

## The Extra

I've always felt like I wasn't the protagonist in my own life. Sure, plenty of exciting things have happened around me, just never to me. And that's given me this sense of being ... disposable.

I never knew my parents, so they couldn't make me feel like their little princess. In the orphanage, I didn't notice that I was laying low, until some of the other girls started having the most exquisite adventures.

One of them, a sprightly thing with tight red curls, was chosen to spend a weekend with a cantankerous old billionaire. She came back in the most despondent state. Told us how she'd grown to love the old codger, but he refused to accept her. But then, one of our teachers realised that this abandoned little girl had hidden treasure and thieves were after her. What a night that was. The other girls and I stared wide-eyed as she ran down the street, the robbers in hot pursuit. It turned out that the old man had developed an affection for her and came to her rescue. She moved out after that and went to some fancy place where they had to wear hats and ties to school.

Another girl, also with bright red hair, somehow became friends with the orphanage caretaker and he taught her to play chess. She must have had a gift or something, because she went on to become a world champion, one of the first females to do so, I heard.

Me, I was just there. Oh, I participated of course. Studied hard. Entered the competitions and ran in the races and clapped when some other girl went to collect her medal or prize. I was happy for them. When someone was so elated or distressed or confused that they spontaneously burst into song, I would dance and sing along. Fall into line with the rest of the chorus. Somehow, I knew the moves.

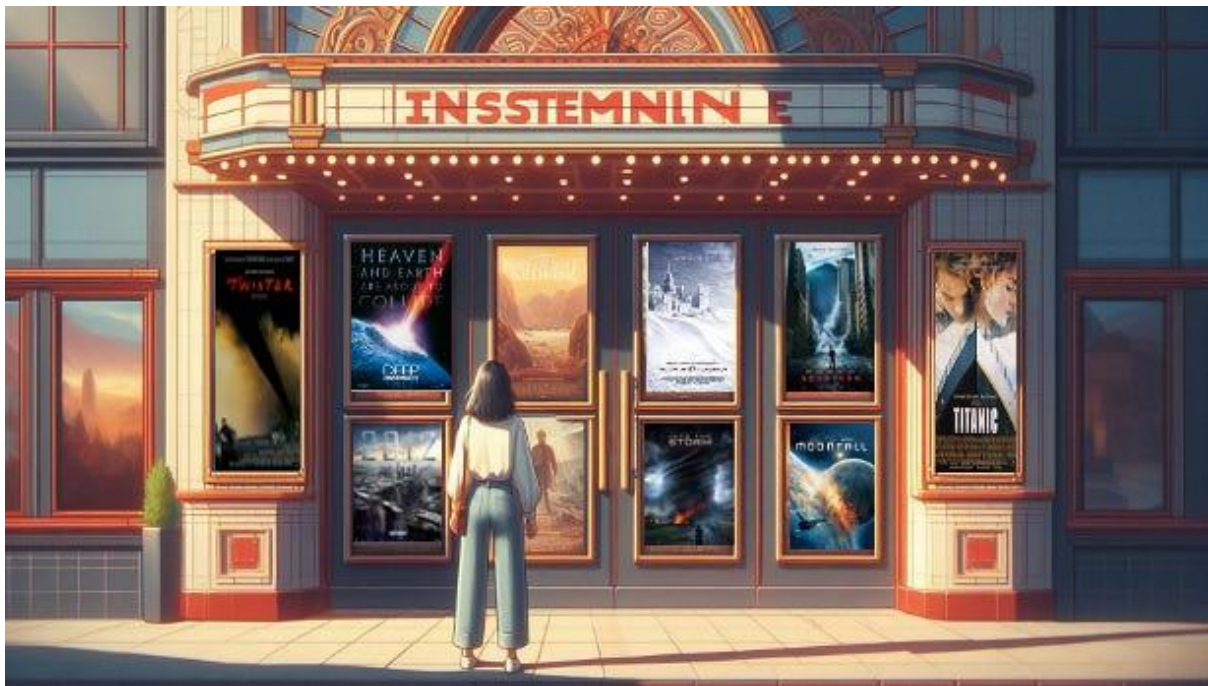
At 18, the house mistress helped me and the other graduates pack our things. I rented an apartment in the city and got a job at a busy Italian restaurant. It was the brain child of a young woman who had always dreamed of having her own place, and she would sometimes sing and dance about it too.

