

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE CAMERAMAN

Colleen Cable, Master of Fine Arts, 2016

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In this novel segment titled *The Cameraman*, a fictionalized version of silent film icon Buster Keaton grapples with his newfound role at big picture studio MGM, which has stripped him of his creative influence. For the first time in his career, Buster must operate with little authority in what was the beginning of the Hollywood studio system. This excerpt's narrative present takes place in New York City in 1928 during the filming of *The Cameraman*, with flashbacks to Los Angeles in 1927, prior to the filming. The close third-person narrator examines what it means for Buster to be famous, to be an artist, and what happens when public and private identities are conflated.

THE CAMERAMAN

by

Colleen Cable

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Chapter 1: Grauman's Egyptian Theater

1927

Buster Keaton.....The Little Fellow
Fred Gabourie.....Technical Director
Elgin Lessley.....First Cameraman
Clyde Bruckman.....Scenario Man
Natalie Talmadge.....Wife
Myra Keaton.....Mom

Gruaman's Egyptian Theater was packed at the premiere of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* in 1927, every seat accounted for before the opulent plaster Egyptian pillars, framing perfectly the black and white hurricane gusting on screen. Buildings collapsed, splintered into a thousand pieces, as wind whipped through the small river town. It was all blustering beautifully on-screen, light playing over the darkened theater, orchestra trailing to the action.

Buster sank lower in his chair, bunching up his suit jacket in the back. He knew what was coming next, the best gag he'd probably ever done. Or would do, he supposed.

Sitting in his theater chair, he reached in his pocket, but then remembered, there was no flask. As a rule, he didn't drink while he was shooting a picture. At least, that was his rule. Now that he had switched his contract to MGM, everything was different, all of his rules, all of his practices were jumbled around.

Natalie cast a glance down at him, her diamond cluster earrings catching the light and casting a glare in his direction, but the screen quickly captured her eyes when an entire building was blown off its foundation.

Whenever Buster watched *The Little Fellow* on-screen, he couldn't shake the uncanny look of him – the same wide forehead that tapered into a square chin, the

same hollow shadows beneath his cheekbones, the same straight nose and large, clear eyes. And the mouth, they had the same little hyphen for a mouth that every once in a while, might tip, just barely, into a slant.

But there were enough differences to make the viewing bearable. The black and white helped, that's for sure. And The Little Fellow's body was exaggerated, wearing overly large slapshoes and pants two sizes too big, cinched at the waist with a belt, usually with a too-small porkpie hat. Anything to make his body look smaller, more odd, and as if even his clothing was plotting against him. The Little Fellow was the perpetual underdog, an innocent trying to win in a world that was rigged. Maybe that part of The Little Fellow wasn't so different from Buster.

The Little Fellow stood perfectly framed in front of a two-story clapboard house. As he stood there, the face of the wall behind him begins to fall.

Sweat prickled at Buster's hairline as he commandeered the entire armrest, pushing Natalie's gloved elbow off. He gripped the edge and wished that he had brought anything to help him make it through this night. He wondered if Mom had any of her peppermint schnapps on her, but of course she wouldn't, not tonight.

Watching the wall gag sent tremors through his legs, made them jolt in his seat. He remembered that day, and all the days leading up to it. The way he insisted on a real wall and the way Clyde and Elgin and the rest of them looked at him like he had gone suicidal.

"But a real one is two tons," Gabe said. "We could do a plywood shell and it will probably look the same."

"It's gotta be real," Buster said. "A fake just won't fall the same."

Gabe nodded, acquiescing. But that was Gabe. Tall, tan, and stoic. He always carried a wrench, pocketknife, and leather gloves in the back of his workman's pants he wore on and off the clock. He was a believer in being prepared for all circumstances and that if you couldn't solve the problem with those three things; you were probably done for anyway.

"We're going to give you some clearance with the window," Gabe said. "But, I have to say, a million things could go wrong here. You could land off-mark, the house could shift during the fall. These Liberty motors produce wind that can pick a truck off the road. If we've got those going during the fall, the house won't fall where it should."

Buster pushed away that possibility. "It's a hurricane. We can't stop the wind."

But his story man Clyde and his cameraman Elgin protested, saying they would rally the rest of the crew to walk out if he proceeded with the stunt. The two of them had been with him since the early twenties and had always been more restrained. Elgin, in particular, treated Buster as a sort of China doll ever since that gag went awry in '23's *Our Hospitality*. Buster usually found their caution charming, a consequence of their friendship, but at this moment he could only interpret it as distrust.

"I only need a camera and some wind," Buster said. "And that wall."

"Don't do this. Not when you're," Elgin stopped.

"What?" Buster snapped.

They both shot him looks like you would give a small, petulant child.

“It’s just that we know you’re upset and taking bigger risks isn’t,” Elgin started but Buster interrupted.

“Give me a real wall, Gabe,” was all he said.

Elgin and Clyde ultimately agreed to help with the gag, but they refused to be present during the shooting. Elgin got a second cameraman to operate the filming.

The day of shooting, the pair stuck to their promise, walking off as soon as the gag was set. Buster stood alone under the wall with only a few of the crew ambling around on the four block stretch of the fictional town of River Junction, Mississippi they had constructed on the west bank of the Sacramento River.

He glanced down to see the nail they had hammered into the packed dirt road, Buster’s mark, measuring exactly fifteen feet from the house’s foundation. He stood there on the mark, or at least, he was pretty sure he stood on the mark. It was difficult to see beneath the dirt that shifted in waves from the breath of the Liberty Wind Turbine placed just off-camera.

