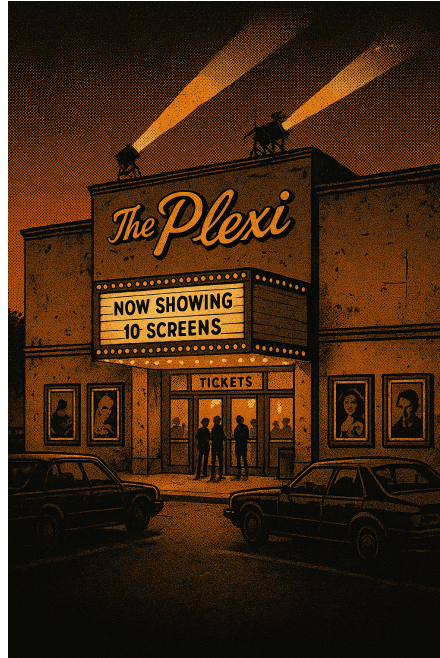


22. The Unspeakable In Screen 7

Two young, teenage boys creep in to see a new movie at the cinema, but what they encountered, well, let's say interest in the movie died quite quick.....



ChatGPT 5o, 2025

1. Delayed Break In & Toilets

'It's freaking Risky Business, Jazz-Head, it came out recent, and they're showing the full cut in about half an hour. We gotta be there, just gotta!', exclaimed Richie Dimitrou, the taller and thinner of the two boys, with spectacles and an excited state that only reinforced his nerd status. 'It'll be shitting risky business if we both get caught stealing into the Plexi, Dim-Boy!', retorted Liam Findsbury, or 'Jazz Head' due to his shock of red hair, shorter, stouter and a year older than Richie. He knew the other kid hated being called, 'Dim-Boy', but he wasn't in the mood for this.

They were friends since primary school, through thick and thin, and even though they went to different schools now, they spent all their spare time together. It had been noticed in the neighbourhood, naturally, so the local bullies and snipes would call, 'Queers!', and even more ruder statements, some of which Richie didn't quite understand, thankfully. They only joshed and ridiculed the two, nothing physical, Liam had a particularly accurate and painful right hook, which he had demonstrated on at least two of their name callers to great effect. And since Richie never really left Liam's side, he was generally protected by that right hook too.

'Ya, ya, you know I don't like that Liam, it's Rich, Richie, Dimi, or Dimitrou, but not that. I ain't dim, not stoopid, Jazz-Head,' the younger boy said quietly. Liam now felt a pang of remorse, that inner ping sensation in the pit of your stomach that stated you had done a bad thing, shooting back to front and up like a tiny electric shock. 'I'm sorry Rich, I'm sorry. I got reamed by my step-dad for not doing my chores, guess I'm a little pissed myself now,' and he put a reassuring arm around Richie's shoulders, looking around for any of the local baiters before he did. 'It's okay, Liam, I get it. He's giving you a rough time all the time, right. It's a bummer, he's a poo bag,' Richie replied and they both laughed at 'poo bag'. One of the endearing aspects of Richie was his quaint use of words, quite out of sync with

his generation. 'So, do you feel up to it, it's the full cut, an' all?', just pushing a little further, but without needing his companion.

Liam looked at Richie, mussing his hair briskly and smiling, 'okay, okay, but if we get caught, I'll roast you so hard you'd have wished you'd gone downstairs to meet Mister Pointy!', and with that, Richie smiling to himself and Liam looking a little ill at ease, moved off. They were a couple of blocks from the Plexi cinema, which had seen better days, but was the only source of such entertainment for quite some distance. It was also beyond most kid's financial means, so they all worked on ways to get in without paying. Mister Duggen, the manager, or as he was called, 'The Childcatcher', was ever vigilant so success was limited to one or two attempts being successful out of ten tried, but they were still acceptable odds to kids wanting to see the big screen, and especially adult movies.

The short walk was uneventful, both of them chatting aimlessly, Richie giving Liam the low down on this new star in the making, Tom Cruise, but Liam just thought he sounded like a bit of a creep, Tom Cruise Around. He was more interested that the movie was about S-E-X. Any kid of his age became a bit more focused at the possibility of seeing the opposite (and sometimes the same) sex, hormones spewing around their bodies like a racehorse derby. The Plexi was a large multi-screen cinema, still an independent, with ten screens, sweets and refreshments, and quite comfortable, if worn chairs. The yellow edifice was faded in patches, and one of the big searchlights on the roof was on the blink, but it was the town's big cinema, and still it elicited some civic pride.

