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An Offer I Couldn't Refuse

“We live in a box of space and time. Movies are windows in its walls...”

Film critic Roger Ebert (1942 – 2013)

As a young boy growing up in The Bronx, I knew it was always one of those family moments that actually felt *familial* – where we would gather together in the living room while my mother pulled out the 8mm movie projector, set up the portable viewing screen, and opened up the film cases that held various canisters of home movies.

Perhaps this is where my love of movies was born and raised – watching the grainy images of color films that captured birthday celebrations, First Holy Communions, Confirmation ceremonies and weddings, Christmas parties, Easter dinners, or just random moments at the homes or apartments of relatives...the parade of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends.

Until her death when I was a small boy, our Aunt Rita was the auteur of the family, wielding her compact 8mm movie camera like an ever-present eye to events unfolding – capturing the mundane and the magical, having a knack for chronicling in these silent films the essence of gathering, spirit, those smiling faces or embarrassed looks that are shared within everyone's tribe.

Even when I was young, I would be fascinated with watching my mother, Rita – usually with a Pall Mall cigarette dangling from her lips – work the spooling of the 8mm film into the projector, hearing the whirs and clicks of it catching and the excitement when the living room shades were drawn tight and the lamps laid low so the darkness of this makeshift home movie theatre became the screening of images, memories, and connection to a larger story.

And there I was on the screen – not quite 40 feet wide or as handsome as Robert Redford – but it was me.

Fascinatingly enough, my heart would leap whenever I appeared – a celluloid apparition come to life, a ghost in the story made real, a reflection of the me I never could see. Oddly enough, I also tracked that it was a way for our family to remind itself that we were actually *a family* – in spite of the breakdowns, the fighting, the abuse or the emotional turmoil. In those moments where we would gather to watch these films, it was a reunion of the heart and soul, a magical healing that took place which didn't require words or sound, just the images themselves playing out again, the viewer able to discern what it was that needed to be seen.

In later decades, the director's role passed to my mother – she took up the camera and filmed our exploits, handed the creative baton and responsibility of capturing the story for us to review and relive.

Like most families during the 60's, 70's and early 80's, the *home movies* were ticketless adventures into the banal realities of life – existence on a tarnished silver screen of mundane events, staged scenes of forced happiness or exuberance where it was tolerable to be in frame for a moment or two, that subtle pissed off look of “...*please move along before I smash that fucking camera into a thousand pieces...*” always written into the subtext of the script that never was recorded to audio.

And as the six siblings advanced in age and life's experience, the bringing out of the screen, projector, and film cannisters could only mean that someone's friend or boyfriend or girlfriend was being subjected to Mom's endearing yet infuriating habit of embarrassing the shit out of us at the expense of treating our guest to many laughs and a peek behind the curtain of truth.

No fancy lighting was needed. No creative editing was done. Most of it was spur of the moment filming, on the fly cinematography, jump cuts from one moment to the next – pan and zoom to her heart's content, not overly concerned with what was captured but from a heart of being the eyes in the room that were trying to see something that was *universal*.

In those beginning years of my own journey, my exposure to filmed story came through our black and white television and the occasional visit to a real movie theatre in The Bronx or Manhattan. As a young boy, I had an obsessive fascination with the classic Universal Pictures horror films – *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolfman*, *The Mummy*, and *The Invisible Man* in particular.

On one hand, they scared the living shit out of me – tales of monsters, mayhem, death, and the evil specter of men becoming possessed by a darkness that overtook their true natures or the fantasy of some sort of twisted eternal existence where power became the privilege of revenge.

They were readily available for screening on local New York television stations, and my fascination with them puzzled my mother but she didn't censor my viewing of them at all. There were even glow-in-the dark models that could be purchased featuring the monster characters – another creative avenue that, strangely, my mother encouraged and brought me deep pleasure...getting the models, opening the boxes, putting them together with that glue which was

intoxicating to smell, and using the included small paint kits to color the various plastic pieces and assembling the model, anxiously waiting for the night when I could switch off the lights and see the glowing features (faces, hands, various other parts) *come to life*.

And, as a viewer of the stories these films told me, I took their images with me into the recesses of sleep. Nightmares came and went, but I was always greeted by awakening to the glowing faces of the models, the bedroom nightlight casting its own eerie shadows. I found comfort in thinking they were somehow *my friends*, guardians in the night standing watch over the real horrors I was subjected to.

I didn't know it then, but those exposures were teaching me that life is scary, dangerous, and sometimes *the monster in me* was just trying to be seen and loved beyond the terror it presented to the world in order to scare the shit out of it so I would somehow feel safe.

Traipsing down the corridors of memory, I can remember certain films seen as a young boy when they were screened on local television: *West Side Story*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Birds*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *A Hard Day's Night*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *Help!*

As rare as it was, going to a true cinema – and the joy of having freshly buttered popcorn and a Coke – brought to my imagination such gems as *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid*, *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*, *The Planet of the Apes*, and *Chisum*.

Perhaps it was going with my mother, or father, or older sister on the bus or train, being out on a shared adventure, the thrill of being handed a few green dollar bills and handing them through the plexiglass window and being given that small, paper ticket that guaranteed entrance into a world that wasn't my own. Maybe it was sitting in the vinyl covered seat that always felt magical, feeling the soles of my sneakers catch on the sticky floor below me where someone else might have spilled some soda. Possibly it was always munching on the popcorn quicker than I

should have, filling my belly with all of it and relaxing into a delicious food coma to enjoy the unfolding story that would captivate me for the next few hours.

From the time I could read, comprehend, and filter the written – or filmed – word, *it was always the story. Always.*

“I’m not an actor. I’m a movie star.”

Peter O’Toole (1932 – 2013)

Doesn’t everyone, somewhere along the way, secretly wish *to be a movie star?*

If Hollywood is make believe turned real – and the actors and actresses mere extensions of the beating hearts sitting in the dark watching the stories they desire for but cannot make come true – then, from an early age, it made sense to me that my story was going to resonate inside of the tales being told on the screen – whether seen on the television or in the movie theatre.

It took me decades to understand both the mythology behind a good movie that spoke to my story and heart as well as the dedication to craft – direction, acting, scriptwriting, production, cinematography, score, costume, and set design – which brought such gathering of images to *real life* inside of me as I experienced them.

The transformation was in the transportation – to another place, a different time, a world I didn’t know or understand yet to a realization that in the characters I affiliated myself with I was seeing a part of me in them. *If I spot it in you I’ve got it in me.*

Through that filter, I could become Van Helsing in *Dracula* or feel the terrified fear of transforming into *The Wolfman* that Larry Talbot did. My heart could pound like Tony’s for Maria’s in *West Side Story*, or yearn for the father and integrity of heart portrayed by Atticus Finch in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I certainly could see the innocence of my childhood dreams in *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* through Charlie Bucket’s eyes or the sense of impending

doom held by George Taylor in *Planet of the Apes*. The grit of Lucas Jackson in *Cool Hand Luke* was mesmerizing, as was the good guy versus bad guys tenacity of the cattle baron with my first name in *Chisum*. During *A Hard Day's Night* of growing up – and needing all the *Help!* a boy could use – I always had John, Paul, George, and Ringo in my corner. And, for goodness sakes, I couldn't decide who to be on any given day – so why not be both *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*?

And in the memories of childhood cinema, it's easy to see the lights, cameras, and action of my own heart scripts coming to life – the casting of heroes and villains; the triumphant plots fraught with danger and suffering; the varied settings that made a difference in how the story played itself out; the love and loss and emotional beats that kept me engaged; and the beautiful scores of music that became the soundtracks to my soul.

