

Steven Millhauser

Behind the Blue Curtain

(UNITED STATES)

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On Saturday afternoons in summer my father took me to the movies. All morning long I waited for him to come down from his study, frowning at the bowl of his pipe and slapping the stairs with his slipper-moccasins, as though the glossy dark bowl, the slippers, the waiting itself were a necessary part of my long-drawn-out passage into the realm of dark. I savored every stage: the hot summer sunshine outside the ticket booth, the indoor sunlight of the entranceway with its glass-covered Coming Attractions and its velvet rope, the artificial glow of the red lobby, the mysterious dusk of the theater, the swift decisive darkening—and between the blue folds of the curtain, slowly parting, the sudden shining of the screen. Gravely my father had explained to me that the people on the screen were motionless photographs, passing quickly before my eyes. It was like my black-and-white flip-book from the candy store: a smiling mouse leaped from a diving board toward the water as a frowning shark rose up, opening its jaw wider and wider. And when you did it the other way, see!—the sinking jaws close, the upside-down mouse rises through the air and lands on his feet on the high board. My father was never wrong, but I felt he was trying to shield me from darker knowledge. The beings behind the curtain had nothing to do with childish flip-books or the long strips of gray negatives hanging in the kitchen from silver clips. They led their exalted lives beyond mine, in some other realm entirely, shining, desirable, impenetrable.

One Saturday afternoon when my father had to drive to the university on business, and my mother lay on two pillows in her darkened room, rasping with asthma, and my best friend was spending the day at his cousin Valerie's, it was decided that I could go to the movies alone. I knew that something forbidden was happening, but I greeted it with outward calm. After the second feature I was to go directly to the front of the theater and stand outside under the marquee, where my father would be waiting. I felt that the decision had been arrived at too hastily, that the careful, repeated instructions only revealed the danger in this sudden violation of the usual. I wondered whether I should warn my parents, but I remained silent and watchful. My father dropped me off at the ticket booth, where a short line had formed, and as I

watched him drive away I felt an anxious exhilaration, as if in the pride of his knowledge he had failed to reckon with the powers of the dark.

Past the blue velvet rope on its silver post I stepped into the well-lit lobby with its red rug and glass-covered candy counter. The glossy wrappers brilliant under the counter lights, the high popcorn machine with its yellow glass that turned the popcorn butter-yellow, the crimson glow of a nearby exit sign, all these expressed the secret presence of the dark, which here made itself felt by the intensity of the effort to banish it. Behind me, through the open door leading back to the entranceway, I could see sunlight flashing on the glass of a Coming Attraction: in a green-black jungle a man in a pith helmet was taking aim with a rifle at something invisible in the blaze of obscuring light. I turned to the darkening corridor leading away from the candy counter. There the lights grew dim, as if they were candle-flames bending in the wind of the gathering dark, there the world was bathed in a reddish glow. I bought a box of popcorn and made my way along the glowing night of the corridor. The aisle surprised me: it sloped down more sharply than I had remembered. As I passed the arms of seats I felt a slight tugging at my calves, as if I were being pulled forward against my will. Impulsively I chose a row. I slipped past four chair-arms and pulled down a red, sagging seat. I leaned back eagerly, waiting for artificial night to fall, whispers of ushers, the cone of a flashlight beam in the darkened aisle.

Soon the lights went out, on the luminous curtain bright letters danced, the blue folds began to part; and sliding down, far down, I rested my popcorn on my stomach and pressed the back of my head against the fuzzy seat.

And suddenly it was over, the lights came on, people rose to go. Legs pushed past my knees, a coin clinked and someone bent over sharply, slapping at the floor. A foot kicked a popcorn box, a seat came up with a bang. Was it really over? The rolling coin struck something and stopped. A heaviness came over me—I could scarcely drag myself to my feet. Outside my father would be waiting under the marquee: one arm across his stomach, the elbow of the other arm in the palm of the first, the bowl of his pipe supported with thick fingers. I felt that I had let something slip away from me, that I had failed in some way, but my thoughts were sluggish and kept sinking out of sight.

