



2-15-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Logan, Kelley (2018) "A Thumb on the Dragon," *Westview*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 23.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol33/iss2/23>

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# A Thumb on the Dragon

by Kelley Logan

**“Look, lady. Get. In. Line.** You can pee all you want after you buy a ticket.” The man in the ticket booth glowered at her and then refocused his attention on the couple in matching blue sweats, who were looking at her like actuaries at a flood site. She stepped back from the ticket booth and looked down the line. There were at least twenty couples and a few more singletons. Those were the ones she could see. The line wrapped around the old brick building and down the alley between it and the jeweler’s next door. She was going to wet herself before she got in.

“Really? I swear I’ll come right back out.” She tried to widen her eyes pleadingly.

“Sure lady, and I’m your Dutch uncle. Next.” The blue sweat suits shouldered their way past her. The woman dug a coin purse from her bra and started counting out bills.

“A Venti, who the hell buys a *Venti* coffee and then walks to a movie?” Shirley muttered a little desperately as she walked back along the line that had now formed halfway back to the parking lot along the side of Roxy’s Retro Cinema.

She had been spending a usual Sunday reading free newspapers left in the neighborhood coffee shop, eating scones, and drinking an absurdly large coffee when an ad for a Hitchcock retrospective caught her eye. The movies would kill the rest of the afternoon and give her something to talk about at work tomorrow—something better than describing the rather bland brick-like scones and vat of coffee in front of her. She popped the last bite of scone in her mouth, took a swig of coffee to soften it, and headed for the door.

Three blocks later, she realized that deciding to do anything after ordering a Venti was a bad idea. She needed to go. Her bladder was not as cooperative as it had been before her ladies’ operation. Sometimes, it would sneak up on her and throb until she sat for barely a trickle. Other times, she wouldn’t even think about going until she got home from work to empty a bladder that seemed to hold more than she thought should be possible.

She stopped by a closed hardware store to think about her options: There was really nothing much open even during the week in this area. Sunday, everything was dark and defended—chained, barred, and promising watch dogs. Although there were empty lots, closed stores, and very few people around, she was not the sort of woman who peed in alleys. And she was halfway there. If she turned back to the coffee shop, she would surely miss the opening credits of *Vertigo*. She was the kind of woman who watched credits.

She kept walking.

Hitchcock brought back memories. Her grandfather had liked Hitch. It was one

of the few things they had had in common. Sunday afternoon, after sweating through the hell and brimstone of mandatory church, after the three-bread, five-vegetable, two-meat Sunday dinners that her grandmother invariably made, she and her grandfather would turn the on the TV and search for an old movie. Sometimes it was a Gene Kelley; those were alright. Sometimes, it was one of the old film sirens from Hollywood's golden era—a Jean Harlow, Rita Hayworth, Myrna Loy. Shirley did not often get through these. Her grandfather was sure to lapse into a running commentary about women today and living up to ideals. Shirley wasn't toeing the line, wasn't trying, wasn't the girl she could be. Wasn't ever going to be one of those women. She learned to slip out at the first set of commercials if one of these were playing.

But Hitchcock! Oh, Hitch was just right. The beautiful women were venomous, harrowingly vulnerable, or icy—nothing to wish on a granddaughter, so Shirley always stayed through those sitting on the floor by her grandfather's Barcalounger, grabbing his trouser leg when the heroine was stabbed or the birds got the lady in the bedroom. He would pat her gently on the head and whisper, "It's a movie, Shirl." Once though, after the second time they had watched *Shadow of a Doubt*, he snapped off the old TV and stood quietly by it, a hand on its warm, broad top. He then turned and said, "Girl, get up and come with me."

They had gone to the unused back bedroom that her grandmother kept for her other son, Shirley's uncle, who rarely visited. Shirley had sat on the bed while her grandfather had dug around in the closet, lifting down boxes of old clothes and sliding junk around on the shelf above the clothes rod. After a few minutes, he pulled down a shoebox.

"That Uncle Charlie fella, he was real smooth, but she caught on to him," he said, weighing the box in his hands.

Shirley nodded.

Her grandfather tipped the lid off the box and poured the contents onto the coverlet. Shirley turned to look, hitching her knee up on the bed. The junk that tumbled out was typical: old pin back buttons, a brass cigarette case with an owl etched onto its face, five pairs of cufflinks, two tie tacks, a broken pair of scissors, a watch, five rotary pins, a tiny compass, two keys, and four pocket knives among assorted ticket stubs and other paper rubble. Her grandfather shifted through the heap and picked up a red Lucite knife and handed to her. The handle was slender and nearly as long as her hand. On one side, there was a gold dragon, on the other, a bull and matador with the word "Mexico" at his feet.