I can recall being sat down in front of our Bronx apartment living room television one day by my mother, her words of “*I think you will really enjoy this movie*” an introduction as she invited me to view *West Side Story* as she went about her daily chores of running a family of eight.

Caught up in a film inspired by the timeless Shakespeare classic, *Romeo and Juliet*, and released the year before I was born, my eyes and ears were pinned down with fascination and awe from the opening *Overture* in maestro Leonard Bernstein's epic musical score and soundtrack and the masterful direction by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins.

The story of a late 50's Upper West Side gang rivalry between the Jets and Sharks was the backdrop for what was clearly a love story set in a world at war. As a young boy, I knew what surviving on turf like that felt – the duplicity of violence inside the home and the abuse at school was where the bare knuckles of life smashed into my vulnerability and tenderness. In the

dual storyline within the film of “retired” Jets gang founder, Tony, and his rebellious, forbidden love for Maria – the sister of Sharks leader, Bernardo – I found my heart aching for something it desperately wanted: *love*.

As the 2 and ½ hour film opus captivated my spirit, I found myself – in the end – weeping for the results. I saw parts of myself in the story, the music, the love, the hate, the loss and the grit of it all. My mother was too busy to see my tears, and a part of me – embarrassed and furious at the unexpected reaction – quickly dried them with my shirt and went about my afternoon with no admission to her whatsoever. When she asked later on from within her own hurriedness and busyness whether I enjoyed it or not, I simply said, “*It was okay.*”

I didn’t have the words then, but that film taught them to me: *haunting, inspiring, bedazzling*.

And in those few, short hours of falling in love with Maria (played by the angelic Natalie Wood) and seeing both Riff, the leader of the Jets and his best friend, Tony (marvelously portrayed by Russ Tamblyn and Richard Beymer, respectively) inside of me – one tough as nails and the other tender to a fault – I walked away into the realm of fantasy come true, the portrayal of dreams through the art of story...and the power of a movie to tell me a story I knew I was writing in my own hidden truth of who I was, who I wasn’t, and who I wanted to become.

From that day, movies were the life preserver as I drowned in the oceans of hurt that threatened to swallow me into the deep recesses of shame, anger, and fear. I knew that if one movie could do *that*, then I could find respite and relief in the next one...and the next...and the stories that were told in the darkened cinemas or in front of the glowing cathode ray tubes of black and white or amazing color.

The movies in my life – in part – were now telling me my story. *There was hope.*

“Frank, has anyone ever told you that you have a tendency towards self-pity?”

“No, you’re the first.”

Dialogue between Capt. Inspector McClain & Officer Frank Serpico from *Serpico* (1973)

In the fall of 1975, I was thirteen when I was kicked in my newly dropped adolescent, teenaged balls by Sidney Lumet’s biographical crime drama film, *Serpico*, starring Al Pacino. The riveting book, written by journalist Peter Maas, was published two years earlier and had entered my reading lexicon on a lark.

Focused on the details of Officer Frank Serpico’s intense struggles with rampant corruption and graft within the New York Police Department during his eleven year tenure, it told the no bullshit tale of his whistleblower journey that ultimately almost cost him his life and led to the highly publicized investigation by the Knapp Commission.

Back in those days, the *ABC Sunday Night Movie* on television was a big draw for and huge deal to me. First off, it gave me room to flex my muscles in “...growing up...” since it usually aired from 9 to 11pm on the East Coast and meant that I would be *allowed* to stay up late before attending school the next day. Primarily, it fed my voracious appetite for recently released theatrical films that were debuting on television for the first time, albeit in edited form.

Something about the admonition “...viewer discretion is advised...” fading in and out with white print on a black matte created a feeling of consensual taboo, quickened my heartbeat, and said, “*This is grown up shit, son.*”

And, even in the edited form, this usually alluded to stories of sex, violence, adult language, and mature themes. It was *educational* – subject matter never discussed at home or within the classroom, a secret language of words and images that spoke to me directly or indirectly as they saw fit.

Films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Andromeda Strain*, *Summer of '42*, *The Getaway*, *The Killer Elite*, *The Gambler*, *The Cowboys*, *The French Connection*, *The Seven-Ups*, *Dirty Harry*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Death Wish*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Bullitt*, *The Exorcist*, *Play Misty for Me*, *The Last Detail*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *The Driver*, and *Three Days of the Condor* conjure up just a few of the movies that marked the adolescent years of going from G to R in both content and impact upon my story.

Whether it was the illusion of sex or the capacity towards violence – the twisted root of man’s inhumanity towards man or the carnal soil that bore the fruits of fucking – my mind soaked up the scripts, parsing them for days and weeks afterwards in my pursuit of an understanding as to who I was in the world.

It was also the turning point, visually and viscerally, that my heart needed to kick start imagination and fantasy, a deep bones-to-balls love of story that shaped who I was to become in the world.

“I am the last guy in the world that you wanna fuck with.”

James Caan as Frank Serpico from *Thief* (1981)

In the 82 years he lived – and in the wake of news that actor James Caan died a few days ago – I found myself oddly moved this morning to remember how the power and passion of movies...and the actors in them...have impacted my life and heart’s story.

When I first saw *Brian’s Song* on the *ABC Movie of the Week* on television in 1971, I was deeply moved by Caan’s portrayal of Chicago Bears football player Brian Piccolo stricken with terminal cancer and his enduring friendship with fellow Bears teammate, Gayle Sayers (portrayed equally as brilliant by Billy Dee Williams). Based on the true story, I was also fascinated to learn they were the first interracial roommates in the history of the NFL.

The story of friendship, courage, valor, and strength marked a territory in my young spirit that both inspired and saddened me – for I wished to emulate such strength in the face of fear and death and yet knew that I also needed such strong friendships in my story in order to get through any of the tough times I was experiencing.

In not just being ranked as a “...*guy-cry film*...” or one of the finest made for television films ever made, it was Caan’s performance as Brian that impacted me. Albeit I was moved by the beautiful Michel Legrand theme, *The Hands of Time*, as well as the script centering on Piccolo’s and Sayer’s deep friendship in spite of racism around them, I was also introduced to *pure Jimmy* behind the role he was playing – the mischievous twinkle in his eye, the humorous sarcasm, the tough-as-nails exterior hiding the soft underbelly of compassion and loyalty.

Throughout his career, I got to know his acting prowess through such diverse films as *Lady in a Cage*, *El Dorado*, *The Rain People*, *Cinderella Liberty*, *Freebie and the Bean*, *Rollerball*, *The Killer Elite*, *Gardens of Stone*, *Chapter Two*, and *This Thing of Ours*. Yet it was in three iconic roles – at least to my taste – that defined *classic* Caan: Santino “Sonny” Corleone in *The Godfather*, Axel Freed in *The Gambler*, and Frank in *Thief*.

Each role – meaty on the screen and in the script, with depth of characterization and complexity throughout the layers each offered – brought to me a different sense of what a man was, the demons he fought against, and the redemption of his soul in spite of circumstances weighing against him.

As different as Sonny was from Axel and Frank, I knew it was Caan on the screen in front of me – yet he took me into the psyche of each man he portrayed. In one aspect, he’ll always be *Sonny* – the hotheaded oldest son of Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*. His death scene alone in that film can never be erased from my memory.

Yet as Axel in *The Gambler* and Frank in *Thief*, I've found the man in me being highly influenced in real life by the mesmerizing performances he brought to life in these films. As an English professor in New York City with a vicious and fatalistic gambling addiction in *The Gambler* or as the grizzled veteran high-line thief in *Thief*, Caan's portrayals of such dangerous men on a mission to either succeed for the quiet glory or fade away fast into a blaze of selfish victory taught me that a man chooses the path he goes down – and some men choose wisely in the face of foolish odds.