At the top of the aisle I hesitated, looking with disappointment toward the band of sun streaming in through the open door. I went over to the drinking fountain and took a long swallow. At the darkening end of the corridor I noticed a sign that said REST ROOMS, with a red arrow pointing down. Perhaps my father had not arrived yet; the out-streaming crowd was dense, oppressive; I would only be two seconds. Slowly I descended the speckled stone steps, sliding my hand along the dark brass rail. In the men's room a teenager with slicked-back yellow hair and a black leather jacket stood wiping his hands on a soiled roller-towel. I slipped into a stall and listened with relief to the departing footsteps, the banging door. Two people entered without speaking and left one after the other. I felt weary and restless. I didn't know what I wanted. I did not move.

I must have fallen into a stupor or reverie, for I was startled by a clanking sound. I opened the door of the stall and saw an old man in droopy pants standing with his back to me beside a bucket of soapy water. He was slowly pushing a mop whose long gray strings moved first one way, then the other. The mop left glistening patches on the white-and-black tiles. I tiptoed out of the bathroom as if I had been guilty of something and began climbing the stairway, which seemed darker than before. It was very quiet. At the top of the stairs I came to the corridor, now empty and still. At the other end the darkened candy counter was lit by a single bulb. The theater appeared to be deserted. I was nervous and calm, nervous and calm. Nearby I saw the row of closed doors leading to the entranceway; under the doors I could see a disturbing line of sunlight. And clattering around a turn in the spookhouse, suddenly you see a sliver of light at the bottom of the black walls. My father would be striding up and down, up and down, looking at his sunny watch. He would talk to the girl in the ticket booth. All at once a desire erupted in me with such force that I felt as if I had been struck in both temples.

I stepped onto a downward-sloping aisle and plunged into the soothing half-dark, penetrated by the odor of old dark red seat cushions, butter-stained cardboard popcorn boxes, the sticky sweetness of spilled soda. On one seat I saw a fat rubber nose with a broken elastic string. At the end of the aisle I stepped over to the wall and reached up my hand, but the bottom of the great curtain was high above my straining fingers. It was set back, leaving a ledge. The thick dark folds looked heavy as marble. It seemed to me that if only I could touch that curtain, if only I could push it aside and stare for one second at the fearful blankness of the screen, and perhaps graze the magic whiteness with my fingers, then my deep restlessness would be stilled, my heart would grow calm, I could turn away from the theater and hurry back, quickly quickly, to my waiting father, who at any moment was going to burst through the doors or drive away forever. I walked along the wall, desperately searching for something to stand on, say a popcorn box or one of those tall ashtrays with white sand that I had seen near the blue velvet rope. I saw nothing but an empty, carefully folded silver gum-wrapper with its phantom stick of gum. High overhead the curtain stretched away. As I approached the end of the curtain the lower wall curved slightly and I saw a narrow flight of six steps going up. The stairs were cut into the wall. The top stair was half concealed by the final fold of the curtain.

With a glance over my shoulder I climbed swiftly and began to push at the velvety thick folds, which enveloped my arm and barely moved. I had the sense that the curtain was slowly waking, like some great, disturbed animal. Somehow I pushed the final, sluggish fold aside and found myself before a flaking wooden door with a dented metal knob. The door opened easily. I stepped into a small room, scarcely larger than a closet. I saw dark brooms, mops in buckets, dustpans, a bulging burlap sack in one corner, an usher's jacket hanging from a nail; in the back wall I made out part of a second door.

Stepping carefully over buckets, cans, and bottles I felt for the knob. The door opened onto a narrow corridor carpeted in red. Glass candle-flames

glowed in brass sconces high on the walls. There were no doors. At the end of the passage I came to a flight of red-carpeted stairs going down. I descended to a landing; over the polished wooden rail I saw landings within landings, dropping away. At the bottom of the seventh landing I found myself in another corridor. Through high, open doorways I caught glimpses of festive rooms. I heard footsteps along the corridor and stepped through one of the tall doors.