One by one, my colleagues met and fell in love with handsome but troubled men, who usually seemed completely unsuitable at first, but they'd eventually grow attracted to the quick-tongued waitresses who could take them down a peg or two in the most charming ways.

I grew friendly with the women who worked on the street outside too. One of them (another red head!) was picked up one night by a rich business man who bought her expensive clothes and ended up climbing up a fire escape to whisk her away and get married.

It was around this time I decided to apply for the army. Maybe I missed the regimented life of the orphanage, I don't really know. Just saw an ad one day and filled in the paperwork. Then something happened that shook me to my core. One of the chefs lost it. Up until then, he'd been the stand out guy. Come in with almost no experience. Hired out of pity as a dishwasher and then proved that he had a flair for flavour. Things seemed to be going amazingly until this one night. His hat came off and it was revealed that - get this - *a rat* was controlling his movements. It was the rat that could cook, not him.

Well, you can imagine the pandemonium. Boiling water and knives flying everywhere. And somehow, I was right in the thick of it, screaming and flailing about. Luckily, no one was severely hurt. As I was running my forearm under cold water that night, I got to thinking. What if I found myself in a storyline that wasn't PG rated? What if it was only a matter of time? I took a walk downtown, past the movie theatre, and the posters outside did nothing to ease my mind.



Despite my deep sense of foreboding, I went in. And emerged a complete mess.

But I couldn't stop. Day after day, I returned to the movies and watched one after another. When I ran out of new releases to watch, I went to the cinemas that screened old movies. They were no better.

I barely followed the storylines, my attention was always on the people in the background. People getting hacked up and shot and drowned and sucked underground and covered in acid. I became convinced that my fate was to be a victim on the sidelines of someone else's story. Whenever I saw a car crash or got caught in a thunderstorm, I quickly took cover. When the acceptance letter from the army arrived, I tore it into a thousand tiny pieces. I started researching the safest places on Earth. Where there were no fault lines, hurricanes, or experimental labs. Big cities seemed like disasters just waiting to happen. If a monster was set free, I'd be sure to be trampled. If aliens invaded, I'd be in the first wave of casualties. But nowhere was completely safe, and drama clearly followed me.

I started therapy.

A nice woman named Linda. She had red hair, which should have been a tip-off, but I let it slide. I thought she'd laugh off my concerns, but instead she asked why didn't I watch some movies where the extras had more fun. The disasters were obviously getting to me, she said, and she was right.

I had to stop my sessions when she got caught up in a legal battle over something her husband had done and her whole family had to move to some small town. No way was I going to visit and see whatever messed up shit was going to happen to the townsfolk there. But I liked her idea and started to form a plan.

I spent my days in bed, worked the evenings, and after, I'd go to clubs. I could dance with my eyes closed while the interesting people had their important conversations and fell in love. I even found some sex clubs where I could make love in the background of someone sharing news of their cancer diagnosis, discussing their fledgling startup, or explaining why their drug deal had gone bad.

What? My head sprang up at that one.

The two people caressing my skin carried on unperturbed, but I inched closer to the conversation, which I could tell was getting heated.

"How do you propose to pay what you owe me?" said a mean-looking man to a smaller one with a chiselled jawline.

No, this isn't that kind of movie, I thought helplessly, leaving the man and woman entangled with each other and crawling to put my face even closer to the escalating dialogue.