Even as Sonny, I could see in me the violent temper, the lust for women, the ferocity in times of violence, and the loving loyalty of a brother and son. In many other roles and ways, Caan brought humor, pathos, quiet desperation, a father's loving discipline, integrity, and truth to whatever the script required. I wanted to wear that fucking hat he had in *El Dorado* and wield a knife like he did. I wanted to be the irreverent detective he gloriously played in *Freebie and the Bean*, wise-cracking and kicking ass all day long, giving the finger to authority and criminals alike. I wanted to find hope and love again in the wake of a broken heart as he did in *Chapter Two*.

In the end, for me, it was as Frank in Michael Mann's directorial debut film, *Thief*, that Caan is at the pinnacle of his craft – he even considered his monologue scene in the coffee shop with actress Tuesday Weld to be the favorite of his career. Earlier in the film, he utters a single line to an organized crime associate who stole some of his hard earned money from a jewelry heist.

With a gun poised at the man's face, his eyes reeking of serious shit and potential mayhem poised on his trigger finger, Frank delivers in a chilling monotone voice the line, "*I am the last guy in the world you wanna fuck with.*"

I believed him then. Still do. And that's a part of Jimmy – the man, and truly a myth and legend, as well as actor – that the world can never strip from me.

“It was impossible not to see that the loves scenes were filmed like murder scenes, and the murder scenes like love scenes...It occurred to me that in Hitchcock's cinema...to make love and to die are one in the same.”

François Truffaut on Alfred Hitchcock

Throughout my life and over the decades of indulging them, it's been through sex and violence in films that I've received a cinematic education in the carnality of the flesh and the violence of the soul. From G to R my life has gone, kindergarten to graduate school, beauty and the beast within man and woman scored to masterful editing, photography, and direction.

Fantasy become reality.

Back in The Bronx as a small boy, a television screening of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* brought about the admonition from my mother to, “...go to bed. This isn't a movie for you.”

And so I crept from my forced banishment, down a darkened hallway, beckoned by the black and white shadows cast on the walls, knowing I was going to have a silent vantage point from the threshold where I stooped, my mother sitting on a couch in front of the television, her back to me. I arrived just in time to see a scene where young Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway) is stroking the barrel of a gun held by Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty), held right in front of his groin and pointing straight at her.

Even in the crouched seat of my secret shadows, I knew this was grown up, *adult*. Eyes wide, I felt a rush of joy and wonder as I spied something forbidden. It wasn't until years later when I screened the film as a young adult that I was capable of understanding *why* my mother

didn't want a young boy seeing a film like this. Censorship or good parenting? I often wondered what she was thinking while viewing the film, in the dark, surrounded by cigarette smoke and her own fantasies. Living in the violence of the family, what did she see in the brutality of the ending? Did she want to be Bonnie – beautiful, sexy, dangerous, and seeking more of it? Did she want a Clyde to hit the road with – robbing banks, making money, living an adventure instead of being married to a bus driver?

From that night I also learned, as a young boy, that films told stories that were at times controversial, boundary pushing, and exotic to my limited imagination. And if sex and violence were part and parcel of the world in which I lived and that which surrounded me, what could movies teach me about how to navigate those tricky waters of lust and rage?

In actuality, I can't imagine how many people I've seen killing or fucking in movies. There are critics and intellectuals who would argue it stunted or damaged my emotional growth, its capacity to embrace the healthy images and concepts of sexuality or aggressive behavior. Be that as it may, *it sure looks good on the screen.*

Artfully done, a great love or murder scene – if I'm to believe Truffaut – is as good as it gets in real life, the beauty of bullets or the grappling between the sheets so painfully recreated for films, a celluloid mirror of choices and consequences reflecting the real thing.

Knowing abuse in my own story, the imagery of movie violence was a fantastical way of imagining the revenge I wanted to bring to those who hurt me. Never capable, in my own mind, of actually using a weapon or my hands to take another human life, my mind accepted the visuals of carnage and death as substitutes for a rage that festered within my own wounds. From the earliest movies that depicted any such scenes to me as a viewer, I remember never feeling shocked as I did *fascinated* to see someone getting what they deserved.

Perhaps, to me, it was a sense of good versus evil, white hats versus black hats.

Granted, there have been plenty of films where murder is done for the sake of evil – that’s a different flavor and a remarkably contrasting reaction from my spirit. And, to the point, I’ve witnessed more than enough gratuitous sex in movies that weren’t relevant to the plot for any other reason than to titillate the viewer as voyeur. Both can be scripted, photographed, acted and directed in the most amazing and evocative ways – others are pure pulp, grind, and slasher qualities that cheapen the overall effect.

One film embodied both as an introduction to my own story being drawn into the cinematic themes of sex and violence.

Written by Walter Hill, directed by Sam Peckinpah, and starring Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw, *The Getaway* was a movie – to a young boy – that had it all: *good* bad guys, even *worse* bad guys, a gorgeous woman, bank robbery and bullets, double-crosses, Slim Pickens, along with Sally Struthers *and those breasts*.

First off, the onscreen chemistry between McQueen and MacGraw was *sizzling*. In real life, the attraction was so intense that the two began an affair during the production and Ali ended up divorcing her movie mogul husband, Robert Evans, to become Steve’s second wife. With the pacing of a great crime action thriller and all the amoral qualities of such a life, I remember being both thrilled and turned on by the movie – especially the stunning beauty of MacGraw and the raw sexuality of hostage-turned-harlot Struthers.

To a young boy, the *cool* of McQueen and *allure* of MacGraw were undeniable – I wanted to be him and be with her. It was also the mythology of movie stars and Hollywood that baited the early traps for me with movies – rich, famous, handsome, gorgeous, beautiful, wealthy, living decadently and free, and playing all day and night at *make believe*.

What I was beginning to love about movies was losing myself in the story...the few hours I could spin slowly down and forget about whatever life was or wasn't. I could go places I'd never see, be people I'd never become, or walk inside of worlds that both attracted and repelled me. I could see a life ahead of me or one I wanted desperately to put behind me. I could venture into subject matter my family wouldn't teach me about nor school educate me in. The hands of my soul could play in the dirt, get bloody, get wet with the sweat and stickiness of sex and love and lust.

The good ones – movies that mattered to me – would stay with me *forever*. The characters – transposed from the scripts by the talents of actors and actresses – would become friends, foes, heroes, and villains to me in a world of make believe come true.

And little did I know that such a realm – and such a rescue – would be the lifeline that movies would offer to me in years looming on the horizon.

“In 22 seconds, I could break your fucking spine. In 22 seconds, I could pinch your head off like a fucking insect and spin it all over the fucking pavement. In 22 seconds, I could put 22 bullets inside your ridiculous gut. What I seem to be unable to do in 22 seconds is to keep you from fucking up my film!”

Peter O'Toole as Eli Cross in *The Stunt Man* (1980)

During the four years of high school – as well as my first semesters of college – I found my heart and its early story under siege warfare – a kind of assault of the spirit that could easily cast a dreamer into the role of a killer.

Movies were a lifeline, a rescue, a light in pitch black darkness.

They came through different years, genres, casts and directors. Some drama, some musical, some fantasy, they all pierced some tender wounds in me that needed to bleed to heal

properly. Some I witnessed in movie theatres while others I found through the advent of cable television. Regardless, all were inspirational to a young, teenaged man on the cusp of escaping a prison that tried to rehabilitate him for crimes he was never guilty of.

