

I Made a Little Movie

by Cody Pearce

So I made a little movie. It's called *The Wildmen*. I borrowed my friend's digital camera and used his illegally downloaded Final Cut. I could never afford the stuff myself. Not on a part-time salary at Doggie Heaven, a local hot-dog joint. The movie is a fifteen-minute short about the human survivors of some unspecified nuclear apocalypse trying to ward off radioactive mutants in a desert wasteland. There. How's that for a pitch? Boiled down to the essentials. I bet Tom could never explain his movie so simply. They say if you can't pitch a story in 25 words or less, it's not worth trying.

But don't get me wrong. There's more to it than that. I work for a living and I know the pain of modern life. And the paranoia. *The Wildmen* is all about paranoia. The threat of terrorism, the economy. How we face these tumultuous and uncertain times when everyone thinks the world is going to hell at the hands of some asteroid or presidential candidate. But mostly my movie is a bunch of people sitting around in a concrete bunker talking Camus and masturbation. But it tells the truth; right down to the desolate visuals we shot on the sand dunes of Little Talbot Island.

Tom graduated from NYU film school and is currently back at his parents' place, a palatial estate on the St. Johns. His movie also concerns a post-apocalyptic universe. It's titled *Bloodbath 3000* and involves flesh-eating zombies and some rabbit virus that caused the whole mess. I saw his thesis film posted on his MySpace Film page, a bland teen sex comedy involving cheerleaders, football jocks, the proverbial nerd with glasses and a strategically placed grapefruit that gives way to the big laugh at the end. Unfortunately, I have to admit this kind of shit is what sells to the general public nowadays. Especially the sex appeal.

I was planning on having some sex appeal in my picture as well, but things didn't work out between Chris and myself.

I've known Christina Maple for years. We went to the same high school together, Brandenburg High, by the abandoned coffee factory. She wasn't the prettiest girl on campus; there were plenty of blonde waifs with bodies thin as aluminum foil that attracted more attention. In fact, Chris has always been on the chunkier side, but by no means fat. She just has some

curves to make her features more supple and inviting. There were quite a few boys in high school that shared my views and virtually all ended up luckier than myself. I've never received more than a peck on the cheek from Chris. We've been good friends, but I know my weight is an obstacle to any deeper relationship. Still, I can't shake my deep lust for her.

Chris has wanted to be an actress for as long as I've known her and to this day I see her as a burgeoning Scarlett Johansson. She had a brief modeling career and even got an agent for a time, but she never got past doing local fashion magazines. Like me, she hasn't managed to leave Jacksonville. Currently, Chris is going to law school out at the beaches and interning at Tom's fathers' firm. But whenever I talked to her I could tell she still dreamt of the red carpet. She carried herself like a famous actress, always wearing sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats, eating lunch at \$30-a-plate restaurants.

I knew I had to cast her in my movie when I saw her playing Vivian in the West Municipal Theatre's production of *The Big Sleep*. She was absolute heaven in her tight gray women's suit, perspiring sex with every syllable that came from those pillow-shaped lips. "A lot depends on who's in the saddle," she told the actor in Bogart's role, bending towards the lucky guy so he could get a long look at the top of her bubble-shaped breasts.

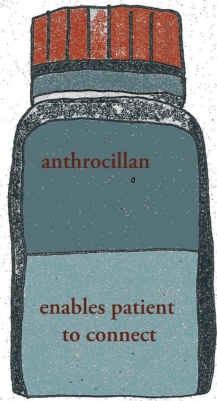
About a week later she came into Doggie Heaven. We hadn't talked in a while, but our friendship was one in which it didn't take long to catch up.

"I saw you in the play last Friday. You were really good," I said behind the cash register as I rang up her total.

Chris smiled, "Oh my God. I can't believe anyone even showed up." She had her cell phone pressed up against her ear, but she said nothing into it and I couldn't really hear anyone on the other side either. I wondered if it was her new boyfriend. Chris went through boyfriends like I went through chilidogs on slow days. I was among the first to hear about the time she lost her virginity back in junior year of high school. She was barely sixteen. The guy was in college. I felt sick after she told me.

Chris whispered a goodbye into her cell and put it back in her purse. "So. What are you up to these days, besides cooking wieners?"

She laughed and I forced a chuckle as well. "I'm kinda doing this short movie," I began. "I plan on submitting it in the Golden Reel Competition." The Golden Reel was part a of nearby film festival with considerable prestige. Two of the past winners have gone on to direct features in Hol-



lywood and the majority of those who placed have at least gotten into nice film schools. The kind Tom graduated from. The possibilities were limitless in my mind.