In the uncanny light of reddish gas lamps, many-branched candelabra, and chandeliers with flaming candles, I saw them taking their ease. They were splendidly costumed, radiantly themselves, expressing their natures through grand and flawless gestures. They lolled against walls, strolled idly about, displayed themselves on great armchairs and couches. I wasn't surprised by their massiveness, which suited their extravagant natures, and I looked up at them as if gazing up at the screen from the second row. Even the furniture loomed; my head barely came over the cushions of armchairs.

They seemed to pay no attention to me as I made my way among the great chairs and couches and came to an open place with a high table. Beside it strode a figure with flowering black hair, a great crimson cape, and a glittering sword. He seized a gold goblet and took an immense swallow, while beside him a bearded figure with a leather helmet bearing two sharp silver horns burst into rich laughter, and a lady with high-piled hair and a hoop dress covered with ruffles turned to look over her rapidly fluttering fan. Passing under the table I came to a great couch where a queen with ink-black hair and blue eyelids lay on her side looking coldly before her as she stroked a white cat. Beside her stood a grim figure with a skull and crossbones on his three-cornered hat, a red scarf at his throat, a long-barreled pistol thrust through his belt, and loose pants plunging into thick, cracked boots. I passed the couch and saw on the other side a jungle girl dressed in a leopardskin loincloth and a vineleaf halter, standing with her hands on her hips and her head flung back haughtily as two gray-haired gentlemen in white dinner jackets bent forward to peer through monocles at a jewel in her navel. Farther away I saw a figure in green with a quiver of cloth yard arrows on his back and a stout quarterstaff in one hand, standing beside a tall, mournful ballerina whose shiny dark hair was pulled so tightly back that it looked like painted wood, and far across the room, through high, open doorways, I saw other rooms and other figures, stretching back and back.

Though shy of their glances, I soon realized I had nothing to fear from them. At first I thought they failed to notice me, or, noticing me, shrugged their shoulders and returned to their superior lives. But gradually I recognized that my presence, far from being ignored, inspired them to be more grandly themselves. For weren't they secretly in need of being watched, these lofty creatures, did they not become themselves through the act of being witnessed?

Through a wide doorway I wandered into another room, and then into a third—and always through open doorways I saw other figures, other rooms. The very abundance that drew me proved quickly tiring, and I looked for a quiet place to sit before returning to my father, who perhaps at this very

moment was pushing open the glass doors and striding toward the blue velvet rope. He would step into the empty theater and stare at the dark seats, the closed curtain, the red-glowing exit signs. Downstairs in the rest room he would find an old man in droopy pants who would look up with red-rimmed eyes and shake his head slowly: no, no. On the rung of a tall wooden chair I sat down, hooking one arm around the thick leg. Almost at once I became aware of someone pacing up and down before me. She walked close to my chair in a great swirl of petticoats, her ruffled skirts shaking as she walked. She sighed deeply and petulantly, over and over again, and from time to time I caught snatches of muttered monologue: "... have to do something ... impossible ... unbearable ...". Suddenly she sat down on a chair opposite; I saw a flowery burst of petticoats settling against white stockings, but she sprang up and continued her odd pantomime, gradually moving away so that I was able to catch a glimpse of her: a tumult of bouncing blond curls shaped like small tubes, a pouting red mouth and round blue eyes, a neckline that exposed the top third of high, very white breasts, which appeared to be pressed tightly upward. When she walked, all her curls shook like bells, the tops of her breasts shook, her skirts bounced up and down, her eyelids fluttered, her plump cheeks trembled; only her little nose was still. Sometimes she glanced in my direction, but not at me. All at once she stamped her foot, pushed out her bottom lip, and swished away, glancing for a moment over her shoulder. It was clear that she expected to be followed, that she always expected to be followed, and without hesitation I slipped from my rung.