A Small Circle of Friends. Fame. All That Jazz. My Bodyguard. The Deer Hunter. Ordinary People. The Black Stallion. Excalibur. The Stunt Man. Hair.

Not comprehensive, these particular films were a M*A*S*H unit for my crippled heart.

My lonely heart gravitated towards the tale of three college students at Harvard and Radcliffe in the 1960's. The story of Leo, Jessie, and Nick portrayed in *A Small Circle of Friends* (directed by Rob Cohen) was a poignant coming-of-age tale, peppered with loyal friendship, the testing of boundaries, and the fickleness of sex, drugs, and the search for life. Many a young man fell in love with Karen Allen through either *National Lampoon's Animal House* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but here – as Jessica Bloom – she had me with one look of her eyes. I wanted to be the sure and steady Nick Baxter (Jameson Parker) or the brash raconteur Leonardo DaVinci Rizzo (the phenomenal Brad Davis). Approaching my own college years at Manhattanville starting in the fall of 1980, I was not as much influenced by the upheaval plots of the '60's so much as the potential for *community* that was a possibility of my future.

Set in New York City and chronicling the lives, stories, and challenges of students attending the High School of Performing Arts, *Fame* (directed by Alan Parker) was a musical film that inspired me to keep dreaming – even when life pissed on my dreams. Seeing parts of my heart and story in the young characters portrayed – all creatives who, through music, dance, or other expressions were finding themselves and their own voices – I was once again enthralled by the marriage of script and score. Songs like “*Fame*,” “*Out Here On My Own*,” and “*Is It Okay If I Call You Mine?*” became a part of the soundtrack that helped bring about tears when all

I felt was rage. To this day, the closing scene to the film – a performance by the school’s students for parents and friends using “*I Sing the Body Electric*” – never fails to both inspire me once more and bring tears of love streaming down my cheeks.

In the musical drama *All That Jazz* (directed by theater legend Bob Fosse), I was transfixed by the semi-autobiographical story of Fosse told through the lens of fictional director and choreographer Joe Gideon (played to perfection by Roy Scheider). When it was released, I literally paid money over a dozen times to sit in Showcase Cinemas in Louisville to watch it again and again, parsing the characters, plot, score, and cinematography apart – finding different nuances with each screening, mesmerized by the scope of the work, the adult themes and spectacular score, and the underlying portrait of a man with vision who was captured most effectively by the demons that brought about his talent. Once more, the final scene – “*Bye Bye Life,*” which paired Scheider with the incomparable Ben Vereen – took my heart and emotions on a soaring jump off the cliffs of hope and into the skies of promise.

To a young boy turning into a young man, I knew what deep loneliness felt like, especially around the playgrounds and emotional jungles of school. In *My Bodyguard* (directed by Tony Bill) – which was in release categorized as a family comedy drama – I found in the character of new school student Clifford Peache (Chris Makepeace) a celluloid ally to my own story of being the *new kid* in my own story at DeSales. In the story of him befriending a quiet yet menacing older student named Ricky Linderman (Adam Baldwin) to become his bodyguard against a gang of terrorizing fellow classmates, I also found a hero – and the bodyguard within me – that my story desperately needed at the time.

Having found this movie on cable, I devoured it time and time again – getting up early in the day or staying up late at night to screen it over and over, captured by the stories and

performances (including gems from Martin Mull, Matt Dillon, and Ruth Gordon). A few years later, I was staying in New York City for a weekend solo trip while taking a semester's break from Manhattanville College. On the Saturday night, while heading to a performance of the Broadway musical *Barnum!*, I was casually strolling through Theater Alley, killing time before the show.

I was just walking among the crowds filling the sidewalks when a young man sporting a worn military jacket, long hair, jeans and motorcycle boots passed me by with an older woman by his side. The two were just exchanging dialogue with each other, but as I passed him there was something *in his voice* that I immediately recognized. Only having caught a brief glimpse of his face as we passed each other – our eyes meeting in a moment – I found myself frozen on the sidewalk twenty paces away as it hit me.

It was *Ricky Linderman*...

As I turned back, I saw the woman going into a storefront while the young man remained outside. I walked up to him from behind, came around his side to view him in profile...yes, his hair was much longer but I immediately recognized actor Adam Baldwin. *My Bodyguard* was his very first film role, to soon be followed by a minor supporting role in Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* later in 1980.

Amazed to be standing right next to him – and, of course, the embodiment of the character of Linderman – I casually threw out a line from one of the movie's antagonists who tried to bully Linderman.

"*Hey, tough guy,*" I said, an obvious stranger on the streets of Manhattan coming up to him out of the fucking blue. When I saw Adam's eyes light up but also look a bit inquisitively into mine, I followed up with, "You're Adam Baldwin, right?"

Extending my hand to shake his, he smiled wide and shook it. Introducing myself, I told him how much *My Bodyguard* meant to me as a film fan and young man in a story that had similarities. He was amazed that he was even *recognized* by anyone, his film career so new and fresh, in its infancy.

The woman exited the store and came up to him – it turned out to be his mother, and they were out that night to see a musical as well. He introduced me to her, his voice filled with amazement as he told her I recognized him from the film. She was beaming with pride – and something inside of me was, too. Baldwin has gone on to enjoy a rich and varied career in films and television – and it was one of those moments for me, the intersection with celebrities, that would follow me throughout my own avenues of experience.

Another film that introduced me to the terrors within exacerbated by the terrors of the world was *The Deer Hunter* (directed by Michael Cimino) and starring Robert DeNiro, Christopher Walken, John Savage, Meryl Streep, and John Cazale. This epic war drama was galvanizing to me as a young man, depicting the story of a trio of Pennsylvania steel workers who are shipped off to fight in the Vietnam War. As Michael, DeNiro embodied both a steely conviction and tortured tenderness that shaped my late adolescence and early male adulthood. The underlying themes of loyalty, love, and loss were very impactful to me as – like with other films on this short list – I would watch again and again, seeing new aspects of the movie within my own stories and with repeated viewings having new, locked doors of my heart opened by the keys of discovery they gave to me.

In his directorial debut, Robert Redford crafted a cinema masterpiece with *Ordinary People*. Starring Donald Sutherland, Mary Tyler Moore, Timothy Hutton, Elizabeth McGovern, and Judd Hirsch, the story of one stoic and fucked up, dysfunctional family mirrored to me – in

several ways – the pain and suffering that I, as a young man similar in theme only to the protagonist, Conrad, was able to endure and ultimately overcome. It also gave me pause to think of mental and emotional health in my own story in deeper, more reflective and gentle ways. Moore’s portrayal as the emotional glacier of a mother and Sutherland’s as the good hearted yet soul stunted father who were at odds with each other as they were quickly losing their last remaining child to suicide attempts and massive depression was hard to watch but entrancing to witness. Hutton remarkably deserved his Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor (the youngest recipient at age 20).

Based on the 1941 classic children’s novel, *The Black Stallion* (directed by Carroll Ballard) offered a whimsical and intoxicating translation into film. Starring Kelly Reno, Mickey Rooney, and the talented Terri Garr, it unfolds the story of Alec Ramsey, a young boy who is shipwrecked on a deserted island with a wild and mystic black Arabian stallion who befriends him and becomes inseparable from him after they are rescued. The musical score by Carmine Coppola (*The Godfather* trilogy director Francis Ford’s father) was just as capturing to my spirit as was the story of Alec and his love for “*The Black*” as his heart was broken for his father, lost and killed in the shipwreck. The early scenes in the film where Alec tries to woo and befriend the stallion – including their tentative and finally firmed bonding – are some of the most beautifully filmed and evocative scenes I’ve ever witnessed in movies. As a former jockey who mentors Alec in learning to ride and race *The Black* in the storyline, Mickey Rooney was impeccable as the grizzled veteran who used all his heart and head to shepherd a young boy in search of dreams without an earthly father at his side.