The sight of a gun drew a high-pitched scream from my throat. But it was too late. Sharp jaw moved quickly, and the bullet sailed past my head into the couple behind, exactly where I had been lying moments before.

The woman pulled away from the bleeding man and joined in my screaming as the lights came up and the crowd started fighting. A beer bottle crashed onto the head of the person beside me, and they lurched in my direction but I ducked out of the way. The woman on the bed's eyes met mine for a brief moment, then she went back to trying to revive her partner, but I could see it was a lost cause. I shot her a sympathetic look, then grabbed what clothes I could from the pile under the bed. I dashed onto the street alongside a throng of panicked people in various states of undress.

I sobbed and stumbled all the way home, the night air biting my skin through the sheer red material of my negligee. As soon as I passed the door, I collapsed onto the floor with my back against it and wept into the bundle of cloth in my arms. The words 'collateral damage' kept running through my head, over and over, until I fell into a fitful sleep right there on the itchy carpet.

Over the next few days, I couldn't bring myself to leave the apartment. I ordered food in and sat in pyjamas watching endless TV shows, entirely absorbed by the fates of thousands of 'unimportant' extras that spanned hundreds of episodes.

And then, a miracle.

I had been queasy for a while, but figured it was probably due to the lack of fresh air. On a whim, I ordered a pregnancy test with one of my grocery shops. And, joy of joys, a little blue + came up within moments of withdrawing the stick from my urine stream.

I was over the moon. The pregnant lady almost always survived, and if she didn't, it was because she was a main character in a terribly shocking story, rare even in my life. I was saved!

I returned triumphantly to work, telling everyone the happy news and using morning sickness as an excuse for my prolonged absence. I wore tight-fitting clothes to make my tiny bump more visible, and spent all my spare time in maternity and baby shops until my apartment looked more like the sales floor than the store did.

But it didn't last. It was my day off when disaster struck. I was assembling the cot, when a knock at the door caused me to look up, hex key hanging between my lips. A floor warden delivered the grim news that the building was being evacuated. With a knot forming painfully at the base of my throat, I followed my neighbours out into the street.

It was eerily dark on the wide, tree-lined avenue, and with trepidation, I followed the gaze of a crowd of thousands to confirm what I already suspected - it was no cloud bank blocking out the sun. Rather, the whole city block was in the shadow of a giant circular craft. Its base was flat but uneven, its centre a giant open tunnel that threatened like a pitch black, beckoning chasm.

My foreboding was quickly being overtaken by all-out panic. No unborn baby could save me from a city-wide disaster. The only way out was to befriend an unlikely bunch of misfits with a strangely complementary skill set, and my only friends were waitstaff, chefs, and prostitutes, none of whom were in sight, and my only skills were carrying four plates at a time and memorising long lists of orders without writing them down.

I looked at the groups of people around me and tried to make eye contact with some of the huddles, but they were focused entirely on the unworldly sight above and each other. Hands in hands. Parents holding children. Cars filled with loving families, inching their way out of the city.

My hand went to my stomach. I wasn't alone anymore. I might be an extra in someone else's story, but my baby had her own tale to live. I couldn't let that be taken from her before she was even born. As if in response, I felt a strong kick and saw a movement through the tight cotton clinging to my expanded belly, now in the final weeks.

Glancing for one more moment at the craft hovering above, I strode forward, slipping through the crowds using the skills I had built over dozens of nights on dance floors, surrounded by bodies but not touching them. There were shouts and cries all around me, but instead of joining in, I kept my head down and marched on. The entrances to the subways were all packed with people, shoving and pushing each other in dangerous stampedes. I walked by.

A noise like a sizzle began to emanate from above, and I knew it wouldn't be long. I broke into a run, my hands steady beneath the gigantic baby bump I'd cultivated so carefully. Suddenly, a stream of light turned the whole street as bright as day and I paused and spun back, just in time to see my building collapse. My breath caught in my throat as an image of

my beautifully prepared nursery crumbling into rubble filled my mind, but I pushed the thought away and turned around and kept going.

