship, saving Tatooine. Back on-planet, the Jedi see what Luke managed to do. Though most of them cheer, Leia tells Obi-Wan that she senses strong Force powers in Luke. He might have achieved the rebel's goal, but he has his own agenda now and likely won't listen to them any longer. Back with the Empire, Palpatine flies into a rage upon hearing that the 'Jedi Flu' plan had failed. He screams to one of his underlings that they must confront the rebels in a show of force, to put them down once and for all. His speech was so hammy that Michelle got disappointed when he didn't end with an

evil laugh.

The film's final shots are of Luke Skywalker in space. He bears a tired, battle-worn look on his face as he surveys the wreckage of the enemy ship. Luke had saved Tatooine, but at the cost of re-embracing a life of violence and selling his own soul. Before the credits roll, the Force whispers to him that there is much more work to be done, and he should seek out a creature called Yoda.

As the lights turned back on in the theater, a scattered amount of clapping started. No one was quite sure what type of film they just saw, or whether it was a sci-fi film, political satire, or cosmic horror movie. The loudest cheering came from the cast and crew, likely relieved that their work finally made it to the big screen despite its production issues. Michelle herself gave a small, polite amount of clapping to cover up how little she liked the whole ordeal. Was this really the best that Kennedy could do? Good God, Lucas was right. Kennedy herself basked in the scattered praise like she had already won an Oscar, wearing a Cheshire Cat grin as she sat tall like a proud parent. Was this the best Michelle's life got, attending premieres where smarmy executives patted themselves on the back?

Flashes of the film still playing in her mind, Michelle stood up and made for the exit. Marcel shot her a concerned look. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Michelle nodded, "I just need to get some air. I'll be back in time for any post-premiere interviews." She waded her way through the aisles, past the sea of

bubbling conversation and famous faces, before reaching the hallway outside their theater room. The reporter leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath and struggling to regain her composure. "I can't do this anymore," she thought. It felt like both an admission and a cry of relief. She couldn't keep living as a scavenger, feeding off of the kills brought down by larger predators. Life in the jungle wasn't worth molding herself into someone who exploited someone else's crushed hopes and dreams.

The moment she leaves the theater, Michelle thought to herself, she was going to call Mr. Grant and quit the *Daily*. After that, she'll book a one-way flight back home and tell her parents everything. They'd probably freak out, but Michelle hoped they didn't mind her staying with them until she could find a new job. Maybe a paper in Rhode Island would like a new reporter? She'd be up for anything as long as it isn't entertainment. She gave her first real smile in what felt like months. Though the future looked shaky and uncertain, the possibility was still bright.

Michelle waited at the airport for her flight to arrive. She and her meager amount of luggage were pushed into a small seating area, as swarms of people moved around her all with somewhere important to be. The vaccine being distributed meant that LAX had once again returned to life as the busiest airport in the country, and getting a flight required hours

of wait time. Michelle passed the time by reading online reviews of *Star Wars*. It was the box office bomb of the summer. Though critics applauded Cooper's performance, the film's 'grim tone', and the 'withering political satire', audiences loathed virtually everything about the movie. Multiple video essays, including a memorable one by a profane Scottish critic, described *Star Wars* as 'soulless,' 'pandering,' and a 'disappointment to the original director's idea.' The only actor that audiences praised was Robert Downey Jr, who looked like he'd get a much-needed career boost from playing Han. George Lucas himself was furious, telling as many directors as he could on Twitter to never work with Disney.

Michelle shared the sentiments of those online, and though she still felt bad for Lucas, she was glad to get out of Hollywood. It wasn't a place for optimistic

types. A minute later, her flight finally got called and Michelle rushed over, trying to maneuver her bags of luggage around lines of fellow travelers. She handed her ticket to the smiling flight attendant, still feeling unsettled at everyone's newfound lack of masks, and stepped onboard the plane. At her seat, she looked out the window and down at the bustling landscape beneath her. As the plane took off, Michelle noted how small LA seemed from the air, like the bustle of Hollywood didn't matter compared to the vastness of the world around her. Michelle turned away from the window, as the plane took her far, far away from the land of opportunism and five-second fame. Beyond the spotlights and celebrities. Beyond the stars. ❖

END TRANSMISSION