Within the fantasy realm, *Excalibur* (helmed by John Boorman) is a standout for the mythological story of King Arthur, Merlin the Magician, Lady Guinevere, Lancelot, and the

Knights of the Roundtable and their quest for the Holy Grail. While found in my early college days, this story of the legendary sword taken from the stone by a boy who would become king, its powerful tale of valiant honor, divided loyalty, good versus evil, and the honor of brotherhood and the delicacies of love took me to places that my own heart searched for but rarely found. Visually stunning in its cinematography and epic in its musical score, the film captures my heart and imagination with each and every subsequent viewing, a treasure to enjoy time and time again if only to reawaken the myths in my own story that are – and always will – battle for the good in a world that is assaulted by the evils that wish them ceased.

An action comedy film discovered as well through cable – and, in my film pantheon with little to no equal – is *The Stunt Man* (directed by Richard Rush), starring the one and only Peter O'Toole. Sure, sure – *Lawrence of Arabia*...I get it, got it, have seen it and am sold on it. But oh, my – in this wild and wooly tale of a young fugitive on the run from the law who hides out as a stunt double on the set of a World War I movie being directed by O'Toole's character, Eli Cross – a maniacal and brilliantly talented film maker who will spare no cost to achieve his vision of art. O'Toole himself noted that, "*The film wasn't released. It escaped.*" This movie, when I devoured it on cable in 1980, was like a drug to me – I couldn't watch it enough, nor could I get enough of the story, its characters, twists and turns, or the tale of make believe come true as both metaphor for rescue and the lengths anyone will go to in order to discover – or uncover – their real self in a world that beckons them to be something or someone else.

A final film that encapsulated my journey from adolescence and into independence was the musical anti-war comedy-drama film *Hair* (directed by Miloš Forman). Based on the 1968 Broadway musical, it starred John Savage, Treat Williams, and Beverly D'Angelo with dance choreography by Twyla Tharp and music by Galt McDermot. Not only sympatico with the

character of Claude Hooper Bukowski (the always enigmatic John Savage) and fascinated with his hippie muse, Berger (marvelously portrayed by Treat Williams), I was smitten with the soundtrack and the story of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll rebellion. Being another movie I paid money on multiple occasions to sit in the movie theater to enjoy time and time again, I let the joy and pathos of a young man on a sojourn into himself and the society that tried to fit a square peg into a round hole launch my heart and dreams – for my own identity, love, friendship, a tribe, and a reason to live and die – into the stratosphere of possibilities and opportunities to believe I, too, could let the sunshine in.

What these films – and so many more over so many more years – would come to unravel and reveal inside of me was a yearning, a hunger, for the *importance of story* in my own life and journey.

And in any film, when “*Action!*” is given voice by the director, it’s the unfolding of the story that centers a viewer – me in particular – on just exactly where the real tale is told.

“I believe that filmmaking – as, probably is everything – is a game that you should play with all your cards, and all your dice, and whatever else you got. So, each time I make a movie, I give it everything I have. I think everyone should, and I think everyone should do everything that way.”

Francis Ford Coppola, director of *The Godfather* Trilogy

Within the last few years, I reread Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather*, which was published when I was just 9 years old. The 1972 crime film – with a script co-written by Puzo and the film’s director, Francis Ford Coppola – won an Academy Award for Best Picture, as well as Adapted Screenplay along with Best Actor (Marlon Brando). It is considered by the American

Film Institute (AFI) to be the second-greatest film in American cinema, only eclipsed by Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*.

So, to paraphrase one of Don Vito Corleone's most iconic lines, "*How could this story be an offer so many people cannot refuse?*"

And, perhaps, it's as simple as it is complex to answer: maybe the magic of movies is when "*Action!*" is called out by the director, putting into motion the words of the scriptwriter, taking from the page and channeling through the community of talents *the story behind it all*.

Is *The Godfather* – as a standalone film or one chapter in a trilogy – a story about a crime family or really a love story set in a world of crime and death? Is it a tale of honor among thieves, crooks, and killers or simply a montage of tales that blend into an epic journey through one family's struggle to obtain the American dream? Is it a father and son story, a story about brothers in arms who love and betray each other, or the story of how crime really does pay? Is it stunning historical drama or the pinnacle of gangster homage? Surely, it's Michael Corleone's story as the youngest son, isn't it? Or is it Don Vito's story, told through his life and legacy as the patriarch of the criminal empire Corleone? Are all three films Coppola's story – masterfully and exquisitely crafted, filmed, and directed to near perfection (...yes, even *The Godfather, Part III*...) – or does the story belong to legends such as Brando, Pacino, DeNiro, Caan, Duvall, Keaton, Cazale, Shire, Garcia, and a cast of acting prowess that supported each and every aspect of the story come to life through its characters?

All great questions. My answers are not going to shed any new light on decades of having these films parsed and parceled out in critiques, opinions, essays or reviews. But if taken through the lens of *the importance of story*, then how could I possibly be the only one who has fallen in love with the Corleone's, wanting to be adopted into the fold, written into their scripts, and

having a part to play in the murder, mayhem, loyalty, betrayal, and fierce love they shared inside the glorified and gut-wrenching framework of organized crime?

The core importance of *story* in movies and films is what keeps me going back into a viewing for multiple runs – seeing something new in the script come to life; viewing the cinematography with fresh eyes; learning how scenes are directed and their impact; the beauty, art, and craft of masterful editing; and, of course, the luscious intoxication of the film’s score or music choices. Acting? Yes, by all means – major and minor roles, cameos, and the various levels of expertise in their craft thespians bring to the story.

Obviously, I’m smitten with film series – sequels and trilogies and series (when done exquisitely right). The Marvel Cinematic Universe? How can a kid who geeked out on his older brother’s comic book collection not be captivated by it all, even if for only the breathtaking advancement of effects that truly bring those storyboards to life? Harkening back to *The Godfather*, I cannot simply just watch the original film – I have to journey deeper into the belly of the beast with Michael (Al Pacino) and *la famiglia* through *The Godfather, Part II* and *The Godfather, Part III* (now re-edited and titled *Mario Puzo’s The Godfather, Coda: The Death of Michael Corleone*). Talk about fuckin’ cotton balls in Brando’s cheeks – that’s too much for me.

I’m one of the silent minority that actually *loves* Part III as originally presented. My DVD collection holds *The Coppola Restoration* versions – and they’re good enough for me *not* to refuse time after time. *Part II* is also considered to be one of the greatest films of all time – it is the first sequel to win the Best Picture Oscar, and can also be viewed as the rare example of a sequel that is superior to its predecessor. The dual storylines showcasing both Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro (as the younger version of Brando’s Don Corleone) are stunning; DeNiro won Best Supporting Actor at the Academy Awards – I mean, Jack Nicholson was *good* in *Chinatown*

but Fugghedaboutit...Al was robbed in 1975 when they handed out the Best Actor Oscar. While the re-editing of *Part III* does make sense (thematically and in logistics of the re-do), the original version – featuring a smoldering Andy Garcia as Santino “Sonny” Corleone’s bastard son, Vincent Mancini who, eventually, becomes the new Don) – is remarkable, to me, for the ending scene where Michael experiences the breaking of his own heart completely in a saga that has been filled with death and loss. And, yet, he lives to be a *very old man* – and I always felt a *Part IV* could’ve, should’ve, would’ve made sense to be made with both Pacino and Garcia returning for one more dance with danger.

