

SAM EISENSTEIN

From

THE CANDYCOUNTER

Chapter I

Dark, with flashes of phosphorous, smoke entering the playing-finger beam two bodies in height above the reclining seats.

Righthanded finger manipulates a piece of gum still tacky and pliable, unseen felt remainder, chewed fast or slow, what kind of mouth, with or without teeth, before or after decision?

A seat filled with horsehair or settled fused airfoam, polyethylene cover has cushioned how many sweaty buttocks in the dark anonymous. No history. Every night different universe.

Lights go up at 7 in the morning until 8:30 am; the sign turns on again: "Open — Always Three Big Hits."

On the floor above, a rooming house drains its residents from bottle to booth and into reclining chairs, luxurious, were luxurious, reminder of a time when the theatre was first run Ida Lupino and Rita Hayworth.

The screen is coated thousands of images deep. It should extend to take up all the room in the auditorium. Voices, soundtrack sprocket teeth in the projection room — how many thousands of miles of beautiful people it had passed like ammunition clips, shot at the screen, embedded.

Spring, winter, fall, summer, always the same temperature.

Chapter II

A man enters the theatre. His name is Joe. He pays his silver. The woman in the booth issues him a ticket and tears it in half. He walks into the lobby. A sickle-shaped counter with candy and popcorn faces him. He must go around it in either of two directions, left to the water fountain and men's room, or right to telephone booth and women's lounge, then through the heavy black curtains into the auditorium. No sound from the auditorium can be heard next to the machines that keep popcorn popping, ice cream cold, lights bright. When the telephone operates there is a ring and a hum from the turning dial. If the man looks away from the counter his eye can feel the pulse of the fluorescent lights. In several places illuminated "exit" signs glow.

He has come west. The theatre is located as far west as it is possible to go on this continent. So he stops here, at the theatre, with three features going continuously all night and all day, except for one and a half hours in the morning, when everything piled up during the night is swept out into the street, into barrels or into the gutter and is flushed away into the sewers which go further west yet. But the man doesn't know about the sewer. He might choose the sewer, he knew they go further west than the theatre.

He is very tired, in all the parts of his body where a man can be tired. But he does not sag. The tiredness is like a solid core in his body; it holds him up like an iron bar. The light flashing and changing direction from the projection room softens his tiredness until he molds himself to the reclining chair. It is always difficult for the manager or assistant manager

or ticket taker or candy counter woman — whoever's turn it is to stay until 7 — to detach him from the chair. He continues to look at the screen as though voices and bodies still come from it. But then he gets up and walks into the early morning before the traffic of business and banking companies start, disappears into one of the openings in one of the buildings.

When he comes back his tiredness is much more rigid. He walks like a tin soldier. He could be placed like a rod between two chairs. Once the theatre had housed vaudeville. He might have volunteered to be the subject hypnotised and prodded, sawed, bled between two chairs with a sequined-bottomed assistant sitting on his chest.

Joe enters the theatre. It is the time he always enters the theatre. But it is a different night. It is impossible for him to become more stiff. Tiredness has entered every finger of his hands. Silver tumbles out of his pocket to the floor. He walks into the theatre without a ticket. The ticket-woman walks out of her booth, recovers the change, puts it into a drawer. She does not give him a severed ticket. He walks to the left, into the auditorium. The assistant manager, sitting where he always sits, bows to the man slightly, as he does to regular customers. The candy counter girl and the assistant manager exchange a glance. But they do not speak. Nobody speaks in the lobby, no matter how many people are there. People pass through on their way to the auditorium where pictures are shown, or they buy confections, but the candy girl does not ask them what they want. She reaches into the refrigerated case or popcorn machine or soft drink mixer and hands out to the waiting hands what they need and then takes the silver, putting it into a drawer beneath the counter. Then people walk either to the left or to the right, either to the men's room and then into the auditorium or to make a phone call and then into the auditorium, or into the women's room. The toilets have muffled flushers, so in the lobby it is impossible to know whether the toilets are flushed or not. The assistant manager goes into the men's room every hour he is on duty and checks on the toilets, the soap, the rotary towel. Then he relieves the candy counter girl and she goes every hour on the half hour to the women's room to check conditions here. But nobody checks the conditions in the auditorium where images flood the screen so many frames per minute, so many frames per hour, through the day and night, season after season. Only once a day, for an hour and a half, does anybody check the auditorium. Some of the people in the auditorium must be awakened and convinced it is time to go outside into the street that is beginning to be filled with pedestrians and motorists.