Strange having to stand still when Buster was used to falling. Falling from slipping on banana peels, on slick surfaces, over fences, off of buildings, into walls, into lakes, into animals, into people, on ice, a la mode, flambé, in drag, in tails, from bridges, from trains, out of cars, into cars, under cars, and through windows. But now, the wall would fall on him.

“Here it comes,” called Gabe from off-set.

Buster heard the wall detach from the house, a crack and a lurch. Free from its hinges, the wall hesitated, seemingly trying to maintain balance, sideboards creaking, tensing against the nails. And then silence.

He felt the whoosh of the fall, the pull at his clothes, the shudder of the wall against the packed dirt road. He had been on his mark and his slight frame had slipped through the second story window.

In Grauman's Theater, he heard the audience gasp, a few small shrieks when the wall hit the ground, punctuated by the crash of symbols and applause. Sitting in his seat, he felt his abdomen, his arms, his legs, making sure he had really made it, that this all wasn't some dream. He regretted sometimes that he did not step to the left or the right. It only would have taken a few inches.

"What's the matter?" Natalie whispered. "You're fidgeting."

People around him clapped, echoing off of the high ceilings. His mother, sitting on the other side of him put her gloved hand on his arm, looking at him with concern.

"Buster?" she asked.

"Fine," he said. "I'm fine."

Chapter 2: Musso & Frank Grill

1927

Buster Keaton.....Steamboat Bill Jr.
Joe Schenck.....The Money Man

About a year before the premiere, at the start of making *Steamboat Bill Jr.* in September, Joe asked to meet Buster for an early lunch near Buster Keaton Studios. Buster felt a slight déjà vu because the last time he was invited to lunch, Joe told him the budget for *Steamboat Bill Jr.* would be \$200,000, nearly half of what the budget was for his last picture *College*. Who could do anything on \$200,000? A two-reeler, maybe, but a feature? Nevertheless, Buster and Gabe were making pennies work as best they could.

They had the final climactic sequence planned as a great Mississippi flood that tears through the fictional town of River Junction, Mississippi. They were in the process of building an entire set with waterways and canals that would simulate floodwater. It would cost a significant portion of the budget, but it would be the scene that people talked about, the one that would put dimes in the box office.

Buster walked from the studio to the restaurant, only a few blocks. He liked walking, especially after getting a few hours of work in. Walking seemed to knock the cobwebs out of his head, the gears turned better, and as he walked, he tried to go over the way The Little Fellow and his ladylove of the movie would meet.

By the time Buster got to the restaurant, Joe was already waiting at a table.

When Buster came in the door, Joe signaled to the waitress that they'd need another cup for the new arrival. His was sitting in front of him, half-empty.

“The chicken salad here is wonderful,” he said, as Buster slid into the booth.

“Coffee first,” Buster said. The waitress bustled over with a pot and a teacup. She clattered it down onto the table and sloshed the coffee inside before retreating back to the kitchen.

“How is our Natalie doing?” Joe asked.

“You would know better than I would. She’s been over at your place every day since you and Norma have been in town.”

“Norma is happy for the break between filming. Norma has been giving Natalie a hand with that party you are throwing next week,” Joe said. Joe and his brother Nick were originally from the Ukraine and though they had both worked on their accents, Buster never knew Joe to use contractions, giving every sentence a feeling of formality. “I believe Dutch is coming in in a few days.”

“Natalie, Norma, and Dutch. All the Talmadge sisters together,” Buster said.

“The newspapers will go wild,” Joe smiled.

“Just so long as they don’t say that Natalie likes to read or that she’s the youngest sister again,” Buster sipped his coffee. “She read those clips to me every day for a month.”

“What is wrong with liking to read?”

“According to Natalie, it means she seems bookish,” Buster said. “Which somehow, she says, means ugly. I kept telling her that it’s only because Norma and Dutch are in so many movies they both have these familiar personalities. Norma’s the dramatic one, Dutch is the funny one, and Nate is” he paused.

“Your wife?” Joe suggested. “A Talmadge sister?”

“It’s not as though she couldn’t have been in the movies,” Buster said.

Talking about Natalie’s displeasure irritated him. Even thinking about it set his blood to boil. “I thought putting her in *Our Hospitality* would make her feel better, but she didn’t like it.”

“The Talmadge girls are a capricious sort,” Joe said.

“Nice word,” Buster said.

Joe smiled. “Anyway, how’s your picture coming?”

“We’ve gotten started on it. On schedule and on budget.”

“That is what I like to hear.”

“This flood sequence we’ve got is going to be fantastic,” Buster said. “Gabe’s been working on the set and you should—“

“That is what I wanted to talk to you about,” Joe said. Whenever Joe was about to deliver bad news, his right eye would lean slightly inward, crossed. It flickered as Joe rubbed a spot on the table with his napkin.

The waitress came back over to the table, coffeepot in hand. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked Buster.

“I think we’ll have two chicken salad sandwiches,” Joe said.

“What about the flood?”

“It cannot happen,” Joe said.

Buster was flabbergasted. The flood was what everything in the film had been building toward. There was foreshadowing and symmetry to consider here. And they’d already spent nearly half their budget on the flood set and all the water and the machinery needed for that sequence.

“What do you mean, it can’t happen?”

“We cannot do a flood. Not after the flooding on the actual Mississippi River last year,” Joe said. “Over two-hundred people died and making a joke of it will not help your gross numbers.”

