

The Blind Birdhouse

By Lillian Hargreaves

Out of Sight

Review by L.T. Frankfurt

Blood. Gore. Too many disembowelled bodies to count over lunch. This is not a film for those with sensitive-vision or prone to revisit their meal at the first sign of blood. Roger Krumpwaffle's stellar new film Out of Sight is a visual feast that keeps you darting from left to right and then back again for three straight hours, relishing in the horrific beauty of this modern-day children's romance set in the depths of the Kalahari Desert...

Let me begin by saying that I did not write this. It wreaks of vulgar adjectives and unnecessary departures from readable syntax. No, this is the work of my boss, the Lieutenant. Though don't get me wrong, my stamp is all over this piece. I helped with the corrections and I added in that part about your eyes darting from left to right throughout the film, as to me that's what it felt was happening.

Some say that being a film critic is hard work and that there is tremendous psychological pressure. For the record: It's not, and no, there isn't. Still, I didn't always want to be a film critic. For someone who wanted to raise alpacas in the windswept mountains of northern Peru it was just rather unfortunate that I was born on the east side of lower Manhattan.

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'I can't believe those alpacas are still grazing in your head.' Harold took a large step back from the table of books his pants had just brushed. It was Thursday morning. We were in Hardings & Square. 'Will you hurry this up, Ealing? You know I'm allergic to books.'

'Gimme a sec.' I was on my toes, hands outstretched towards *The Critic's Critic: A Critical Summary of a Self-Proclaimed Criticker*, my body twisted in a dogleg left as I did my best to bend around the large piles of velvet quartos titled *Red: The Colour of Fashion*. I didn't leave the house for the first five years of my life. While every other kid went out on walks with their mothers, I stayed at home colouring in stencils of playgrounds and parks. As a result, I have an inexplicable and crippling aversion to the colour red. Tomatoes. Fluffy dice. Stop signs. And yes, the red carpet is a recurring problem I am yet to properly deal with.

Harold was stifling a literary sneeze. 'I have to be back at the office in ten minutes. You coming?'

I fingered the book, lost my balance, dived to the left to avoid the nightmarish table of red books and knocked over a pile of paperbacks that had been stacked from floor to ceiling. Harold let out a squeal not unlike that of a small flying rodent as it crash lands into a shrubbery painted on brickwork.

'You sook. Just let me get this and I'll walk to the park with you. I'm not heading back though. I have the afternoon off.' Harold worked in the building opposite me, a fellow film critic with much the same flair for recounts and nondescript vocabulary that had defined our

careers. ‘And as a matter of fact my alpaca dream is more alive than ever. I’m only one article away from finishing my contract. After tonight’s premiere I will be a free man.’

‘No more Lieutenant to hold you down?’

‘And no more verbs, adjectives and irregular grammatical rules to restrain me. As soon as I hand in that article on Monday morning I’ll be on the next flight to Peru. I even have a plot of land picked out and several alpaca to get me started.’

I left Harold at the entrance to the park and found a spot in the sun to sit down and begin *The Critic’s Critic*. An elderly woman nearby was wiggling her toes in the grass as she listened to a portable radio: ‘...fears renew over sled dog decline and a reminder folks that at 2:32 EDT there’ll be a solar eclipse visible over Manhattan. Meteorologists remind us that in the interests of public safety do not attempt to look directly at...’

My yawn awoke me from the world of fog drenched mountains and regal alpacas. Walking home I took the path round the lake, sheltering my eyes from the eclipse with my hand. As I neared the lake’s tip I began to hear a low gut-rending scream. I walked towards the reeds and found a small duck jerking its neck back and forth, its leg caught in a cereal packet. I bent to help the poor creature and afterwards permitted myself the feeling of a good Samaritan – a feeling a critic is not to apt to feel very often. It was as I picked up my book that they struck.

Ladybirds! Hundreds of them. Less than a centimetre away from my nose. Swarming on a little green weed, flapping their wings in a threatening display as they devoured a nest of aphids and rejoiced, like young men around a campfire as they roast their first kill, jumping all over each other, red-faced and blood-thirsty.

Words cannot describe the fear I felt at seeing this vicious incarnate of the colour red. Nevertheless, several come to mind: repulsion, mortification, trepidation, sheer unadulterated horror and, at the crux of it all, just damn unnerving.

