House of Vettii

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Not long from now, people will crowd the street, weeping and scanning the skies. A woman will flail on her bathroom tiles, gripping a bottle of poison, and tomorrow’s newspapers will rail against any mishmash of fiction and fact.

But, for now, despite a drizzle of forecasted rain, everything is swimming along just fine to Ramon Raquello and his Orchestra churning through a moody tango in the Hotel Park Plaza’s Meridian Room. That there is no Meridian Room with a low chandelier laced with faux pearls and a shoe-worn checkerboard dance floor, nor any grinning, tuxedoed Ramon stitching the air with his baton, doesn’t matter. Just now, no one is the wiser, and the show’s few listeners are barely attending to the radio filler this is meant to be.

Even when the announcer interrupts with a weather update again – a slight atmospheric shift above Nova Scotia – it barely warrants a mention. Soon Ramon is back, trotting out that workhorse “La Cumparsita.” And if this melody, too, will give way to the announcement that a streak of hydrogen is racing toward earth “like a jet of blue flame shot from a gun” – no importa. In a few beats, we’re returned yet again, lilting through “a tune that never loses flavor, ‘Star Dust,’” the title’s gag not yet clear.

In Euripides’ play, Pentheus can’t stop thinking about what goes on in those woods. The revels, the rapture, the whipping of hair, his citizens slinking off into thickets. When he says that Bacchus has no place in the law of Thebes, that all the polluted will hang, what he means is that, more than anything in the world, he desires their pleasures, their thickets.

After the perfumed Stranger – Bacchus in disguise – is captured by palace guards and dragged back to Pentheus in order to
answer for his corrupting ways, his chains keep slipping from his wrists with the ease of dripping water: the god of desire, wine, and thrashing in the dark cannot ever be bound.

Nor can he abide insult, and Bacchus will have his revenge.

"Bring the torch burning," the god instructs his followers. "Lady Earthquake," he commands, intimate enough with Destruction to summon her by name, "come shake the floor of the world."

They combed the Kansas malls, on the prowl for ordinary folk willing to become corpses. Or rather, body types that fit the bill they had in mind after wading through declassified Hiroshima footage.

Allow them to hack off your hair in haphazard chunks, and you'd pocket seventy-five dollars. Choose to be merely a mud-splattered, soot-caked heap, and you'd earn thirty-five bucks.

The director — fresh from filming a doomsday, world-evaporating device and the death of an irradiated Spock — knew what he wanted for his on-location shots. Throw in, for instance, a few scrap-heap cars, a few corpse-volunteers, and the wrecking ball-pummeled hospital he knew would be perfect.

The real hook begins with eyewitness reports: gas eruptions coming from Mars, some kind of striped disk hurtling down.

But even after the meteorite causes earthquake-like shocks, the music pretense continues: a few lilting, incidental measures on the piano; twenty seconds of Bobby Millette's Orchestra thumping out beats in Brooklyn at the also-nonexistent Hotel Martinet, which now can be read, in a low-ball gag, as a facsimile of "Martian."

It won't be long now. Soon, the carefree dancehall swing is scrapped for reports from Grovers Mill: some kind of flaming weirdness is smoldering there in the wheat.

Even as he tries to stop the Bacchaic rites, Pentheus feels their pulse. He can't help it. He can't shake what he wants beyond all
else, and the need clings to him like the last swill of burgundy coating a glass.

Arrangements, the Stranger suggests, might in fact be made. Perhaps the king could sneak a peak after all.

If Pentheus intends to feign nonchalance – those woods, that unbridled flesh – the charade is not long-lived. Although, he admits, it would cause him distress him to see Thebians wild with frenzy, he would cough up a great deal of gold to watch.

“You'd see with pleasure that which gives you pain?” the Stranger asks.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice trembling, “sitting beneath the fir trees, without a sound.”

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For months, we'd been chomping to see it, baited by teasers on ABC: one minute, Jack Palance on Ripley's Believe It or Not preening over a thirty-pound turnip; the next, a coming-soon clip of that tantalizing brick-red mushroom cloud.

“Not a chance,” my mom assured me. “End of story. You won't be watching that.”

Ah, but I knew that I would. And although I needed, pleaded, pledged nag-free chores, in the end it was Mrs. Jenkins, my fourth-grade teacher, who provided my trump card by assigning the film as homework. She said something about a wake up call, about how – yada-yada – this would change our lives. The rationale didn't matter: I'd be watching when The Day After arrived.