Joe is very tired. He has never approached the candy counter for anything. The girl has never offered him anything from the counter. He always goes to the left, parts the heavy dusty curtain, disappears into the auditorium. He sits mid-way down and in the middle, directly under the heavy beam. He looks up into the light sometimes rather than at the screen. He seems to be able to read the image, cutting it transversely because of his great amount of experience with images. He could have been in the projection room, film running in his hand, and seen as much with his fingers. He has never seen the man who runs the machines. The pictures are projected out of a little hole in the wall, but Joe has never been there to see how it works.

He has seen the large hexagonal metal cases in which the films are delivered. They stand on certain days outside on the sidewalk for a few moments until they are picked up. They are heavy cans and contain the week's films, thousands of feet and minutes, the only reason to be inside the auditorium devoted to shining images.

Joe is so tired, he might have carried film cases on his back. As though he had marched with the films from manufacturer, where they were packaged and labeled, to all the theatres where they had ever been shown. Now that they had come to the three-feature film palace, he was very tired, he had chosen this place to be very tired in.

But Joe could not go on skirting the counter, rest rooms, telephone and water fountain, or the assistant manager who exchanged a look with the candy counter girl. He walks into the theatre without a severed ticket, parts the heavy curtains that were always dusty, and takes his place.

He has to decide, after having felt for the tacky gum left by him or someone else, just where to open himself so that the tiredness can flow out. He has spent many, many nights deciding just where the tiredness might flow out fastest. He decided finally on his toes, because they were closest to the floor and all of him could flow down to his toes with the least amount of labor. He opens each big toe, left foot and then right foot, and begins to feel tiredness flow out in two streams down the slope of the theatre auditorium. Over the steps, where there were steps, the two streams flowed apart and then together. Finally they come together beyond the seats in a space where there is nothing between front seats and the raised place on which the large silver screen stands. The blood collects there and stops.

By seven in the morning all the tiredness had passed from his body through his toes and down under the seats into a pool in front of the auditorium.

He is still sitting when the lights go up. The assistant manager and the candy counter girl enter the auditorium from either side and stop at his accustomed aisle. They walk from either end to the middle; each takes one of his arms and one of his legs. They carefully step over the seats with Joe in their hands. He is very light now that all the tiredness has passed through his toes, and they bring him down to the place in front where there are no seats.

Then they let him sit in the middle seat in the front of the theatre, a few feet from where all his blood is collected in a brown, rusty pool. His face, as they hold him over the pool, reflects a dull red dim light. If the blood were frozen rather than only congealed, more of the details of his face might be revealed in it.

The blue face of the assistant manager was almost kindly. "Step over here," he intoned, glancing to the candy-counter girl to see if she were following and keeping tabs on the man.

Joe brought his face up from the mirror, annoyed at noting that he had another black head on his right nostril. "What is it?" He glanced in the mirror and saw both of them smiling at him, waiting for him to turn around.

"Say, what is this? What's she doing in the men's room?" Joe was belligerent. This wasn't a kinky theatre. She wasn't in drag. Neither was the other one. "Step over where?"

"Over to the Waiting Room," the assistant manager said, taking Joe's elbow.

Joe pulled away. The man's hand was uncomfortably hot on his elbow. The woman slipped out of the room.

"What time is it?"