So many responses zipped through Buster’s mind, like sparrows out of the brush when you take the first shot in the woods.

“It is going to be considered one of the great natural disasters,” Joe added.

Buster’s confused paralysis gave way. “Are you kidding me?”

“Of course not,” Joe said. “I know this changes your plans—“

“It changes the entire movie,” he said, trying to keep his voice down. “First you give me a shoestring budget, then you tell me, halfway through production, to change the final sequence. You couldn’t have let me know this even a month ago?”

Joe nodded as if he were just as angry as Buster. “I know, it is terrible,” he said. “I, like you, did not consider the ramifications of a flood on the public, but after thinking it over, it does seem in poor taste to highlight a flood.”

“Did Brand talk you into this?” Brand was a weasel of a studio manager, always penny-pinching and being a general pain in the ass, trying to hobnob with Joe’s crowd of executives. His real motive should be making Buster happy not Joe. But the bigger the movie business was becoming, the more leeches elbowed their way into jobs.

“We discussed it, yes,” Joe said, shifting in his seat. “But it is not as if he is trying to stop the flood in spite of the picture.”

“That’s exactly what he’s trying to do,” Buster said.

“How could sabotaging the movie work in Brand’s benefit? Really,” Joe said. “Just try to see it from a distributor’s perspective. No one wants to try to sell a movie that will upset a huge demographic of the country.”

Joe was mostly a hands-off producer. He didn’t give many notes and only visited the set on days when the shoot would be most expensive like when they would film large-scale gags. But then, every once in a while, he would get insistent. His voice was still soft, but there was a certain menace underlying the velvet of his voice. Change this, alter that, there’s only enough money for one. That was the voice he used today. Just consider, he said, harmless. Buster knew Joe would get his way.

“We have to rebuild the set.”

Joe nodded. “I can give you \$80,000.”

The waitress came back with the sandwiches – chicken salad on rye, pickle on the side – and placed them carefully in front of them. “Anything else?”

“No,” Buster said.

“You know it’s going to be at least \$100,000,” Buster said, aggravated by the back and forth.

Joe took a bite of the sandwich. Some of the chicken salad flopped out from the bottom of the roll and landed heavily on the white plate. As he was finishing chewing, he brought his napkin up to his mouth, dabbed.

“I cannot right now,” Joe said. Another bite. When Buster didn’t respond, Joe continued. “Do you know how much the Talmadge movies make? Not as much as they did in 1924, that is for certain. This independent producing is getting so

expensive. I cannot afford to give you what I used to. It would be different if you had studio backing.”

“What are you saying?”

“I did not want to get into this today,” Joe said, setting his sandwich down. He sighed. “I am considering giving up producing and focusing solely on United Artists,” Joe said.

Buster knew Joe was first and foremost a businessman. He was new in his presidency at United Artists, which, at the time he came on in ‘24, was failing. UA was created by Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart and D.W. Griffith to ensure that artists would maintain creative control over their own pictures. It was a wonderful, altruistic aim, but quickly, Griffith left as did Hart. The others, just to barely break even, had to each produce five pictures a year. Joe liked to tell the story how between 1919 and 1924, UA had only produced five *total* pictures. Picture costs were skyrocketing and they had no financial backer. They asked Joe to be president, knowing he was brothers with Nick Schenck, owner of Loews and Joe brought his stable of actors: Norma, Dutch, and Buster.

“So that’s it? You’re cutting me loose?”

“Of course not, Buster,” Joe said. “We are family. I have been asking around for studios looking for comedians.”

“And?”

“Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer does not have one,” Joe said.

For a moment, Buster wasn’t sure how to respond. MGM was a factory more than it was a studio, churning out movies that were quite profitable, but often lacking

in quality. Buster had only ever been distributed by smaller companies – UA, Metro, Comique. Buster had autonomy over his own movies because he was funded entirely through Joe, who bankrolled his studio.

Joe sighed. “I know it seems like a strange decision. But, you might consider that MGM has more resources.”

“You mean, my pictures are too expensive,” Buster said.

“They are wonderful pictures, no one can deny that, but they come at a cost, especially for such a small company as United Artists.”

Buster dipped his finger into the mote of coffee surrounding his teacup. He picked it out and watched brown droplets fall and ripple.

“Cost is not the only reason I want you to think about this,” Joe said.

“Expense aside, as MGM’s only comedian, you would be distributed and publicized around the world.”

“I heard LB doesn’t like comedy,” he said. “I thought old Mr. Mayer only liked to make pictures about virgins and family values.”

“But MGM’s got Thalberg,” Joe countered. Buster had played cards with Thalberg before, and liked him. But he never had imagined working with him.

“It is just something for you to think about.” He paused uncomfortably as Buster stared at a lamppost outside the window. In a hushed voice, Joe said, “If Natalie is anything like Norma, I know you cannot be breaking even right now.”

Buster looked at him, jaw tense. “I make more than Norma.”

“Norma blows through her salary, but I have an income for us. Your house only has one salary and it’s not that much more than Norma’s.”

Natalie was a great spender. Buster always let her have free access to all their funds, but he wasn't sure if she actually knew how much he made or how much was okay to spend. If he put limitations on her, it would feel strange, somehow uncouth. He had never worried about it because he had Joe and there was always another movie. But Buster could feel the tremors of change coming and he suddenly felt tightness in his chest.

