The Amusement Center in Tallulah

by Anthony Bukoski

Tallulah is a fine little place. The highway going east and west across north Louisiana runs right past Bloom's Arcade in town. We're fifty- six miles from Monroe, twenty-nine from Vicks- burg. Another highway runs south from Arkansas down to beyond Ferriday, Louisiana, the birthplace of Jerry Lee Lewis that's got the kids all stirred up. Being THE spot in northeast Louisiana, we have among other things the first enclosed shopping arcade in the South—not Jack- son, Little Rock, or Memphis but us. I'n't it a beauty?
Abe and Mertie Bloom had a vision. They're the ones that built Bloom's Arcade, also known as The Amusement Center. Inside of it, we don't worry about the traffic on Depot Street or the wind or rain. Look at the sun stream through the translucent glass skylight. Three hundred feet of skylight running over the corridor up to Max Levy's Department Store, W. A. Dozier's Jewelry, the barbershop, Bloom's Drugs with the soda fountains and luncheonette, the post office, pool hall, and other businesses. Notice what the archi- tects call "piers," "pediments," and "pilasters." Notice the marble terrazzo floor of alternating black-and-white squares and the figures in relief above the front entrance canopy. This is the "moderne" style of architecture. We're moderne and have been since Bloom's Arcade opened in 1930.

Now to Lem Finster, my husband, a good man. Though strong of arm and chest, he has soft, white, piano player's hands and legs like a cattle egret. You'd think he'd be the other way around after lugging cannisters of movie film up so many stairs. When he changes for work, I avert my eyes from the area between the bottom of his drawers and the garters holding up his socks. The body with the puny legs is mismatched. And so I focus on the upper parts, the wavy hair, the green eyes glinting in the sun, the way he pouts his lower lip when he sings to me like Maurice Che- valier. He'll end the song by saying "Oh, Gigi." Holding my hand in his moist palm, he'll kiss it and say again, "Gigi," as though I'm Leslie Caron in that beautiful picture.

Lem and I run the movie theater. Country people call them "pitcher shows." The building's attached to the front of the arcade and is owned by Mr. Bailey, who has theaters in northeast Lou- isiana and around Mississippi. Ours has the BAI- LEY sign in front that you can't miss.

With all the troubles in the world, you'll find peace in our Bailey Theater. A double feature viewed in the comfort of the Nu-Air Cooling Sys- tem is just the ticket. In fact, Lem will sell you the ticket. Starting at 3:30 p.m., he's in the win- dow out front, while I'm at the popcorn ma- chine. The

projectionist is, well, Lem Finster again. Everyone in town knows that once he’s gone up to start the movie you just stop at the concession stand and buy a ticket from Pearl Fin- ster.

I represent entertainment. On the other side of the concession stand are Americans hungry for dreams and candy; on this side in the person of me, Pearl, is the glamor of Hollywood. I’ve gone to Vicksburg to buy the type a horn-rim

glasses Joan Crawford wore in one of her movies. You've seen June Allyson on screen wearing a green taffeta dress like the one I don on Saturday nights. Of course, I put on my white apron when I'm working. Lem sounds like Cary Grant saying I look "smashing" posed before the case of Jujubes, Good and Plenty, Raisinettes, Spearment Leaves, Mike and Ike, and such, behind me the lid of the popcorn machine pushing higher until there it is, fresh, healthy popcorn brimming over. When I spot a cotton farmer clutching his money at the other end of the concession, I swish over to him as if I'm Loretta Young descending the staircase at the start of her TV show.
A lot of this business is make-believe. The music arouses human sentiment, the previews promise great excitement, the actors probably don't look so good without makeup. At four, we open the curtain. When Lem switches on the projector, the adventure begins. Sometimes I think Lem and I are make-believe like we're in a B-movie. Why can't we be celebrities? I guess Hol- lywood wants them young and beautiful. In the movie of our lives, he doesn't love me too much.

On this summer day, we study the lobby cards Lem and I put up last week. The ones for Sweet Bird of Youth read, "HE USED LOVE LIKE MOST MEN USE MONEY" and "The big dif- ference between people is not between the rich an' the poor. The big difference is between those who have ecstasy in love an' those who haven't."

"You have ecstasy, right, Lem?" I ask as he heads up to the projection booth.

"I'll show you. The special night I promised you in Eros, Louisiana—we're going to spend it together very soon."