The assistant manager glanced down at his wrist watch. "Mine has stopped," he said apologetically. "In the lobby there's a big one, based on the movement of the stars and sun, Accutron, I believe. The jewelry store down the street installed it recently. No more than one second in every hundred years off, or so they say." He laughed. "I don't expect to be around long enough to find out."

"I guess nobody will be," Joe said, more at ease. "I wouldn't want to stay in this lousy theatre long enough to find out when next week is."

"That's right," the assistant manager said. "Now, won't you come out this way?"

"Hey, I can find my way into the movie all by myself, I've been here before." Joe was all suspicion again. Something was fishy. He was being closed in on. The candy counter girl was back again. She was smiling at him. "How come you let dames in the men's room?"

The assistant manager and the girl exchanged another significant glance, shook their heads almost in unison. They looked so comical Joe broke into a laugh. He took another look at the black head and turned briskly to the door.

The door swung to his hand, the automatic disinfectant dispenser wheezed, and Joe stepped out into the lobby. The lights were stronger than he could remember. "Must have been real dim in the rest room," he thought. The fluorescent light in the center of the lobby pulsed, every pulse brighter than the one before. Joe began to grope with some panic to the familiar black, dusty drapes covering the entrance to the auditorium. If he could reach the place where the black curtains fell heavily apart in the center, he would be out of this clear, bright light. He would be home. He could sit in the center seat of the center row, the center of the beam from the projection booth, relax and enjoy the show.

What was the name of the first feature? The second? The third?

No way in. Joe's hand came onto clear, smooth surface. What? The glass counter top. The plastic side of the popcorn machine, hot, too hot for the hand. Stucco. The wall. The plastic of the telephone. Make a call. Joe groped for a dime in his pocket. Smooth down his side. The pocket wasn't there. Sure it was there. He got the dime out, dialed a number.

"Teresa. I'm at the show. Something's happened. You got to come get me. Something's wrong. I don't know what's wrong."

Joe listened. He heard a dial tone. He pressed the receiver down. Waited, dialed again. "Teresa?" Dial tone. He pressed

the receiver again. The coin released and came down to his finger. The coin was old, smooth. But it had remained in the machine while he dialed. He put the dime back into the slot, feeling for the right one, not the nickel or the quarter, but the dime slot. The coin fell in, stayed. He dialed. "Teresa?"

He must have the wrong number. Ask information. The blinding light. It was to keep queers in line. Nothing doing in this lobby. But his eyes must be going bad from sitting, watching.

The assistant manager's hand was at his elbow again. Joe shook it off. "Get your paws off me. I paid to get in here. I don't know you. I don't want your help. No, wait. Can you dial a number for me?"

"Of course," the assistant manager said. "What's the number?"

"How do I know you'll dial it for me?"

"Well, why shouldn't I? Teresa isn't in the theatre now, is she? Or could she be, and you're getting a no-answer signal? Perhaps Teresa is in the theatre right now? Would you like to go look for her?"

"How the hell can I look for her, I'm goddamned blind!" Joe yelled afraid now that he'd said the word. Blind. Maybe blind for good.

"Come with me," the manager said, "We'll go look for Teresa."

"No, I want to call her on the phone. I don't want her here. If I'd wanted her here I'd have brought her with me. She's in school. She's playing. She's at work. I call her when I need her. So I have to call her on the phone. That's why I have this dime. Now will you take this dime and put it in the phone and let me call Teresa?"

"Yes, give me the dime." The assistant manager took the coin from Joe's jerky fingers. He put his hands over the fingers. Joe broke away and ran in the direction he hoped led to the doors to the outside. He held out his arms, expecting to encounter hard wood, metal, doorknob, or bar, to push, thrust the door open into the sunlight, thousands of times less bright than this aching brilliance on the lobby. Smooth radiance on his hands as in his eyes. Another direction, smooth. Another. Smooth. Joe heard the assistant manager's quiet padding footsteps coming toward him after every pass. "I have your dime, Joe."