“You know, I think I heard a mention that Irving and his bride will be coming to the party on Sunday. Maybe just chat with him for a moment, you know, investigate your options,” Joe said. Joe locked eyes with Buster, even though that right one still drifted inward. “I am going to make sure you settle somewhere. We are family.”

Chapter 3: The Pierre Hotel

1928

Buster Keaton.....The Cameraman
Ed Sedgwick.....Director
Ed Brophy.....Unit Manager
Elgin Lessley.....First Cameraman
Reggie Lanning.....Second Cameraman
Marceline Day.....The Girl

“Okay, so today,” Sedgwick started, stirring sugar in his coffee. “We have a lot to accomplish.” He thwacked his bound script for *The Cameraman* against the glossy table, shuddering the glassware. “We’ll head to Battery first to get those shots and then to the Ambassador lobby.”

It was only a few days after the *Steamboat Bill Jr.* premiere in Los Angeles, but MGM wasted no time on getting to filming Buster’s next picture. MGM requested that whatever Buster’s next picture was, it would be swell if he could incorporate Hearst’s MGM news division, though Buster didn’t get the feeling that was a suggestion. Even though he was at first resistant to the directive, the more he thought about it, the more he thought the life of a newsreel cameraman could work for a feature. He outlined the plot in his head. A newsreel man in New York tries to get the best reels to impress a girl who works in the Hearst newsreel division. He buys an old camera and runs around looking for newsworthy footage to impress his lady.

If he were back with United Artists and the Keaton Studio, that germ of an idea would have been enough to start. He would have talked with his technical director Gabe, about sets. He would have asked some starlet to be the girl and they’d be in full swing by the next month, figuring out the plot as they went, staging gags as they thought of them. He hadn’t realized how spontaneous his process had been until

he was asked to commit visual gags to paper, to plan every move before they had even turned on the camera. How was that supposed to work?

The falling wall in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* just wasn't as funny when described. A wall falls, but a man beneath it escapes danger because he's placed exactly where the window will land. That's it. Reading the script for *The Cameraman* was about as interesting as reading bars of music, notes cluttering the lines. Slapstick wasn't something that could be described. You could never truly tell if something was funny until you tried it. Buster had an entire rubbish bin of frames of gags that were dead on screen. Some, even, had all the merits and traits of a great visual joke, but that somehow fell flat. At the Keaton Studios, you'd throw that gag in the bin, but then think of something better. At MGM, it seemed, you stuck with what was plotted in the script.

But here in New York, he was feeling a little lighter 3,000 miles away. He was allowed to film, the part of the process that he truly loved. He was sure that things would turn around without so many of the writers and producers and studio managers and Irving and Louis B. Mayer looking over their shoulder. It was never explicitly granted to him, but he felt a certain amount of freedom when shooting.

Buster's team, Elgin, Reggie, Sedgwick, Brophy, and Marceline, all ate breakfast at Sherry's the day they got into New York. Sherry's, located in The Pierre Hotel, was known for its high mahogany ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and well-dressed women whose eyes darted around searching for who they might recognize. Buster and his crew had come to New York for the week and there was a reason MGM had put them up in The Pierre. Word was that people waited outside of the

hotel, just to catch a glimpse of what Astors or the Rockefellers or the Vanderbilts, what they were wearing and who they were wearing it with.

Buster nodded at Sedgwick's presentation of the schedule for the day, wondering if he could get a nip of whiskey in his coffee before they left.

Sedgwick had already talked his ear off on the airplane about their schedule for the week they were in New York. It was plotted out, nearly minute to minute, and included "unstructured time" slots. Sedgwick kept pointing those out to Buster as if to appease him.

"These are times when we can take an experimental shot, if you like," he had said. "Try something off-script without losing any of the planned, constructive time."

Buster felt as though he were on a loop, saying the same things to different people over and over again. The so-called "unstructured time" is what his entire schedule used to be. He'd never known any comedian to work from a script or from a set schedule, but he was told just as many times, things run differently at MGM.

He pressed down on a poached egg with his fork, watching it rupture and ooze yolk over the rest of his plate. Every time Buster looked at Sedgwick's wide, square face, all he saw was Louis Mayer, chomping on a cigar and threatening to terminate on his contract if Buster didn't deliver.

"Excuse me," a robust woman with a mousy sidekick said as they crouched over their table. "Aren't you," she started, but then became doubtful. "Aren't you Buster Keaton?" The mouse stared, wide-eyed. A couple at the table next to them turned to eavesdrop.

“Mmhmm,” Buster said, glancing up, but pretending to be immersed in the dregs left in the bottom of his coffee cup. He was never sure what to do in these situations. They happened more and more often, especially outside of Hollywood. Once somebody recognized him, they usually kept their eyes trained on his face, and he was convinced, more than that, on his mouth. They wanted to see what they couldn’t in his pictures – his face curled in a smile, eyes merely slits from the widespread grin in bloom across his face.

“I knew it,” she said. “I knew it had to be you. Why, what are you doing in New York?”

“We’re actually about to get going, right guys?” Buster said.

“Oh, could you give us a quick autograph? Margery, where’s that datebook you were scribbling in?”

The girl behind her fumbled in her bag, coming up with a shiny black book and a pen. The larger woman grabbed it and handed it over, smiling very hard.

Buster took it and the pen and asked, “any page?”

“That’s just fine,” the woman cooed. “You know, I’ve read the *Photoplay* article about you. Do you really carry a locket with pictures of your sons? How sweet that is.” She swept her gaze across the table, looking for corroboration.