She pushed open a door and I followed her into a red room brilliant with mirrors and the flames of many candles. I saw a high white armchair, a great dressing table with a soaring mirror. Smaller mirrors hung on each wall; the dark red wallpaper was patterned with little pale princesses leaning out of silver towers with their long flaxen hair. She stepped onto a stool before a swivel mirror and clapped her hands sharply twice. An elderly woman in a black dress appeared and began removing her ball gown with its flounced skirts and blue bows. Then she removed another skirt under that, and several petticoats, leaving a billowy, frilled petticoat and a satiny white corset with crisscross laces in back. "Thank you, Maria, now go away, go away, go away now ...". For a while she stared at herself in the tall mirror, then hopped from the stool and began pacing about, glancing at herself in the swivel mirror, in the mirror over the dressing table, in the mirrors on the walls, in a silver bowl. The room filled with images of her, turning this way and that. As she paced and turned she heaved great sighs, and pushed out her bottom lip, and tossed her curls, and muttered to herself: "get away with ... just who does he ... can't breathe in here ...". Though she paid not the slightest attention to me, I felt that my presence permitted her to display her petulance with the richness she required; and as she pranced and pouted she tugged at a fastening at the front of her corset, she kicked off her shoes, she unbound her high-piled hair, which spilled down her flame-lit shoulders and shook as she moved. And as she flickered and shook before me I felt a vague excitement, my skin began to tingle, as if she were brushing against me with her thick, shaking curls, her trembling

skin, her white silk stockings. All at once the shaking stopped and I saw her raise the back of a hand to her forehead. Slowly, like a falling leaf, she swooned onto the dark red rug.

I had no thought of calling for help, for the swoon had been executed with such elegance that I felt certain she had intended it to be admired. She lay on the floor between the lion-paw legs of the chair and the red wallpaper. Her heavy yellow ringlets were strewn about her face and shoulders, her lips were partly open, her stomach moved gently up and down, the lines and bands of her corset went in and out, in and out. I stepped over to her and looked down. An unaccountable desire seized me: I wanted to feel the satiny material of her corset, I wanted to place my hand against the fire-lit white breathing cloth. In her white slip my mother had sat at the edge of the bed, drawing on a stocking. Slowly the corset bands went in and out. I bent over, careful not to touch the breathing form in any way; the skin of my palm prickled; I felt tense and anxious, as if I were about to transgress a law. And as I lowered my palm against the forbidden white cloth with its stretching and contracting bands I felt my hand sinking through melting barriers, as when, on a trip to New Hampshire with my parents, one morning I had walked through thick white cottony mist that lay heavy on the grass and parted like air as I passed. So my hand fell through the whiteness of that cloth. My sinking hand struck the velvety hard rug—I felt myself losing my balance—suddenly I was falling through her, plunging through her corset, her breasts, her bones, her blood. For a fearful instant I was inside her. I had a sensation of whiteness or darkness, a white darkness. On the sudden rug I rolled wildly through her, wildly out of her, and sprang up. Blood beat in my temples. She lay there drowsily. My whole body tingled, as if I had dried myself roughly with a towel.

I stared at my hands and shirt and pants as if fearing to see little pieces of cloth and flesh stuck to them, but I saw only myself.

A moment later she sat up, shook her headful of thick, springy curls, and pulled herself lightly to her feet. "Why I must have ... fainted or ... Marial Oh, where is that woman?" She began pacing up and down, sighing, pouting, flinging back her hair; a corner of her flying petticoat rippled through my hand, which I snatched away; and in the many mirrors her many images appeared and reappeared, thrusting out their bottom lips, darting glances, fluttering their many eyelids.

I didn't know whether I was relieved or bitterly unhappy. Would I have guessed her secret? I knew only that I wanted to go.

In the doorway I stopped and half turned to look at her. Fiercely she paced, exuberantly she sulked, in the full radiance of her being. I was tempted to say something, to shout, to draw attention to myself in some way, but the desire drained swiftly out of me. A shout, a scream, a knife in the throat, a plunge to the death, all were quite useless here.

