



Episode 45

Another Reason for Sticking with Bruce Willis Movies

It exists as a unique environment, almost a biosphere, containing nearly everything necessary to sustain life. It operates by its own rules, separate from the rest of humanity. It has replaced entire cities, and redefined the remaining few too large to be contained within its boundaries. To the cultural analyst it emanates a series of emblematic signs that comprise a language all its own, some of it simulating the cities that came before it, some of it a simulacrum of a city that has never existed, and never will. Its inhabitants ebb and flow with the day and the hour, some of them diurnal hunters, some of them nocturnal prowlers, some of them seen day in and day out, a few spotted only occasionally.

It is a magical place, and yet the most mundane place in the world. Within its walls, certain realities are inescapable. And one of its definitive realities is that Friday nights are different from every other night, because Friday nights are given over to... them.

Them.

The all-encompassing pronoun of otherness. The enemy. The not-us. The them. Or, if you must, the they.

Them. You know them. They are at it again. They always do that. You know how they are. It was them. Them. Them...

In a shopping mall, that unique self-contained village simulacrum of the late twentieth century, on a Friday night, the them that the place is given over to are the teenagers, the most frightening them of all.

The relationship of teenagers to shopping malls is not difficult to understand. A mall is a relatively safe environment, or at least safe enough that parents are willing to allow their pubescent

and even prepubescent children autonomy within it. And for all practical purposes, it is the only autonomous environment most teenagers have. Hence they flock there in droves, and Friday night, being the night they are most desirous of an autonomous place after a week of the moil of school, and also the weekend night they are most likely not to have a conflicting place to be due to family pressures, Friday night they are there more than any other night. And if, as with the Veblen Mall in Nighten Township, there is also a conclave of cinema screens, then welcome to Teenage Heaven. Or, if you're an adult, especially a adult merchant operating a mall venue other than the cineplex, welcome to Teenage Hell.

Which, by the way, is the only difference between any heaven and hell -- perspective.

For Had Fleece, the Veblen Mall is not a normal place to be. For that matter, forensicians by nature are less inclined than the average teenager to seek the nurture of the mall environment, and even those for whom shopping is a pastime rather than a need for goods, Friday nights tend to be tournament nights, not hang-out nights. But this is one of the rare weekends off at least for Had, who is now uncharacteristically in the mall, on a Friday, standing in line for movie tickets, the fingers of his right hand entwined with the fingers of Cartier Diamond's left hand.

Some guys would consider this heaven. Had considers it hell.

Again, it is all a matter of perspective.

Had Fleece has spent nearly a week agonizing over this date with Cartier. He wanted to break up with her, and he tried to do so over the telephone, but she simply refused to listen to him. To make matters worse, what he really wants to do is go out with Jasmine Maru, but Jasmine won't have anything to do with him because of his relationship with Cartier.

Sometimes it's easier just debating. You're either on one side or the other side, and you know the reasons why. Too bad life isn't the same way.

"I really don't want to see a science fiction movie," Cartier says, slightly leaning into him. As always, she is dressed in black, and her voice sounds like melting sugar.

Had, who would rather be anywhere than here, is hoping to salvage at least some of the evening with a movie of his preference. "What else is there?" They have maybe two minutes to decide before they reach the ticket window.

"That one's supposed to be good," she says, tilting her head toward the poster next to them.

Had shudders involuntarily. The movie Cartier wants is a patent, out-and-out girl movie. Two hours plus of unrelenting sensitivity.

"If you really want to know the truth," he says, going for the correct counterbalance in the negotiation, "I'd really rather see the Bruce Willis movie."

Touché!

"You're kidding," Cartier says.

"Well, I'd rather see that than weepy women any day."

Cartier's eyes narrow, but Had can tell that she is ready to deal. Considering that he had intended to break up with her last week, and she absolutely forced him to keep their date tonight, he knows that whatever is going on in her mind is beyond his comprehension. To a degree, he feels like Michael Douglas stepping out with Glenn Close, and he is wondering if she is going to order rabbit stew for dinner.

"Not the science fiction picture," she says finally.

Considering its two thumbs marginally down from Siskel and Ebert, Had is willing to listen to reason. After all, how many computer-generated alien monsters does one person need to see in a lifetime? "All right, then. What?"

They are now two places away from the ticket window. Cartier's eyes narrow even further, but there is a less sinister cast to them. Suddenly, as they step to the window, she lightens up.

"Two adults for 'The Little Mermaid,'" she says to the girl at the counter.

"Little Mermaid!" Had moans. "Nooooooooo!"

"I love 'The Little Mermaid,'" Cartier says. "It was like the first movie I saw when I was a kid. I want to see it again."

"It couldn't have been the first movie you saw. You were probably about eight--"

"Pay for the tickets, Had. We can discuss the chronology later."

Had pays for the tickets, wondering if even weepy women wouldn't be better than simpering mermaids. Aaaaargh! He hasn't seen a Disney movie since grammar school.

After collecting the mandatory box of popcorn, they find the correct screen. If they run into anybody they know, Had will pretend that they're going to see the Bruce Willis picture instead, but they make inside the correct theater, which has exactly two families in it. Cartoon pictures are not big draws at the mall on Friday nights, and only the most foolhardy adults venture to them with their offspring, fighting the tide of the teenage wasteland to do so. The benefit, of course, is that they do get the theater almost completely to themselves. God knows how many screaming kids would be here tomorrow afternoon.

"Let's sit back here," Cartier says, indicating the last row.

"We can sit anywhere we want," Had protests.

"And I want to sit here."