"Then why don't you call Teresa for me? That's your job. You're supposed to help customers. Well, help me. I can't see. Something's gone wrong with my health. I was always healthy. I could see. Now I can't see anything. If you won't call Teresa, I want to get out of here. Show me the way to the door."

Joe listened for the steps of the assistant manager following him again. He heard nothing. Then a little steaming noise, and new popcorn began to pour out of the machine on the candy counter. Joe smelled fresh butter, salt. His mouth watered. "Say, let me have a box of popcorn instead. Teresa, she can wait."

"Of course." The assistant manager padded to the counter. "I'm giving you a smaller box, because the price is twenty cents, and you have only one coin, the one you gave me, isn't that right? So here you are, half a box of popcorn."

Joe groped for the box. He stuffed wads of popcorn into his mouth, gulped unpopped kernels between his lips, bit down on them, even on sensitive teeth. He felt no pain. He ate down the box and flung it away. He could not hear where it landed.

"Now you have no more money," the man said to Joe.

"No more money," thought Joe, "no more Teresa." He sat on his haunches and stared at the unfolding blue tapestry of the screen, an elongation of the Mercator map variety, as the

teacher tapped on Baluchistan.

"Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Rajastan — which doesn't fit?"

"It isn't Rajastan — those don't go with the other ones,"

Joe yelled, sticking up his hand at the same time.

"Latvia, Lithuania, and"

"Estonia," Joe yelled.

"Go home, Joe," the teacher said. "Go home, you have an infectious disease, foot in mouth," she hissed. "And your sister too, all the terribly intelligent little children of your race."

Ashamed. Race. Raced home. See Teresa. ("When?" inquired the assistant manager pleasantly. "None of your damned business.")

Run down the blue carpet, to fog rising from a field, whistle from thistle, thistlewhistle and the dog, cog rail of Southern Pacific tracks over the rise of Truxtun and pennies on the track — Lincoln looked funny with his head pushed up like a coke bottle. Upon a dime, almost paper thin, trains thundering clack-clack. Once a face as Joe stooped to watch the wheels turn between the wheels, a bearded face. Joe threw a rock. Commotion. Red. Tumbling. He ran home, hid in Teresa's closet, in among the ammonia smelling underclothes, powdery dresses, moth-balled coats.

Summer. Simmer. The summing up, blue as eggs in the sky, reeds in the vacant lot.

"And Teresa? Do you still want to make the call? I can allow you one dime, for one call," the assistant manager's voice smiled.

"Sure, I'd like to call. But she makes me sick. She's waiting for me to call. Sure, I'll call," Joe said. He was dizzy. Feeling sick. Too much wine. Blinded, but probably only a broken blood vessel. Shouldn't have looked so long, so closely at the black head on the side of his nose. Which side? Wouldn't that make a difference as to which eye would be most affected? He felt on his face for the blackhead. The nose was smooth. The assistant manager's palm was smooth. He became asphalt in summer, under the roaring asphalt fire of the road repair, the inferno of an asphalt layer. He lay on the floor of the lobby, no place to go. He felt the fire iron him until all was as smooth as wall, door, the palm of the assistant manager's hand, the well-worn dime. Teresa was smooth too. The candy counter top was smoother than ice. He slid over its top onto the floor. He was smoother than beaten gold, than a jet contrail. He was elongated from the lobby to Teresa.

He slipped out of the hand. Several hands were outstretched to catch him, but he eluded them. He would get to Teresa. Teresa, bound on the two arms of her name, he followed her whenever she moved from rooming house to dormitory to another city. Always the same phone number but another area code. No more money, not one thin dime. "Damn the luck — how much does a quart cost now?" Used to end up with two dimes, one for pop corn, and the other for Teresa to come and get him in the morning on her way to work, her long old sedan moving slowly over and around the filled and overflowing trash bins and garbage pails. He could see her far away down the boulevard, picking her way with the big Packard sedan, blunt-nosed like a big watch dog. She would get out and check the trash for something useable while the car waited or moved ahead slowly until she made a little hop to catch up to it. The car never actually stopped for Joe. He caught it on the run, and Teresa took him to where he could stay for the day. Then in the evening they took him back to the theatre.