“What’s the movie about?” Chris asked.

“Well...” I thought about the plot I had in mind so far. There was only one female role and it belonged to a lesbian psychologist/Olympic gymnast who may or may not be the only woman to survive the mutant apocalypse. She has been holed up in the bunker with all these other male survivors for about a year and she starts sleeping with them out of a noble attempt to repopulate the Earth, but it turns out she’s barren. “It’s a little complicated,” I began.

“You wouldn’t mind doing a sex scene would you?”

Chris laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“Nothing too personal.” I imagined her naked breasts before the camera. I had a part planned for myself. “Maybe just some kissing and stuff.”

Chris sort of frowned. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

I e-mailed her the script as soon as I got off work, performing a quick revision first. I cut back the nudity as well as a mutant sex scene, while giving myself a part with her.

I met with Chris a few weeks later to discuss details at my mother’s house.

“Didn’t you used to have an apartment?” Chris asked when she arrived. I was 26, but the free lodging allowed me to spend more time writing and less worrying about the bills. Plus, my mother needed the company after the divorce and I hated my old roommates. They would bring over girls who laughed at my weight. “It’s only temporary,” I said. I led her into the living room where a couple crew members and Lyle were waiting.

Lyle was a friend from work. No one really knew where he came from though I know he had a stint doing off-Broadway plays for a few years. “It’s too cold up there. Too much negative energy,” he told me. He had once won an award for playing a talking lamppost. Lyle had shaved his head and

eyebrows for the part of Octavian, the male lead in my script, a drug-addled philosopher character. However, I hadn’t written Octavian as someone specifically bald, but Lyle told me that the nuclear fallout would cause all sorts of cancerous problems. He had been writing a journal for Octavian, trying to get inside his mind. I’m not sure he had even read the entire script.

“So. How are we gonna do this?” Chris asked. She was wearing a tank top and tight jeans and I had to keep from ogling her as she crossed her arms underneath her breasts accentuating their size.

Lyle thought she was too fat for a starving survivor but I had told him to shut up.

“Well. You play the lesbian psychologist Lyra,” I began.

“I figured that.”

I told her about the rest of the cast and that I would be playing the role of Logan, the hero of the story who ends up marrying Lyra.

“You’re acting in this?” Chris asked.

“I figured I’d give it a shot,” I said, hoping she would be okay with the news.

Chris laughed. “That should be interesting.”

“What? You don’t think I can act?” As if I would need to act with her.

Chris talked less and less as the meeting went on and I explained how I was going to block all the scenes. She spent much of the time staring at her shoes, while Lyle pushed for a darker, more extreme approach to my story.

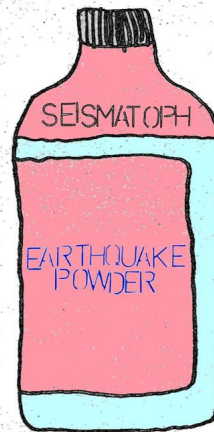
“We need this to be way outside the mainstream,” he explained. “You and Chris need more of a dangerous relationship. It would be interesting to have such fluid gender roles. I’m thinking she’s almost like a dominatrix. You know with the whipping scene and all.”

“There’s a whipping scene?” Chris asked.

“Lyle, I cut that scene from the script,” I said.

“Why? That was your best material,” Lyle said. “That’s the whole reason I wanted to do this movie in the first place.”

“Look. I want a more positive light on the subject matter. We’re dealing



with the apocalypse here. It may be dark enough.”

“But you’re gonna need more sex. Tell me you at least kept the orgy scene?”

“Orgies. I don’t know if I do orgies,” Chris said.

“Well. No. No. I’ve taken all that out,” I said. “Now it’s just a relationship between us...Between our characters.”

Chris looked at me quizzically. “This isn’t what I read in the script.”

Lyle turned to me, furious. “You’re compromising yourself for her,” he said. He got up to grab a drink from my fridge, letting the reality of the situation sink in. I wasn’t sure how to respond. The bastard was right. “And you call yourself a filmmaker,” he added sitting back down with his drink.

I called Chris over the next few weeks during our pre-production period. I left e-mails and text messages, but she her only response was she was too busy to begin shooting. *This is unprofessional*, I e-mailed to her. *If you really want to act you’d be more proactive about this project. This could be your big break.*

Finally, she sent me a text that read: *I don’t think I can do the movie anymore. It’s just not my type. Sorry ☹. Good luck. I’m sure you’ll do well.*

I didn’t become furious until I saw the article in the papers about Tom’s movie a week later.