I panicked. I’m sure I screamed – undoubtedly like Harold the flying rodent. I lunged forward to escape their clutches, my shoes slipped among the reeds and my body inverted so that I landed on the grass with an awkward crack, face to the sky and a hostile collective of ladybirds centimetres from my face.

The eclipse was spectacular – refracted colours drenched my vision as the moon began to sidle over the sun. Then, of course, I realised what I was doing: staring at a bloody eclipse while I lay in wait as a hoard of ladybirds schemed how best to mount me on a rotating spit.

I closed my eyes.

Yet everything was still bright. The rainbow of light, the sunflares, the onset of the cookie-cutter eclipse. It took me several seconds to realise that something was wrong here: my eyes were still open. Light continued to pour in. Like high-powered lasers the UV rays began to burn the life out of my retinas. My entire body was inert, functionless in the grass. I tried to call out for help but no sound escaped my lips. Darkness spread like a dirty towel over the sky and the quiet beauty of the eclipse mesmerised me as my eyes were brought to a rather uncomfortable boil before being left to simmer in the new afternoon sun.

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‘Good news, your temporary paralysis is over.’ I could hear the click-clacking of the doctor’s stethoscope as he played it on his knee like the spoons.

‘Then what’s the bad news?’

‘You’re blind.’

‘Also temporary?’

‘Nope. Not a chance.’ His click-clacking began to adopt a steady country rhythm.

‘Nothing we can do?’ Harold asked.

‘Nope. Nothing.’

‘So I’m blind? Indefinitely?’

‘Nope. Not indefinitely. Quite definitely actually. You’ll never see another thing again in your lifetime.’ With this remark I heard his click-clacking make its way out the door and down the corridor.

‘Harold, are you there? What day is it? What time? Have I missed the premiere? For goodness’ sakes man I’m blind, throw me a goddamn bone!’

I waited several minutes.

‘Ah, you’re still here.’ Harold sounded cheerful. ‘Just had to spring a leak.’

I glared in the direction where I assumed Harold was standing.

‘Are you alright? You look kinda funny. You’re not having a heart attack, are you? At all costs avoid bright lights.’

‘I’m not having a bloody heart attack, Harold. I’m pissed off.’

‘Ah. The doctor said this is a common reaction to acute blindness.’

‘Will you help me out here? I need to know what day it is.’

‘It’s still Thursday. You were only out for 25 minutes.’

‘And the time?’

‘About 5.30.’

‘Thank god. I need to go to the premiere tonight. Help me get out of this hospital gown and dressed.’

‘To write that review?’ Harold was laughing. ‘How on earth will you be able to manage that?’

He had a point. I was not in the ideal condition to review a film.

‘I don’t know. I’ll just listen to it and work the rest out from the dialogue and soundtrack. You’re going tonight. You can take me along with you, help me get to and from my seat and make sure I don’t run into any trouble.’

‘And the four months of rehab you’re expected to complete?’

‘Forget about it. I am one article away from raising alpacas in Peru and nothing, not even acute blindness, is going to stop me.’

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The fanfare was typical of the big budget premieres I usually attend: a live band playing ominous theme music from the film, frantic interviews left and right, and an endless hum of excitement rising from the crowd like steam.

I, however, was a disconsolate pancake.

Just minutes before we were due to arrive at the cinema I had received a phone call from the Lieutenant reminding me, as with all of Krumpwaffle's films, to give it a favourable review because the production company was paying us off. A little known fact outside of publishing circles, but printing reviews in newspapers almost always makes a loss. Few read them so instead reviews rely on the myriad of unscrupulous directors and producers who pay off critics so that they can use their star rating and five or six words of their review in their advertising posters. It is this weight of unprincipled criticism bombarded to the public en masse that persuades them to see the film and determines the final box office grossing. If you have ever seen a wildly successful film that seems as if it was written by, edited by and starred a strain of mildly intelligent bacterium, you will now appreciate how this occurred.