He's kidding. Eros is seventy-eight miles away. What's in Eros? Both of us approaching late middle age, we've lived our lives in the Bailey. I've missed out on so much. I have neither chil- dren nor ecstasy, but I have stacks of Photoplay. Peeking in at the feature attractions over the years, I've seen Grace Kelly, Deborah Kerr, Burt Lancaster, Liz Taylor. After cleaning the popcorn machine and wiping the candy counter, after Lem comes down to shut off the marquee lights, I ache for Audie Murphy to hold me, and instead there's my projectionist in his wide, flowery ties, sleeves rolled up on wrinkled dress shirts—Lem Finster in his drawers and garters when we get home. This was how things were for fifteen years, for twenty years. Now Pillow Talk and Sweet Bird of Youth play at the Bailey.

In the mall, nothing harms you except a lonely heart. Thank heavens I married a kind, if unexciting, husband to help me through the troubles that come to some women in middle age. Lem does what he can. That's how we are in Tallulah, helpful. For Highway 80 travelers, a gas- oline filling station stands at the opposite end of Bloom's from us. Everything's been planned and thought out, everything taken care of here. At the luncheonette, the key lime pie is excellent. In the movie house seating 680, we have a first-rate balcony.

Last year, protected like this from everything, I had a surprise concerning love. I'd read that be- fore they have their Caesars—their seizures—the epileptic sees an aura and senses things are off.

Sometimes just thinking of the aura I had makes me scramble words. I’m no epileptic, but I had a vision and aura in the movie house when we were showing Susan Hayward and James Mason in The Marriage-Go-Round. No, it was the second half of the double feature, come to think of it, that brought on the aura—By Love Possessed star- ring Lana Turner, Jason Robards, and George Hamilton. “THE BOLD BEST-SELLER THAT SENT A FEVER THROUGH AMERICA NOW FIRES THE SCREEN.”

The show’d begun. Coming out of the ladies’ room, relieved that I hadn’t spilled pop- corn oil on my new blouse and that my makeup

was on right, I peeked in the theater. Someone sat halfway to the front. The cartoon played. As though the lady's sun hat was laughing with her, it rose up and down when Sylvester the Cat said, "Shufferin' Shuccotash."
We'll see about this, I thought. "Where's your ticket?" I asked the early bird. When I rec- ognized an important old lady from our First Baptist sitting with the box of popcorn she'd gotten herself, I was embarrassed. "Oh, Mrs. San- difer. I didn't know it was you, the head of the Ladies' Guild."

"I couldn't wait. The show was starting," she said, opening her pocketbook to pay me.

"I took so long checking to see how I looked that you just keep the money and enjoy the show." Remembering how Mrs. Sandifer, by love possessed, used to come to the movies with her husband, I figured today might be their anniver- sary or another special day. She was crying when I came back with a Royal Crown Cola for her. Forgetting I'd seen her husband's photo one hundred times, she showed me the picture of him before he got sick.

Where was the aura in this, the aura-vision I hoped would lift me out of my predicament of wanting to be loved more than Lem could love me? Maybe thinking I'd caught someone sneak- ing into the theater had pumped a chemical into my head. An aura being "a subjective sensation (as of lights)," some a what I saw was in techni- color. In the center of the aura sat a customer who'd adored her husband and loved going to movies with him. I saw popcorn husks sprinkled down her tear-stained bosom. I saw melted butter from the popcorn on her lower lip. Everything was clear in this vision of longing I had. In the coming years, maybe I'd be alone like Mrs. San- difer. At least she'd been deeply, truly loved.

This was the first aura or premonition of something that couldn't really have been a pre- monition because I had no idea what would happen next. Once it did, then what'd happened before might be considered the premonition. Sometimes, everything's a dream and life is hard to figure.

A year after we showed By Love Possessed, Pil- low Talk is playing. When I spend too long in the ladies' convenience, I come out to see the sun hat again. No one's in the theater but Mrs. Sandifer. "Sufferin' Succotash," I think. "She's a widow and a churchgoer. Don't bother her," I say to my- self. "Let her enjoy her Rock Hudson and Doris Day."

When the sports reel ends, I don't know whether to laugh or cry when this tall boy, "Bubsy" Watson, real name Johnny Lee Watson, walks down the other aisle carefree as ever and sits beside her, kissing the old lady's buttery lips. A church-going lady with an eighteen-year-old! Mrs. Sandifer's finally gotten over her husband.

Is this the aura I've expected since last year: The Nu-Air Cooling System kicking in, Porky Pig saying "That's all, folks!", the popcorn machine's racket when I step into the lobby? Has the aura come to Pearl on a hot afternoon to show me the many forms of love? The money for their tickets lies on the concession stand. A moment later, I come to my senses. It might be Mrs. Sandifer's sun hat,

but it isn’t Mrs. Sandifer.