The queue was already reducing as townspeople made their way through ticketing and on to their allotted screen like an airport to celluloid destinations. The front ground floor was all glass doors, and there were the inevitable film posters across them and the building, some in display cabinets, some naked to the elements. There were side and a back entrances or exits, but they were usually locked and Mister Duggen always checked them at the start of a day's, and evening's scheduling. Liam and Richie stealthily snuck into the bushes and short trees that lined the far car park by its exit, looking like scuttling beetles up to no good. They whispered various arguments for this strategy or that, becoming quite agitated, but eventually Richie agreed with Liam, they'd use, 'delayed break in and toilets', which was a favourite, but only used sparingly by the local kids to avoid it becoming useless.

The twosome were fortunate that it was a busy night, a lot of premiers, and the staff would be stretched, helping people to the right screen and their seats, clearing up the mess of popcorn and wrappers around the refreshment bar. Even The Childcatcher was distracted by elderly Ms Bloom, who was complaining about the Plexi not showing the oldies she kept on requesting. Duggen just mollified her with affirmative noises in the gaps of her slurred speech, which had been a bane of her life since her stroke three years prior.

The brave duo in the flora surrounding the car park stole through the mixed variety of cars, even a couple of those Japanese models the unions were upset about. Eventually, and waiting the allotted few moments to check out the cinema's foyer, they pushed through a door, automatically closing behind them like a vampire's coffin lid before sunset. Running hunched over they easily passed through the ticket turnstiles and raced for the nearest toilets. A little breathless, they waited on the other side of the door, listening as if their very lives were in danger. Nothing.

Cracking open the door sufficiently to see the coast was clear, their hearts beating out a rapid rhythm in their mouths, they ran out. Liam suddenly panicked, which screen, which screen, but ever dependable Richie was signalling seven with his fingers and they headed to the entrance door. Still no one, The Childcatcher and his helpers were still busy settling in stragglers and finalising the projection procedures in each of the ten screens. With a sharp breath each, the boys crept into Screen 7. The emergency exit light was shining green down on them as if to accuse them as interlopers, but the main lights were down, the seating only illuminated by the large screen showing an advert. A

Japanese car was being put through its paces, with an all American man and woman smiling and laughing as they rode around some nameless city.

Liam nudged Richie as they hunched down behind a low wall in front of the initial row of the second tier of seats. The crept down to the last row of the front tier and as luck would have it the two aisle seats were empty. With a sense of mutual satisfaction and even more relief, they relaxed back into the seats, now their seats. They had inevitably missed a few minutes of the movie, Tom Cruise Around was talking to his parents, placating them before they left him on his own while they vacationed. Tangerine Dream was riffing in the background, a piece reminiscent of the theme track. Richie was in awe, already spellbound by the flickering imagery, booming dialogue and background electronic music. Liam watched him, a smile spreading over his face too. He wasn't queer for Richie or anything, but at that moment he loved his friend more than any brother possibly could.

2. Awfully Quiet In Here

They both had snuggled in comfortably to their seats, but of course, breaking in meant no popcorn, no drinks, but ever dependable Richie had planned ahead. 'Here,' he whispered, proffering an open bag of jelly babies to Liam. His friend's eyes widened, these were his favourite, he had a remarkably sweet tooth. Liam's grammy had oft remarked he'd have that, 'sugar 'betes', before he was thirty, the amount of sweet things he ate. But Liam, and for that matter, Richie and any kid of their age were immortal, it was only the wrinklies who got sick or died. That was a fact.

Both of them chewed through the jelly babies as Tom Cruise Around was making an idiot of himself to a blond woman, Lana, who was probably the most gorgeous either had seen in their short lives. Richie was entranced by the whole cinematic spectacle, but Liam was feeling a somewhat more baser reaction to the blonde actress and he crossed his legs, embarrassed, and focused on biting the heads off jelly babies. He imagined them screaming and crying as he did. It was a young boy thing, he wasn't unique in that, childhood horror being what it was. His attention was drawn back to the movie, there was some smooching going on, but he also started to survey the audience.

There were mostly couples, some individual men, one or two women (it just wasn't the done thing for women to be out on their own unaccompanied in those days, said Ms Bloom, not until you were senior, of course). Plenty of gaps between couples and singles, the initial rush to see Risky Business had died down a bit, but this again had played in the boy's favour. Liam's attention was drawn back to the movie as Tom Cruise Around was meeting Lana's pimp, Guido, a slimeball. But something was nagging at the edge of Liam's lizard brain, his amygdala starting to sound off an alarm quietly, but sufficiently to irritate Liam's senses like a buzzing insect.