She is already halfway into the row, so there is no point continuing the argument. Had follows meekly and sits down next to her.

For a few minutes they are silent. For that matter they haven't said much of anything to each other since Cartier picked Had up in her Miata -- she had insisted that she pick him up rather than vice versa, and given his Honda Civic versus her Mazda Miata, who would disagree? Now they quietly eat away at their popcorn, their hands reaching into the box in synchronic alternation, like railroad workers banging in the same nail with their sledge hammers. On the screen is a series of still advertisements and trivia questions, at which they both stare with grave disinterest. Eventually the theater darkens, and the coming attractions begin.

Had Fleece is a great student of coming attractions. His theory is that the longer and more explanatory the preview, the worse the actual movie. If you feel as if you've seen the entire movie, then you don't have to. Also, if it's for a picture that they probably haven't even started filming yet, avoid it like the plague. And if it's opening in three months, that means it's probably the biggest thing the studio intends to release, so it's worth paying attention to. He has a lot of ideas like this, but he doesn't bother to share them with Cartier. There is anger growing inside him for being here, mostly anger at himself for agreeing to come, and then not saying anything about it.

Does she have him cowed? Is there something about her that makes him less the Had he is used to being? He is beginning to suspect that this is the case.

Somehow he is forgetting their night together only one short week ago. He has gone from total infatuation to total dislike in what seems like the blink of an eye. Once he decided that he didn't want to go out with her anymore, she became a different person. Or did she become a different person, and then he decided he didn't want to go out with her?

When the movie starts, the popcorn is finished, and Had hunkers down into his seat, slouching so deeply that his knees are stiff against the back of the empty seat in front of him. Cartier's hand slips around his left arm.

He doesn't want to be with her, but he doesn't dislike the feel of her warm hand. He closes his eyes and momentarily imagines it is Jasmine Maru's hand.

But as the movie goes on, it becomes clear to Had that no amount of imagination can make that hand anyone's but Cartier's. And it has taken on a life of its own.

It remains on Had's arm for the longest time, right through "Under the Sea." Then it starts to move. First it goes up his arm, then it pulls back and goes under his arm. For a while it rests on

his stomach. By the time he is watching "Kiss the Girl" the hand has unfastened two of the buttons of his shirt and is warmly rubbing first his chest and then the top of his belly above his belt.

"Kiss the Girl" indeed!

He turns in his seat, and Cartier is waiting. His own hands start to take on a life of their own, and in the back row of the nearly empty theater, while the five-year-olds and their accompanying adults down in front are respectively wide-eyed and glassy-eyed over the final underwater confrontation with Ursula the Sea Witch, Had Fleece and Cartier Diamond are having their own final underwater confrontation.

So to speak.

As the credits roll and the lights come up, Had Fleece is completely flummoxed. Physical pleasure and desire have replaced intellect and morality. There is only room in his consciousness for Cartier Diamond, and he can barely pull himself away from her as the families from down in front make their way up the aisle. Not that decorum matters so much as getting out of the theater and finding a more private place to go even further under the sea.

"Hello, Cartier." A pause. "Had."

Had Fleece looks up at the family walking up the aisle. A family not of two adults and their child but of two teen-aged girls and their little brother, of Jasmine Maru and her two siblings.

"Hello, Jasmine," Cartier purrs, sitting up and readjusting herself.

Had begins to sputter something, but no words come out, and Jasmine does not wait as he redoes his buttons. She is gone before he can even stand up and tuck in his shirt.

"Did you... I mean... Did..." He takes a breath as Cartier stands up beside him. "Did you know she was here?" he is finally able to ask.

"I saw them when we were on line to buy our tickets," Cartier says, stretching her back like a cat waking up by the fireplace.

"You knew they'd come in here."

"I thought they might. I wanted to see the weepy women, if you'll remember correctly."

"But you saw them when we came into the theater!"

"Of course I did." She squeezes by him and starts walking up the aisle. He follows.

"You did that deliberately."

"Did what?"

They are out the theater door now and heading for the mall exit.

"You made a fool of me in front of Jasmine."

"Do you think I did this for Jasmine's sake?" Cartier asks. "If so, then you really are a fool. Good-bye, Had."

"What?"

"I said good-bye."

He is now walking a step behind her as they go out into the parking lot. The night is cool and dark.

"Good-bye?" Had repeats blankly.

"When there's breaking up to do, Hadwin Fleece, I'm the one that does it."

"But what was all that back there in the movie? I mean, we were--"

"We were showing you what you're going to be missing." She unlocks the driver's side door of her Miata, gets in, and rolls down the window. "Some people would kill for that, Had Fleece. But not you. And I won't forget that." She starts the motor, that electric purr not unlike her own. "Just try to stay out of my way. Just try." She slams the engine into gear and backs out of her parking space with a squeal of rubber. She shifts into first gear, and with a second squeal, she tears off out of the lot, leaving Had standing there, watching her disappear.

Suddenly the night is that much colder. Had looks at his watch. Nine o'clock. He can call his parents to take him home, or he can walk. If he walks, it will take about an hour. In the cold and the dark.

He decides to walk.

What better way to end the most miserable night of his life?

Is this the end of Had and Cartier?

Will Had ever get to date Jasmine?

What does Camelia Maru make of all this?

Is The Little Mermaid really that bad?

Are our existences so trivial that we are really posting our 45th episode?

Don't bother looking under the Christmas tree for the answers, and don't look in next week's episode either: "Ebenezer Scrooge: Liberty in the Social Order or a Kielbasa in every Wok?"