"Hold the knife in your right hand, girl, and keep your thumb on the dragon. That way you can press the catch." He took the knife from her and showed her the little brass toggle at the top that flipped the blade out, "You have to press it back up to lock the blade in or out of the handle. Like this, see?" He held the knife gently in his hand, sliding his fingers up the dragon's scales, and deftly

flicked the toggle down. The blade snapped out as his grip shifted to lock the toggle back flat against the top of the hilt. “The blade locks in place so you can’t cut yourself.” He handed the knife to her. “Don’t tell your granny.”

It was the best present he had ever given her and the only secret they shared. He had been dead now for ten years. Shirley kept that knife sharp and oiled, tucked in the side pocket of her purse. She might not have been what he had wanted in a granddaughter, but he loved her.

Now she was in line, jiggling and shifting her feet, seriously worried that her bladder would give up and let go before she could buy her ticket and get in the theater.

As she came alongside a metal emergency door, it opened. A scrubby guy in black stood just within the opening.

“Hey, you the one who’s gotta go?”

“You’ll let me in?”

He smiled, “Yeah, if you’ll do something for me.”

She sighed, “How much?”

“Not money,” he grabbed her arm and drew her into the doorway. The couple behind her stepped around and refilled the line. As he stepped back into the dark of the theater, he whispered, “I want to watch.”

Her breath caught, “Watch?” For a second, she thought that he wanted to sit with her during the movie, then she realized what he was asking. She smelled him more than saw him there in the dark and thought fleetingly of bathing and hot running water. This made her bladder spasm. She tenderly pressed her lower belly. “I can’t do that.”

“How bad do you need to go?” His face was flat, his small eyes a steady gleam in the dim corridor.

She realized that the answer was *bad enough*. She stepped through the doorway and was blinded by



the sudden darkness as the heavy metal door swung shut; she felt his hand slip into hers, almost comfortingly. He led her forward toward the gaily lit concession area until she could see, dropped her hand, and pointed down the right hallway. She brushed past him and went down the hall and on into the lavatory.

It was cold, the walls a deep pigeon-blood red with fake plants on the counter and bordello inspired borders along the ceiling. She thought, *they want it to be exotic*. Shirley felt a bubble of hysteria rise, but she swallowed it down and then felt only the air conditioning and a slight nausea. She turned without thinking down the row of stalls and hurried to the last one. Opening the door she hesitated feeling the heat from the man's body so close behind her. But she really had no choice. She barely had time to shift her skirt forward and pulled down her panties; she wasn't on the seat before her bladder released.

"Hey! We had a deal," he roughly shoved her back against the tank, one hand squarely against her chest, the other lifting the front of the skirt, "I get to watch." She looked up at him, nodded, and spread her legs on either side of the toilet, planting her feet. She swung her purse forward and slipped her thumb and forefinger down into the narrow front pocket.

He had expected the prim old gal to put up a fuss; they usually did, that was part of the fun. He had been doing this for years. The best ones wept and turned red from shame. He was shocked to see her reach out toward his fly almost supplicating, palm down like a dog begging. Just his luck, he picked a weirdo. Then he felt a quick punch in his groin.

"Bitch!" he cried, "You bitch!" She had missed her target if she was trying to clock him one, but he could teach her a lesson. "You missed," he hissed; he raised his hand to slap her. Mid-motion he felt a warm wetness running down his leg and looked down. A dark stain was spreading down his leg. He stepped back and braced himself in the corner of the stall, suddenly anxious that she would laugh at him. He couldn't be pissing himself because she tried to hit him in the balls, could he? He felt light-headed and shivered. It was always so damn cold in the ladies' room. He looked back up at her, now sitting primly with her knees touching, "What did you do?" She smiled softly. He fell forward on his knees in front of her. The stall was filling with the bright, tinny smell of blood. He tried to grab her, but she seemed so far away, and he couldn't seem to hold on to anything.

As the man tilted forward toward her, Shirley caught the front of his shirt with her left hand and pushed him away from her until he fell out of the stall, one leg buckling under him. He moved slightly and then was still. She wiped herself, flushed the toilet, and thought about the handle.

"It's a public toilet." Her voice bounced off the metal walls of the stall. She looked at the tile floor. There was enough room. She had to hop over his extended leg and the growing pool of blood. She didn't get anything on her shoes. She walked back to the sink to rinse the knife off under the sink, gently rolling the sticky handle in her palm—dragon, matador, dragon, matador—until both were clean



and unsullied. She then carefully dried it and slid it back into the front pocket of her purse. She pushed open the door; nobody was in the hall. She slid out the door, hurried toward the front of the theater, and joined a noisy group of teenagers entering the lobby. She followed them to the concession stand.

She looked into the glass case at the brightly colored boxes. There were always too many candies to decide between; she bought popcorn and a small Coke instead. Shirley smiled at the girl as she handed over her money. "I hope I can find a seat about midway. I hate the front, don't you?"

The girl smiled back, "Well, you won't find one in the back, not with that crowd you came in with."

Shirley laughed and winked. "You've got that right." As she turned to go in, she could hear the first spirals and circles of Bernard Herrmann's score. She had not missed anything.

