



THE 31st

A Short Story

TOM WHITE & MILES HUBLEY



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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Photo created by OpenAI software Dall-E (an AI generator) using the direction: “a group of teenagers surrounded by various monsters like aliens, dracula, werewolves, digital art”.

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“Holy shit!”

“Holy shit!”

“Holy shit!”

That’s all anyone could say when it started happening. I whip-panned the camera (a pocket Sony PXW) to Casbo — his hands were already starting to morph, wiggle and shrink; two fingers vanished completely, leaving three long slimy ones; his eyes expanded into glassy almonds, turned pitch-black, head wriggling and widening and I suddenly flashed back to Mrs. Ormencupp’s Freshmen year English class when we had to read that story about the dude who turns into a bug, but this wasn’t just some crazy short story, this shit was literally happening right in front of me. A moment later, Casbo was a slimy, bug-eyed, E.T. munchkin.

He’d fully transformed.

Into a Grey. You know, the classic pop culture alien? And, highly worth noting, the literal halloween costume he’d been wearing, like, ten seconds ago.

I heard his 15-year old voice in my head: “HOLY SHIT!”

He was telepathic now, too. And then, one by one, like freak dominos, the rest of us —

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— hold the phone a second, I'm getting way ahead of myself.

The name's Ross Portfolio (my name is weird, I know, but aren't all names, like, inherently weird); I'm fifteen, existentially confused (who isn't?), on 75mg of Zoloft for a slight serotonin imbalance, I'm insecure about my silly Picasso body (although apparently I have a nice "mug"), I've been told I'm the rare teen who asks meaningful follow up questions during conversations, and the reason I don't hate high school is because of video production class with Mr. Boyer — which, incidentally, is the only reason I'm even able to tell this story in the first place, because without his film equipment we never could've made the craziest-ass found footage film in human history.

It happened on Halloween, and it went down like this...

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Friday morning.

Me and the main video prod gang (aka the "Vidiots:" Casbo, Zuko, Jules, Gus) were in Mr. McGuinnes' mind-numbingly dull Geography class, all staring at the wall clock and fantasizing about killing ourselves, when the girl of my dreams — Phoebe Walker, a spaghetti noodle of a sophomore, with chin-length black hair and eyes mined from Krypton— smuggled a note up the aisle and landed it with a gust of butterflies right on my desk.

It read: "Hey."

The Vidiots all gawked at me from around the room like, duuuude you're in! They knew I was pining big time. While McGuinnes droned on about how the earth used to be one big mega continent called Pangea, (which, in his defense,

is incredibly dope), I killed myself over a response. Finally, I cracked it, and ingeniously wrote back —

“Hey.”

I smuggled it back down the aisle. She read it. Then turned a cheek ever so slightly and I caught a glimpse of that glorious shade of teencrush-red. The bell rang.

After class, Phoebe and I found ourselves in the hallway looking at each other.

She said, “Hey.”

And then several eternities passed while I wracked my brain for literally any two-syllable word; if I'd been a poet I might have said something like, *Phoebe, you live in my gut — er, wait, solar plexus? Are solar plexuses and guts the same thing? What I'm trying to say, Phoebe, is that you're in my core, cuz one time I saw this Yoga Lady say 'core' while pointing at her gut, which is, like, where I feel my feelings for you. Does that make sense?* Clearly my brain was showing me jackshit in terms of social mercy, so I just went with —

“Hey.”

We both sorta giggle-hiccuped and then awkwardly parted ways. Casbo, the Vidiot's mousy, strawberry-haired Condescender-in-Chief, tapped me on the shoulder, “So was that the first time you've ever interacted with a Homo Sapien woman before?”

The other Vidiots sidled up, relishing my lack-of-game...

“You should write, like, a pick-up artist book or something,” he added.

I booped him on the nose, “And you should write, like, a book about being a ginger who owns too many flesh-lights and watches *The Dreamers* 5 times a week, or something.”

Jules, our fearless director and IQ superior by a factor of something close to infinity, herded us down the hall towards Mr Boyer's office. "Let me make myself crystal fucking clear," she said, her untamable mane of brown hair swish-swashing in the air, "I never, under any circumstance, want to hear the term 'flesh-light' uttered in this social pod ever again."

Three hallway right turns later, Mr Boyer's office (just the door itself was like an extra mg of Zoloft). Imagine Jack Black and a young Steven Spielberg had a love child and it grew up to become a disheveled and criminally underpaid public school teacher. He's literally the best.

He looked up and grinned as we tumbled in, wearing, per usual, his timeworn JPark T. "So what's the plan, my dudes and dudette?"

"We need the Sony PXW and the XLR-K3M dual-channel mic, if that's cool," I said.

"Hit me with the idea, first."

Jules rubbed her hands together and then flung them out, "It's a rag tag gang of unlikely heroes who fight creatures of the night. It's sorta like, if George Romero directed the Dirty Dozen, but there's only five of us, so it's the Dirty Five."

"I love the concept, but the title..." Boyer lowered his voice, "Dirty 5 sounds a little..."

"Porn-ish?" Gus offered (our token "stoner" who had never actually smoked before).

"Orgy...esque?" Casbo added. Jules punched both of them in the shoulder.

"I'm gonna pretend neither of those words were just said out loud in my office," Boyers said. Then, thoughtfully, "How about..." he snapped his fingers, "the Freaky 5?"

“Bingpot!” Jules shrieked, “There it is!” And then, in her best mimic of the Movie Trailer Guy’s Voice, “It’s the 31st. Scary monsters go bump in the night. And it is incumbent upon the Freaky 5 to thwart the evil machinations of their imminent crepuscular subterfuge.”

We all gaped like, *imminent crepuscular subterfuge??*

“What? I’m studying vocab for the SAT, I know dope words now,” she said.

“But we don’t have to take the SAT till next year,” Casbo said.

“And your point is?”