Rich was watching the unfolding car chase on the screen, but Liam's attention was drawn back to the rest of the audience. Up by the top, the rear seats of the theater, there were two couples on opposite ends of the final row, canoodling and taking little interest in the activity being projected. A bit of a cliché, but it was a cinema. Liam's gaze went from one couple to the other, perhaps he recognised the couple on the right, but since they were eating each other's faces it was hard to tell. Then, with that nagging alarm still buzzing in his brain, his eyes jumped from one audience member to the next.

It took a few moments, but with a dawning and somewhat unnerving recognition, Liam realised what was making him increasingly concerned. None of the other audience couples and singles were moving. Even though people normally stared at the cinema screen, they fidgeted, repositioned themselves when their bums were numb, ate popcorn, chewed candy, or slurped from big drinks cups, as well as whispered to their companions, or worse to themselves. None of the audience, apart from the romantics at the back, were doing any of that. They were just still, unmoving, facing the front moving imagery. Nothing. Inert. Sitting statues.

A chill went through Liam, making him shiver, he didn't like this. No way, no way at all! Sliding back and into his seat, facing Richie, he poked the other boy gently but with a little edge in his ribs, trying to obtain his attention. Richie was laughing silently to himself as Tom Cruise Around was trying desperately to stop his father's Porsche from slipping into a lake. Liam poked him again, with a little more meanness into the space between his midribs. Richie recoiled and turned to Liam with a what the fuck are you doing expression and surprise, but also flipping his attention back to the slapstick humour in the movie and back to Liam.

His mop of red hair moved close to Richie's dark black hair and Liam whispered, 'there's something weird going on in here, nearly all the people are not moving,' and he nodded slightly to indicate the rest of the audience. 'Funny, funny, Jazz-Head, sorry you're not enjoying it, but don't think you can scare me instead!' And with that and a jovial smirk, Richie turned back to a very wet Tom Cruise Around in the lake, unsuccessful in protecting the very expensive sports car. Liam considered Richie's reaction for a moment, looking back to the rest of the audience again. Above them, at the front of the next tier was a middle aged man in a sports jacket and with wide spectacles on. The man's head moved, very slowly, but it had moved, and Liam was starting to feel relieved and a little bit silly. Sports Jacket's head stopped its movement and his face was facing Liam directly. Both his eyes were milky white and glowing a little, and they were pushing Liam back in his chair with their stare. Sports Jacket sat there, head turned, abnormal eyes fixed on Liam, and the boy felt his stomach turn, all the beheaded babies dancing with fright.

He elbowed Richie aggressively, his friend watching as Tom Cruise Around was selling a one night only experience with ladies of the night to his school friends. Richie spun in his seat, now looking even more annoyed this time, an unsaid, 'what now?' on his lips. Heads approached each other and Liam whispered, almost babbling, 'shits, guy, the shits, the audience, they ain't moving at all, except for the man up there, and his eyes, his eyes!' The younger boy looked into his friend's face and what he saw in that expression chilled him. He had known Jazz-Head almost all his life, and this was just not his style, he didn't resort to cheap gags, and certainly not when they had both gone to the trouble to get into the cinema. With a hint of fear in his own mind he turned to look back and over his seat.

Sports Jacket was still staring intently on their own position, and he could see a couple a row back and a few seats to this left, their heads turning eerily slowly, their opaque, slightly lit eyes gazing right back at him. Richie could not at first comprehend what he was seeing, what was unfolding behind the two boys as Tom Cruise Around's home was turned into a brothel in the movie. A movie he was very much now uninterested in. He pulled his head down like a soldier quickly ducking down as the top of the trench was raked with machine gun fire. But it wasn't bullets, it was staring, milky white and slightly backlit eyes, like ghastly LEDs monitoring their seats. 'Liam, what, what, what is g-going on, why are they l-like that?', he stuttered to Liam.

His friend and protector, the boy with the right hook, was scared, and even more so seeing Richie's reaction. As happens at the beginning of the flight, fight, fawn, or freeze stage of a fear, of the recognition you may be mortally in danger, it acted like a contagious agent, jumping to and fro both boys. They were both starting to shake, murmuring and whimpering escaping their mouths against their will. Liam could see down the row and there were two teenage girls, one in a red jacket and jeans, and the other in a summer blue dress. Both were sitting as if they were watching the movie, but their heads were both rotated so that those grisly eyes were fixated on the two frightened boys.