Not wanting to embarrass myself, I stand in the rear of the theater to eye the lovers. Appar- ently, they don’t care what Tallulah thinks. When I crack the door a quarter inch to check on the popcorn, I see the lobby card for our first feature which reads, “PILLOW TALK—IT’S
WHAT GOES ON WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OFF!” Rock Hudson’s so handsome. Bubsy isn’t bad himself, except for his sunburn and unruly hair. A hard worker, he does chores for our mer- chants. Good-looking, strong, he has the girls after him. At his age, he deserves anyone fifty years younger than Mrs. Sandifer. Exactly whose

shoulder has Bubsy put his arm around? Did he just do what I think? What's going on? In God's Little Acre, which costars Buddy Hackett and Tina Louise, Robert Ryan keeps saying, "What in the pluperfect hell!" That's me, mystified by the young people of Tallulah.
On weekdays, I don't wear high heels. If I have to run see Lem or get items from the store- room, flats are fine. With the lovebirds busy, I can spy on them from nine seats back, even six back. I sit in a row over to the side of them. They don't notice, wouldn't care if they did see me snooping. She's putting her head on his shoulder. How can they do these next things in a public place?

I blame the technicolor reflections from the screen, the pillow talk of movie stars, the sun hat she's got on, all of it, blame all of it for not saying to myself earlier, That's Mrs. Sandifer's cleaning lady! She don't belong downstairs when there's balcony seating. When Bubsy whispers in her ear, she whispers back. Just because she removes his hand when it travels down the front of her blouse doesn't mean I'm naming this dirty be- cause it's no more dirty than what Lem did to me when we were young.

Lem, how do I tell you what's going on? Ex- cited, I climb the stairs. Through the little aper- tures where the movie projector sends out its images, Lem can't see me in the balcony, but he knows I'm here watching something because I hear him step out of the booth. Rock Hudson and Bubsy Watson. Doris Day and the mystery girl. Everywhere I look, people hold others as I sit alone in the balcony.

Oh, Rock Hudson, love is what I feel for you up on that screen. Every night when I leave the concession for a moment, leave the view of the street outside, the streetlights coming on, I whisper to you, "I'm in love, madly in love. I love all of you, Rita Hayworth, Gilbert Roland, Jane Russell."

"Go mind the concession, Pearl," Lem says. "I'll take care a whatever bothers you. Bring me back some Jujubes."

I can't stay with him when we have such "ac- tivity" in the theater. If anyone sees Verneta down in front, we'll be in trouble. I get the Bissell carpet sweeper, a noiseless appliance needing no electricity. I give a quick back-and-forth to clean the carpets. With me standing almost on top of them, they still pay no attention.

When I clear my throat and say, "Downstairs is for the white folks," that beautiful Verneta doesn't pull the sun hat down to disguise herself. Nor does she understand Lem and I are separate entities. She combines our first names. When she looks at me, surprised I'd interrupt her, she says, "We busy right now, Miz Lemonpearl."

"What!" I say, almost choking over being spoken to like this. "I'm cleaning here," I tell them, knowing right away it makes no sense.

“Yes’m,” they answer, but nothing changes. Mrs. Sandifer’s girl isn’t as shy as she’s made out to be. If anything, the old lady’s straw hat with the wide, round brim brings the attention to her that she wants. I called her a cleaning “lady” but she’s Bubsy’s age. Here I stand resting my arms on the Bissell sweeper, a middle-aged woman, successful operator with Lem Finster of a Bailey theater, and I have been put in my place by two teens.

Though inconvenient to answer the phone in the ticket window, Lem will do so if it rings too long. When I go up to ask who it is, he says, “Hilyard at the pool hall wanting to know if something funny’s going on. There’s reports that Vernetta and that kid who works around the mall were looking at things in the department store. They’ve been parading all over as if to teach their hometown a lesson. They examined the muslin curtains on sale at Max Levy’s. They talked about cups and saucers, all kinds of domestic things. Hilyard says they were heading here. He’s worked

up.”
“I guess so,” I say, trying to steady him as I walk Lem into the theater.

When he recognizes Verneta, it’s like he’s been punched by Mr. Big in Kansas City Confi- dential. “The picture that hits with BULLET FORCE and BLACKJACK FURY.” “This is what Hilyard meant about trouble,” Lem says, trying to control his anger. “You aren’t to be here, not together—and you, Verneta, not downstairs.” Then the phone starts.

“You can’t stay,” I tell them.

“We ain’t climbing no stairs, Miz Lemon- pearl,” Verneta says.

“He’s Lem. I’m Pearl. It’s two names.”