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Everything was calculated. Those yawning stretches of orchestral fluff not only added veracity, but also bought some time until Ed Bergen and Charlie, his monocled, man-about-town ventriloquist dummy, were done trading jabs on NBC's Chase and Sanborn Hour. While listeners might be hooked on hammy puns, they were understandably less loyal to the hit-seeking tunes that followed. When Dorothy Lamour began to croon “Two Sleepy People,” itself a lackluster spin-off from “Let's Put Out the Lights and Go to Sleep,” Orson Welles knew that many listeners, long after his butt-
covering disclaimers were done, would go fishing around the dial. By the time body counts were broadcast—"At least forty people, including six state troopers... their bodies burned and distorted beyond all possible recognition"—he hoped fewer dupes would suspect the man behind the curtain, or that a curtain existed at all.

Because once the destruction began, there was no room to fudge it: the terror needed to be real or the whole broadcast was a wash. In order to train his actors for the moment when the crowd gathers at the pit in the field and the ship's hatch rotates off and a slithering, bear-sized thing, glistening like wet leather, takes aim with its heat ray and turns men into flame, he made the cast listen, again and again, to Herbert Morrison's radio report of the Hindenburg disaster which had taken place the year before. After all, in the broadest strokes, the event they were describing was the same: what begins with the weather—"It's starting to rain again. The rain had slacked up a little bit."—ends with someone screaming about carnage, wreckage, the humanity, a sky suddenly in flames.

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There was always something to fear.

Dungeons and Dragons puddling our brains, whipping us into Satan-loving louts; razor blades tucked into the gooey goodness of a Trick or Treat brownie; our town's cat-burglar dubbed Bigfoot; and Iran's bloodthirsty Ayatollah, who also appeared, for two straight years, stationed between Leatherface and a zombie clown in our town's annual Haunted House.

Through it all, though, and setting the bar, were the Com- mies: Jesus-loathing Reds who lived to the left of Alaska, and who were less, it seemed, a fully-bodied people than a single finger hovering over a cherry-red button labeled "Launch."

In The Day After, following some forgettable formulaic preamble (a machismo, can't-blink Soviet showdown; a couple loafing in button-down jammies, sure it'll all work out), after ads for Redenbacher popcorn and Dollar Rent-a-Car, the air sirens were wailing and missiles deployed and our T.V. screen turned entirely white just before a jellyfish-like shape loomed above the Kansas highway and, in the fields, in the homes, in the churches and
schools, all those midstride incinerations – what we had tuned to see – began at long last.

That first kid in overalls, puzzled by the sky; a mother clutching her infant; an entire cross-legged elementary school class; a galloping horse, a lollygagging bride and groom, still wrapping up vows at the altar – for a few wide-eyed, jazzed-up weeks, other than that evaporation montage little else was on our minds. At the bus stop pine, over sporked tatter-tots at lunch, in any class ripe to digress, we couldn’t stop rehashing those x-ray bone-flashes, all that here-then-gone.

Outside of Thebes, beginning to venture into the woods, Pentheus is no longer sure what he’s seeing. It’s become impossible to know what’s real: the stranger seems to be growing horns from his head and there seem to be two Thebes.

For a time, there seems to be two Grover’s Mills: one in the thick of apocalypse, one beginning to nuzzle down on a Sunday evening beneath a cloud-smudged half-moon. Wet rag stuffed against his mouth, a man screeches around the block again, unsure where to flee. Someone from Dayton calls The New York Times asking, “What time will it be the end of the world?” Someone fires a shotgun at a windmill, mistaking it for a Martian tripod.

In Lawrence, Kansas, the day after The Day After, some residents drive around town, heaters blaring, making a tour of the landmarks that they had watched, just the night before, be obliterated on ABC. They park, and stay put, for quite a while.

I should admit that the choice to linger on Pentheus is mine. At the House of the Vettii, in addition to seeing a man about to be ripped into pieces, we could gaze upon a fresco of a finch eyeballing some cherries, a monochrome panel of deer. There’s a Cupid, rodeo-like, riding a crab; there’s a woman riding a man. Here is Leander splashing toward Hero in her tower; elsewhere, an eel-crowded sea.

Except now that we’re here, now that we’re looking...

In the fresco depicting Pentheus’ death, the Maenads have
only just reached their king, and their work hasn’t started yet. His flesh, however, cracked and faded with age, is already falling apart. It’s as if, even though what’s to come hasn’t yet begun, the ruin was there all along.

What else to expect when the name Pentheus means “Grief”? What chance does Grief have against Bacchus, One-Born-of-Fire, the Thunderer, the Roarer?

At Camp Manatoc, in a muggy August heat, hopped up on shotgun-chugged Mountain Dew, we were hard at work. Just the week before, all of us had watched, in the first PG-13 movie ever made, Russians parachute into the autumn fields of Colorado, followed by ragtag, heartthrob, Brat Pack kids taking to the hills and becoming The Wolverines, America’s feral last chance. Taking our cues from Red Dawn’s guerrilla whoop-ass, we too wouldn’t rest until we’d stymied the en-route Soviets.