3. The green light of an exit sign

By now it was occurring to the scared and vulnerable friends that they were surrounded on three sides by townsfolk who were no longer what they were when they sat down in Screen 7. Only the aisleway

steps they came in on were not occupied. Liam and Richie were hugging each other, rapidly losing control. Richie could see the rows below them, dotted with couples and singles, and all staring with their heinous eyes at the boys. Liam was facing upwards, seeing Sports Jacket, but also the others around him and back to the rear. White milky eyes, slight glow, in pairs and aimed unwaveringly at him and Richie. Adjusting his gaze he saw the two couples at the rear. The pair to his left were unmoving, staring. The pair to their right, the ones he thought he might know were still in their unedifying embrace, seemingly munching on each other's faces. Liam's own eyes were as wide and incredulous as an antelope being hunted by a pack of predators.

Above the snogging couple was a large white shadow, it was undulating and wavering, like a sheet in a high wind, but it had the vague shape of something humanoid. It was darting in and out above the couple, acting like a hunting bird that was trying to find a way to attack the unsuspecting teenagers. With his eyes still wide he sat back, unbelieving what he had seen, and faced Richie. The other boy didn't look in particularly good shape either, scared almost witless. Without a thought he grabbed Richie and pulled him down into the footwell between the rows and back to the steps. Half hugging him, Liam looked closely into Richie's face, 'we gotta get out of here, get Mr Duggen or someone,' he stated in hushed tones that only his friend could make out. The theater was drowned in the sound of a Tangerine Dream track accompanying as Lana was sitting astride Tom Cruise Around in a tram or train. Liam kept a wary eye out as best as he could from their vantage point on the steps.

The audience had all transferred their attention to the white sheet trying to attack the couple at the back. Liam popped his head up further, still half holding Richie, feeling the younger boy trembling. The couple seemed to be coming up for air, noting the couple on the screen taking over on the physical interaction front. As the teenage boy's attention was on the movie now, and not on his girlfriend, the situation seemed to alter rapidly. The sheet bird thing jetted downwards, enveloping the teenagers who were momentarily indiscernible within the white fog that was surrounding them, and it pulsed with varying degrees of white light. Richie had moved to face the same way as Liam, and a further whimper escaped his traitorous lips, as he tried not to give them both away to the audience. 'I think it's a wraith, yep, a w-wraith,' escaped from the same lips, and Liam couldn't decide which was more shocking, the wraith-like entity around that couple, or the fact that Richie seemed to know what it was. 'WTF, Richie, whatya talking about, how the hell would you know that?', he asked quickly. His best friend in all the world looked at him and just said, 'in the comics, in them, s-s-seen something like that thing up there.'

They both stared up, and the wraith-like creature, or whatever it was, was now hovering above the last couple. They were rigid and staring, just like all the rest. And they were fixated with the boy's last position in their seats. Liam pulled Richie further down until they were both hunkered down together lower than the seats. Tom Cruise Around was at least showing some solidarity with their situation, on screen, head in his hands, scared, as he found his parents house devoid of anything, cleaned out. Meanwhile, nobody was reciprocating any concern for him on the audience side. The whole audience of townfolk had been turned into who knows what, apart from two frightened boys holding each other.

'We've got to get out, and the only closest exit is the way we came in,' Liam noted, and Richie slowly nodded in response. They both looked up the few steps to the floorspace between them and the upper tier, and beyond that the exit doors would be a short run. Short, but also possibly the longest run in their young lives. 'I'll check first and if we can rush through, I'll squeeze your hand, then we go!', Liam started to stand up a bit more, holding Richie's hand tightly. As he did he saw all the people's heads in his view swivel to stare towards him. They at least remain seated. He couldn't see the wraith-thing, but he knew it was around, and they would be the last two for it to engulf. He took a deep breath, tensed his legs and prepared to launch himself as he squeezed Richie's hand. It was perhaps microseconds that elapsed, but Liam saw a white blur ahead of him and then the wraith-thing was between the exit and them, pensive and ready to pounce.

He could feel Richie's impatience through his hand, but Liam recognised they were trapped. He hunkered back down and pressed his head to Richie's, 'that sheet monster is in front of the exit, we're going to have to get to the one on the opposite side,' he said softly to the shivering boy. Richie looked distraught, but his eyes gave away a determination to get out of this horror show the same as Liam's. Three rows down there were no occupants, and they both seemed to come to the same conclusion simultaneously. Both started to slide down the aisle steps until they could start scuttling along that row's footwell. It seemed like an age since they were moving through the car park foliage similarly.

