

field note
A FIELD TRIP

He dragged me by the hand into his world one Saturday afternoon at the movies. On the afternoon that I crossed over, if ever so briefly, Horace and I were in one of those late-twentieth-century cinemas where half a dozen movies are simultaneously showing in theaters carved out of what used to be one big extravagant room. We were there to see the film of his choice, *The Last Boy Scout*, which I, primed by TV ads, had expected to be full of graphic scenes of violence and killing. Exactly the type of movie that I always carefully avoid. But I had rashly promised Horace this visit to the cinema as a reward for finishing a class project and I could not back down. I, the person who is about to go on an unexpected field trip guided by a twelve-year-old boy, am a black woman who is almost half a century old, the mother of two sons, a grandmother even, a wife, a daughter, a teacher. Horace and I do have some things in common. In spite of the enormous age difference, we are both students since I have recently returned to school to work on a Ph.D.

The Last Boy Scout had just opened at theaters and drive-ins everywhere and was expected to be so popular that it was being screened in not just one but two theaters in the complex. The particular screening we had come to see would not start for another thirty minutes, so I prepared to wait. But not Horace. He wanted to go in now. "But we'd see the end first," I said, "won't it spoil the movie for you?" It would for me; I hate ends before beginnings. But he didn't want to wait, and since this was supposed to be his outing I let him take the lead.

I reluctantly followed him through the closed door of the theater. He plunged into the darkness and I, feeling very responsible and more than a little guilty for aiding and abetting his consumption of violence, but fearing more than anything else to lose him, blindly followed. We squeezed by several sets of knees into seats that were in my estimation far too close to the front.

On the screen, the hero, popular actor Bruce Willis, is holding a large gun to the head of a girl who is about twelve years old, Horace's

age. Willis is snarling at a visibly frightened man something like, "If you don't give me your car, I'm going to blow her head off." Willis looks mean enough to do just that. This movie was going to be far worse than I thought; just the type of film that I should never have brought this impressionable young boy to see.

Though Willis does not shoot the girl in the head, the violence of the scenes escalates. The hero gets blown up, blown away, burned, beaten, abused. The darkened theater becomes a roar of voices cheering him on and applauding when he hurts and kills. Horace is leaning toward the screen transfixed and excited. The climax takes place in a football stadium where the bad guy has his balls blown off in a foiled helicopter escape sequence.

The film has a happy ending. The twelve-year-old girl of the earlier scene had turned out to be Willis's resentful and disrespectful daughter, and the movie ends with him asserting his parental authority over an adoring, submissive girl. Willis's unfaithful wife is suitably chastened and adoring, and the black guy who reluctantly became his comrade-at-arms during the action is now his friend, and the soon-to-be partner in a detective agency. As the credits flash across the screen, our hero Willis has an admiring wife, a respectful daughter, a career, and a buddy.

I am rigid with horror at the violence, the antifemale patriarchal message, and the disturbing sexist qualities of the hero. I fully intend to have a discussion of the film with Horace later on to defuse the dangerous messages that he has received about masculinity, violence, and relationships with women.

As we walk out, I notice that the audience is almost entirely young men. The very few females all seem to be there in the company of men. One young man has a little boy and a little girl with him and I guess that this is his idea of baby-sitting.

I look at my watch. We have about an hour before the next full showing of *Boy Scout*. "Have you seen *My Girl*?" Horace asks as we stand in the hallway. This is one of the three films showing in the theater that afternoon. The other is *Hook*. Both of these films have "Family" ratings.

"You haven't? It's really good. It's hecka sad. Let's go!" He grabs me by the hand, tugs gently and then harder, pulling me in the direction of one of the other viewing rooms. "But we haven't bought

tickets for *My Girl*,” I counter. “Soooo?” he says looking at me impatiently. It occurs to me that this might be the way to avoid going back to the Willis film, so I stand my ground and begin to negotiate.

“Well if we do go to see this one, then we won’t be able to go see the first part of *The Last Boy Scout*. We won’t have time to do that and go get something to eat.” So we fumble our way to two seats in the darkened room in which *My Girl* is showing.

My Girl is about a friendship between an adorably cute blonde boy who is about ten and a tomboyish white girl of the same age. The story is about family, about mothers and fathers, about love and a first kiss, about friendship, about death. It is about the tests and difficulties of becoming a boy. As we move into the final scenes, Horace leans over and hisses in my ear, “This part is hecka sad. Just wait.” The boy hero dies in his attempt to recover a ring lost by the girl from a nest of hornets. He is stung to death.

The boy hero of the film is white, lives in a small town different and strange from the urban area that Horace and I live in. It is a place where children ride bicycles down sidewalks and bullies are vanquished. All the people who live in the town are white. The only danger comes from nature. We have escaped to that small town for forty minutes. For Horace it is like no place he has ever been or likely will be.

Unlike *Boy Scout*, masculinity can be soft and gentle. But in the final analysis, being masculine in this way is also mortally dangerous.

Our eyes glisten with tears as we leave the theater. I feel quenched. This movie has caught me, grabbed me, reminded me of so many things I could have said to my own children. Why does life have to be so sad, so complicated? Why can’t we just honor each other, moment by moment?

By now, I’m finally in the spirit of the afternoon. We’re both ready for *Hook*, which is showing in a theater upstairs. Together we fly up the stairs, dodging slow-moving adults in our impatience to get there as quickly as possible. I shove past knees and flop down gratefully into a cushiony seat. We are right up front and *Hook* is in progress. Beginning, middle, or end, what does it matter. This is heaven. Once again we are lost in a story about masculinity: gentle mothers, absent fathers, girls who get you into trouble, villains, tests of manhood. And the fight scene that inscribes masculinity.

I was never aware of the exact moment when I stopped being an

adult. But somewhere between *My Girl* and *Hook*, I began to have a good time. A hecka good time at the movies. That was when the whole experience began to be transformed from the planned linear motion from beginning to end to a kaleidoscopic back-and-forth of sights, sounds, and tastes.

When *Hook* was over we headed for food, drink, and then back to *The Last Boy Scout*. We sat through the entire movie suffering and cheering. Horace turned the treat I had carefully planned for him unexpectedly into a shimmering afternoon of emotional ups and downs and adventures for both of us. As we went from theater to theater mixing up pathos, sentimentality, greed, violence, tears, screams, laughter, horror, fear, I glimpsed Horace in ways that I had not expected to. But I also recollected, experienced feelings, parts of myself that I did not even know I had lost: the experience of losing myself in a movie totally without the imperative to interpret, criticize, distance myself from plot, characters, and feelings. I lost my preoccupation with time and schedule. But this was not just about a shift in the way that I thought or felt, entirely about mental states; it was also about my body and how it began to grow more powerful and present. That body took me on a chase between theaters and up and down stairs. I swerved to avoid pedestrians and skidded to a halt rather than bump into or bowl over small kids and old people. I did not even think about how I must have appeared to observers as I dashed behind Horace, or sometimes ahead of him, from screening to screening.

When we finally emerged from the grip of the flickering screens, I felt tired and resentful knowing that I had to deal with time (it was growing dark, they expected us home hours before), adults (husbands, mothers) who expected us to slip back into the real world as if we had not traveled an exhausting journey through space and time; the shattering disappointment that unlike the movies all the problems out in the world were still unresolved, without visible cure. I felt sad, let down, and hungry. I was grumpy most of the rest of the evening and unwilling to hide this feeling of malaise from the other adult I lived with, who called me “a crab.”

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