Or at least that was part of it. Did we actually think there were canteen-poisoning Commies on the loose? We weren’t stupid. Try instead an off-the-leash, on-the-loose, primal fest a la Lord of the Flies.

By day, we saluted in our beige Boy Scout shirts and fudged the Lark’s Head knot. By night, long after lights out, we whittled sticks into makeshift spears, dug pits we disguised with a thin crosshatch of kindling, and, best of all, fashioned tree tops with nails and thorns, then bent the slender trunks to the ground, rigging them with hair-trigger fishing line laced across the path.

In the woods, with the ease of pulling back a bow, Bacchus bends the top of a pine down to the dark earth below. Pentheus, having been told by the god that this is the best place to watch, nestles himself into the branches before the tree straightens again, inch by inch rising into sky.

Despite the care with which the man settles into the tree, the slow way in which the branches allow him to ascend, it’s not long before the god permits his followers to glimpse him and attack on cue.
They see the man in the tree and begin hacking at its trunk, and although soon enough the Messenger in Euripides' play will be back in Thebes, explaining that after Pentheus was torn to bits, Bacchus made a light of holy fire appear in the sky, no one who is listening to the story will understand what that means.

When Kansas City is destroyed, there's plenty of flames and tumbling debris. There are crowds swarming streets, blue sky turning black, buildings that simply disappear. And each time the scene slips from color to black and white, it's footage taken from those Nevada desert tests – actual cookie-cutter homes, water towers, and tanks buckling in a frenzy of metal and timber; pines bending in-synch as the shockwave arrives, their tops arcing down to the earth.

And some of the shrieking mobs are taken from two years before, borrowed from a film about an assassin lurking in the game day stadium. Some of the blasts and rain of metal – how quickly catastrophe can slip into collage – come from the scene in Meteor when a glowing orb plummets down, making New York buildings, against a crimson back-light, crumple like papier-mâché. There are earth-rending rocks from Damnation Alley, and, in a technique borrowed from Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan, some of the mushroom clouds are made from ink plunged into a water tank and then filmed upside down. And some of the ruin is taken from Superman, a film in which the hero cannot bear to lose the woman he loves, and so loops the earth in a counterclockwise streak until time moves in reverse: rocks tumble uphill, a gaping dam seals shut, and Lois Lane's car rises, resurrected, uncrushed, from a crack in the earth, and everything that day that was broken and rent is no longer broken or rent.

Feigned terror coached by that zeppelin in flames; government footage interwoven with disaster-flick schlock. There's a plaque on the edge of a Grover's Mill field, commemorating the Martian's landing. There's Jason Robards shuffling back home through flur-
ries of painted cornflakes meant to be nuclear ash, surveying a deci­
mated Kansas City that is, in fact, not Missouri at all, but a spliced-
in panorama of Hiroshima.

And still one more from the pre-splice, pre-broadcast world:

Marcus Crassus, aka “Moneybags,” hoping to expand his Syrian lands, hoping to be known for battlefield glory as much as his real estate zeal, waded through the Euphrates, and, in an act of reckless chutzpah, attacked. There was much, however, he didn’t anticipate – namely his newly mutinous men and the never-miss archery of the Parthians – and it wasn’t long before the Roman general was negotiating the terms of his surrender. Then, despite the orchestrated cease-fire, Plutarch tells us, there was a scuffle in which Crassus was killed.

Before long, a mock processional was underway. The victorious soldiers dressed one of their own in drag, pretending it was Moneybags himself and – flanked by camels, accompanied by lutes, carrying spear tips heavy with pieces of the hacked-up body – bel­lowed songs about Romans as cowards and girls.

When the Parthian King, a great fan of Greeks plays, ordered up some celebratory Euripides, he decided he would grant his trophy-corpse a staring role. As the actor playing the mother of Pentheus swaggered onto the stage and spoke his lines – “We bring from the mountain / A tendril fresh-cut to the palace, / A wonderful prey” – he held high the severed head of General Crassus before hurling it, triumphant, across the room.

There is, of course, no turning back, although how often we need to be told.

Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, grandfather to Pentheus, is trying to make clear to Agave what was done in the woods, what now cannot be undone. She hasn’t yet tried to reassemble her son’s severed flesh, and Bacchus hasn’t yet cursed them all, turning some into serpents, some into exiled hordes who, in cycles of war that never end, will be forced to attack cities they love. For now, Cadmus is simply trying to make Agave see what she clasps in her hands.
Please, he asks her, inching her back, look for a moment at the sky.

She glances up, but doesn't see a thing.

Why, she asks, still holding the severed head of her son, would you want me to look at the sky?