“Here you are,” Buster said.

“Well do you?” she asked, her smile unflinching.

“Nope.”

“But the article,” she sputtered.

“Now we really must be going. Elgin? Shall we get the car while Sedgwick takes care of the bill?”

Elgin got up from the table, pocketing a pastry, and started for the door.

“We’ll see you all outside.” Buster nodded at those at his table, keeping his eyes down.

“We look forward to seeing you again,” the woman called after him. “We have breakfast here every morning.”

As he followed Elgin out, he fingered the boys’ locket that he kept on his pocket watch chain and shoved it in his vest pocket.

“Ready for today?” Elgin asked as they walked through the brass revolving door to East 61st Street.

“I don’t know, Elgin,” he said. “I hope today, at least, feels a little more normal. You know, filming.”

Elgin nodded and adjusted his cap, squinting his wide-set dark eyes against the sunshine.

“What do you think about Sedgwick?” Buster asked. “You’ve seen some of his stuff, right?”

“Who hasn’t? He’s got MGM comedy direction cornered.”

“What was that last one? With Arthur and Dane? A pair of circus performers. God, it was dumb.”

“It was fairly ordinary,” Elgin replied.

“That’s the problem,” Buster said.

“We both know that Sedgwick isn’t very innovative,” Elgin said. “But what can we do? I can try to push him a little with the camera stuff, but it’s captain’s orders.”

Buster started to walk up the length between the hotel door and the corner of the building, snapping his fingers in time with his steps. He ran the gamut of cliché consolations in his head – everything will be okay, it will all work out of the best. He would be fine.

Out in the sunlight, Buster couldn’t believe his headache, a thudding heartbeat in his skull. Buster never used to get hangovers, but as he neared thirty and then surpassed it, he began to wake up with those behind the eyes kind of headaches, a slimy whirlpool in his stomach and a slick of sweat on his skin. He just needed to make it over the hump of this day, the first day of shooting. It would be easier after today, once he got back in the swing.

“Hey,” Elgin said, stopping him on another rotation around his route. “Filming is always the same,” Elgin said. “The film doesn’t change, only the subject.”

Buster leaned against the stone of the building, feeling the coolness of it against his back. He so grateful to have Elgin here. He was like a tether to a different, almost dreamlike time.

“Let’s go,” Sedgwick bumbled out of the revolving door. “We ought to get going. Lots to do today,” he said. “Where’s our car?”

The one consolation at MGM was that he was making nearly double what he was making at United Artists, but standing outside The Pierre, waiting to get this day over with, he wasn't sure that was any comfort at all.

Chapter 4: The Corner of Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street

1928

Buster Keaton.....The Cameraman
Ed Sedgwick.....Director
Ed Brophy.....Unit Manager
Elgin Lessley.....First Cameraman
Reggie Lanning.....Second Cameraman
Marceline Day.....The Girl

Sedgwick had hired a black limousine, specifically outfitted with window curtains. “I hear Cooldige has the same one,” he said. They were worried about causing too much of a stir filming in New York City, but they thought if they were discreet they could get the shots they needed from the trip. Their plan was to place the cameras out of the back window of the limousine while Buster or Marceline performed behind the car.

“It’s going to be strange,” Marceline said. Distaste crept into her voice. “To perform to a windshield.”

“You’re not this year’s WAMPAS Baby Star for nothing,” Buster joked. Marceline was usually in the weepies or dramas, often opposite Lon Chaney. MGM now wanted her to try comedy, especially coming off of her award, which was given each year to a young actress who was on the rise. Buster didn’t mind this decision – any girl would do. You only needed a girl for the hero to fight for. No real acting chops needed.

Marceline gave him a waxen smile, as if she were being strong in a trying situation. Clearly, Marceline thought comedy was beneath her.

The car shuttled them along the New York streets until they arrived at Sedgwick’s planned intersection. Sedgwick, once again, reviewed the script. “In this

scene, Buster, you will be with your camera and you just want to walk across the trolley tracks. Easy. This shot is mostly for background continuity. We want the audience to really see that you're in New York."

Buster peeked through the window curtains out at the bustling intersection. "Are you sure we can get a shot in this crowd?"

"Of course," Sedgwick said, but he barely glanced up from the camera directions outlined on his lap.

"Sedgwick," Buster prodded. "If it were me, we should have come earlier this morning, before there were so many people. This isn't exactly the spot to maintain anonymity."

"We need the people," Sedgwick said. "Otherwise, it would look strange for the shot."

Buster moved to push back, suggest they come back at a different time.

"We're losing time," Sedgwick snapped before Buster could get another word in. "Just go."

Buster bristled in his seat, feeling the anger swelling through his body. He gripped his prop camera until his fingertips turned white. He took a deep breath. Get through the day, he thought. Just get through today.

Trying to forget Sedgwick, he stepped out of the car. It was filming, he reminded himself. He had the comfort that filming, as Elgin said, was always the same.

He began to walk across the street in costume— a black three piece suit with a backwards newsboy cap, much like the one Elgin wore. He also carried an ancient

Pathe' newsreel camera, which was nearly as tall as he was. He walked to the starting position on the other side of the tracks. The street was busy, but then again it was nine in the morning when everyone was headed to work or go sight-seeing. Cabs were ripping down the street, honking, while people tried to herd across, all while glancing to make sure the trolley wasn't coming. The morning sun was glaring down on the intersection and the heat mixed with the noise and people jostling him and his camera set him on edge. He could really have used a stiff drink.