“I think it’s really cool how nerdy you are,” Zuko said, dewy-eyed. He was a good natured, good looking, B-Minus-On-The-Final-Exam kind of guy. They looked at each other and split a cheek-melting blush. Quick backstory on Jules and Zuko: Jules likes Zuko. Zuko likes Jules. Jules and Zuko are afraid of ruining their friendship, so their unrealized feelings follow the Vidiots around like an omnipresent fart.

“You know,” Casbo said, annoyed, “this whole ‘will-they-won’t-they’ crap between you two is very destabilizing to the interpersonal dynamics of the ‘social pod.’”

Mr. Boyer laughed, “Footage on my desk Monday morning, Freaky 5.”

He pulled out his Epic Public School Keychain and opened the door to the Hallowed Equipment Room of Glory; we heard a choir of angels singing, Lights, Camera, Action!

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The day played out like a million other forgettable high school days before it...

But for one notable factor: the impending social-anxiety-doom of the Halloween-themed Fall Formal that would take place in the gym later that night prior to calling Action! on Freaky 5. None of us had dates either — except sorta me. According to Jules’ SAT vocab guide, I’d been too “pusillanimous” and chickened out on asking Phoebe, even though she clearly wanted me to. Word through the locker-bay grapevine was that she was going stag in the hopes that, quote:

“Portfolio grows a bean bag.”

The bell rang mercifully and a hop-skip-jump later we were crammed into Jules’ movie- poster-plastered-bedroom getting ready. The Vidiot’s costume breakdown was as follows:

Yours Truly: I went old school. Dracula. OG prince of darkness. ‘Cause let’s be honest, if Stephanie Meyers and Deborah Harkness have taught us anything, it’s that Vamps are timelessly sexy, and I had a “bean bag” to grow later. Casbo (our crew’s resident “X-Files” obsessive) went as the Classic Grey Alien. Zuko (possibly planet earth’s biggest Val Kilmer fan) donned Doc Holiday from “Tombstone.” Gus? Nada. Gus hates wearing anything other than scuffed-up Air Jordan’s, sweatpants, and a T-Shirt with a supposed Einstein quote that claims: “The greatest mystery of the universe is spam.” Lastly, our fearless leader, Jules...

After a good 30 minutes in the bathroom she emerged from a bygone era; hair a big- sturdy bob with bangs glued to her forehead in an upside down pirate’s hook; topped off with a spiffy hat, long white gloves, and a dirt-brown dress that ended at knee-high leather boots.

“What do you guys think?” She did a spin. No doubt she looked dope, but none of us knew who she actually was. We all just looked at her and nodded supportively...

“Are you serious, guys?” she said, “I literally explained this to you yesterday.” She glared at each of us individually, got blank stares back, and then snapped, “You guys are fucking incorrigible — SAT vocab word 12 — I’m Alice Guy-Blaché! From France? Hello?”

“Who?” we all said in unison. And now she was really pissed.

“Who? Who??,” and then in Jules-level all-caps, “WHO????????????? Uh, how about the first woman to ever direct a narrative feature film! That’s fucking who!!!” She turned away...

Zuko put on Major-Chagrin-Face and very timidly approached her, “Hey, uh, Jules...” Her eyes flew around at him with holyshit-fire. “We’re genuinely sorry that we didn’t know who Alice Guy-Blaché is, and... and I just want you to know, that we are committed to disrupting the evil barnacle—I mean, particle—no, PATrickal —

“— PATRIARCHAL,” she assisted him, a very slight smile maybe-almost forming.

“Exactly, the evil PATRIARCHAL academic machine that, you know, erases the accomplishments of dope women from history.”

She looked at him, a little stunned. He tried a bomb-diffusing smile on her and finished with, “I read that v cool, v readable book you gave me by that one lady.” He held onto that smile like he was in a hurricane. She studied him for any signs of bullshit. Her brow loosened...

“Better not be cheap lip service, Doc Holiday.” And then they shared a v long and private gaze that only ended

because Casbo coughed into his styrofoam alien hands and nearly rolled his eyes right out of his head, “for the love of God...”

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Fall Formal.

Just as we entered the gymnasium to the sounds of Lou Bega’s Mambo #5 — “...a little bit of Monica in my... —” Jules pinned me against a wall, and after muttering, “Bega? What is this, 1999?,” she looked me dead in the eyes and grabbed fistfuls of my cape: “Listen to me very carefully, Portfolio, because I want you to fully comprehend the arcane realities of inchoate womanhood.” I tried to speak but she put her finger to my lips, “SAT words 18 and 23, shut up and listen, what I’m trying to tell you is this: you may think being coy or not acting TOO into something is, like, mysterious or sexy, but I want to disabuse you of this tired gender construct. Women want men, not boys, you understand? We want clear communication and confident demonstrations of unwavering, unflappable, unambiguous moral clarity.” She stepped back...

“Got it?”

“Uhhh, I think so?”

A couple cups of punch later, I saw her. A stunningly elaborate dragon; like, Fairytale World-Destroying-Elaborate-Dragon. Our eyes met, and locked, from across the gym, and then, like a man just stepping out of a bomb shelter after thirty years, I approached her...

“Oh my god, you look....” I lost my mouth... where does a mouth go?

“I’m Smaug.”

She had yellow and black contacts in, so even her eyes played the part. “And are those...”

She was holding a pumpkin-shaped bag full of golden chocolate coins...

“I’m coveting my gold.” At which point her mischievous smile, like, literally almost killed me. I was so attracted to her that I genuinely think I could’ve eaten both my feet.

“And you’re... Dracula?” she asked. I nodded stupidly. “Vamps are seriously legit,” she added with a smile.

“Right? The most sensual of the night creatures.” “V sensual.”

“I think it’s the whole neck thing.” “And the blood”

“Yeah, def, blood is v sensual.”

“I feel like this conversation is headed in a v weird direction.”

“It really does, doesn’t it. I don’t even know what the hell I’m saying right now.” And I didn’t. I’d only been drunk one time before, and this now felt like the second.

We both laughed, blushed, and then awkwardly tried to slow dance. But at this point the DJ had made a hard right turn into gangster rap, which isn’t really a “slow dance” vibe, so we just sort of bounced in place while gripping each other’s waists. Hovering at the punch table, I saw the Vidiots nearly keeled over laughing.