Flashing back to my love of sequels and trilogies, some more come to mind: *The Equalizer* (and *The Equalizer 2*) with Denzel Washington; the *Bourne Trilogy* (*Identity*, *Supremacy*, and *Ultimatum*) with Matt Damon; the *Batman Trilogy* (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*) with Christian Bale; of course, *The Lord of the Rings* films (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, *The Return of the King*); Daniel Craig’s turn as James Bond (*Casino Royale*, *Quantum of Solace*, *Skyfall*, *Spectre*, *No Time to Die*); Quentin Tarantino’s spectacular *Kill Bill, Volume 1 & 2*) with Uma Thurman; *The Matrix Trilogy* with Keanu Reeves (including the original and *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* – I have yet to view *Resurrections* but I will soon swallow the red pill on that one); the *John Wick* series of action films starring the kick ass and gun fu ferocity of Keanu Reeves (*John Wick*, *John Wick: Chapter 2*, and *John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum* – also the upcoming *Chapter 4 & 5*); and Tom Cruise in the *Mission: Impossible* series – *M:I*, *M:I 2*, *M:I 3*, *M:I – Ghost Protocol*, *M:I – Rogue Nation*, *M:I – Fallout* and, waiting for what looks like a wild ride to the end with *M:I – Dead Reckoning Part One & Two*).

And I love the fact that some movies need *more story* to tell the tale right.

At various points in my own life story, I go back into these films for another round of viewing, and in their reflections of the stories told, I see some of my own – the highs, lows, and in between of my own character development. I am, after all, the lead actor in the movie of my life, one directed by God in a scripted role in the Larger Story.

In the mirrors and illusions of those stories, I see parts of them in some of me – Robert McCall, Jason Bourne, Bruce Wayne, Frodo or Samwise or Gandalf or Aragorn, *Bond* – James Bond, Beatrix Kiddo, Neo, and Ethan Hunt. Why do I return to the movies and the stories embedded within them?

One of my favorite authors, John Eldredge (*Wild at Heart*) writes eloquently about the impact of film on both the spiritual and masculine journey – how the images and plots, themes, and story awaken in a man the deeper mythology of seeking a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to see and fight for. Long before I read his groundbreaking and epic work, I knew that was true – bones to balls.

Story matters. If I looked at my own story – and my *love* of story – I was not only enamored by the letters that made up the words, and how the words were stitched intentionally together to make the sentences, and then the sentences carefully crafted to make the paragraphs, and how – once stacked one after another – the paragraphs made up the whole damn thing, I was a willing slave to the master of plot...especially in film, through the masterful craft of screenwriting, the script coming to life.

Throughout the decades, this love affair with movies – and their stories – has broken my heart so many times, a jilted lover returning again and again for more and more, the pains and the pleasures of a vast romance with no real beginning and no true end. Much like Clarence fell for

Alabama in *True Romance*, I am smitten for all of my favorites – those I’ve seen that never leave my spirit, soul, and body, never betray or abandon my heart, mind, and will.

Somewhere, the director is always yelling, “*Action!*”

And those actors and actresses – in their roles –are always forty feet wide in the movie theater of my life, the surround sound of their lines shaping some of my most cherished memories with performances that have fileted my heart.

“The camera can film my face but until it captures my soul, you don’t have a movie .”

Al Pacino – *Actor*

Perhaps in the atmosphere of make believe that movie making is and can be, the finished product – the movie – is something that captures a part of my soul that is seeking its reflection in the frame-by-frame capturing of the performer’s essence.

For example, the remarkable Paul Newman was Butch Cassidy or “Fast” Eddie Felson in *The Color of Money* or “Cool Hand” Luke Jackson or even Donald “Sully” Sullivan in *Nobody’s Fool*. He *was* those characters – not just the handsome movie star on the screen, adored by fans across the globe, including me.

Just as Robert Redford becomes *Jermiah Johnson* or Daniel Day-Lewis inhabits Nathaniel in *The Last of the Mohicans*, a part of me joins an actor in the creative metamorphosis they engage when taking a character off the script’s page and transferring something through their soul into the finished movie.

And, as Kate Hudson captured my heart as Penny Lane in *Almost Famous* or Charlize Theron blows my hair back as Lorraine Broughton in *Atomic Blonde*, my fascination with actresses in movies speaks to my heart for the beauty portrayed – both in spirit and in flesh.

Over time and through many genres, the gifted actors and actresses always make a great film *memorable* to me – transposing the celebrity far away from the star they are and into the depths of the character they are playing.

Edward Norton – in either *American History X* or *The Illusionist* – shows me a variance of skill and dedication to craft, whether a modern day morality tale or a historical drama rich with intrigue and mystery. Always a joy to watch his measured intent in bringing a character to life, Norton owns the transformation of Derek Vinyard from Nazi thug to protective brother as well as the nuanced performance as Eisenheim, *The Illusionist*, in a multi-layered story of misdirection and endless love.

When I first saw Julia Ormond as Susannah in *Legends of the Fall*, my heart was captured not only by her stunning beauty but the broken vulnerability of a character that ended up loving – and losing – three different brothers who loved her each in their own broken ways. Her wide-eyed innocence turns to tragic heartbreak as she gives herself to these men in search of a deeper truth inside of herself, all the while played by Ormond as not just the beauty but the beast inside.

To me, Warren Beatty as Las Vegas visionary and mega-gangster Ben Siegel in *Bugsy*, is another example of an actor delving into the soul of a character. There's also the electricity and chemistry between him and actress Annette Benning – who would become his wife after this movie – bravado and sparks that were also exhibited by them individually in other great movies such as *Bulworth* and *American Beauty*. Beatty's turn as the larger-than-life Ben Siegel is full of his charm, bombast, and raw power.

In the rich love story of *Somewhere In Time*, actress Jane Seymour – as Elise McKenna – cannot do anything but imprison my heart with her beauty, grace, and vulnerability in tandem

with Christopher Reeve's performance as Richard Collier, a film that not only transports me into a place *with no time* but also thoroughly encapsulates my heart's unwritten language of desire for love and romance more brilliantly than any other film I've ever seen.

As far as actors taking me into their own souls through a performance, few can measure up to Robert DeNiro's Oscar winning performance as The Bronx Bull, Jake LaMotta, in Martin Scorsese's masterpiece, *Raging Bull*. Every time I watch the black and white story, I can actually see it in color – come to life, through DeNiro's expertise in his craft, through his heart and soul being bled out into the character and onto the screen, holding back and letting go and taking the risk to be raw, real, and raging.

Not always being a fan of a particular actress doesn't necessarily mean I cannot deeply appreciate the depths of her talent and taking me into the soul of her character. As Ryan Stone in *Gravity*, Sandra Bullock brought me into the terror and tenacity of her character's human spirit to survive, to be lost in space, to fight her way into falling back to earth, and picking herself up from the muck and mire with awe and gratitude to be able to take just a few more steps for mankind...all fueled by love, belief, faith, and ferocity to live.

With all the grace and undiscovered passion of a woman's heart and desire to share a real life and a deeper adventure with and for the man she's fallen in love with, there is Madeleine Stowe's meticulous performance as Cora Munro in *The Last of the Mohicans* which allows me into the mysteries of the feminine story and the battle she can go into in order to fight for her own heart. When Nathaniel (Daniel Day-Lewis) has to leap off into the waterfall to live to fight another day, it's her ability to show Cora's belief and trust in his words that matter the most – said with all eyes and heart and longing and hope.