Tom didn’t have any real actors in *Bloodbath 3000* besides Chris. He doesn’t seem to understand the delicate nature of acting. The breathing exercises. The rehearsals. I had met Tom only twice before making *The Wildmen*, but I knew his family well enough through his older brother, Aaron. I went to high school with the guy. He was a major presence on the baseball team, earning a scholarship at Alabama, which eventually led to a position in the minor leagues. Back in high school he used to call me the “white whale” when I ran past the batting cages during cross-country practice. I stopped running without my shirt shortly afterwards. Aaron dated Chris, though I never told her what he said about me. They were together for a couple years until she caught him cheating on her with one of the cheerleaders.

Tom followed in his big bro’s footsteps in high school, becoming a star receiver on the Bradenburg football team. However, he passed up his scholarship opportunities to attend NYU film school. It appears daddy represented Spike Lee once and got him a few recommendations. Tom’s success has appeared many times in the *Times-Union*. They published an article on his \$30,000 thesis film shot in town. His father even purchased an abandoned warehouse so he could set up his own studio: *Silver Leaf Productions, Ltd.* The place is named after the street he grew up on, a veritable den of waterfront

McMansions.

“I feel so blessed,” he said in an interview once. “I just know God has big plans for me.” I stared at his picture on the bottom corner of the front page. He looked like a fashion model, always pouting for photographs. I wanted to punch him right in his aquiline nose. He was planning on submitting *Bloodbath* for the Golden Reel competition.

When I told Lyle the news he just shrugged and said, “It figures.”

I began rewriting the script, while Lyle brought some of his “female friends” over to my house to audition in Chris’ place. He still pushed that dark sexual angle and I agreed with him, but I couldn’t cast any of the other girls. They were all airheads, emaciated and sallow. “You want me to do what?” they would ask after every sentence of explanation. None could deliver a line like: “I love you, even with the prosthetic arm” or “Let’s make a child right now,” and give it real conviction. None could bring the sexuality that Chris had.

So instead I wrote *The Wildmen* as the all male, dark depressing vision that you see on the screen. I also took out my own role of Logan. Lyle delivered a powerful performance, though I would have preferred a better wardrobe. He insisted that his character was some kind of Neo-Adam, walking around in soiled rags that barely covered his genitals. “This world would be like a furnace underground,” he told me. “They wouldn’t need to wear much of anything.”

We were a week into shooting in my garage when things started to reach a breaking point. The location resembled at best a dusty wine cellar rather than a nuclear fallout bunker, but it was at least big enough to hold all the lighting equipment (Which mostly included a bunch of household lamps) and the entire cast and crew. Lyle was practicing his speech on how to kill the mutants through Buddhist meditation when he stopped and pulled me aside. It was clear to him and everyone else that I was nervous. I slept maybe three hours a night, ate one meal a day consisting of potato chips and left over hot dogs from work. My weight had gone from moderate flab to being on the verge of ballooning over my waist. I went through each day chanting my director’s mantra: *Why isn’t the camera charged? Where is the charger? These lights aren’t bright enough. The mutant make-up looks too much like green Cornflakes. We need more money. Lyle’s running late again. No one knows their lines. We need to rehearse more. We need more money. When am I going to find the time to shoot this scene? To Edit? We’re out of money. Why am I even wasting my time on this trash when people make a hundred thousand movies like this each year using digital cameras and editing software?* There were a constant string of nightmares in my head. Tom had a complete schedule posted on his MySpace page. He had an allotted budget, from his parents

of course. All I had were mental doomsayers, each with a separate prophecy printed on cardboard signs: *You're not a good director.*

"You know, you're not that good of a director."

"What?"

Lyle was whispering so the rest of the crew couldn't hear. "I'm sorry, but this thing is turning into a real mess."

"What? Why are you acting in it then?"

"We're stuck," he said.

"Stuck how? We're getting things done." We'd just finished one of the most technically difficult scenes in the picture. It was where Lyle and the other survivors learn how to cook mutant feces so they won't have to resort to cannibalism.

"There's no desire here. You need to make your audience want to eat the cooked mutant feces," Lyle said. "I'm just not feeling it. Maybe we should rewrite the scene."

"I'm not rewriting anything. We're too far into this."

By now everyone was watching our argument. It was a sick fascination of mine, but I wanted someone to be filming it, though I probably would have punched that person's lights out. It could have at least made for a nice YouTube video.

Lyle sighed. "I may be done...for a little while."

"Jesus Christ," I yelled at him. "You can't back out now. The festival is in three weeks. You're my main star." I had dropped my role entirely after Chris left.

"I need some time to collect my bearings. The whole thing is disturbing my Qi," Lyle said. He walked out and I told everyone to go home. We were shut down, indefinitely.