“So, Phoebe, um... you know how my friends and I
— ”

“— The Vidiots?”

“The very same,” I said, still bouncing. “So later tonight after the dance, we’re gonna film this, like, halloween movie, and, well, do you wanna, maybe, like, be in it with us?”

Her smile was fast and vast, “What’s it about?”

“I’m honestly not really sure yet. Mr. Boyer says that screenplays are for fascists, so we’ve decided to go full Terrence Malick and just film shit as we go — do you mind if we stop hopping for a second?” We both laughed awkwardly. I continued, “But the basic idea is that we’re this ragtag gang of heroes called the Freaky 5 who fight evil at night.”

“Cool!”

“And I feel like a dragon would be a seriously legit addition to the gang.” “But then we’d be six, and the title wouldn’t work.”

“Oh, we can totally just change it; that’s, like, no biggie.”

“The Slick Six!” she blurted.

“Whoa! Perfect!”

She suddenly put a plastic-claw to my face, “I’m One-Hundo-P in, Portfolio,” and then kissed my cheek. It was like a shot of heroine right to the hippocampus. Mr. Boyer, chaperoning as a plump T-Rex, gave me the thumbs up from across the gym.

After back-to-back Lizzo songs (during which Phoebe/ Dragon said, “NOW we’re talking!”) I drifted back to the Vidiots with the update; and got pushback. Minus Jules, they were like, *whoa whoa whoa, you getting your game on is one thing, but we’ve got a tight vision here.*

“No we don’t! Our script is literally called,” and I held it up: “Untitled halloween movie suggestions/ideas/possible shot sequences” was written in chicken scratch sharpie.

“The Vidiots are a veritable — SAT word 3 — sausage fest,” Jules said, “Phoebe is in. Debate has ended on the floor.”

And that was that.

An hour and a half later, the first shot of what would become the most notorious found footage movie ever made was framed and directed by a 15 year-old girl who had suddenly and magically transformed into a French film pioneer.

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Our hood was what the SAT Vocab Einsteins might call a “gallimaufry,” but what I would call a stone cold “clusterfuck.” According to my dad, Cincinnati’s famous lack of zoning laws has created a scenario whereby in a matter of two blocks you can walk seamlessly from Spielbergian suburbia into a bustling city and then pop up into a wasteland strip mall featuring a large porn emporium sandwiched between the corner bodega and the video arcade.

The Vidiots, aka the newly minted Slick Six, kicked things off in suburbia, and took half an hour to trick-or-treat and just get a solid sugar rush going. The night was absolutely bumping. Young and old. Some houses, like the Vandoozer’s, notorious for their fructose-ian generosity, had lines wrapped around their lawns like they were a night club or something.

Zuko crushed three candies in his mouth, “We’re like Scorsese in the early years, but instead of cocaine we’re doing bumps of mini-Butterfingers.”

“You know, minus the nasal delivery system, cocaine honestly sounds pretty awesome,” Casbo said.

Two blocks later, cresting the diabetic waves of corn syrup, we regrouped at the newly renovated playground on Mariposa and 3rd; as I popped the lens off the Sony, I looked

to our fearless leader, Jules/Blaché, and said, “So what first, boss lady?”

She made a movie frame with her fingers, squinted her eye, and panned around the night to tee up the first shot. Got it. “OK, Dracula, you climb up to the top of the slide and start wide on the street, get some ESTABLISH-INGS of peeps strolling by etc. — we’ll lay in ominous music in post. Then we’ll run up and huddle at the base of it here, at which point you slide down towards us slowly as we spitball that there’s a *dark conspiracy and we’re the ragtag gang that’s gonna* blah blah and then we’ll just, you know, Terrence Malick-it.”

I scrambled up, got my bearings and ZOOMED wide. The costumed teen and tween hordes teeming all around us, a few bits of the sunset still clinging to the horizon, but dissolving quickly into the stars. I heard Jules say, “Action!” held the shot for 5 seconds, and then herkilly- jerkilly slid down the slide to reframe on the SlickSix, heads conspired together...

“There is an unknown evil that lurks in the shadows tonight,” Jules riffed, “and so I have gathered you four: a brilliant alien, a powerful fire breathing dragon, a handsome cowboy — ” She stoped a moment, the “handsome” had been involuntary, and Zuko beamed; she continued, “And a...” she looked at Gus, “... and a... well, and Gus, to stop it from destroying the city.”

Zuko: “But what could it be?! The force causing this darkness?!”

Radio silence ensued. Malicking-it was proving difficult (in our defense, half of his movies are unwatchable); but just as Jules was about to yell “cut!,” Phoebe/Dragon to the rescue:

“I have a theory, it may sound bananas, but the best theories usually are...” She smiled mischievously. My knees wobbled. I whip-panned to her face and slowly pushed...

“You know how there’s all this anti-matter in the universe that we can’t see but apparently has gravitational pull?” Everyone nodded, genuinely anticipating her lines, “Well... what if all of that matter is mobilizing because it wants to stop the universe from expanding and instead force it to implode, but in order to do that it needs Humans to die ‘cause we’re the only sentient beings in the universe with the scientific ingenuity to create an ANTI anti-matter machine, and so anti-matter lieutenants have sent shadow monsters to earth to destroy us.”

Everyone just stared at her. “Anti-matter shadow monsters?” Casbo said. Phoebe, crestfallen, “Too weird/complicated?”

But then he grinned, “Honestly? I fucking love it. I mean, why the hell not?”

“And maybe they, like, ‘bodysnatch’ humans!” Zuko added.

Everyone was rolling with it now. I zoomed a little closer on Phoebe. She was pure, validated exhilaration. “Ooo yeah, they slink through the shadows,” Casbo piled on, “and anytime a human touches the darkness —

— Gus interrupted, “the anti-matter monsters inseminate you with their galactic placenta.” Jules’ hand flew up, “Pause: do you honestly not understand how procreation works?”

Phoebe shrieked!

Everyone jumped!