"Teresa, what do you do during the day?"

Teresa let the steering wheel hum its power steering and turned to him with her big Woolworth plastic sunglasses.

"Joe, baby, it's a long world, and there's 400 horses under this hood. I've got to let them go wherever they want to, and I don't know where that will be. I can't take you, so don't ask, don't ever ask. I pick you up, and I leave you there."

"Teresa, drop me off at a different theatre tonight."

"No."

"Teresa, I'm sick of the same goddamned movies. And the stiffes there spook me. They never say anything. I never say anything. Give me some more money for wine. I never have more than two dimes in my pocket. They're raising the price to get in."

"No."

"They are. They said so. There was a notice in the window this morning; they're raising the prices, effective November 1."

"It's May now. It's now the first of May. Spring is in the parking lot. The Packard's horses stomp and pant. I have to use Ethyl in May. I can't afford to give you more money. In the fall everything dies back and I can use regular. If they raise the prices then, I'll give you more money. Find something in the back seat you can use to eat on."

Joe rummaged. A lamp shade with a name and number on it, a rubberized pair of pants with a hole through the right pocket and another hole down near the knee, an electric train caboose with the initials T. J. scratched into the roof, the root of a calendula tied with wire painted white. "Nothing here this morning."

"Then you'll have to take what's in the brown bag and make it do."

Joe sighed. He took the bag, swung the door open as it passed the theatre, and hopped out. The pain in his right leg was worse, and stepping hard on the foot and toes made it worse every evening. The neon lights never changed. He didn't notice the name of the triple bill.

Teresa drove on slowly. Joe tried to step aside from the black exhaust, the fumes making his head as usual blow up in a headache that exhausted him and kept him in a stupor for whole minutes inside the theatre. That was why he never said anything to the girl who took the tickets, to the man who tore them, to the candy girl at the candy counter and the assistant manager who smiled. Teresa, Joe supposed, went to the theatre when he wasn't there, since she was able to discuss intelligently with him the plots of all the films. She knew the

names of the actors and actresses, and the directors of all the films. Joe sat beside Teresa on the freeway as they drove through the interchange to a suburb, where they stopped in front of a different house every morning for Teresa to explain the night's films. She could have written a book.

"Teresa, why don't you write a book? Then we could get in for nothing. You're wasting your talent."

"Here's the brown paper bag. And there's the Theatre. Don't make us wait."

"O.K., Teresa. But if I need you, I'll call."

"You call, if you need us. But don't call if you don't."

Joe never called before the blindness episode. He never spoke to the assistant manager, which was a glorified name for all-around errand boy. He had no respect for such people. They were functionaries. He never needed them before. He had Teresa, who provided for things. But now he was blind, stretched over the counter, reaching in some blind way the distance between phone and restroom. He had to crawl down and get into the auditorium.

People were trying to prevent him getting inside to his place. Their smooth, lineless palms were feeling his face, poking around his pockets where the hole was, down by his knee cap where they had no right to probe.

He jumped over the roof of the caboose and down the other side to the railing. He flattened his body in the dark so that even a flashlight might have slid by in the murky night without revealing his whereabouts. He chuckled almost out loud at his cleverness. They wouldn't catch him. Now he could make a dash for it into the auditorium.

"There he is," Joe heard the assistant say to the candy counter girl. "Don't let him get in. He hasn't any right to get in. He's been in there. Now he has to stay out here in the lights, until it's all set up. Hold him while I call for the others."

Joe heard all this while the tracks sped under him, while he waited for the slow-down to jump into the cinders. But the train continued to speed, diesels sounding like they were geared to cross the Tehachapis, maybe two or three engines together. If he jumped now, he would break every bone.