“Yes’m,” Bubsy says, “but we like these seats and have paid to see Sweet Bird of Youth, which is on after Pillow Talk. Who cares about Rock Hud- son and Doris Day? We have pillow talk evra night under the stars with the pillow from Mrs. Sandifer’s spare bedroom.”

“This her hat,” Verneta says.

Lem rests his hand on the back of a seat. I fear his legs will give out and he’ll collapse from being nervous. I love when he needs me. Dear Lem, I want to say, Who could foresee a problem like this in our middle-age years? But we’ll help each other.

“If anyone believes we’re running a love-nest, there’ll be trouble,” Lem says. “Hilyard pokes his nose into everything. Those no-goods that hang around him—their grandpas lynched five Sicilians in 1899 for no reason other than their goats were chewing up the doctor’s garden. I’m not worried about myself, Lem Finster. I’m worried about you two and Pearl if there’s a window broken in the theater. If they storm in to look around, I can’t be responsible unless you help me now.”

“This her hat,” Verneta says again. Then they stop talking to put on another show for us. Such touches and tenderness are never seen openly in Tallulah.

“Never mind the kissing. Just for once do something. Help me. There can be plenty of meanness when something starts. They’ll ruin me,” Lem says, bribing Verneta with the box of Jujubes. “It’s never been right for your people to sit upstairs, I know that, but you’ve gotta help. Take the candy. Go sit in the middle of the bal- cony with your sun hat off. If anyone comes up there, you say, ‘Verneta hasn’t seen a soul.’ We won’t mention Bubsy in the projection booth. There’ll be lots more candy for you and him af- terward.”

I wouldn’t want Bubsy angry, especially if it concerns his black pearl. Bubsy has a bull neck. From April to October, it’s sunburned. I saw it turn red with fury one winter day when a mer- chant said

the wrong thing to him. He has a broad chest. This and his arms are rock hard.

The phone ringing like crazy, the two kids taking their time getting up to leave, Lem starts explaining cue marks on a movie screen. On the way upstairs, he tells Bubsy the motor cue appears eight seconds before a reel of film ends. The changeover cue comes with about one sec- ond left on the reel. “If I’m downstairs reassuring Hilyard, he won’t be thinking about what goes on up here. No one watching a movie thinks about the projectionist, but you have to watch for cues. When you see the changeover cue on the screen, start the reel on the other projector.”

A minute later, Verneta’s sitting upstairs where today I sat for the first time. When she waves, I don’t acknowledge her. The more she waves the more I know I’d feel lost without Lem. Finally, I wave but I don’t know why.

“How are your legs?” I ask when my husband comes from teaching Bubsy.

“Maybe I’m weak-kneed. But I’m sure of this: We should never have made people sit where they didn’t want to. There’s Bubsy’s motor cue. Eight seconds more and he’ll practice his first changeover.”

When I look outside, six men have gathered.
“Anyone wants in, they buy a ticket,” Lem says. Then I’m left looking my best on a Wednes- day at five. Now Hilyard from the pool hall is in charge, Hilyard opening the door to the Bailey, Hilyard saying, “We need to look around.”

“Six adults will be three dollars. Midweek, things are slow. There’s one person in the bal- cony.”

T. P. Hilyard in his gabardine pants and white shirt is the best dressed of them. The hangers-on from Bloom’s Arcade wear soiled blue work shirts, overalls. “I finished my carpet sweeping. You stay here if you have mud on your shoes.”

“It’s not mud. It’s likely somethin’ you find in a pasture,” they say when I let Hilyard pass. I think him and his men, ten of them now, are tired of being taken for fools, tired of the heat. Such things as trouble them I don’t want to know. In addition to the axe handle he uses to rule over the pool hall, Hilyard has a thick belt from a uniform, a Sam Browne belt, it’s called. With three daubs of pink nail polish, Hilyard or his wife has painted a smiling face near the buckle.

“Oh, Tony Randall! Oh, Paul Newman and Geraldine Page in the second show,” I whisper as I watch Hilyard walking toward Verneta up- stairs. Even from down here, I see him unbuckle his belt, hear him over the movie. “Where’d you get that hat? Where’d you get that lipstick on your face?” Verneta answering, “Don’t know.” “You too dumb to know? You Miss Sandifer’s girl?” “Yes, sir.” “I have a notion to whip you—”

The movie screen behind me, the projector light streaming through the aperture in front, I’m caught between life and dreams. Lem gave me a Photoplay magazine from the drugstore, Lem in his red Buick twenty years ago with a box of Mike and Ike and the movie star magazines, Lem motivated by love. I think Hilyard will hurt Verneta. Then someone comes out of the booth. It can’t be Lem. Lem would be afraid of what’s going on. Everything’s confusing. Hilyard’s swinging his fists. The projector light is flickering. A cue nears.

