

The Last Show

By Dennis Detwiller, © 2013

A phone rang somewhere in California and Amee pressed the warm, wet handset to her cheek. She cried silently, scanning the creased paper in front of her, over and over again: a typed list of names, all the same, a list of phone numbers, all different. Outside on Canal Street the lights of Manhattan were blobs of color, blended with tears.

“Do you love me?” she said once, lying on her sister Nikki’s lap in the sun. It was a long time ago, before the city, in a place that was gone.

“I love you, kiddo,” Nikki finally replied, sounding far away. “I’m the only one who loves you.”

“You won’t leave?”

“I won’t leave you.” And she sounded so certain, so sure.

Amee wiped her nose and dropped the receiver. Her face was flush, and felt cold without the phone against it.

No one answered. She put a star on the list next to NIKKI MORGAN 310-766-1050. Some names were starred (those she’d call back), others crossed out (wrong numbers).

She didn’t want to think about what would happen when she reached the end of the list. It had cost her two months of wages to hire the man to find them. If Nikki wasn’t on the other end of one of them, what next? She didn’t know. The telephone number list was the furthest extent of her planning. The limit.

Amee had learned many things in the time since that conversation with Nikki, but the most important thing was this: People lie. People always lie.

It was easy to turn away from the world when it had nothing left to say. For three and a half years Amee moved in the quiet. Her conversations dwindled until all that remained were exchanges of immediate concern. Her last memory of a conversation was with a bus driver.

“Exact change,” he said to Amee when she opened her tape-covered wallet, and Amee said OK, sure.

That was months ago. Since then, she nodded at people or shook her head (or took their tickets or bussed their table) in silence.

Instead of talking, she walked. She walked through classes, walked through the assignments out of reflex, and walked the streets.

She crisscrossed, she raced. Sometimes she’d find herself in a foreign neighborhood miles from the dorm, in the middle of the night, and would look up at the luminous purple sky that hung between the buildings and wonder at how far she had come—from home, from the hotel.

There was no such sky in Wyoming. There the sky looked like the black maw of an enormous beast with glittering stars for teeth. Every night that sky ate the world. In the city, the sky was only the place the buildings weren’t.

She was prepared for a march through the ice, alone in silence without stopping, but at the street across from the Flatiron Building she stopped.

On the cement divider in the middle of Broadway, a floodlight illuminated a two-story structure like a jungle gym: a wire frame of aluminum cut into odd lengths, woven together in some sort of figure.

Only when she moved a few steps south could she discern what it was. One moment it was a mess of pipes, the next she saw it: the shape of a man. As her perspective shifted the torso, arms and head slid into view like a magic trick.

The sculpture was still in progress. A small portion had been covered in odd, orange plastic sheets. No, not orange; yellow. The rest was simply framework. The figure beckoned south. Its open-cowled, faceless head hung in desperate yearning.

It had not been there the day before.

After a few minutes standing in the cold, wiping her eyes, Ameer walked onward.

Now she walked past 38th and Broadway, in the dark, hands in her hooded jacket, eyes on the ground. Her outfit brought her in line with the people who occupied such a place at such a time: Times Square, January, 1984.

At 41st and Broadway she stopped. The darkened marquee hung above her, covering her. Looking both ways, she fished out the huge ring of keys from her pocket. She began to open up.

She slid back the gate, pulling twice before it gave way with a rusty scream. Unlocking the door and keying the alarm to OFF, she turned and flicked a battered light switch covered in electrical tape.

The marquee, the last marvel of a building nearing the end of a fifty-five-year run, erupted in a silent explosion of light. Red, yellow, blue. Lights spun and danced, reflected in a thousand different panes of glass, bathing the street outside in silent rainbows.

Playpen, Live Shows, XXX, the sign said.

Ameer went upstairs in the dark to thread the projectors. Who else was going to do it? It was her job.



Henri showed up at his usual time, poked his face in the booth as Ameer was threading Projector Two, and vanished, closing the door behind him as quietly as he could. He was old, but even that wasn't enough of a descriptor: he was ancient.

He had been the same for as long as Ameer had known him, going on three years. Ameer liked him for many reasons: he didn't speak very often, never smiled, and had tried to dissuade her from the job only once.

Ameer flipped on the master switch and Projector One leapt to life with a stuttering explosion of clacking machinery. Sounds from the theater seeped distantly through the thick wall and glass. Ameer put in earplugs and glanced up at the clock, a relic of some middle school, she thought, green and industrial and endless. It hung on the wall above the two monstrous projectors. Taped notices next to the clock, mostly in her handwriting, indicated timing for the movies.