I nearly dropped the camera... when I reframed, she was squinting her dragon eyes cinematically and said, “I see

one!,” and then flew after a group of kids from our AP history class loitering across the playground. Jules waved at me, “Go go go go!” I scrambled the camera after her and caught up just as she jumped on Oren Chapesky (recently de-braced, an unbearable knowitall) and roared —

“Suck fire, bitch!”

It was unclear if Oren’s screams were real or not, but either way he bolted. Phoebe turned to the rest of the Slick Six and proclaimed, “One anti-matter shadow monster down!” Jules started clapping, “You’re a natural! A god damn natural!”

Goddamnit she goddamn was. She made a silly dragon-curtsey and said, “Splice off the end in post? Make it seem like I legit smoked that fool?”

“Bingpot!” Jules agreed, and pointed at both of their heads like, great minds, girl.

My dragon/crush had completely won the Vidiots over.

“So what next?”

“Well, as Parker and Stone once famously wrote, ‘All you need is a montage!’” Everyone suddenly broke out in song, singing the lines from Team America —

— And that’s when it happened.

We instantly shut-up and looked to the sky: It had flashed, blindingly, for a moment turning night to day; it was as if the entire world had suddenly taken a polaroid picture of itself. Then stillness, that eerie, goosebump stillness that shivers through your body while your brain prepares itself for the “inexplicable” (SAT vocab word 16).

And then, one by one, that weird Kafka story from Mrs. Ormencupp's English class came true... and is it did, I luckily had the wherewithal to turn the camera back on.

Casbo wiggled, gurgled, shrank, bug-eyed, and voila — Grey alien. Zuko shot up six inches as the hair above his lip — once described by Gus as “pubic hair glued to his mouth” — turned into an honest-to-God stache; he was suddenly 40 year-old gunslinging Doc Holiday, wheat stock between his teeth, skin tanned by the West. Body on fast-forward, Jules grew up 25 years until she looked like Marion Cotillard in a period drama. Then Phoebe. Holy shit Phoebe. I WHIP-PANNED the camera to find a literal teenager-sized dragon; like, an actual clawed, scaly, kaleidoscope-eyed fucking dragon. Suddenly, the camera slipped from my hands...

I felt my canines extend and sharpen; my body surged with cold power, my senses went wild, the world's “olfactory” (SAT word 26) universe exploded in my nose; my heart rate plummeted and suddenly all I wanted to do was stare at people's neck arteries.

And then, of course, there was Gus, who hadn't gone as anything. He just stumbled back and tripped and then screamed, “HOLY SHIT!” We all looked around at each other and agreed:

“Holyshit”

“Holyshit”

“Holyshit”

Zuko/Holiday turned away and peered south into his rawhides, smiled, “Holy shit.”

Before we had a chance to process what the actual fuck was happening, the diagetic soundscape from *The Purge* erupted in the distance. A moment later, we heard rustling in

the trees, followed by a collection of beady yellow eyes emerging from the darkness...

“Uhhh, guys?”

“Keep filming!” Jules whisper-yelled.

I picked up the Sony and ZOOMED OUT, focused on the trees... as four literal Velociraptors quietly drew a circle around us. We knew who they were: Pete, Mac, Sammy and Oliver from 2nd period PE. Jules called out, “Hey, guys, it’s us, the Vidiots.” But they didn’t respond; they just tightened the circle, their urine-tone eyes looking, like, whoaaaa hungry.

“Pete? Mac? Are you guys okay?” She asked. “This shit is crazy, right?..... Guys???”

Casbo’s newly telepathic alien voice piped into our heads, “So, uh, SlickSix? I’m getting the v strong impression that they’re just legit velociraptors now.”

I white-knuckled the camera, the SlickSix huddled together; I found Phoebe’s claw and squeezed, she squeezed back, both of us bracing for our mind-bogglingly inexplicable and phantasmagorical (SAT words 16 again and 22) fate, when —

— BOOM BOOM BOOM! The ground started to shake. The raptors whipped their heads around just as a portly, 5 foot 9 inch T-Rex named Mr. Boyer came bounding into the playground. He did his best impression of a carnivorous *ROOAARRR!* and snapped his jaws menacingly at the raptors; luckily, old school dino power structures still applied in 2022: they instantly spooked, squawked submissively, and then scattered... leaving us face-to-face with our freshly Mesozoic video production teacher...

“Thank god you’re okay,” he said, resting his stubby little arms against the monkey bars. He took a good long look

at each of us while catching his breath. But then the insanity of it all hit him like a car crash and he, well, he just freaked-the-living-hell-out, as an avalanche of truly inspired cuss words tumbled out of him. Things like, “McFucking cockwagon puppet fart!,” and “Swogglng anal dick shart!,” and “Bitchass cornhole muffin fucker!” It went on like that for a while, his stubby claws rocking the monkey bars back and forth; and due to the Kafka-esque transformation, his J Park T was now a shredded ascot dangling from his dinosaur neck.

He finally ran out of steam. “Sorry about that.”

Jules put an elegant, 40 year-old hand on his shoulder, “are we better now, Monsieur Boyer?” He nodded. “*Tres bien.*” At which point we suddenly realized that her voice had a musical French accent now. Zuko/Holiday looked just about braindead with love. He hooked a cocky thumb into his belt, tipped his cap and said twangilly —

“I’m gonna bed you later, woman.”

For a moment it was a tossup whether she was amenable (SAT word 13) to the idea, or winding up to slap him. She chose the latter. Knocking the wheat stock right out of his mouth. He rattled his head like he was shaking off a trance, “Whoaaaa, sorry ‘bout that, ma’am.”

And then, because whether a 15 year-old American girl or a middle aged French woman, Jules was Jules, she clapped her hands three times and reeled in our focus, “*D’Accord, deux* things need to happen simultaneously now. Most *importante*, our movie just got WAY more *epeek*, so Portfolio [*Portfolio* in a French accent is amazing btw], I need you filming like you’ve never filmed before.” She clapped at me! “Like, RIGHT now! Film film film!” She did a quick directorial spin, “I want zis to feel like Superbad meets

Cloverfield.” She brought her hands together like she was physically merging the two comps, “but with a *soupeçon* of Ze Goonies,” and she sprinkled ‘Ze Goonies’ in the air. “That is ze elevator pitch, *mon amis* — remember, before we move to LA after high school, we need to get *tres bien* at high-concept.”