Of course, I assured the Lieutenant that giving a positive review would not at all be a problem and, with this my last official review, I meant it. 'Excellent,' he replied, 'I knew I could count on you. Just don't mess it up or you'll end up serving time in critic hell.' He chuckled to himself. 'I'll be at the premiere tonight as well, so make sure you save some champagne and chocolate mushrooms for me.'

Since that call my stomach had felt like an eggbeater was tearing at it, churning up the rushed dinner I had never eaten.

'Thankfully you can't see this,' Harold said as he led me by the arm, 'but we're about to walk onto the red carpet.'

A second egg-beater joined the fray.

'Just get me in as soon as possible and for heaven's sake keep an eye out for the Lieutenant.'

There was one step on the entirety of the red carpet and naturally I stumbled up it to the sound of laughter and camera flashes. Apart from that the experience was uneventful. Our tickets were clipped, our press passes draped around our necks like Hawaiian leis and an usher led Harold to our seats who in turn led me. I was even offered a popcorn and coke.

My phone buzzed. Harold read the message. '*Can't see you. Where are you? The film's about to start. You better be here. My wife wants to meet you. L.T. Should I reply?*'

'Best not to I think,' I said, slinking down in my chair.

After three more buzzes I told Harold to dispose of my phone. I couldn't take any chances.

'Are you sure you don't want one of these?' Harold asked.

'One of what? I can't see.'

'Oh, right. A glass of champagne.'

'No. How many have you had?'

'Three. Or maybe four. What does it matter?'

‘What does it matter? Because at the end of the film you need to get me out of here as quickly as possible. I’m relying on you. That’s gonna be awfully hard if you’re incapacitated. Remember the *Return of the Vampire Duck* premiere?’

‘Calm down, calm down. That happened once and it won’t happen again.’

The cuffs of my suit were drenched in sweat. My blindness made me feel naked. All eyes were on me. Scrutinising me. Wondering what it was like to be blind, why I was here, how I could be a blind critic, and whether I’d always been blind and maybe that was why I was so good at what I did?

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ the MC began, ‘if you will now take your seats the night’s proceedings are about to begin. We’ll hear a few words from the director first, Mr Roger Krumpwaffle, and then it will be the Palace Theatre’s great pleasure to show the first screening worldwide of his new film *Out of Sight*.’

Spontaneous applause broke out.

‘By the way, what colour are the seats?’ I asked Harold.

‘Scarlett.’

Suffice to say an expletive was heard in the twelfth row. ‘Any sign of the Lieutenant?’

‘He’s about five rows back,’ Harold replied after a few moments. ‘His wife’s pretty attractive. And hey, she wanted to meet you.’

‘Just shut up and let’s get this over with.’

‘Also,’ the MC announced, ‘a mobile phone has been turned in to us by a generous young lady.’ A small squeak was heard behind me. ‘Could the owner please come up and identify it?’

Harold nudged my arm. ‘Hey look, he’s holding up your phone.’

‘No takers? Well ladies and gentlemen, I can’t say I’ll be able to suppress my habit of making long distance calls for very long, but if you realise you’re phoneless please come and talk to one of our theatre staff.’

Now I don’t know about you but if you’ve ever put on a film and watched it with your eyes closed you will realise just how pathetic and predictable Hollywood films are. For three hours I sat there in complete darkness listening to the sounds of phony screams, incessant gunfire, sappy dialogue and a score so overdramatic it would have been enough to sink the Titanic. It came as a relief when the final words were uttered – ‘Though you’re lying dead in my arms, Michelle, you will always live on, out of sight of this cruel world in the depths of my heart’ – and resounding applause filled the theatre.

‘Right,’ I said, grabbing Harold by the bare arm, ‘time for us to go.’

A woman gave a shriek and slapped me in the face.

‘I’m over here,’ Harold replied.

‘Apologies, madam.’ I turned to Harold. ‘Quick, get me out of here.’

I could still hear the rupture of applause as the cold air hit us and we emerged onto the street, Harold leading me by the elbow.

‘Pick up the pace, c’mon.’

‘Relax, will you?’ he assured me. ‘I saw the Lieutenant in conversation with one of the theatre staff. He didn’t see us. We’ll be fine.’

The eggbeaters in my stomach began to slow to a steady whisk. We walked for at least a quarter of an hour.