Some of these messages dated back dozens of years, if not more. Ameer's more recent additions read "AUTOEROTIC No1, 1.22. 2 Start 8:30AM. Rewind 8 mins." She never thought about what was shown. This was all a job. An action. The filth on the screen never made it past her eyes.

In an hour and twenty-two minutes she'd power up Two, rewind One and start it all over again. She ran the films, took a break for fifteen minutes, four hours in, then did it again.

She picked up a digest-sized book from the desk and considered it for a moment, but then looked up. Usually she'd be gone by now, lost in the drawings and art and humor, but now she found herself glancing around the room.

The wall facing the theater had three small holes in it. The projection booth hung like a tick in the space in the upper right corner of the theater. Amee looked out the small window to the filth.

She expected to see no one and was surprised to see the man again in the front.

For the last three weeks she had seen him there, in the same seat. To the right and near the front. Nothing more than a mat of black, like a pumpkin with a wig propped on top of a chair. For all she knew, that's what it was.

Had he slept here? Was he dead? Who closed the night before? Amee found she didn't really care. It was too much trouble to go down, too much trouble to look into it. Best to pretend she didn't notice and let Henri or Michael or Johnson find him.

Amee settled into the chewed wooden chair and sat on something.

She pulled up a magazine she had not seen before, ancient and water-bloated. It showed two towers erected in the middle of a man-made lake bordered by fresh, untouched marble blocks. The towers appeared Russian, with bulbous tops, once tinted red or green but now brown-gray with age.

Heavily seriffed letters rode the top of the page, so complex in their design she could not read them with certainty. They seemed to say HTILL PAVILION. The place PARIS. The date 1929.

Amee folded the booklet open and leaned down, the man in the locked theater, forgotten. She read with a fervor she had not felt in a long time.

The projector chattered away like a jungle of mechanical insects.

School was a place to be for several hours a day. That was all that could be said about it, really. The art produced there was at best ridiculous. At worst, it illustrated the pointlessness of going to such a school. It was a giant, expensive game of pretend.

Playing pretend had its purposes. For Ameer, it was a way out of the hotel.

While her father prowled the halls like a boogeyman that stank of cigarettes and whisky, she sat behind the ice machine and scribbled her world down in applications. She recalled the application to the school, because she filled it out with a pen her father stuck in her brother's hand at the dinner table, in the web between his thumb and forefinger, to prove some point that squirmed in his rotting mind.

Once the pen was through the hand, the look left her father's eyes and whatever was in him was sated. While Carl screamed and wept and pulled the pen from a dime-sized hole, her father stared at her through half lidded eyes and she knew that some day he would consume them all.

Her brother was dead now, but she didn't like to think about that.

The pen still worked, after rolling it on the page for a bit. It was the only one she had, and she brought it everywhere with her, even after her father had used it as a weapon. So the application had been half filled with faint, uneven marks. It was the last application she filled out.

They accepted her, even gave her a full scholarship for her art. It was as far from the hotel as she could get. She left one night after packing a Spalding duffel bag full of dirty clothing, two sketchbooks, a cigar tin of pastels and pencils, and a photo of Carl, Nikki and her from the Fourth of July, 1976. She said nothing to what remained of her father.

Still, she dreamt of the T-shaped hallways, of bland orange carpet washed to off-brown, of the clacking of the ice machine in the night.

It was once a playground, before her father changed. They spied on the residents, hid under beds in occupied rooms, listened through doors to the sex sounds of fat businessmen who rolled in with women who wouldn't look at you when they checked in.

Once the hotel was a dream. Now it was something else. Something like a ghost.

At the school she thought about the hotel, and at the hotel she thought about school.

Nostalgia, it seemed, applied even to nightmares.

Nikki was sixteen when she left them. Nikki had been Ameer's life: her mother, her sister, the one person she could trust. Carl was a boy and mean. He wasn't malicious, but he didn't understand like Nikki did.

Anyway, Carl was dead, definitely dead in the ground, with bugs crawling through him. Little Carl playing at Christmas with a blanket of white outside and toys on the ground and a sigh from a chest which was rotting meat now.

Gone.

Nikki wasn't dead, as far as she knew. Nikki was simply...gone.