“What’s ‘high-concept’ again?” I asked.

“Nobody really knows, but apparently it is ze cat’s pajamas.”

I looked at T-Rex/Boyer for an answer. “Hmmm, it’s sorta like...” he raised his squat arms tentatively, “...high up... *conceptually*.”

“High up where?”

“*Allons-y! Allons-y!*” Jules clapped three times again.

“So that’s *numéro un*: Film everything! And *deux*, because our movie just took on an entirely new layer of verisimilitude — SAT word 28 — ze Slick Six is now, to put it bluntly, motherfucking real. And so it is up to us, *mon amis*...”

I slowly ZOOMED into her face, “to save our city, and perhaps... ze world!”

Bam!

The earth shook.

The camera shook.

My brain shook.

Zuko spun the barrel on his six shooter, “We best make haste outta this here dusty old backwater ‘fore the shit *really* hits the iguana.” He snapped it back into place.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Casbo said, “that’s not how Doc Holiday talks.”

“How do *you* know how Doc Holiday talks?”

“It’s certainly not like that.”

“You just got the star-slicker brain rot, is what you got, slime daddy.”

“Is your version of Doc Holiday on mushrooms?”

“Everybody shut up and listen!” Phoebe put a clawed-finger to her snout...

“What?” we all said in unison.

“Sonofabitch,” she said, something terrible dawning, “Franky Pitts from home room.”

“Oh god.” someone said.

“Oh god,” someone else said.

“Oh god,” another person said.

“What?!” Mr Boyer asked, starting to panic, “Why ‘Oh God’?!”

Because Franky Pitts went as Thanos.

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A brief anecdote.

Three years ago my dad actually died. I’ll spare you the messy stuff, but by the end he wasn’t really my dad anymore; he was more like... like a stick figure attached to a very dim light bulb. I don’t want this to become a sob fest or anything, but I mention it because before that fateful Halloween, I knew a thing or two about magical transformations; how something that seems whole, concrete, *forever*, can suddenly not be. He tried to hang on at the end, mentally I mean, and the hospice ladies even praised his efforts, said some people just get vicious; but not dad, he tried with every thing he had to stay, well, to stay *Dad*.

And so, as a galactic tyrant’s purple rage-face appeared through the trees, I heard Dad’s voice in my head, it was so clear: “Hey dude,” he said.

“Hey dad.” I said back.

“Look,” his voice took on that pep talk tone he used when I was nervous before a little league game, “I know that you really want to suck the blood from everyone’s jugular right now — it’s called the ‘carotid artery’ by the way — but you need to stay *You*, dude, okay? Because *You* is who’s gonna get you out of this.” And Dad-Voice was right. We may not be able to control our physical lives, fate can throw you an asteroid — or a velociraptor — anytime it pleases, but who we ARE, that’s the real shit.

For zero narrative reason, I turned the camera around and looked into the lens, “Love you, dad — ”

* * *

“ — Werewolves??!!”

I spun the camera back around, “Since when does Thanos use — ”

(Note to viewer: a lot of this segment is blurred out for copyright reasons)

The earth shook again. Instantly, big-ass neon lasers started “felling” (SAT word 32) all of the surrounding trees as Franky Pitts/T***** boomed into the playground.

He pointed, “Get them!”

A fleet of literal goddamn Werewolves was already running at us!

“Who went as werewolves?!” Gus yelled.

“What the hell does it matter?!” Boyer roared, “RUN!”

And holyshit did we run.

A mad dash later, we emerged onto Juniper Street, a neighborhood lined with one-story cookie-cutters, and my god, if we thought T***** and his Werewolves were lunacy, well, double it. As we ran, Alien/Casbo piped into our heads:

“So... quick question, everybody: why in the holy-mother-loving-fuck-of-Jesus are we the only people who seem to have NOT lost our goddamn minds?!” An essential question, but one we’d have to answer later. At one point the camera dropped, and when you watch the footage now, for about ten seconds, the frame, at a slight POWER-ANGLE, is just a stampede of crazy-ass feet rushing by: werewolf claws, clown shoes, bone white witch's feet (floating), dino paws, robot legs, lion pads, centaur hooves, etc.

But here’s the thing: we honestly had no idea where we were even going. Like, seriously, where the hell do you take shelter when Disneyland-on-Acid turns into The Fantastical Purge?

We managed to lose T***** and his Were-minions in a parade of screaming Fairytale Princesses and then OMG-Yes-Praise-the-Lord up ahead: parents we recognized! Unchanged! Still themselves! The generous Vandoozers! They were on their porch, looking around in shock.

“Mr. and Mrs. Vandoozer!” we all yelled.

They took one good look at us, SCREAMED, and then dashed inside and locked the door. And why wouldn’t they? We were being chaperoned by a literal Tyrannosaurus Rex. Mr. Boyer stopped on their lawn and turned to Gus, “You’re up, buddy. You’re the only normal looking teenager left; you need to get the Vandoozers to let us inside so that we can —,” but he paused, just a Concerned High School Teacher again; because something was happening to Gus. A donut glaze had come over his eyes. He looked... stupefied (SAT word 14).

“Uhhh, Gus?” T-Rex/Boyers said. Radio silence.

“Gustavo?” Alien/Casbo tried.

And then it happened for him, too. He didn’t change visually or anything, but on the inside? Kafka was happening.

“Holy shit, guys,” he finally said, “I’m... becoming... myself.”

“What?” Casbo said. “I’m... becoming... *me*.”

“Seriously what the hell are you talking about?”

But I understood. Gustavo was having an existential awakening. As he began to dance like a Hare Krishna, I turned to the others: “I think that somehow, because he wasn’t wearing a costume, whatever crazy shit caused all of this, has made him, sorta, like, become a deeper version of what he already was; which was, you know, *himself*.”