"You can't make it, Joe," the assistant manager said, his voice smiling, his meaning clear. He meant to keep Joe in the lobby until he would bring someone to hit him over the head. Joe remembered their carrying his head bobbing and bloodless out of the seat. They didn't care how hard he bumped against the unpadded seats. They never cared afterward. He was supposed to sit quietly while they did things about him behind the counter where nobody was allowed to go except authorized personnel. Joe Couldn't see behind the counter even though he was high enough up on the glass, could feel the heat of the lights underneath that kept the goods illuminated. But he couldn't reach through the glass, although he was hungry and had lost the brown paper bag somewhere along the way — maybe in the rest room — and he couldn't reach behind the counter into the case because it was closed in some ingenious way so that only the girl could press and slide, hook or unhook, dispensing the goods, the candy.

The only chance he had, he thought, was to make himself thinner and thinner until he looked like glass wax on top and thus delude the eyes of the personnel. Then he would scrape his way into the theatre and be safe. There they couldn't go. Only when they got somebody outside in the bright lights did they have jurisdiction.

"It's not true, Joe. We can go in there too. Didn't we go in and get you?"

"Yeah, but I let you. I saw myself in the pool, and that's the permission. I know what the rules are. I didn't know before, but

now I know what the rules are, and Teresa is coming for me in the Packard. She's probably outside right now, and the car doesn't wait. Because it's May and the Packard runs on Ethyl in May. That's why I just had one dime, and now that's gone. You tricked me. I didn't need any popcorn. I had my brown paper bag, and now the bag and the popcorn and the dime are gone. Because of inflation, and prices going up."

"That's only in the fall," the assistant manager said. "We like to give our clients ample time to make arrangements for the higher price. And we don't go up very much at a time. Not like other places. The price goes up gradually, so that people, our clients, can make the adjustment. Then they can sit and not worry about money. We like everybody to be comfortable. Are you comfortable now, Joe? Would you like to lie down? We have a lounge. I don't think you've ever been to the lounge. It's a beautiful lounge, where there are many people lounging, but they won't bother you."

"Keep your hands off my knee cap. I'm poor but I'm proud. I have connections. I don't need your crummy lounge. I paid to get into the theatre. Let me in the auditorium now, and I'll pay you again, since I guess it's another day now. Is it another day? Is it after 7:30?"

"Yes, it's after 7:30, and there's nobody in the theatre, or on the screen. The janitor is cleaning the theatre, scraping."

"Teresa can put it all up again. You should hire her. She knows all the ropes, all the pictures just like she was in them personally. I'll go get her. She's probably outside right now if it's around 7:30. Wait a minute."

The assistant manager's hands were at Joe's temples, but he brushed them aside. Joe's temples felt like quicksilver when the assistant manager's hands touched them, as though they could go right through into the back of Joe's throat. Joe swallowed, wanting to feel the heavy weight of a full bottle against the back of his throat, pressing down on his gums, while his throat worked to take the liquor down hardly even swallowing.

Joe's gums tingled when nipple teased them. His nose was full, he had a cold. It was hard to suck. He cried without tears — his whole face got hot. Something put a hand on his hair. He cried harder. Steam helped. Headache. Nothing knew. He kept it. Light gave him a headache, the glass was too hot, kernels of unpopped corn stuck to the back of his throat, exactly opposite something warm and wet. No more crying, his face was not hot, no blood pumping into his head. That was in the theatre. Mirror and brown pool.

"Joe," the assistant manager reminded, "we have the authority. No use holding back. I offered to call Teresa. She won't answer, she knows the rules. She's been there. Come down off the counter."

CHARLES PLYMELL

SURREALIST

HAIKU

a landscape of barking grease
will chase me past the
carbon copy of the blue light

COASTLINE CLARITY

Poetry in my dinner plate
and poetry on the wall
I am writing poetry
for my big readings this fall.

I don't write anymore good poems
I write bad ones to get well known.

I want to be on the lips of every poetry pimp
and old weedaholic ex professors
and their students with bad breath & taste.

Yes. I want to write new poems
clean as a whistle
on a mirror full of skates
that you can hear sometimes
flying around in the coastline of cities.