Across a wide range of characters and roles, Brad Pitt has taken great risks to be not only a masculine force, an actor that harkens back to another time in Hollywood, but also to show the varied shades of what a man feels and knows and how it plays out in the impact of those around him in the story's life. In *A River Runs Through It*, Pitt plays Paul Maclean, the oldest son and brother who loves his father and brother but also is enamored by the darker side of his nature, not compromising his lust for life or the possible death it could – and would – bring him to.

With a family legacy of spectacular acting in her genes, actress Bridget Fonda takes the role of drug addict turned assassin Maggie Hay in *Point of No Return* and delivers a phenomenal performance of showing me in a movie how a caterpillar actually becomes a butterfly – albeit a butterfly that can kill instead of floating languorously around the world surrounding her. Guts and grit come through her beauty and brains, a little girl seeking the woman who's still looking for both a father-figure to teach her and a knight to rescue her from the dragons who want to consume her.

As Cuban refugee turned into cocaine kingpin Tony Montana, the *always* remarkable Al Pacino brought to life *Scarface*. With a hunger packed into each of his transformational scenes, Pacino does let the camera into his face, heart, and eventually soul *and* soul-lost man who is taken down by the power and violence that he clawed his way to the top of. Pacino is a master at taking a character – even one as reprehensible as Montana – and turning the tables on the moviegoer into accepting the contract of finding a humanity buried underneath the façade of evil.

In *State of Grace*, actress Robin Wright (who, years later, went on to marry her co-star, another fine actor, Sean Penn) gives her character of Kathleen Flannery the tough exterior of a woman scorned but the intense passion of a heart yearning for reconnection to the character of ex-lover turned police detective, Terry Noonan (Penn). As the sister of another major character,

(the pitch perfect Gary Oldman as Irish criminal Jackie Flannery), Wright is torn between loyalty and love – a balancing act that moves me every time I rewatch this magnetic piece of filmmaking.

Another legacy of remarkable acting DNA, Michael Douglas – as the perennially stoned, one-hit novel writer and college professor, Grady Tripp, in *Wonder Boys* – takes center stage in a super supporting cast (Tobey Maguire, Robert Downey, Jr., Frances McDormand, Rip Torn, and Katie Holmes) as he deftly and defiantly walks the wobbly tightrope of his own self-destruction as his heart is torn between making the impossible choices a man faces when he’s looking into the abyss of his own broken dreams and undeniable talents.

Besides many of the films previously mentioned, I’ve sometimes asked myself the question: *If I had ten movies to watch in the final days of my life, what would they be?*

“The technology available for filmmaking now is incredible, but I am big believer that it’s all in the story.”

Robert Redford – *Actor, Producer, Director*

With such a good question as the one above – and believing that, if Redford is *right*, then it’s the story that captures it all – the following movies are a short list (...compared to a very *long* one...) of those I’d love to spend time with if I knew time was really, really *short*.

25th Hour: 2002 – Directed by Spike Lee; starring Edward Norton, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Rosario Dawson, Barry Pepper, Anna Paquin, and Brian Cox.

What does a man propose to do with his last 24 hours of freedom, facing a 7-year prison sentence for peddling dope?

The “fuck monologue” scene Norton delivers is worth the price of admission alone. As Monty Brogan, the portrayal by Norton – along with the supporting cast – is a gritty, decadent,

and somewhat desperate gleaning into the heart of friendship, the pain of betrayal, and the story of a man who – in the end – imagines that hope can redeem him and his story, much like he rescued the dying dog, Doyle, in the opening scenes of the film.

Cinderella Man: 2005 – Directed by Ron Howard; starring Russell Crowe, Renée Zellweger, Paul Giamatti, and Craig Bierko.

Inspired by the life story of world heavyweight boxing champion, James J. Braddock, it's a whimsical and mythical tale of one man's journey rise to the top – interrupted by the Great Depression and a wife's plea he stop getting into the ring. Crowe's moxie and heart in portraying a man who knows nothing else but how to fight – and must fight for the pennies and dollars it takes to keep his family together – is both remarkably inspirational and gut-wrenching to witness.

A true David versus Goliath subplot – the actual opportunity that Braddock had to fight world champ Max Baer – takes me by the throat every time I watch it, stunned by the vulnerability of the friendship between Crowe's and Giamatti's characters and the love that fuels Braddock's courage in being willing to fight in spite of his wife's fear (played marvelously by Zellweger).

Good Will Hunting: 1997 – Directed by Gus Van Sant; screenplay (Best Original Oscar award) by Ben Affleck and Matt Damon; starring Matt Damon, Robin Williams (Best Supporting Actor Oscar award), Ben Affleck, Stellan Skarsgård, and Minnie Driver.

Damon's characterization of a South Boston self-taught genius working as a janitor at prestigious MIT – all the while getting drunk with his buddies and arrested for street fighting – leads him headlong into an MIT mathematics professor who wants to tutor Will and use his genius to gain more fame and acclaim for himself. As part of his plea deal, Hunting is paired

with Dr. Sean Maguire (the perfect Robin Williams), and enters the abyss of his childhood wounding in order to come out the other side a young man redeemed and set free from the demons that both drove and terrorized his talents.

No matter how many times I watch this movie, the love story – between Will and best friend Southie running buddy, Chuckie (Ben Affleck), between Will and Skylar (played with grace and soul by Minnie Driver), and with Hunting and Maguire as they learn that trust can change lives – always brings me to the tears I need to shed for my own story, and the good places within it.

Legends of the Fall: 1994 – Directed by Edward Zwick; starring Brad Pitt, Anthony Hopkins, Julia Ormond, Aidan Quinn, and Henry Thomas.

This epic Western captures the lives and love of three brothers and their father living in the wilderness plains of Montana in the early 20th century, facing the realities of World War I and one woman who comes into their lives, a disruptive and life-changing force that will impact them all.

Exquisitely filmed by John Toll (Best Cinematography Oscar winning) and tenderly directed by Zwick, the performances of the cast – all bearing equal weight and gravitas – are a combined pantheon of brilliant acting, depth of characterization, and a love story that permeates all of the plot with both an elegiac and heart-stopping power.

The music soundtrack by James Horner is one of my all-time favorites, scoring the beauty and despair that involves all of the characters as their worlds collide and rejoin in a film that ends with the line, “*It was a good death.*”

The Pope of Greenwich Village: 1984 – Directed by Stuart Rosenberg; starring Mickey Rourke, Eric Roberts, Daryl Hannah, Burt Young, Geraldine Page, and Kenneth McMillan.

A peerless crime black comedy film, this is one that never fails to make me want to *be* Mickey Rourke as the main character, Charlie Moran. Some would say the film belongs to the character of Paulie (the mesmerizing Eric Roberts), but – to me – it’s Rourke and his ownership of Charlie (who, in the film, is Paulie’s cousin) throughout the film that is a tour de force to witness.

Originally slated to be the first on-screen pairing between acting titans Robert DeNiro (Charlie) and Al Pacino (Paulie), with *The Deer Hunter* director Michael Cimino attached, it is a blessing – to me – that Rourke got an opportunity, as well as Roberts, to play these criminal cousins to absolute delight and delicious dedication. As with the others, once I start watching this movie I can’t stop until the final credits roll.

Seabiscuit: 2003 – Directed by Gary Ross; starring Tobey Maguire, Jeff Bridges, Chris Cooper, Elizabeth Banks, and Gary Stevens.