He took my face in his hands, “Bingo, Bloodsucker!,” and then kissed me. “I have just experienced Ego-Death, fellow beings. The conceptual universe has crumbled before my freshly opened third-eye. And all that is left... is ME!”

“Not gonna lie, that sorta sounds like the *opposite* of ‘Ego-death,’” Casbo said.

Laughing like a legit madman now, Gus started stripping down to his birthday suit, because I guess that’s what one does when their third eye opens? Jules clapped at him like he was a misbehaved pet, “Pssst! *Non non non!* Put your clothes back on, Kierkegaard... there you go, one leg after ze other... becoming enlightened does not mean we get naked...”

And that’s when I smelled it. Something wrong. Something even wrong-er than what was already wrong. My vampire nose literally seemed to say, *turn the hell around, bro*.

So I turned the hell around. The street was empty. Those pre-inexplicability goosebumps crawled up my already cold neck. “Uh, guys? Where did everyone go?”

The whole neighborhood seemed to have ghosted. Then there was a synchronized *whooooshing* sound, followed

by the sudden arrival of a roving gang of Inflatable Wavy Guys. They stopped in front of us. We all took a step back. Are Inflatable Wavy Guys inherently good or bad? Who could say? One of them broke free and approached us, its arms flapping wildly. It's weird little mouth opened and out came, "blblblblblblblblblblblblblblbl!"

We were all like, What?

"blblblblblblblblblblblblblblbl!" it repeated, with more urgency.

"This lanky huckster tryin' to sell us some combustion jalopies or what," Zuko said, taking the wheat stock out of his mouth and squinting through a non-existent sun glare.

Across the highway, two blocks up, there was indeed a car dealership lined with identical Wavy Guys. But these kids (Teens? Adults? Who knew!) were clearly poking fun of them with their costume choices. So what the hell was going on here?

Head Wavy Guy suddenly got way more intense:

"BLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBLBBL!!!!" And as if in response, we heard what *blblblblblblblblbl* was referring to. I did a Michael Bay POWER-ANGLE-TRACK around Mr. Boyer just as he turned and looked up: "motherrrrfff —"

You see, for the last two weeks, the dealership had been sporting this enormous "Monster of a Deal Halloween Day Sale" sign, and to underscore that claim, the guy who owns the place had gone as what I think he intended to be Godzilla, but he — Mitch Flogmen — was a drinker, and clearly three sheets when he made the thing, so it also sorta looked like King Kong, and even a little bit like Frankenstein's monster. The sum effect? Well, when I PANNED the camera 180 degrees and ZOOMED, I found myself CLOSE ON the

hell-face of a Fire-Breathing-Zombi- Lizard-Monkey rising up over the Vandoozer's house...

Mr. Boyer finished the, "ucker" and then stepped in front of us, trying his hardest to seem bigger than 5 foot 9. "I TOLD you 'Cloverfield' was a *tres bien comp*," Jules said, her creative titillation (SAT Word 7) barely edging a victory over her fear. That was, until Flogman/Monster, 2X taller than the house, shook the earth with a roar and then lifted his foot and brought it right down thru the roof into the Vandoozer's living room. From inside, a bloodcurdling scream!

"Holy shit, did Flogman just kill the Vandoozers?!" Phoebe said.

"Chill, Dragon Spirit," Enlightened Gus said, "they've just been liberated from their mortal coil, this is a moment to celebra—" but Flogman/Monster opened his mouth and sprayed drunken monster-fire at us. Everyone screamed and ducked. Inflatable Wavy Guys fled with:

"bbl!"

"Thanks for the heads up!" I yelled after them.

We were just about to flee too, when Jules got her classic Epiphany-Face, turned to Phoebe and said, "Wait, you're a fucking dragon, *Mademoiselle*."

"Oh my god, you're right... I'm a *fucking* dragon." Her reptilian eyes rearranged like Rubik's Cubes, "which means..." and then some deep, ancient, mythological instinct clicked into place; her throat started to burn the color of lava, and just as Flogman freed his foot from the Vandoozer's living room and took a step closer to destroy us, a stunning volcano-blast of flame erupted from Phoebe's snout. He stumbled back. Stunned. But not deterred. He opened his shitshow-of-a-mouth and sent a blast of fire back. The two fires met midair and began their own sort of wild duel.

Suddenly, Jules' sultry musical accent directing us over the chaos —

“Mr. Boyer! Attack his ankles! Casbo! Try to get inside his mind! Zuko! Shoot for ze love of God you handsome cowboy shoot! Portfolio! Film! For ze sake of posterity — SAT Word 25! — dear God FILM! And Gus! Ummm — ”

Gus sat down in lotus position and said, “I'll meditate on the nature of this moment.”

“Sure.”

Phoebe trembled with fire as we sprang into action!

“I can almost hear his mind hiding,” Casbo yelled, “it's like this... really quiet frequency, but I can hear it!” He squeezed his big black eyes: “Mr. Flogman?” we all heard him say telepathically, “if you're in there, behind the, huh, godzilla monkeything, please stop.”

As if he could sense what Casbo was doing, Flogman/Monster shook his head and the fire spewing forth got even crazier. Phoebe was pushed back, but she dug her claws into the grass and stood her ground; while T-Rex/Boyer snapped at Flogman's achilles and Zuko/Holiday slammed the hammer of his six-shooter, screaming, “GiddyUp, bitch! YeeHaw!”

“I can only hold it a little longer!” Phoebe yelled. We could all see it, Flogman's fire starting to overtake hers. Two, big, bright, lava forcefields battling in the sky.

“Wait! I have an idea!” Casbo said, “On three, run!”

“That's your fucking idea?!”

“Just trust me! On three!” We all counted together, One.... Two... Three!

“Hey, Flogman!” Casbo piped into his monster-mind, “LOOK BEHIND YOU!”

Lucky for us, it turned out that Flogman/Monster was a real moron: he took the bait. Confused, he spun around, and Phoebe's final blast of snout-fire hit him square in the brain stem, causing him to stumble forward and belly-flop onto the Vandoozer's garage — Splat!