He tried to shake off the headache and start walking. He seemed to be walking upstream, people all heading in the opposite direction. He saw people looking at him, that flicker of recognition in their passing faces, but he kept his eyes on the car where, presumably, they were filming. A Ford swung around the intersection, but it stopped abruptly, skidding on the pavement.

“Hey Keaton!” a man yelled, leaning out of the driver's side window. “Give us a smile.”

Suddenly, the flow of people rushing past him slowed and congealed. It felt like everything slowed slightly. People pivoted – a lady with three small children, a man in a bowler with a briefcase, two young women in tennis whites – and all looked at the eye of the storm, at Buster's face. Then it erupted.

“Buster! I loved *Steamboat Bill!*”

“Can I get your autograph?”

“Where's your porkpie hat?”

“Buster! Buster! Buster!”

The crowd came closer all at once. He wasn't even sure what they intended to do once they were right up against him, but it seemed like he was being hugged from forty different angles, people grabbing at whatever they could reach. His hat slid off of his head and one arm of his jacket was torn off. It was all he could do to hold on to the tripod attached to the camera. Over the din of people shrieking, he heard police whistles, but there were too many people for them to cut through with any speed. He couldn't even see over the crowd, couldn't be sure how far it went back. All he could see was the tops of buildings and the smoggy sky.

Then, a harsh tug on his arm. As he was about to clock whoever it was that yanked him so hard, when he saw that it a line of blue-clad cops trying to make a path for him through the thicket of fans. "This way," one said, as the ushered him through and quickly into the limousine.

The door shut behind him and with it, much of the noise of the crowd.

"Wow," Marceline said, peeking outside of the pulled curtain. "I've never seen anything like that."

"This is what happens," Buster said, blotting sweat off of his forehead with a handkerchief. "Sedgwick, this is what always happens."

Sedgwick pursed his lips and glanced out of Marceline's window with her at the confused and dissipating crowd. "It's certainly a bigger kerfuffle than I had expected." He looked uncomfortably at the shooting schedule in his lap. "How long before this group passes so we can try it again?"

Buster looked at him incredulously.

"We haven't got the shot yet," Sedgwick said.

“This is going to keep happening.”

“Buster,” he said, sternly. “You mustn’t overestimate your fame.”

“I need a drink,” Buster said. Elgin pulled out a flask from his jacket pocket and handed it over. Buster stared at the silver bottle as if it were a mirage. It would feel so much better with just a swallow of what he suspected was whiskey in the flask. It would go down smooth and welcome, numbing him a little, making everything just a little hazier. But he waved it away. Things would get better.

“Let’s just move on,” Elgin added. “This intersection is too crowded right now. Let’s move to Battery and see if we have more luck.”

“I suppose we could do away with the unstructured time today and come back here at two o’clock,” Sedgwick considered. “Driver,” he rapped on the divide.

“Battery Park, please.”

Chapter 5: Battery Park

1928

Buster Keaton.....The Cameraman
Ed Sedgwick.....Director
Ed Brophy.....Unit Manager
Elgin Lessley.....First Cameraman
Reggie Lanning.....Second Cameraman
Marceline Day.....The Girl

Right up against the Hudson River was Battery Park, a green patch crisscrossed with sidewalk overlooking the steamship docks. The car pulled up on the street and Buster drew back one of the curtains to observe. There weren't that many people here, but it was a bigger area than at the intersection, so it was harder to tell. People were mostly gathered around the docks near the river, admiring a huge steamer, its massive chimneys looking nearly as tall as the skyscrapers. The aquarium sat at one end of the park where a few people waited outside, or filtered in and out.

"Okay, Buster," Sedgwick said. "This looks calmer here. So, for this scene, you and your camera will be going around and trying to get some good footage for Hearst's newsreel. You'll take some of the steamship, some of the aquarium, but the whole point of the scene is that you don't find much interesting here, so generally you'll seem dejected."

"That should be easy to pull off," Buster said.

"Yes," Sedgwick said, immersed in his script until he got the joke and gave Buster a stern look. "Well, let's not let the grass grow under our feet here. Get going. Elgin and Reggie are ready whenever you are."

“Is this really the best angle for this shot?” Buster asked, looking out of the window once again. “The car is just so far away from, well, anything. Are you still planning to shoot from inside the car?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” Sedgwick insisted.

“You’ll barely see me in the shot,” Buster said. “I’m telling you, it’s too far away.”

“It’s fine,” Sedgwick said.

“No,” Buster said. “Elgin, isn’t this too far?”

“It’s not ideal, certainly,” Elgin said. “It is going to be quite a wide shot.”

“We want to see the steamship, no? And even the aquarium? We can’t do that if we go tighter,” Sedgwick said.

“This is ridiculous,” Buster said. He nudged Brophy, a stocky, solid Italian New Yorker. “You could throw Brophy out there and you wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference. If you come out of the car and set up,” he shimmied the curtain over a little and pointed. “Right there, where those two sidewalks intersect, you’d probably get a great shot of the steamer and me.”

“Stop wasting time and get out there,” Sedgwick shouted. “We don’t want to call attention to the fact that we’re making a movie.”

“I’m not doing it.”

“Buster,” Elgin said.

Sedgwick stared him down, sitting opposite him in the car. “Stop wasting my time or I can get Mr. Mayer on the telephone.”

Everyone else in the car shifted uncomfortably.