It was hard to imagine Nikki on a slab or in the ground. Nikki was alive in a way few people ever achieve. She was beautiful, of course, but it was something more that set her apart: an ownership of the world, a way of looking at people, at things, as if she had made them. Ameer could not recall a time when Nikki wasn't in control, wasn't thinking for herself, wasn't doing exactly what she wanted to do.

When Nikki got the tattoo, the loop of roses on her forearm, that was when things began to slip.

It was the first time her father had struck Nikki. She took the shot, and in the same motion grabbed a steel toaster from the kitchen table and struck back. She smashed her father in the chest and neck with the heavy thing, grunting "fucker" at the same moment the machine connected with his breastbone, taking him down.

She had been aiming for his head.

He goggled from the ground, all menace gone, a welt growing on his chin as Nikki stood over him. It was a perfect moment. Her father struggling, arm raised in defense, terror in his eyes. Nikki straddling him, hands balled into fists, with blood dripping from a cut in one palm. Carl sat in a corner on a ruined steel-tube chair.

"No one touches me unless I want them to," she said quietly, breathing heavily. "Next time you'll wake up with a knife in your neck." She left the room.

He believed it. They all did. How could they not?

Amee was horrified, exhilarated, jealous. Her father flipped over like a bug and retreated. No one saw him for two days. When he reappeared, it was as if the confrontation never occurred. The only change was the way he interacted with Nikki. It was like, to him, she was already gone.

After that, Nikki came and went. While Carl and Amee lived in fear, Nikki lived in boredom. And she didn't do anything to help them. No words to protect Amee or Carl, no attempts to intervene.

Everyone else, even her blood, were afterthoughts in her pursuit of happiness.

School was of little interest to someone who made her own rules, and by her seventeenth birthday Nikki was already gone, all but her body. Her room, covered in pictures of Los Angeles and movie stars and beautiful faces like her own, hovered there like dreams on paper. It was clear where she was aiming.

There was no goodbye, no heartfelt letter, no best wishes. There was simply a hole in the hotel. Nikki was gone and would never return. Still, Amee loved her, even after the lies. Admired her. Wanted to be her. Even after she was gone.

Amee wanted to be gone as well.

And then, one day and without any fanfare or revelation, she was.

Δ

Amee took her break in the courtyard air shaft at the old picnic table, a meeting place in the center of buildings that stunk of rotting garbage and wound upward to a dim square of sky. She had the HTILL PAVILION booklet folded open in front of her. She tilted the book and read from where she had stopped when the projector clicked off: a magnanimous speech to make the pavilion seem the wonder of the entire age.

HTILL, she now knew, was the capital of some European country which the book had yet to explicitly name.

The pavilion was a lavish affair thrown in Paris in 1929. Htill, this country or city or government, held court for the elite of Europe. The twin towers erected in an artificial lake on the *Jardin du Champ de Mars*, the fireworks and lightning, the light shows, the strange electrical secrets and clockwork displays were the talk of the city, or so the booklet claimed.

The narrator expounded on the beauty and power of the nameless land, of the turn of the Russo-Germanic forces in the 1920 skirmish on the shores of the lake Hali, which had shifted the tide of the entire war. Just what was this book, anyway? Allegory for another age? Sarcasm? A fake history?

She flipped the book to what would have been its middle, but which was now, due to time and water, a ripped and ruined edge. Amee found a page and a half of full page pictures, one torn down the middle and bleached by water. The caption read:

The Clockwork King Considers Its Next Move.

The picture on the full page showed a hand-carved wooden figure with segmented arms sitting at a table in front of a stylized chess board, like an industrial scarecrow. A rook hung from its mechanical, hook-like hand.

Its face was a somber cutout. Holes for eyes, a grinning slit for a mouth, a hood which sloped and became the forehead. Some sort of chess-playing machine.

The next page was clipped off, cut hastily with scissors in a clean but jagged edge. It seemed to read:

The princesses Cassilda and

The words vanished into time. The half-picture showed an arm clothed in a tuxedo holding a flute of champagne, but the picture fell to pieces before it arrived at a face.

Reaching the end, Amee flipped through the booklet one more time, considering all the captions, looking for the secrets of the pavilion and its meaning.

The fire door banged opened and they all entered and sat at the picnic table. Henri, Johnson and Michael clustered with her around the tiny old picnic table, not looking at one another, waiting. They were her coworkers, but they never really spoke.

"The owner has decided on a change, I'm afraid," Henri said. His voice echoed back from the cement walls and, with nowhere to go, died at his feet.