Along the way as they shuffled slowly they picked up old popcorn, candy, and stains from the old carpeting, like two hedgehogs picking up leaves in the undergrowth. About two thirds along Liam stopped, and he attempted to look back to Richie. He mouthed, 'wait!', and also held his hand out to signal the same message. Liam's head partly emerged enough to look up. He could not see any of the audience, nor the wraith-thing. He tried to listen, but the squabbling voices of Tom Cruise Around and Guido negotiating over the contents of the house drowned everything out. Nothing seemed to be moving or happening nearby, but it was more guesswork rather than any significant information from Liam's ears. He looked back at Richie, the light from the movie just about illuminating him and he gave a nod and a signal with his hand to continue their shuffling. Both boys moved on and reached the end of the row. Liam realised that this was going to be a literal leap of faith.

Deciding he would just have to lead them both as they bolted, he gripped Richie's hand fiercely and as he rose he pulled his friend along with him. They jumped up the steps consecutively as they straightened, and all the audience's heads swiveled their way. What was more disconcerting was that the audience behind them turned their heads a full one eighty to face backward, like demonic owls, their eyes staring, unblinking, accusatory. They reached the top step and could see the green light of the exit sign which raised both of their expectations and momentarily diminishing their fear. Almost home free, but then the white blur was driving along the ceiling and in a dive downwards like a ghostly eagle.

As the protagonists in this danse macabre started their endgame, the light from the movie dissipated whilst the credits started to roll. Liam pulled Richie along with him like a ragdoll in the hand of a petulant infant girl, and he drove them both, changing direction in a pivot and running back to the original exit. All the evil owls monitored their progress, and the wraith-thing dove upwards and forwards at a rapid rate to allow it to turn and chase the escaping duo. Liam and Richie would have made it to the other exit, but Richie, not quite balanced from being tugged left, tripped and fell, losing his grip on Liam's hand. His lifeline disconnected and his protector running onward, Richie fell forward, hands outstretched as he hit the floor hard enough to push the air out of his lungs in a whooshing sound.

Liam carried by momentum, ran on a few steps, and then with realisation he started to turn back to face Richie. And the wraith-thing saw its opportunity to strike, diving down from the acoustic tiled ceiling. Richie was suddenly in a conflict, try to save himself, try to save them both? In what was a heartbeat or two, but seemed like the lifetime of the universe, Liam dropped down to his best friend and started to grab him to pull him up. The wraith-thing suddenly came to a halt, probing around the boys like it did with the snogging couple before they were taken too. Both boys half grabbed each other and ran the remainder of the distance to face the original exit, the green light shining down. Liam shoved Richie down the slipway to the door, turning to give the finger to the wraith-thing and then running on behind Richie. The owls watched impassively, rooted to their seats, their ghoulish eyes staring.

Both boys plunged through the doors and turned to make sure they were closed. They both screamed at the top of their lungs, screamed and screamed. The Childcatcher was there in what seemed an

instant, others of his staff following, and the other screen doors started to open and townspeople exited, chatting about their movie, possibility of a beer at the nearby bar, what they might see next. All came to a halt as they saw two boys screaming their lungs out, the cinema staff crowding around them. Nobody could make any sense of what they were shouting at first, but clearly something was off in Screen 7.

4. Epilogue

The boys were herded out with the rest of the townsfolk, the cinema staff cracking open the doors on either side of Screen 7 with considerable trepidation. It was never quite fully reported what they initially saw, but all the audience were found dead, though no sign of any 'wraith-thing' was found. Police, paramedics and even a detachment of the National Guard arrived rapidly. Eventually the CDC were called in, just in case it was an infectious agent, but they detected nothing. There were inquiries, angry townspeople at town halls, the victims were buried after much pathological research, but the cause of their deaths was never ascertained. Of the 'wraith-thing' that the boys reported it was eventually put down to the trauma they suffered.

Richie and Liam spent quite some time in therapy, provided by the State, and when they returned to school they were never quite the same, and many avoided them, like they were somehow tainted. They grew, both went to universities and actually did quite well. As is so often the case, they became more distant, being in touch less and less often. Neither would ever go to a cinema or theater ever again, and when they occasionally suffered night terrors sufficient to soak their bed linen and partners in sweat, evil owls staring at them from the darkness, they might call the other. Tom Cruise Around was off limits, Richie or Liam would never watch his movies, it was just too triggering, even in the comfort of their own lounges. Liam did not really remember much about the film, but Richie always wondered if Tom Cruise Around stayed with Lana and got all his furniture back.

Liam did sometimes think about their escape, and why the wraith-thing couldn't attack them at the end. One thing stuck in his mind. When the couples were passionately gnawing each other's face off, it could not attack, and when he leapt back to Richie, it could not attack. And the only thing he could possibly believe was that it was love. Love stopped that monster from attacking. Brotherly love between him and Richie.

And it gave Liam some comfort, sufficient for a slight smile.