We bolted like hell.

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Phoebe had told us to follow her.

So the Vidiot/SlickSix chased a teenage dragon back through the neighborhood, reemerging into The Magical Purge-Parade of Halloween Chaos, me doing my best to make the cinematography feel more Bourne Identity than Blair Witch Project.

Oh, and the entire electrical grid was out at this point.

Several centaurs, spaghetti monsters, and Iron "Guys" (blurred for copyright reasons again) later, Phoebe stopped us in front of small, dark, one story house. Her house.

"My dad works the graveyard shift at the Kroger's so nobody's home. Come on!"

By some miracle, Mr. Boyer managed to squeeze himself through the front door without completely destroying the frame; we rushed in after him and locked the dead bolt.

"So is this shitshow like a Spielberg/Steve King type deal?" Casbo said in our minds.

"What do you mean?" Jules said.

"You know, like there's some government building nearby where crazyassshit is happening and now it's spilled out into the burbs."

"No way, zat conceit's played out. Could we have some water, Phoebe, s'il vous plait?"

“Hold the telegram!” Zuko twanged, “How ‘bout that godawful pink shoeshine?”

“What?” Casbo said.

“He means *ze punch*”

“The punch?”

“At the the Fall Frolic! What if sum' sneaky sumabitch spiked it?”

“Spiked the punch? With what?”

“Magic beans, amigo! Whutchu thank?”

“Magic beans? By who? A fucking wizard?”

“Every moment of existence is a magic bean” Gus said.

“If you ain’t noticed, partner,” Zuko said, “the town entire is hoppin’ with beasties, so how in a possum’s dusty gonads would a warlock spikin’ the shoeshine be topsy-turvy?”

“Every time you open your mouth now, the alien in me wants to perform violent experiments on you in my fucking spaceship. But to answer your question: because, PARTNER, people who weren’t even at the Fall ‘frolic’ have transformed too!”

While the argument between Alien and Cowboy continued, I went to help Phoebe, turning the camera off as I did. Being in her home was surreal, and my vampire nose was on fire: the scent-scape was homey and comforting; it had the leftover aroma of a home-cooked meal, maybe lasagna... yeah, totally lasagna, and salad with balsamic vinaigrette. I also realized, with a shock, that my vamp nose allowed me to smell *feelings* too, and there was sadness here, like real sadness — like sadness that defines a life.

I suddenly found myself standing before some sort of shrine. It was decorated with candles, mementos, and a collage of pictures, all featuring the same smiling woman...

“That’s mom.” Phoebe was beside me. “It’s just me and dad now,” she said.

I’d had no idea she’d lost a parent, too. Without even thinking, I just picked up the matchbook, struck one, and then carefully lit each candle. We looked at each other...

“You know, my dad...” I trailed off.

“I know,” she said, “I heard Jules talking about it once.”

For a long, still moment, it seemed like the entire world, every last insane piece of it, was lending itself to us. And then her snout bent upward into an impish smile —

“Do you wanna see if I can fly?”

“Oh snap, yes! And I bet Jules’ will want a big wide shot, too.”

“Let’s go.” She took me by the hand and guided me through the kitchen into the backyard and then in one single movement she bent her dragon legs and gripped the grass with her dragon claws and spread her dragon wings and then looked at me like, Hop on, Dude! I hopped on. A moment later, after a few practice flaps, she started lifting us up into the air with a shriek of joy and a hiccup of fire.

“Oh my God you’re doing it, Phoebe! You’re flying!”

She flapped us higher and higher until we were level with the roof, and then she flapped us even higher; and as the neighborhood revealed itself... well, let’s just say —

Hollllllyyyyy shiiiiitttttt.

“Get the shot!” she said.

I zoomed out WIDE, and the best description I can give you, is that it looked like every single MMOG that currently exists on any and all gaming systems had been smashed together, and then, as one, new, clusterfuck world of magic and mayhem, replaced the burbs of Cincinnati.

“Got it!”

She landed us on her roof. I slid down and then we sat side-by-side, dangling our weird feet over the eaves of her back patio. Our hands decided to hold each other...

If you’ve ever been a teenager before, you’ll know that a school crush is a weird thing. It’s basically this desperate need to be wanted by someone, but if they don’t, you’ll be, well, crushed — which is why they call it a “crush.” But being in Phoebe’s home, seeing her mom’s shrine, seeing her life, her real life, I realized that crushes are self-indulgent BS. They’re a one-way street. If you truly like somebody, you’ll like them regardless of whether they like you back.

I turned to look at her, and in that moment, my feelings evolved from crush to like, and so I said it. “Hey, Phoebe?” She turned. “I really like you.” She rested her head on my shoulder:

“I like you too, Dracula.”

I put my arm around her. “You know, I’m gonna see if mom wants to make one of those shrine things.”

“My dad calls it the emotional time machine. He says you have to be careful though, cuz if you emotionally ‘time travel’ too much, you’ll forget to live in the —”

“— Oh my God Phoebe you’re a genius!” An idea had just kicked me in the head.

“What?” she said, confused.

“Whoa, sorry, that was, like, a totally psychotic thing to say in response to what you were saying; it’s just that, you gave me an idea, but seriously, I was totally listening, I just - ”

“— stop apologizing and tell it to me!”

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When I told the others the idea, back in Phoebe's living room, they all instantly understood; and I hadn't even really explained it. All I'd said was a name: "Chadwick Nuzzi."

"Chaaaaadwick," Casbo said, it dawning on him as well.

"Holy *merde*," Jules said.

"I'll be a sumabitch," Zuko said

"The mystery of existence continues to astound me," Gus said.

"If you're right," Mr. Boyers said, "it could mean..."

Here's the thing. Chadwick Nuzzi was the president of Physics Club. And in the same way that the Vidiots were Super Nerds about film, they were Super Nerds about, you know, quantum theory and shit. For Halloween, each member of Physics Club had gone as something majorly abstract. And Chadwick, their newly elected leader, well, he had gone as Time.