Henri had spoken to her about the anonymous owner of the Playpen twice. Once to say that they were pleased with Amee as a new hire, and that it had been noted that they had been searching for someone very much like Amee for a long time.

"What does that mean?" Amee finally grunted, bored.

"They are selling this, one of their many holdings, to a new owner. The Playpen will be closed."

"What about us?" said Amee.

Henri coughed and deep in his chest something rattled. Chest heaving, he held up three skinny, nicotine-yellow fingers "Three weeks," he finally said, his voice hoarse.

Δ

Amee sat on the metal guidepost on Broadway, watching the traffic and drinking from the brown bag for two hours before the police showed up to move her away.

The statue was nearly complete, what she could see through the alcohol and the wind which made her eyes sting. It was huge and yellow, with a thousand shanks of plastic waving in the wind. Its face was shadow beneath a yellow hood. The framework was covered meticulously with loose sections of plastic that whipped and cracked in the wind like a million flags in a hurricane.

It seemed familiar now.

The cop came up from behind her, and when his hand fell on her shoulder, she pulled back with a shout. It was then he realized she was a woman, and his manner changed instantly.

"You can't drink that here, miss," he said, his voice nasal and high-pitched and pitying. It was clear he was unsure of what to do if she didn't comply, of being put in a position he thought he understood but now saw that he did not.

"OK," Amee said and stood, her legs cramping. She capped the bottle and put it in her Spalding bag. She stretched her legs and walked away from the statue, back towards Times Square.

"Don't shout at people either," he said as she shook her head.

"And don't come back here again, please," he shouted as she crossed the street. She nodded.

Amee walked the streets back to Times Square, and somewhere along the way retrieved the bottle and discarded her bag. When the bottle ran out, she threw that away too.

Three weeks.

On 36th and Broadway rough hands grabbed her and flung into the dark. The man lifted her completely off the ground and threw her into the alley next to Genovese.

She landed hard on her shoulder, scraping through a pile of garbage. She tasted blood, though she hadn't been hit in the face, as far as she knew. She lay on her side in a puddle of ice and water, smelling the rot, feeling her arm screaming with pain and beginning to swell.

"Coward!" the man roared. Ideas raced through her mind. Insane. He was insane. Hate filled his voice.

His shadow blocked the red of the Genovese sign, a gap in the light which lumbered towards her. Ameer stumbled back on her hands and knees, and feeling the ice water soak in there, to her feet in a position like a runner taking her mark. She watched for the gap, for enough room to run past him back to the street.

As the man crossed into a light thrown from a metal-girded window, his face was illuminated and Ameer memorized everything. Black-bearded and pale, features pockmarked and Slavic. His eyes were full of malice as they entered the light, but it faded as he stopped, drawing back a bit, replaced by fear, and then concern. Ameer lost herself in that face. Her legs went slack. She lost balance.

"Geneviève, I am sorry," the man said. She heard snuffling, and realized the madman was holding back tears.

He grabbed her, gently with one hand, and lifted her, squeezing her bruised arm. He placed her carefully on the ground and considered the entrance to the alley, and in this turn the flash of light caught the blade of the huge butcher knife in his right hand.

"You must know by now, his agents are everywhere. Someone you trust will betray you, soon."

Amee dared to pull back away from him, but the man did not move.

"His forces have already taken the city. It is well you are disguised, my love. Look to the message, trust no other communiqué," the man's hands fluttered over his bulk, knife pointed outward. She heard the paper before he brought it out.

He shoved it at her, banging her chest, waiting for her to take it. It was this she would recall about the incident more than anything else. A huge, black shape shoving a ghostly white paper at her, the blue-white arc of a butcher knife in his other hand. She took the paper.

"Take this to him, buy your passage," he said. And before she could react he leaned in and kissed her cheeks. She could feel warm tears on his stinking face. Then he was gone.

She listened to his stuttering footsteps until there was only the buzz of the lamp over the pharmacy, then the tears and shaking came.

Finally, when an ambulance popped on its lights and siren and screamed through the dark, she pulled herself together, wiped her eyes and arm down, pulled up her hood, and continued on to work. There was nothing else, really, to do. She wasn't drunk anymore.

She stood in the dark of the Playpen lobby, looking at the symbol on the crumpled paper, when Johnson spoke.

"Hello," he said and she jumped. She felt the scream settle back into her chest. And then she saw him, in a shadow near the doors. He looked like he always looked. Big. Disheveled. Dirty.