“Okay, but it’s a junk shot,” Buster said, realizing that he sounded juvenile, getting in that last pointless jab. He adjusted his replacement newsboy cap, clutched his Pathe’ newsreel camera and got out of the car.

“Good luck, Buster,” Marceline said.

Buster walked toward the docks first, cutting a straight line through the park. He glanced around at the people nearby as if they would pounce on him. He tried to seem natural, like he was really just a goofy looking newsreel man with an old camera. Three nuns passed him going in the opposite direction, habits breezing behind them like capes. He almost bumped into a man who had his hat pulled low over his face, gripping a briefcase. But, no one stopped him. No one that passed him even gave a flicker of recognition. Relief started to flow through his body, unclenching his jaw and loosening his grip on his camera.

About ten feet from the edge of the park and the start of the Hudson, Buster started setting up his camera. He placed the three legs in the grass, making a big show of it, letting the legs swing and knock him in the knee. He hoped they were getting all of this from the car. He made a little box with his fingers to try to frame the shot of the steamship and the people gathered by the heavy ropes closing off the galley way.

He looked through the eyepiece of the camera and worked the little crank. The Pathe’ was so old that the crank was on the back of the camera instead of the side, like any modern one. They couldn’t even find the proper film for it anymore.

As he looked through the eyepiece, he panned over the body of the ship and the backs of the heads that were admiring it. He slowed his gaze and saw the captain of the ship berating two deckhands up on the deck. He watched that for a little while.

The deckhands looked flummoxed, like they weren't sure why they were in trouble. The captain was red in the face and kept gesturing toward his feet, but Buster could only see from their waists up. If it were up to him, The Little Fellow would take that footage and bring the film of the squabbling deckhands to Hearst. The manager would watch it, as would Buster's rival and his lady love, all holding their breath for what footage he captured. When they watched the altercation on board, the rival and the manager would laugh. This is what you think is news?! The Little Fellow would be indignant in this. It's an outrage! he would say. Look how the captain is mistreating the little guys.

The idea needed some finessing, it wasn't there yet, but the seed of the idea was. Plus, he was a little rusty, not having made up a gag in nearly nine months. He would just need a few more moments to think on it, to get it right. Too bad there wasn't any film in this little camera, otherwise he could have made his case to add that scene in. They could easily replicate it, but Sedgwick would likely raise his eyebrows and ask if it was in the script.

Buster panned back to the people below, who were staring at the ship. He expected to see another line of heads turned away from him, but the crowd had thinned and the people were mostly looking at something behind Buster. Was something happening at the Hotel Astor across the street from the park? He quickly turned, but there was nothing there. As he was turning back, he caught sight of the aquarium. The crowd around it was no longer looking in the aquarium's direction anymore, but at him.

Buster started to feel a creeping dread in his stomach that crawled up his throat. Not again, he thought. He saw a girl push her friend and point a finger directly at him, exposed, in the middle of an open park. Without seeming too hasty, he tried to pack up his camera. He spotted the car on the street and started to make his way back.

“Buster!” someone said behind him as if they were out of breath. “I just love your films, could I get an autograph.” A girl about fifteen Buster guessed held out an aquarium pamphlet and a pen. She looked at him so eagerly and from the way she asked him, he felt she was shy and that this took a lot of courage for her. The underdogs always got to him.

“Sure,” he said and quickly scrawled his name on top of a picture of a sting ray.

“Thank you so much!” she said.

From the distance, he heard voices drawing closer. “She got one!” he heard. “Look, she got his autograph.”

“Buster!” someone called hustling toward him from the ship.

“Is that?” a woman said, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“What’s he doing here?” a man laughed to his buddy. “Buster!”

Soon there was a little cloud of people around him, hovering, asking for autographs on random napkins or scraps of paper. Nervously Buster kept interjecting that he really had to go. Really.

“Just one more,” someone would say and shove a matchbox in front of him for him to sign.

When he looked up, the crowd had grown. Were there even this many people in the whole of the park before? Where had all of these people come from?

“Buster!” someone called from the back. “Don’t leave before you get to us!”

“He’s leaving?” someone else barked.

“Buster’s leaving!”

A girl in front of him was shoved from behind right into Buster. His camera fell from his arms and knocked a fellow on the shoulder.

“What’s the idea?” the guy said.

Buster was about to apologize, but the crowd surged forward, people from the back trying to push up to the front.

“Hey,” the man said who was hit with the camera. He tried to push through the crowd to get his hands on Buster. But he shoved another burly guy, who shoved another guy’s wife and soon the crowd was climbing all over each other, trying to get to Buster, trying to get to someone else. Buster tried to dive for his camera hoping no one had stepped on it, but once he was down on the ground, arms wrapped around his camera, he could figure how to get back up. People stepped on his back, on his legs. There were at least three fights happening that Buster could identify, people clocking one another in the face, women trying to pull their men apart. He kept being kicked from the sides, or a high heel would pierce his skin.

He tried to swat the legs away from him, but they were using him like a carpet at this point. The satisfaction that this would annoy Sedgwick soon lapsed into a small amount of panic. That sensation of being bodily overwhelmed, of having no control, no matter how much he screamed or thrashed his body. It was all he could do

to simply roll up like a potato bug and batten down the hatches until this all blew over, but it seemed as if the crowd was only growing, a huge park-wide brawl.

“Hey! Get off!” he shouted laying in the grass of Battery Park, but it couldn’t be heard over the din. “Please!” he begged. He couldn’t be sure, but he might have been crying.