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The most relieved I've ever been in my entire life was the moment I skidded to a halt in front of Cedar Circle and discovered that Chadwick Nuzzi had imploded into a Wormhole.

The Great Transformation must have happened just as he was leaving his house, because the entire cul-de-sac was now an epic, frothing donut of spiraling Space-Time distortion...

"Everybody shut up and let me do the talking," Casbo said, closing his glassy black eyeballs and focusing his telepathy. "Chad? Are you there, buddy?" We waited... Casbo's eyes shot open, "He's there! He's there!" Casbo closed

them again, and all we could hear was his side of the conversation:

“Oh for sure, dude, sorry, my bad, *Chadwick* not *Chad*, got it. So, *Chadwick*, we’re trying to figure out how to, uh, you know, fix this insane clusterfuck that has befallen us, and we were thinking... uh huh... yeah... uh huh... of course, dude, I can’t even imagine... yeah, exactly, that’s literally what we were just saying... yeah... but do you think? Ok, hold on...”

Casbo turned to us again, “So Chadwick really doesn’t like being Time. He says it’s very abstract and confusing. As a result, he is very keen to assist us in our journey. He says he can’t guarantee anything obviously, but that — hold on,” Casbo held up one of his three right- hand fingers, “he’s talking again... I’m here, dude, what’s up? Uh huh.... sure, I’ll tell them. OK, so Chadwick’s chief concern with our plan is that there’s no way to ensure we all end up at the same place in the past, but he has a solution; he says it’s way too complex to explain in laymen’s terms (which I think is a little arrogant, but whatever), so he’s boiled it down: we need to enter the Wormhole, AKA *him*, holding hands, with our minds focused on the EXACT same moment.”

“I have it,” I said instantly. Everyone looked at me. “12:45, Geography class.”

“Why *then*?”

“It’s the moment I passed you the note,” Phoebe said, blushing.

“I was looking at the clock right when it landed on my desk,” I said, blushing back.

“*Parfait!*,” Jules said, “We use love as our compass! Cinema at it’s finest!”

“Where were YOU, Mr. Boyer,” Casbo asked.

He scratched a claw at his brow, “12:45? Let me think... ah, right, got it. Good to go.”

“What were you doing?”

“It doesn’t matter. I know where I was.”

“Were you poopin’, partner?” Zuko said.

“Yeah, were you pooping?”

“Fine, yes, I was pooping.”

“So I guess we’re going back to the future, then” Gus suddenly said.

“You mean the past.”

“No, I mean the *future*, my fellow Space Being.”

“Geography class was *earlier* today, oh Awakened One.”

“I’ll admit that where we must go is, *technically* speaking, the past,” Gus brought both of his thumbs to his middle fingers and closed his eyes, “but we are *currently* in the present, which means that wherever we go next, is, by definition, the future. Even if it’s the past.”

The cul-de-sac seemed to burp. “Damn, he says Gus’s logic checks out,” Casbo said.

Jules took a step closer to Chadwick the Swirling Temporal Wormhole: “Past, present, future, it doesn’t matter.” She turned to face us, her 1920’s 40 year-old body framed by this “teenage” spiral of frothing galactic distortion, “all that matters is zat we save our city, we save our family, and we save our friends... and ze best chance we have to do zat...” she turned back, “is to take a leap of faith.”

Zuko instantly removed his hat and tried to swoon in for a kiss, but she gently stopped his lips with her finger, “We’ll kiss after we’ve saved ze world, Holiday.”

And with that, we made a line, gripped each others hands, and —

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I opened my eyes.

Mr. McGuiness was droning on about Pangea again. I looked at the clock. The minute hand was *slightly* before 1245. And somehow, somehow, the Sony PXW was in my lap. I spun around to the other Vidiots, scattered throughout the class, but none of them had the expression you should have if you've just, you know, time-traveled. Shit. Shit shit shit shit—

— the note landed on my desk. I gazed down at it, petrified. If the others were ignorant of what had just happened, then was I, like, going to be trapped in some sort of time-locked purgatory? Would I be forced to relive this shit all over again? Was I that dude from Greek mythology who rolls the boulder up the hill forever? My hands trembled as I unfolded it...

And read: "*Holy shit it worked!!! So what the F do we do now?????? xoxo*"

I glanced up to find Phoebe's wonderful human face staring right at me from 5 chairs away. I felt a rush of relief and affection burst open in me like a Gusher just as you bite into it. We both turned and caught the Holyshit-Eyes of Jules/Casbo/Gus/Zuko, all suddenly, and mercifully, aware of what was going on.

"And what do you think you're doing, Porfolio?" I looked up to find Mr. McGuiness blazing a hole through my brain. Slowly, autocratically (SAT Word 9), he walked to my desk.

"Passing notes? Let me see — "

"No please — "

But he snatched it from my fingers and read... and then re-read, and then glared down at me and said, “What is ‘it,’ exactly, and in what way did it ‘work?’”

The classroom door burst open! Everyone jumped as Mr. Boyer ran in out of breath and nearly skidded to a halt. “Uhhhh, yeah, so, Mr. McGuiness, I’m terribly sorry to interrupt, I really am, but I’m gonna need to steel a few of your students for a moment.”

“Which students,” Mr. McGuiness asked, his voice dripping in disdain.

“The Vidiots.”

“Who are the Vidiots?”

The six of us stood up. We had some spooky-ass crepuscular subterfuge to figure out.

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THE END
or maybe
THE BEGINNING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/S

TOM WHITE & MILES HUBLEY

Originally from Boulder, Colorado, White/Hubley have been creative partners since second grade. After several years working in film editing, culminating with the Academy Award winning documentary, “The Cove,” they transitioned to screenwriting in their late 20s. Their projects have sold and been set up at Mandalay Pictures, Focus Features, AGC, Cinetic, and Gaumont, among others. They are represented by WME and Writ Large.



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FOUNDERS

ANDREW VAN WYK

+1.310.880.2551

andrew@tinywindows.xyz

VAN DITTHAVONG

+1.214.770.7863

van@tinywindows.xyz