She had felt his eyes on her before.

For minutes she had been trying to puzzle out the odd photocopy—a messy maze of something scrawled—while the lights buzzed and clicked on, one by one. She crumpled the sheet and forced it into her pocket. Her heart racing, she stepped past him and considered the porthole to the theater.

“Better?” she asked.

“Oh yeah. Sorry,”

The white of the screen was ghostly and far away, and she saw the man in the chair, the lump in the front right of the theater. The shape.

“Can you get him out of here today?”

“Henri says—”

“Can you just get rid of him? Just do it, OK?”

She stepped past him once more, leaning away from the smell of sweat and fear, and waited for his hands to touch her shoulders. Instead, when she looked back at him from the stairs, there he was, still in place, mop in hand, unmoved.

“There’s a new print,” he said, a moment before she was clear of the room, up the stairs, safe in the projection booth. He didn’t say it loudly.

She stood in the dark, wondering if she should just keep going, pretending she had not heard. Then she turned around and went back down the stairs, her head tilted up to the ceiling out of frustration.

The film was in the usual case, a bulky sixty pounds of celluloid and aluminum slung under a stainless steel handle covered in masking tape and sweat. Ameer hauled it without complaint. The big man crept off and disappeared into the dark. When Ameer turned, breathing heavily at the top of the stairs, the lobby was empty.

The door opened in an explosion of noise from the projector and she stepped in and set the case down. Her hands popped the earplugs in with a practiced motion.

Amee lifted the case to the top of the desk with effort, grunting as it smashed down, making everything jump, the noise lost in the roar of the film. She looked at the case, approximately the size of a large gasoline can, and now she could see its far side. A section of tape had been spread across it, folded and ripped; it was likely this print had played in another theater before the Playpen. On it, someone had written in smeared blue ballpoint: MASQUERADE.

She flipped the clasps and opened the case.

Four reels. New print.

She strung it in the secondary projector to set up the timing. She'd run the normal prints of AUTOEROTIC on the main screen, and this new print, taking notes of the on/off/rewind times for the film as it ran on a pea-green wall in the projector booth. She sat through it, paging through the HTILL book and marking lengths of tape to paste on the clock when they switched over the shows.

She only glanced at the film twice during this time. On the broken wall, she saw intertwined forms of people rutting like animals on an exotic backdrop of satin and stone. They wore masks. In the booklet, the page opened to a spread showing twenty people in full ballroom dress, poised on a staircase. Each wore a porcelain mask.

When the show was over, she packed AUTOEROTIC in its aluminum case, and dragged it to the door to be collected later. She sat in the corner and read her old magazines, pausing once only to pull out the photocopy, glance at its gibberish, fold it, and place it in her jacket. Like the figures in the film and the pictures in the book, she had seen it before.

She switched over to MASQUERADE at the next break.



It was night and late when the phone rang. Finally, she crawled out of her bare mattress on to the cold tile and pulled the phone toward her by the cord. The phone came off the receiver halfway to her and jumped across the ground, bouncing. Even after it came off the hook, the ringing hung in the air.

Amee sat naked, cold, half awake, in the dark. She found the phone by running her hands up the cord and placed the handset to her ear. Someone was speaking to her.

"—sorry," the high-pitched voice said. Whispers played on the line. Hissing that sounded like voices. Long distance.

"Who is this?" Amee managed, her mouth dry.

"I shouldn't have left," the voice continued. It sounded echoey and indistinct. Far away and machine-like and fake. But it didn't sound like her. It didn't sound like Nikki.

"Who is this?" Amee said again.

"I promised," the voice said to her, reluctantly, like it was admitting something. Revealing something.

"Nikki?" Amee said, frightened. Could time have changed Nikki so much?

"Come home to the hotel, Amee," the ghost said on the line.

Amee held the phone out from her face and looked at it in the dark, like she could see down the line to the other side. She calmed herself and put the phone to her ear. Her heart was racing, but she didn't let the emotion find her voice. She could see the alarm clock LED flashing 12:00 in the dark. She counted to five.

"Don't call back again," Amee said finally, and hung up.

In the dark, she dressed. She pulled the list of phone numbers from her pocket, crumpled it and threw it in the pile of garbage.

She took out the photocopy from the mugger and flattened it with her hands until its creases and grooves were shiny. She stared at its loops and whirls and crosses and t's. It spun and crossed itself and found itself and cut patterns in black and white. It seemed to move even when it was still.

