

The Late Show at the Argo

by Gita M. Smith

The Argo Drive-In late show ended at 11:30. When the last car had gone, Marti doused the sodium vapor spotlight, slipped on double latex gloves and rolled the trash trolley through the semicircular theater lot. An empty pint of Courvoisier, an unfurled Trojan, a baby's sippy cup joined the usual popcorn tubs and soda cans. Nothing special, not like the previous week's find of a nacreous South Seas pearl ring and umber calfskin gloves. She heard the cough of the projectionist's truck about to leave; Avner sounded a see-you-later beep and rumbled out the exit toward Cooley's Package Store before it closed at midnight. In the distance Marti could see flashing blue and red emergency lights where the road bent sharply west. Silently she wished Avner a safe detour around the latest crash.

She remembered to check the speaker wires at Slot 23. She'd had to disable that speaker earlier; best to reconnect its parts while it was fresh on her mind. The couple in the car at Slot 23 had not been ugly about the speaker malfunction, especially since she'd moved them quickly to Slot 88 at the darkest corner of the parking rows. They hadn't come to watch the movie, anyway, Marti knew. The woman had been all over the guy, humping him in the front seat and the back. They'd been oblivious to everything around them.

Marti stretched and craned to see beyond the Argo's fence. On tiptoe she was 5'10" even. To the west, the reds and blues still strobed. To the east, a quarter moon was rising.

Marti moved on to Slot 88. It was the Argo's newest parking slot, created when the need arose one day. She checked around for any trash or unusual leavings. Good: clean. In the weak moonlight, it looked pretty much like all the other slots with their yellow lines, speaker stands and call buttons, which patrons pressed in case of problems. Its special feature, though, was something she and Avner had created.

“It's got to be like the bay where the mechanic stands under your car when you go for an oil change,” she had said.

He'd caught on in a blink. “But with a roof to blend with the parking lot.”

He had rented a backhoe to dig the pit one morning when the Argo was closed. Marti reinforced the sides with timbers; four by fours at the corners, two by fours to brace them. They ran PVC pipe downhill away from the pit to drain off water. The bay was big enough to hold a man of Avner's size plus a toolbox and a folding ladder. It was narrower than the wheelbase of any vehicle except a Mini Cooper's. Marti drove Avner's Silverado over the hole, then her own Acura. Avner practiced sliding under the chassis, into the bay and out again. He could reach every part of a vehicle's underside while in the bay, especially hydraulic lines and brakes.

“No cutters, no cutting,” he'd told Marti as he selected the tools that would stay permanently in the bay. “Lines have to be damaged, but any neat straight cuts can be detected. That way, no blowback.”

“I'll blow-back you,” she'd laughed, and they'd had sex in the bay.

The roof for Slot 88 had been a challenge, Marti thought as she rolled the trash trolley back to the concession stand. She turned the popcorn kettle off and rinsed out rags. Impossible to create an asphalt roof over the bay, so they had given up on making Slot 88 perfectly identical to the rest. The roof just had to be strong enough to bear the weight of vehicles driving over it, in the event that someone ever did. A flat steel grate slid over the opening, not soundlessly, but quietly enough. Slot 88 had no other slots next to it; no lights illuminated it; by the time the late show started, it was a shadow box.

Cleanup over, Marti exited and locked the drive-in gates. She liked this quiet time after the late show when she was sole custodian. Her employers, an elderly couple from Birmingham, left the Argo's management entirely to her and Avner. They didn't update the sound system to digital, keeping, instead, old-fashioned

in-car speakers that broke easily. "Just replace what breaks," the man had said. "And keep a good electrician on call."

The Argo offered two shows nightly — the early shows all PG-rated family fare, the late shows adults-only. Twice weekly, Marti completed paperwork or refilled soft drink canisters of CO2. Easy-peasy. Her pay, direct-deposited, was not the point. What counted was the opportunity afforded by the Argo.

At her job interview, she had told her bosses, "I've always loved the drive-in. It's an American tradition, and I want the Argo to survive."

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It was nearly 1 a.m. when Marti pulled up to St. Vincent's Hospital on Birmingham's Southside. She rode the elevator to 3 North, the surgical intensive care waiting room. A haggard older woman, a sleeping child, a nervous-looking man were occupying chairs below a silent TV screen. The man rose quickly and walked to Marti's side. "Shelley's still in surgery," he whispered. "The guy, the driver's dead."

"And that's your...?"

"Mother in law," he answered. "Shelley's mom."

"Lorne, let's get coffee," Marti said and drew him toward the corridor.

"We'll be right back, Mom," Lorne called out, then followed.

"Cameras are everywhere, so here's what we'll do," Marti said. "When you buy the coffees, take a few extra napkins. Hand me my coffee and put the envelope in my hand as naturally as if it was a napkin. Just natural movement. It's all good, all good. Keep talking to me about Shelley and the crash."

At 2 a.m. Marti entered the apartment, showered fast and slid into her side of bed.

"Mmmmm," came Avner's welcome. "Go okay?"

Marti fitted her front to his back. "Your half is on the dresser. It's more than ever."

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The first client had come to Avner, actually. A plumber checking water lines at the concession stand had griped about his cheating wife.

"Bitch probably comes here to fuck in the guy's car," he'd said. "Bet you see a lot of cheating bitches here. I should come over and catch her. Damn, I could kill her."

Avner, joking: "Hey man, I could use some extra cash. Let me take care of it."

Plumber, not joking: "Do you know how to fuck up the brakes on a car?"

Marti, hearing of this later: "Well, do you?"

Avner did, although he didn't have the stomach for the aftermath. Marti was okay with visiting the hospitals. Each one got easier. Cheating Shelley was their fifth.

The routine was beautifully simple: The paying client told what make and model car and license plate to look for. Marti passed by the cheaters' slot and, with a practiced swipe, loosened a speaker wire. The cheaters complained and got moved to Slot 88. Avner slipped into the secret bay under their car as soon as the feature started; the couple drove away at the end of the show. They crashed sooner or later, often with fatalities to the woman cuddled up against her lover.

Money changed hands, lots of money. Time went by. Late shows played seven nights a week. People made love in darkened cars as if they were invisible, the last to copulate on earth.

Marti smiled against Avner's back. Her future was secure. The world would never run out of cheaters.