That night I received an e-mail from Tom. *Hey man. I heard you were doing an apocalypse movie too. I just wondered if you wouldn't mind stopping by my set. Maybe we could help each other out.*

I thought of a three things when I got this message. The first was how I could possibly sabotage Tom's shoot. Steal the DV tapes. Accidentally trip and fall onto the camera. Spill some water on the equipment. Unleash a family of rabid raccoons inside the studio.

Then I thought about Chris. We hadn't talked since she started doing Tom's movie. Would it be too awkward seeing her there? What would I say? Would I tell her that I changed the script entirely after she left? That I only wanted her for the role? She would probably slap me in the face. I know she's

never thought of me the same.

Finally, I thought of the advantages to such an invitation. Perhaps I could gain a competitive edge by seeing how much Tom had fucked up his own project. Surely I was not the only person with problems. We both had similar ideas. I needed to know what sort of clichés he had in his picture, so I could avoid them in my own. If I ever got back my own, I thought. I called up Lyle and asked him if he wanted to come with.

"I hope you mean to sabotage his set," Lyle said.

"Let's see what his movie looks like first," I said.

Lyle and I showed up to the studio during a fight scene. There was blood everywhere and some tall meaty boy dressed in tattered clothes and covered in pasty white make-up like a kabuki performer. And then there was Chris, the zombie's victim. Her body was covered in red corn syrup and she looked like she was shivering from it.

Tom had a much bigger crew. He had multiple grips operating the boom and the lights. There was even a best boy, bringing over sandwiches and bottled water to the cast and crew. The worst part of it was the camera. Tom was using a regular home camcorder. A handheld piece of crap. At least I had borrowed a nice camera from a friend. Tom explained that he had talked to some of the festival judges in the Golden Reel at one his father's parties and they said there more interested in a gritty handheld style. This is probably due to all the nauseous handheld camera work in Hollywood movies nowadays.

"I prefer a more old-school approach I guess," I explained.

"Yeah, but at film school they kept saying that everything's going to digital anyways."

"I'm sure NYU film school would know everything," I said.

Chris was staring at us. A make-up person adhered fake bruises to her face.

We walked over to a set full of smashed out buildings made of some kind of rubbery foam substance.

"Yeah. NYU knows their stuff," Tom said. "But you definitely have a safe bet shooting in a more traditional, professional style."

"Yeah. I probably could have gotten into NYU," I said.

Lyle laughed.

"I just never bothered to apply," I continued, ignoring Lyle. "Back in college I thought I was going to go into accounting like my dad."

"So you were a business major?" Tom asked. They were setting up filters to diffuse the lighting on the apocalyptic set. There were ten or so tech-

nicians running around laying out wires.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“That’s definitely a safer bet than film,” Tom said. “Lord knows if I’ll ever make a profit off this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, but film is my passion. I can’t ignore that,” I said.

“You think this is too bright?” Tom asked, motioning to the set.

“You need more shadows,” Lyle said. “There are more shadows in life than that.”

“Yeah. More shadows would be nice. It would make it much darker, scarier,” I added.

“I think you guys are right. We’ll get rid of some of the backlighting.”

Tom left to talk to the technicians.

“Very original,” Lyle said.

I elbowed him in the ribs.

“So you’re stealing our ideas, huh?”

It was Chris. The make-up artists had done a great job. There was a large gash across her forehead and her hair was pasty from all the blood and guts covering her.

I thought of telling her something clever, something like ‘You look exactly how I feel right now.’ Instead I told her: “Tom invited me. He wanted to exchange ideas and stuff.”

“If only you had any,” Lyle whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

“Well. He’s got a real professional set here, doesn’t he?” she smiled.

“Yeah,” I said.

“How’s your movie coming along?” Chris asked.

Like shit and it’s all your fucking fault. “We’re almost finished,” I said.

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

Tom came back over to us. “We gotta get back to shooting and my Dad only lets visitors stop over for a short while. But if you guys wanna stop by again just give me a call.” He told me his cell number and I pretended to store it in my phone.

The next week, I dragged Lyle back onto my set and finished the picture. We shot 14 hours a day. I made Lyle do 60 takes of him emerging from the fallout bunker (the backdoor of my house dressed with aluminum foil so it looked metallic). I had to get just the right light on every scene. We shot at 6 a.m. in order to get the pinkish glow of dawn. We shot through the night making sure every scene had full coverage. Every angle, every alternate line of dia-

logue. I promised my actors free meals for a month. I promised Lyle \$300 out of an account I no longer had. I promised him I would be the best possible director he ever had. I promised myself I would stop eating fatty foods, stop drinking beer, stop masturbating, and cut off all connection to the Internet until I finished. I promised everyone that *The Wildmen* would be the kind of mutant-freak of an amateur film that surprises audiences and baffles critics. A movie no one can ignore. Their eyes won’t even blink in its presence. Perfect.