She looked at it for a long time.

You must know by now, his agents are everywhere.

Someone you trust will betray you, soon.

She had the keys to the theater and the rooms upstairs, where Henri passed whatever time he had left. She knew Henri lived there. She'd seen him struggle up those stairs carrying a slung bag of food from D'Agostino or lumber down with a small bag of trash which he'd discard in the cans in the lobby.

Now she stood at the base of the steps to the third floor, a staircase of tan linoleum and light green peeled paint. She held a heavy steel flashlight wrapped in electrical tape. The hallway was dark, the projector room silent, the staircase nothing but highlights cast by ambient light from above.

She crept up the stairs.

At the top, the building split into two darkened directions, and Amee clicked on the flashlight. She found one way into an open room and stepped through.

He was sitting there, in the dark, when the light fell on him. Perched at a small writing table, a pen in his hand, a panicked look in his yellow eyes. The room beyond was a great space; the flashlight could not illuminate it. Then Henri fell and hit the ground with a solid thud and a high, weak scream.

Amee stepped forward and shone her light on the scattered bits that had once sat upon the table. A candle which had gone out, spilling a pool of wax. A pile of old

letters, browned with age. An old Bakelite telephone with the handset off the hook. She whipped the light around in the dark and found only vague shapes past the power of the light.

Henri's face was white and pale. His lips looked blue. He wheezed and sweated. His face contorted and he ground his teeth.

"Was it you on the phone? Who told you about her, Henri?"

His face didn't change.

"Nikki. Who told you?"

She put the flashlight down and it rolled, casting light in circular waves. Scraping up the papers, Ameer shuffled them like cards and pulled them into her lap in a jumbled pile. Henri lay back, arms outstretched, cursing under his breath in some other language.

"The owner, Henri. I want to see the owner," Ameer said as she flipped through the letters. French. Some English. Her eyes played across the words as she tilted it towards the light, jumping from random line to random line.

8 Oct 1933

...is interesting, certainly. Her father will be the source of the issue, and the sister will be the key to her possible ascension...

...the hotel will be ideal as a place for her to probe the dark, and will draw parallels with the theater...

...dead brother will simply accelerate deterioration...

...he will wait for her, as necessary, in his throne, in the front...

...to find and present the Yellow Sign, and to debase herself...

Δ

Amee sat and her feet stretched out in front of her, connecting with Henri, causing him to shout. Finally she stood, put the letter in her pocket, and began pacing. With a grunt, she snatched up the flashlight, causing her shadow to track crazily across a ceiling more than thirty feet above.

Amee swung the flashlight around.

"What the fuck is this, Henri? What the fuck is this?"

But Henri was talking already.

Quietly. Chanting.

Amee dropped to her knees and clambered along until her face was close to Henri's. His breath stank of nicotine and rot.

"Give me the Sign, give it to me. It was supposed to be me," Henri said, over and over again.

The doors to the theater popped open and boomed as they struck the wall.

On the screen, MASQUERADE was playing again.

Amee stumbled down the aisle, falling once, smashing her numb face on the side of the seat, pulling herself up. Grabbing for purchase. She found some semblance of balance and wobbled forward.

He was there. Near. The shape was where it had always sat in the front and to the right.

She stumbled to its row and looked at it. She tried to steady herself, to steady her vision. It rose like a ghost. A yellow slicker covering its head, a vast and terrible shape like a scarecrow that disappeared into the shadows between the seats. She had seen

it before. When it stood it looked like it was floating, suspended by invisible wire from the ceiling.

It slid forward to the end of the aisle, towards her.

Its left arm rose, shaking in her vision, pulsing with her booming heart, pointing at the screen.

Nikki was there, wearing a mask that could never disguise her. Nikki with cum in her hair and on her face, gone over and ruined forever. Her sister.

The sob that left Ameer's mouth was uncontainable, a cough and a spit, a wracking pain which shook her. Her vision wavered and she turned back to it, the thing, and held the photocopy out. The symbol on the paper was plain now, a looping, turning eye.

As it gently took the paper from her, she felt something new. There was no word for it. It was some new emotion.

Then, just as she could imagine no more happening, the thing leaned forward in a courtly bow and with its right hand took hers. The grip was iron, like a statue sculpted around her palm as it moved out into the aisle.

They walked towards the screen, hand-in-hand. They walked up the short flight of steps to the screen, together.

And then they walked into it.