Loosely based on the actual Thoroughbred race horse who captivated a country during the Great Depression, this enigmatic tale pierces my heart and soul with the beauty of John “Red” Pollard (Maguire) and his jockey story along with the heartbreak of Charles Howard (the always brilliant Bridges) and how the devastating loss of his own son brings his path into that of Pollard’s as a new and needed father figure.

The story of how a horse – broken and nearly destroyed before it was redeemed – brings all of these broken and bleeding human characters together is one for the ages. The performances and beautifully shot and edited scenes move the story like a racehorse through my spirit every time I watch it. In the end – along with beautiful narration throughout the film by David McCullough – it’s a story about how both man and beast combine to become one heart, soul, and story.

Forrest Gump: 1994 – Directed by Robert Zemeckis (Best Director Oscar award, along with Best Picture); starring Tom Hanks (Best Actor Oscar award), Robin Wright, Gary Sinise, Mykelti Williamson, and Sally Field.

What can I say about *Forrest Gump*? It's an absolute gem of a story, told in retrospect by Hanks' character sitting at a bus stop on the way to reunite with the love of his life. Hanks signed on for the film 90 minutes after reading the script – other actors who were originally in the casting race were John Travolta, Bill Murray, Chevy Chase, and Sean Penn.

Even with his low IQ, Forrest towers over life in a simplistic brilliance. One reason I love this film is that his emotional vulnerability – even based in how others see it as a deficit – gives him the capacity to love, feel anger, question his destiny, and exhibit bravery in the face of danger that most people could live a lifetime pursuing yet never capture.

Makes me laugh, cheer, and cry every single time.

Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead: 1995 – Directed by Gary Fleder; starring Andy Garcia, Christopher Walken, William Forsythe, Treat Williams, Christopher Lloyd, Bill Nunn, Steve Buscemi, Jack Warden, Fairuza Balk, and Gabrielle Anwar.

Not a critic's darling, this is one of my all-time favorite watches on film. Why? Jimmy "The Saint" Tosnia – dashing and daringly played by Garcia – is an ex-gangster trying to go straight in Denver. Let's just say it doesn't go according to plan. Why? Because he falls in love, The Man With The Plan (a deliciously sick and twisted Walken) shows up demanding a favor, and his old running buddies get mixed up in an easy score of money gone horribly wrong.

Gritty, in a Tarantino-flavored way, and with some cool as shit dialogue if you like it that way, this movie is best watched with some boat drinks, the capacity to be entertained without

expecting Academy Award level acting, and appreciation of the cast's delivering the goods. *Give it a name.*

Miller's Crossing: 1990 – Directed by the Coen Brothers; starring Gabriel Byrne, Albert Finney, Marcia Gay Harden, John Turturro, Jon Polito, and J.E. Freeman.

A neo-noir gangster film that floats by my senses like I'm in a dream that never wants to end, this is another film that only gets *better* every time I sit down to watch it – which is at least once a year since first finding it.

Gabriel Byrne is perfect as the right-hand man for an Irish mobster (the mercurial Finney). *Time Magazine* named this one of the 100 greatest films ever made since the inception of the periodical – not bad. *What's the rumpus?* It's *not bad* because it's that fucking good! A mob movie, a love story, a redemption journey, and a tale about one man's loyalty to who he is – regardless of how swiftly and surely life kicks him in the nuts – this is one that I can't take my eyes from the screen once the fade in begins with that black hat breezing across the forest floor.

Somewhere in Time: 1980 – Directed by Jeannot Szwarc; starring Christopher Reeve, Jane Seymour, and Christopher Plummer.

Timeless, indeed. The John Barry score is less than an hour of the most hauntingly beautiful music in a film I've ever had my heart captured by. This romantic fantasy drama is a movie that is focused on a playwright (Reeve) who becomes obsessed with a photograph of a young woman and actress (Seymour) while he's at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan.

This little film with an enduring and endearing heart was one of my late mother's all-time favorites. As a man who doesn't mind thinking I'm just a recovered hopeless romantic, this movie is a leap from the abyss of mindless moviemaking into the void of the fantastical and

fearless. Isn't that what love is really about – believing that *anything is possible*? I know the kind of obsession Reeve's character, Richard Collier, feels for the woman in the photograph.

Wonderfully captured in a movie, this one continues to break my heart every time I watch it – and Jane Seymour is quite easy to fall in love with, so there's that, too.

Wouldn't mind this being the very last film I ever see with my eyes on this side of heaven.

“When I have to score a film, I watch the movie first and then start thinking about it. And from that moment on, it is as if I were pregnant. I then have to deliver the child, so from that moment on, I think always about the music – even when I go to the grocery store, I think about it.”

Ennio Morricone – *Italian Composer*

In the fifty-five years I've been enthralled by movies, I cannot fathom just watching a film without the presence of an underlying soundtrack or score.

Whether it's the sonic legacy of Martin Scorsese and his uncanny ability to pick the perfect rock song for one of his scenes, the sublime beauty of Howard Shore's contribution to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or the vast array of talents that German film score composer Hans Zimmer adds to any film lucky enough to have him on board, these are just a few examples of how important – to me – that music is to movies.

Music has always had an indelible imprint with being the soundtrack to my entire life – and a life spent finding heart and story within movies has subjected my soul to countless moments of transcendent beauty through the intercourse of film and score.

With its undeniable presence – mostly in the subconscious while viewing a movie – I am fascinated as to how the score to any film I'm watching is, to me, just as important as the action

going on with the story, its direction, the acting, cinematography or anything else my eyes are seeing. Above, below, or through the dialogue and plot, the movie's score is something my entire being is transfixed by.

Whether it's a snippet of the perfect song laid over a scene or the orchestrations that flow within and beyond the fade ins, jump cuts, or any style of editing, from the opening credits to the closing ones I always have my ears perked up for the score or the soundtrack.

Countless times I've been privy to discover new musical talent or unearthed treasures of songs by hunting down the titles of tracks I've heard in a movie. And effect? I just think of Nino Rota's breathtakingly simple yet haunting opening theme to *The Godfather* as just one example from hundreds that, for me, help make a movie memorable.

Tyler Bates – *300* or *Watchmen*. John Williams – all nine of the *Star Wars* movies. Leonard Bernstein – the original *West Side Story*. John Barry – *Out of Africa*, *Somewhere in Time*, *Dances with Wolves*, and quite a number of the James Bond films. James Horner – *Titanic*, *Braveheart*, *Legends of the Fall*, *Field of Dreams*, *A Beautiful Mind*. Hans Zimmer – *Gladiator*, *Inception*, the Christopher Nolan *Batman* trilogy, *Black Hawk Down*, *True Romance*. Ennio Morricone – *The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly*, *The Mission*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *The Untouchables*, *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*. This is just scratching the surface...

Like a bridge, the score or soundtrack to a movie gives my heart something to traverse while following the direction, the acting, and the plot. It's the ties that bind it all together for me. Even before sound was introduced into movies, it was the score that settled the mood for the moviegoer – ratcheting up the tension, illuminating the pathos, and announcing the highs and lows of the plot.

Music and movies go together like the dark and something to snack on while viewing.

Inseparable.

In a movie, if it sets the mood or moves my heart, it's a score well done or a song well placed. And as I've discovered – whether in movies or the real life they brilliantly pretend to be or reflect to my moviegoing eyes – the soundtracks to my life are made up of people, places, things, and emotions that can never really *exist* without a score behind them.

In the summer of 1980 – when I first began to capture my story in *Journal* volumes, and with the entry into college on the horizon – I would find that my life was soon to become a movie that introduced some plot twists beyond comprehension and characters that would change the course of my direction forever.

Original