The laser moved on to another building and another, until the craft had destroyed an entire downtown block, along with all the hapless extras still stranded there. The light seemed to be expanding out, and screams grew louder. Parked cars began to combust. It got closer and closer. I knew I couldn't outrun it, and a sob caught in my throat as I realised that this was it. The heroes would be somewhere hidden, plotting to save the world, but not in time to save me or my baby. I stood watching the deadly laser approach and put my arms out wide and my head back.

A grating noise drew my attention downward, and I choked at the sight of a sewer cover sliding to one side. A frightened pair of eyes beckoned me in.

Without a moment's hesitation, I leapt onto the ladder and slid down to land almost on top of a young woman who looked strangely familiar. With a start, I realised it was the one I'd been fucking when her male partner had been shot. We'd been together a few times in the club but never exchanged names. The dead man was almost certainly my baby's father. She smiled. "Glad you're OK." Her eyes traveled to my bursting belly, then terror returned as the noise from above grew deafening.

"Come on," she said. I nodded and followed her further down. Down, down, we went, grateful for the lessening of the crunching and exploding noises from above, while the stench from below grew stronger.

We settled on the side of an underground river, our backs against concrete in amongst rows and rows of other dirty-faced escapees, some with their kids, some wrapped around friends and lovers, others with dogs and cats that shivered with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

Eventually, the noise stopped. Some brave people ventured back up and they returned to let us know that the craft was gone. The danger had passed. The heroes had saved the day.

Hesitatingly, I followed along back up to the city street. It was scorched beyond recognition, but the smell of ash was lifting in a light breeze and it was quiet, aside from the soft murmur of the people around us. I observed my companion. My face must have mirrored hers, because there was a glint of unabashed joy in her eyes. We both started to laugh. I couldn't believe it. I had survived! Not only that, I was standing next to someone who gave a shit about me. I laughed hysterically and held her out at arm's length to breathe her in.

And then there was blackness.

I opened my eyes in a bright room. My eyelids were heavy and I tried to take in the lilac, floral-scented surrounds. There was a bed and I was in it. The sheets were crisp and over-bleached.

With a start, I put my hand to my belly and winced. It was painful to touch, and shockingly empty. Frantically, I looked left and right and my eyes fell on a clear plastic bassinet. I let out a breath of relief at the sight of a peacefully sleeping baby girl, wrapped tightly in a soft pink swaddle, her little head covered in a thin layer of bright orange hair.

"Ah, you're awake," said a voice. Blinking, I looked up into the face of a gently smiling nurse.

"What happened?" I managed to stutter.

"You were hit by some debris that fell from an unstable building," he said, coming to stand beside me. "Lucky your friend Rachel got you here safely. You went into labour and had an emergency c-section. You don't remember anything? You were screaming pretty loud there." I shook my head. Words formed like soap bubbles in my mouth, "My ... friend? Rachel?" The events of the afternoon were gaining clarity in my mind.

"Yes, here she is."

The door opened and she walked in carrying a coffee and a magazine.

"You're awake!" she said, with such affection it brought tears to my eyes.

I looked back at the sleeping baby. "And what about..."

"She's fine," said the nurse, running a finger gently across a tiny round cheek before moving to the base of my bed and picking up a plastic clipboard to rifle through papers. "Now, does Little Miss have a name just yet?"

I nodded and wiped at my eyes. "It's Anne. With an E."

"Oh, like Anne of Green Gables? I love that. A hero's name."

"Hi Annie," cooed Rachel, leaning forward to plant a kiss on the baby's forehead before lifting her and gently placing her on my chest.

I breathed in her warm, milky scent.

"And..." the nurse frowned slightly into his paperwork. "What about you? It says we have a Jane Doe here."

Rachel looked sheepish and I reached for her hand. "I don't know your name," she said, like a confession.

"That's exactly it," I whispered. "Jane Doe."