



They're Shooting a Horror Film in Our Living Room

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They're shooting a horror film in our living room. It's my brother's plan. Alex wants to be a director. He says it's the best job in the world because you get to play with an entire universe. Once, the universe had stretched from our bunk beds to the stairs and parts of the garden. He'd tell me to hold the toys carefully so you couldn't see my fingers, but they'd always be there, blurry and pink in the screen of Dad's camera.

Things have moved on a lot since then. We're older and have our own house. We've got Rob, a real camera man. Rob's tall, quiet and is the only one of the crew who smokes. He stands outside where I sit writing in my notebook on the patio steps leading down to the small front garden.

"Great script," he says.

He smokes slowly and I think about it all going inside him and wonder if the smoke will reach his toes and if that's why people have black toenails. When he's finished, he stubs it out in the small saucer we've given him and goes back inside.

The filming is happening just behind the patio doors, which have been shuttered up and covered in black bags to keep the light out. It's supposed to be night time inside but out here it's five o'clock and the sun is beating down. Thankfully the patio is sheltered and the only direct heat is on my feet, which tap against the tiles as I think.

Alex wanted to try out something dark so I spent a few weeks googling dangerous criminals on the internet until I came up with an amalgam of baddies and called him Rupert Haine.

Haine's an empiricist, obsessed with death and what people go through when they're about to die. He goes to hospitals to film the terminally ill then watches the tapes in his cinema room whilst drinking expensive red wine and listening to classical music.

The main principle of empiricism, according to Wikipedia, is that a theory is meaningless unless it's tried and tested. Haine can't prove his theories unless he takes things into his own hands, so that's what he does, kidnapping his victims or trapping them in their own homes.

I don’t write in all the murders.

I use symbols. Each new tape on his side table is a new victim. There’s his voiceover too. He’s disillusioned because all humans seem to react the same way, pathetic and desperate, under torture.

And then, just like that, in the checkout queue at a supermarket where he’s waiting to pay for bleach to remove blood stains off his carpet, he falls for this beautiful woman.

It can’t be true love because in the end he butchers her to death. But none of the team questions this part because it’s a horror film not a romance.

To be honest, I don’t really know what people want from a horror film. Maybe they’re like the main killer, fascinated by how people die.

Although, let’s be clear, this is not your average dying. I’ve written in a pretty nasty torture scene for the busty, blonde Beverly, who’s actually done drama school and is the most qualified of the whole team. She’s a bit suspicious of everyone, especially Murray, the psycho killer, who keeps going off to the bathroom.

Murray is exhausted. He’s been working nights at his uncle’s shipping warehouse. Maybe he’s putting on a face to the others but I can see he’s worn out.

He comes outside, a can of beer in his hand. His eyes are bloodshot and he looks pale. He squats down beside me and drinks deeply.

“Have you slept?”

He shakes his head.

“I think she can tell,” he says. “Bev... I think she knows I’m not a real actor.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think this is my role.”

Murray’s passionate about acting, he tells me all the time. He’s comfortable with me because I’m the calm younger sister, the good listener who doesn’t judge. That’s not true of course. I judge all the time like everyone else, I’m just quieter about it because I want to catch the story.

Alex is calling him. Murray gulps down the beer and bangs the can down on the tiles beside me.

“Okay, let’s do this,” he says.

Murray’s had no formal training but we’ve filmed him before and he’s always nailed it. Those were the projects that never got finished, always one problem or the other.

“The problem with actors is that they *act*,” Alex said when he gave Murray the part. “You, on the other hand, are natural.”

For once everything has come together. Except this time it’s not Murray’s film and that’s what’s eating him up. Murray’s the nice guy in a romantic comedy or the good cop that saves the day. He’s not the sort to beat a woman around and rip out her spinal column.

“Cut!” Alex calls, and a few seconds later Murray walks outside again. His expression is pretty dark until he notices me watching him, then he gives me one of those tight smiles that don’t really count.

“Can’t do this,” he says.

“You can’t kill her?”

He shrugs then he slides a silver hip flask out of his back pocket, unscrews the cap and takes a swig. He winces after the gulp and breathes in through his teeth.

“It’s not that I can’t get into his head. I can. I *have*.”

He must’ve slipped the flask in from somewhere between the living room and the terrace. I can’t believe he’s had it in his trousers while they’ve been filming. He walks to the edge of the patio and hides it in the pot of geraniums.

“What are you drinking?” I ask.

“I don’t want you to think I can’t do it,” he says, ignoring my question.

“I know you can do it.”

Alex marches outside, a script in his hand.

“Where’s Fran?” he barks. “We need her on standby to get this blood on.”

Alex is irritable, they’re an hour over time and Bev has yet to die. He’s sweating heavily, partly from the pressure but mostly because they’re using floodlights in the middle of a summer heat wave.