I stepped through the door and looked for the room I had come from, but found myself in an alien room filled with harsh laughter. I was careful not to touch any of them as I passed. Through a nearby doorway I emerged in a corridor that led to another room, another doorway, another room. I came to an

upward-sloping corridor lined with shimmering mirrors; the sudden repetition of my anxious face gave me the sensation that my anxiety had increased in a burst. At the end of the corridor I climbed three steps to a closed door. I opened it and found myself in a dusky room I had never seen before, with many seats and a dark wall-hanging that resembled a curtain; gradually I recognized the theater.

I had entered by another door, beside one of the red-glowing exit signs. I hurried up the sloping aisle, stopped for a moment in the lobby to glance toward the sign that said REST ROOMS, then pushed open one of the metal doors and stepped into the sun-flooded entranceway.

A kneeling usher was sweeping a pile of candy wrappers and cigarette butts into a dustpan. In the white sand of a standing ashtray a slanting white straw cast a rippling shadow across a piece of bright yellow cellophane. The man in the pith helmet was taking aim at a tree concealing an orange tiger upon whose back sat a woman in a black fur loincloth. Through the brilliant glass doors I saw my father frowning at his watch. His look of stern surprise, when he saw me burst through the door into the late-afternoon sun, struck me as wildly funny, and I forgot to chasten my features into repentance as I seized his warm hand.

Lorrie Moore

Willing

(UNITED STATES)

How can I live my life without committing an act with a giant scissors?
—JOYCE CAROL OATES, "An Interior Monologue"

In her last picture, the camera had lingered at the hip, the naked hip, and even though it wasn't her hip, she acquired a reputation for being willing.

"You have the body," studio heads told her over lunch at Chasen's.

She looked away, "Habeas corpus," she said, not smiling.

"Pardon me?" A hip that knew Latin. Christ.

"Nothing," she said. They smiled at her and dropped names. Scorsese, Brando. Work was all playtime to them, playtime with gel in their hair. At times, she felt bad that it *wasn't* her hip. It should have been her hip. A mediocre picture, a picture queasy with pornography: these, she knew, eroticized the unavailable. The doctored and false. The stand-in. Unwittingly, she had participated. Let a hip come between. A false, unavailable, anonymous hip. She herself was true as a goddamn dairy product; available as lunch whenever.

But she was pushing forty.

She began to linger in juice bars. Sit for entire afternoons in places called I Love Juicy or Orange-U-Sweet. She drank juice and, outside, smoked a cigarette now and then. She'd been taken seriously—once—she knew that. Projects were discussed: Nina. Portia. Mother Courage with makeup. Now her hands trembled too much, even drinking juice, *especially* drinking juice, a Vantage wobbling between her fingers like a compass dial. She was sent scripts in which she was supposed to say lines she would never say, not wear clothes she would never not wear. She began to get obscene phone calls, and postcards signed, "Oh yeah, baby." Her boyfriend, a director with a growing reputation for expensive flops, a man who twice a week glowered at her Fancy Sunburst guppy and told it to get a job, became a Catholic and went back to his wife.

"Just when we were working out the bumps and chops and rocks," she said. Then she wept.

"I know," he said. "I know."

And so she left Hollywood. Phoned her agent and apologized. Went home to Chicago, rented a room by the week at the Days Inn, drank sherry, and grew a little plump. She let her life get dull—dull, but with Hostess cakes.

film, later becoming an award-winning Merchant Ivory feature

Roy Jacobsen (1954, Norway) Jacobsen has written four novels, and his stories have been collected in *Prison Life* (1982) and *Somebody Might Come* (1989), which won the Norwegian Critics' Prize.

Edward P. Jones (1950, United States) Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Jones attended Holy Cross College and the University of Virginia. His first book, *Lost in the City*, was greeted with much critical and popular acclaim, and was nominated for the National Book Award in 1992—the first time in six years that a collection of stories was so honored.