I think the arcade’s handyman will beat the hell out of Hilyard. Johnny Lee, Bubsy, is pos- sessed by love the way Mrs. Sandifer is, the way Lem Finster was or is. Lem kept the red Buick run- ning. He kept Modern Screen magazine in the back- seat.

“Don’t hit him,” I say to myself as if Hilyard could hear. When Bubsy takes a punch, Verneta hits Hilyard with her small, black fists. Hilyard looks like he’s reaching for the axe handle he for- got to bring from the pool hall when Verneta hits him again. When he swings the belt at her, he misses. Bubsy’s all over him now twisting his lousy neck. I watch them loop the belt around Hilyard’s chest and under his arms.

In the last moments of Edge of Eternity, Cor- nel Wilde fights a murderer named Bill Ward, played by Jack Elam. The mining company’s tramcar they’re in rocks over a deep canyon. The downstairs

theater is the canyon, Bubsy being Cornel Wilde. Next, Verneta and him do the strangest thing, as though they don’t care what trouble they get into. Holding Hilyard by the belt, they hoist him over the canyon rim feet first. Who’d believe two kids could do this? As Hilyard dangles above the seats, kicking out his legs, grab- bing the air, he looks like the trapeze artist in The Greatest Show on Earth. My word, if his beltless pants don’t fall down around his shoes. What kind of underpants are those? “Cover your per- sonals,” I yell to him.

When he stops thrashing, they pull him up. Thankfully for him, his trousers, still bunched and riding atop his shoes, make it to safety.

Hilyard won’t be permitted in here again. Why should he be? Hilyard is a man without dreams. Bubsy and Verneta have dreams. Mrs.

Sandifer does. I do.
When the men ask him, “Did you see them in there?” Hilyard says, “Looks like someone was sitting in a couple of downstairs seats.”

“It was me and Lem resting in the seats be- fore we opened up. We like to look at the curtain and dream.”

“You’ll have to move out of the way,” Lem tells Hilyard’s followers. “After supper, people will be coming in to enjoy the Nu-Air Cooling and a good show.”

“You sure there’s no white boy in here?” Hil- yard asks when he looks in the theater. All of it is a pretense in front of his men.

“Verneta’s in the balcony,” Lem says. “I don’t know about anything more.”

On the screen, the eight-second cue comes on.

Now this changeover from reel to reel.

You know how word gets out in small towns. In ours, a poor man named Sparks, who sweeps the pool hall and shines shoes, tells a cleaning woman that Hilyard’s men have gone to the Bai- ley. She tells the neighbors. They spread it around about two lovers.

A lot of people this night seem to have gotten interested in hearing Lenny Welch sing “Ebb Tide” in Sweet Bird of Youth. By 6:45, mov- iegoers fill half the balcony. “Enjoy the show,” I say.

“Thank you,” they say as they buy a ticket. Then they say, “You’re a good lady. You earned your name. You’re a pearl and your husband a sweet bird of youth.”

On a Wednesday, the downstairs fills too. Everyone wants to see where news has been made. We love Sweet Bird of Youth and will see if Mr. Bailey won’t let us hold it over.

When the show ends, the empty theater stays filled with dreams for a few minutes. All the music and color, all the life being slow to leave. Lem is figuring how to sneak the young people out of town.

Before Verneta and her date come down to find the marquee lights dark, the place empty, I ask my husband, the projectionist, “Is there such a thing as a lemon pearl?’

“Yes.”

Finally, the aura forms.

“Where, Lem? Where is the lemonpearl?”

“Here?” he says, pointing to his heart.

When he whistles “Ebb Tide,” preoccupied with getting our car around to the side of the Bai- ley, I think that Lem and I, Lem Finster and I, Lem and Pearl, understand what we have to- gether.

“It’s love,” he says, as though it’s been this way all along. “It’s the love we see around us too, everywhere around us, Mrs. Sandifer and her husband, Bubsy and Verneta.”

“It is. It is,” I say.

Lem and Pearl. Twenty years in the making. I think of young lovers and others devoted to love in this town.

Lem will drive Bubsy and Verneta from Tal- lulah. After tonight, it’s up to them what happens, for Lem will return to me in the morn- ing. I know that nothing’s going to stop two lov- ers in their first movie. Nothing!

“Oh, Lord,” I think, and the thought frightens and pleases me, “they’re going to Eros.”

Then I remember the scene in Picnic where, from high above, the camera shows a freight train on the Kansas plains and the whole world open- ing for William Holden and Kim Novack.

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