Alex doesn’t wait for answer and goes back inside. Murray reaches for the flask and takes another gulp.

“I don’t think you should drink anymore,” I say quietly.

“Murray!” Alex cries.

Murray clears his throat.

“Why is it *death* always comes in a whisper?”

He says it in a deep voice, a voice he reckons would be better if he smoked. It’s a strange line because death doesn’t really come in a whisper, especially if you’re a psycho torturer. I just liked the sounds the words made.

I wonder if the neighbours will hear the screaming and spoil a take by banging at the front door and crying out, “are you okay in there?” Except, of course, they’d have to get passed me first and I’d tell them that everything was under control before they even got to the front gate.

I turn around and look at the patio doors, wishing I could see through them.

I can hear Bev working herself up into hysterics. She’s on the other side tied to a chair, with a leather strap around her head and a ball stuck in her mouth. She can’t move or speak as she wakes from her drugged state to see her captor waving a scalpel in front of her.

“Cut!” Alex calls. “Bev that’s great.”

She has to be great. There isn’t enough time for her to be anything else. Alex can’t pay for another day. He’s determined to make it work and that’s why everyone, including Murray, *especially* Murray, has got to fulfil their role.

Bev comes outside, barefoot and wearing a black silky nightie. Her eyes are heavily made up with grey eye shadow and kohl pencil. She leans forward and shakes out her blonde, wavy hair then leans back against the wall with her arms folded and looks at me.

“I don’t usually do horror but I’m enjoying this.”

“I suppose fear’s quite an easy emotion to do,” I say, without thinking.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“You don’t act do you? I’m *actually* having to work pretty hard to feel scared of our dear killer, frankly I think he fancies me.”

She says this as Murray comes outside, his jaw working on a fresh stick of gum. He acts as if he hasn’t heard and walks to the edge of the patio.

She rolls her eyes and heads back inside.

Murray retrieves the flask from the pot of geraniums, muttering his lines under his breath.

Whatever he’s drinking looks like its burning him up. His cheeks are all red and every time he pulls the flask away from his lips he gasps like he’s been punched in the stomach.

“You’re a cold, calculating killer,” I say, “That stuff is making you look hot and wild.”

Francine will have to get some powder on him because this really isn’t how I pictured Haine.

“Come on Murray, you’ve got to do this.”

His eyes are on the plants but I don’t think he’s seeing them.

“Alex will kill me otherwise,” he says.

‘Well, I suppose we could film that.’

He doesn’t smile.

“Come on, you’ve got to imagine it’s...”

“I don’t need to imagine, this stuff happens,” he snaps. “You can see it if you want to, if you know where to look.”

I feel uncomfortable. He glances back at the door.

We can hear Alex giving out instructions to Rob about camera angles.

Murray looks behind him then takes another swig.

“How much have you had?”

“You need a lot of this stuff to be able to kill someone.”

“Yes but it’s acting, isn’t it?”

Alex is calling him now.

“Murray, get in here!”

Murray knocks the flask back and gulps it down.

He’s gone too far. He’s drunk. Why didn’t I stop him? I could’ve easily hidden the flask somewhere else. This is my film too!

“It’s acting!” I say again, “you’ve just got to believe it for a while, it’s not personal, it’s not real...”

He smirks, “now who sounds like the killer?”

His eyes are all bloodshot and glassy and he’s sweating a lot. Francine’s going to have to get her fan out and bury him in foundation if he doesn’t calm down.

“Murray! Get in here!” Alex calls, “Murray!”

“You shouldn’t have drunk all that,” I say, feeling angry. “We’ve all worked so hard. Alex put everything into this one! He wanted to get it right!”

“He’ll get it right,” he says, standing up. He staggers back and tosses the flask at the geraniums which collapse under the weight.

“Murray!”

But my voice is drowned out by Alex’s, which is sounding really annoyed.

Then Murray abruptly turns and walks back into the house and slams the door behind him.

I stand so still and listen.

I hear bangs and shouts and then the dull thud of a body falling onto the carpet. A shriek becomes a scream. But I can’t hear Murray. It must be to do with that senseless line about death coming in a whisper.

It sounds convincing, so convincing. If Alex hasn’t got a film with this then maybe he never will.

And suddenly it dawns on me how altered Murray had looked, how in an instance, I’d seen his watery eyes lose their anger and been replaced with something cold and resolute.

I can’t imagine his performance, maybe it’s his best ever, but I’m just dying for Alex to call out “Cut! Cut!” and for someone to open the door and let me know it’s a wrap.

But it’s taking so long and I can barely breathe. There’s too much shouting. Bev is crying and Alex is yelling, but he’s not yelling “Cut! Cut!” but “Stop! Stop!”

I stand at the patio doors and my stomach is turning over and I think, if someone doesn't open up quick I'm going to bang on the shutters and shout, "are you okay in there?" like a neighbour who really and truly doesn't know.

The End