James Kelman (1946, Scotland) Born in Glasgow, where he lives to this day, Kelman is both novelist and short story writer. His many books include the short story collections *The Good Times* and *Busted Scotch*. His novel *How Late It Was, How Late* won the Booker Prize in 1994.

Hanif Kureishi (1954, England) Kureishi lives in London, where he studied philosophy at the University of London and began writing plays for the Royal Court when he was twenty-one. His numerous screenplays have received critical praise; one, *My Beautiful Launderette*, was nominated for an Academy Award. Kureishi's novels *The Buddha of Suburbia*, winner of the Whitbread Prize, and *The Black Album* have been translated into fifteen languages.

Torgny Lindgren (1938, Sweden) Born in Norsjö, Lindgren is a member of the Swedish Academy and has written two novels, *The Way of a Serpent*, winner of the National Book Award, and *Bathsheba*, winner of the French Prix Fémina Etranger. His collection *Merab's Beauty and Other Stories* was published in 1993.

Bobbie Ann Mason (1940, United States) Born in Kentucky, where she lives today, Mason has received the PEN/Hemingway Award for her fiction. She is the author of several novels and the short story collection *Midnight Magic*.

Jolum McCann (1965, Ireland) Born in Dublin, McCann has worked as a journalist, teacher, rancher, and wilderness guide. He has written a novel, and is short story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1996) won high praise and the Rooney Award for Irish Literature. He now lives part of the year in New York City.

Ian McEwan (1948, Wales) Born in Wales, McEwan lives in Oxford. His work has twice been short-listed for the Booker Prize, and his novel *A Child in the Me* won the Whitbread Novel of the Year award. He has written five novels and two collections of short stories: *First Love, Last Rites*, winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, and *In Between the Sheets*.

Steven Millhauser (1943, United States) Born in New York City and raised in Connecticut, Millhauser now lives in Mamaroneck, New York. He has written seven books, including *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer* (winner of the Prix Médicis Etranger) and *Portrait of a Romantic*. Millhauser has won the Pulitzer Prize and an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His collection *The Bar-num Museum* was published in 1999.

Lorrie Moore (1957, United States) Recipient of prized fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation, Moore has published two novels and three collections of stories, *Self-Help*, *Like Life*, and *Birds of America*. She teaches at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Mary Morris (1947, United States) Born in Chicago, Morris attended Tufts College and Columbia University. She has taught at Princeton, New York University, the University of California, and American University, and is now at Sarah Lawrence. Her stories are published in *Vanishing Animals*, *The Bus of Dreams*, and *The Lifeguard*.

Mohammed Mrabet (1940, Morocco) Born in Tangier of Riffian parentage, Mrabet made his first of three trips to the United States in 1960. In 1965 he met Paul Bowles, who taped and translated his legends and tales. These appear in a number of books, including *M'Hashish* and *The Boy Who Set the Fire*.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940, India) Born in Calcutta, Mukherjee lived in Canada before settling in the United States. She attended college in India and earned her doctorate from the University of Iowa. She has taught at Columbia, New York University, and Queens College, and presently teaches at Berkeley. *The Middleman and Other Stories* is her collection of short stories; Mukherjee has also published numerous novels.

Murathan Mungan (1955, Turkey) Born in Istanbul, Mungan grew up in Mardin and holds a master's degree in drama from Ankara University. Winner of the 1989 Best Author of the Year Award from the Turkish weekly *Nokta*, he has written prolifically in prose and has published thirteen books of poetry. He has also published six volumes of short stories: *The Last Istanbul*, *Battle Stories*, *Forty Rooms*, *Silent Tales*, *This Side of Legends*, and *The Djinnns of Money*.

Haruki Murakami (1949, Japan) Murakami grew up in Kobe and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has published many books, including the short story collections *A Day in the Life* and *The Elephant Vanishes*, and translated works by Raymond Carver, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Tim O'Brien, and Tobias Wolff into Japanese. His work has generally been characterized as disenchanted with traditional culture, but of late Murakami says, "The most important thing is to face our history."