When I completed the final edit I locked myself in my room and slept for 24 hours straight, getting up occasionally to take a piss.

I saw Tom again the second night of the festival. He sat behind me with Chris in the back row of the theater. “You excited?” Tom asked. He was beaming at everyone. He and Chris were holding hands.

I looked over my shoulder at the two and nodded. I had sweat through two layers of shirts from the nerves. Lyle sat next to me, occasionally spraying deodorant on my clothes. “You perspire like a rainforest,” he said.

Both movies were slated for the late night horror fest on day 2 of the festival. It was held at a small dusty theater on the Westside of town. The audio was overblown and the seats had no cushioning. The crowd consisted mostly of college kids and 30-something bohemian types that sported goatees and old thick-rimmed glasses. There were 12 movies shown that night.

The Wildmen screened first. I looked down at the floor for most of the beginning. I didn’t want to know what kind of reactions were coming from the audience. I heard sporadic laughter at some points, like when Lyle ate the mutant feces. Most people didn’t say anything. It was silent during the most intense scenes: When Lyle and the other survivors encounter a mutant woman, green and crusted over like an old boat. It’s eyes searching them for some kind of understanding. When they find out about other survivors who have already left for a safe haven. The scene where Lyle laments the absence of his wife and children, lost to the infection.

No one clapped as the end credits rolled.

“This was really weird.”

“Depressing.”

“Ugh. That was disgusting,” one girl said.

Tom’s movie came on next, but it didn’t fare much better. There were more laughs though. Tom had submitted a B-monster movie on par with a wannabe *Night of the Living Dead*. Cheesy dialogue and all. And how many times do we have to see a zombie movie where the military comes in to save the day? Chris still looked sexy covered in blood, even after she lost half her

fingers to a particularly hungry zombie. A few pockets of applause broke out at the end when the survivors blow the up the Monstrous, an enormous zombie creature that was basically a rip off of Nemesis from *Resident Evil*.

After *Bloodbath*, the movies got considerably better, until they screened the winner of the Golden Reel: *Manatee: Quiet Killer of the St. Johns*. It was a 40-minute opus shot on film with lots of expensive underwater photography and a surprisingly terrifying sea cow complete with fangs and special claws that allow it to crawl on land during one scene.

The screening ended and everyone pooled into the lobby to grab drinks at the bar.

“Killer manatees?” Tom said, beer in hand. “Talk about ridiculous. I can’t believe it won.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Anyone who can make a manatee scary has got some serious talent.”

“Yeah. I suppose. But still...” Tom downed his beer.

“I mean at least it had some creativity. It wasn’t just, you know, another zombie movie.”

“You didn’t like *Bloodbath*?” Tom asked.

“Of course he didn’t,” Lyle said. “He was too busy drooling over our ‘masterpiece.’ Talk about a movie that made no sense.”

“Hey. You starred in that movie,” I said.

“I know,” Lyle left for the bar.

“I thought it was nice,” Chris told me, though her words sounded forced.

“Well. I’m definitely submitting mine to a few more festivals,” Tom said. “You can’t let one manatee fuck up everything.” He threw an empty beer bottle in the trash. “Anybody want something to drink.” Neither of us said anything and Tom left for the bar as well, leaving Chris and myself alone.

“Are you going to submit your movie someplace else?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. And I really hadn’t. Winning the Golden Reel was the only real goal I had set for myself. The rest were pure fantasy, walking red carpets and taking three picture deals with major Hollywood studios. I could see myself in each one. I would field interviews. I would make it onto the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*. The critics would bash my picture, jealous of the box office receipts they would bring in. I would be the first person to direct popular Hollywood movies with a sincere, honest message. I would be their dark messiah of truth and the masses would eat up every word.

“Maybe you should think about it,” Chris said. She always knew when I was depressed and I smiled, telling her I would.

That night I dreamt I was in my movie, struggling to make it to the drop point with the other survivors. I was in Lyle’s role. We were due for rescue by helicopter at noon. They had broadcast it on all frequencies and we were the only ones left on ground. I could hear a chorus of wails behind us. The mutant army hot on our trail. I was no longer fat and bloated. I was tattered and frail, gasping for air in the toxic environment as I ran to stop them before taking off. We’re too late, I feared and I knew that it was my responsibility and my fault for anyone left behind.