‘I think we’ll be alright now.’ Harold loosened his grip on my arm. ‘I’m just going to leave you here for a moment. All that champagne has caught up with me.’

‘But where are we?’

‘Corner of Tenth and West Forty-seventh.’

‘You can’t just leave me here!’

The silence of Harold having left ensued.

I was waiting, listening to the sound of abuse thrown from cabbie to cabbie, when I heard a woman’s voice exclaim, ‘Oh heaven’s, look there, that man is urinating in a public garden! What a disgrace.’

I laughed. Harold has never had any luck with public urination. Let’s face it, there are much worse things people can get up to in parks, couples in particular, and yet every time Harold has been overcome by nature’s call there’s either been a policeman doing the rounds or an amateur blackmailer crouching in the shadows.

‘Let’s go around the park to avoid him,’ the woman said. ‘He could be trouble.’

I busied myself pretending to look at the skyscrapers above, my hands in my suit pockets, when I heard the two word response and had to resist the urge to throw up then and there:

‘Utter fools.’

The Lieutenant’s low boom was unmistakable, parting the air with the fearless audacity of a wrecking ball. The eggbeaters began ripping the lining from my stomach in a bid to tear a hole large enough to themselves escape, and in my panic I turned my back to the street, cupped my hand over my ear and began talking in a low murmur as if on the phone.

‘Why, what the hell are you doing here, Ealing?’ Judging by his voice I’d say the Lieutenant was both surprised and somewhat glad to see me. I, on the other hand, was not and proceeded to ignore him, talking even faster into my imaginary phone. ‘Ealing? EALING?’

There was a tug on my suit and I was whirled around to – although I can only approximate this – face the Lieutenant and his purportedly attractive wife. I tried to meet the Lieutenant’s gaze though I feel in this I may have failed and indeed been looking at the gap between the couple because the Lieutenant’s next move was to grab hold of my face and adjust it several degrees to the right.

‘What is wrong with you?’ There was some genuine concern in his voice. There was also some genuine anger.

‘Nothing Mr Frankfurt, sir. I’m just on my way home from the film. It was excellent I might add.’

‘You might add this,’ and I felt my mobile phone thrust into my hand with the force of a collapsing wall.

‘Why were you talking to that shrubbery, Ealing?’

‘What shrubbery?’

‘That shrubbery right there, behind you. The little green one. You were just talking to it.’

‘Was I?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think I was.’

‘You were. What kind of game are you playing at? I’m over here. Stop staring at my wife.’ My face was once again angled to the right by a grip that left a tingling pain in my jaw.

‘Who is this man?’ the woman asked. ‘How do you know him, Linda?’

‘Your first name is Linda!’ I ejaculated.

‘Darling,’ the Lieutenant began, his voice a vicious waterfall with jagged rocks chomping at the bottom, ‘this is one of my critics, Ealing Birdhouse.’

I held my hand out to be shaken and heard the recoil of the Lieutenant’s wife as my hand hit her square in the stomach.

Needless to say I didn’t see the punch the Lieutenant threw that knocked me out cold for a fortnight.

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‘Here, read this over and edit it where you think it’s necessary. You’ve been doing this for years, you know what the producers are looking for, what they need for their advertisements. Give them what they want – what I want – and in return I’ll give you what you want.’

This was the bargain Linda made with me. Despite the advice from Harold to flee the country, I had mustered the strength to not miss a day of work since I regained consciousness. I remained unscathed from the Lieutenant’s occasional tremors until a quiet Friday two weeks later, when a grip upon my shoulder, like play-doh being squeezed out of a tube, signalled my death warrant. The Lieutenant’s voice was calm and even, despite the grip upon my shoulder as it cut off circulation to a third of my body, and his offer seemed genuine on all accounts. With the help of one of the other writers I edited the article, threw in a few catchy lines for the producers and had it back on the Lieutenant’s desk by the end of the day.

Two weeks later, as per clause thirty-one of my contract which the Lieutenant spared no lengths highlighting – that my underlying secondary contract becomes effective if I default on the fixed quota of published articles in my primary contract – I was dressed in an Olaf costume and waddling off the side of the drawbridge in Disneyland, the air filled with the traumatised screams of innumerable six year old children. Thus began my twenty-two years of work in critic hell.