Damn Sedgwick for putting him in this mess. Damn the script, the schedule, and this on-location crap. Damn MGM for sending him to New York. This whole trip, this whole movie, was a waste of his time. They were trying to shoehorn him into the MGM machine and spit him out as an obedient, well-kept MGM product. But he couldn’t work like this, this isn’t how movies should be made.

He was pinned to the grass and no one knew he was there, for once. Someone just fell on him, knees first. As she used his back to right herself, she looked again.

“Wait,” she shrieked. “He’s down here!”

People began throwing themselves at the ground to be closer to him. His replacement hat was yanked off of his head and someone was tugging on his leg. He felt a jerk from behind and someone yanked him upwards by the shoulders of his jacket. He made sure to hold steadfast to the camera in his arms. He was jerked around to find Brophy had been the one to get him up. He then tossed Buster over his shoulder and ran him out of the crowd like a football player going for a touchdown. As he was being carried out of the mob, he saw a man, maybe twenty feet away recording the whole thing, a real life newsreel cameraman.

Buster was deposited back in the car feeling like he was just in a fistfight, his whole body sore. The car drove off because people had already started banging on the windows and trying to climb on the hood.

“Elgin,” Buster said. “The flask.” He took a long pull from the silver bottle and let the cloying, sweet bourbon coat his tongue, savoring the burn going down his throat.

“What is the matter with this city?” Sedgwick said, mostly to himself. “At this rate, we won’t be able to film any background shots. The whole trip a waste.”

“It’s a waste like every movie you’ve ever made,” Buster said and took another long pull on the flask.

The car bumped along through the city. Marceline filed her nails, Sedgwick was ripping through the script with a pen in hand trying to rearrange the schedule, and the rest of the car – Buster, Elgin, Brophy, and Reggie passed around Elgin’s flask.

Everyone stayed fairly silent. Buster trained his eyes on the silver flask as it passed from hand to hand, waiting for it to be his turn again, to help make this day a little blurrier in recollection. He felt beat up and he could tell there would be bruising later tonight. He tried to push the memory of being crushed against the Battery’s grass, the stampede rollicking above him, on him.

Buster prided himself on being able to control his body. Ever since he was a child, he practiced falling. He practiced with a modification of the placement of the elbow, a shift in the alignment of the spine, a tuck of the chin. He was practically

unbreakable in a fall, because there are ways to do it if you know it's coming. If you know it's coming, there are calculations to be made.

But there, being ripped apart, he felt a kind of panic overcome him. His limbs stopped listening to his mind and he was paralyzed. He was reminded of a day shooting *Our Hospitality* in 1923. They were shooting the chase sequence where Buster's Willie McKay tries to rescue his girl from going over a waterfall. His boat upends and Willie ends up swimming down the rapids to save her. To simulate this, Elgin suggested a holdback cable so that he wouldn't actually get swept away by the current, he'd be attached to a cable that would slowly release, creating the illusion of drifting with the water. It was all going fine, he was secure with a harness and a rope attached to the bank. Then, he seemed to speed up all of the sudden, going too quickly down the river. He tugged the cable to make sure it hadn't just released too much slack, but there was no resistance. He pulled and pulled like a never-ending handkerchief out of a magician's sleeve.

The holdback cable had snapped. The water was rushing and picked up speed. His knee hit a rock jutting from the river bottom. His head snapped back to the camera, perched on the bank along with his crew. He started grappling – his feet and arms flailing around trying to catch something, but every rock was smoothed and slippery. His arm banged the rocky bottom, but it didn't slow him at all. His entire body shuddered against something, then he was entirely submerged in the rapids. He gasped for air. The water was rushing too fast. He tried to gain control, but he couldn't get his bearings.

He felt panic.

Gasp. Then he was underwater again. His lungs started to sting. He was swallowing too much water, couldn't breathe, felt delirious from the constant banging against the rapids. His eyes, which felt heavy, couldn't focus.

Eventually, they fished him out of the river, body limp and soaking. Buster came to on the banks of the river, looking up to see the faces of his crew. Elgin was a mess, having been the one to suggest the holdback cable in the first place. Buster propped himself up on his elbows.

He felt himself breathing, taking deliberate care with each breath in and each breath out. In that moment, he felt an instantaneous rage toward Elgin. He was the one who put him under that water, in those rapids.

On the banks of the river, Elgin said, "This is my fault. I'm so sorry."

And suddenly, he was soothed toward Elgin.

To Elgin, Buster said, "You'll never make a mistake again." And he hadn't.

They were approaching The Ambassador Hotel and the car slowed. Sedgwick showed no signs of noticing Buster's increasing anger, still scanning the script. In fact, Buster got the feeling that Sedgwick was mad at *him*, for what reason, he couldn't think. Sedgwick was the one who had caused all this trouble with his almighty script and for being such an MGM stooge.

Every time Sedgwick squabbled about the script or reminded them all of the timeline, Buster remembered back to his MGM contract, almost a year ago. There had been negotiations, of course. Buster wouldn't take the first offer, even if it would likely be his only one. He was used to the pat contract that guaranteed money for

product in a timely manner. Two movies a year, six year contract, all for an amount of money. It seemed to Buster an even trade.

But MGM's proposed contract was hefty.

Clause 3: The artist agrees to be directed by an assigned MGM publicist. The artist agrees to comply with the publicist's media stories, booked appearances, and distribution of artist's image and identity. Furthermore, the artist agrees to cooperate with the MGM publicist's directives and suggestions as to the artist's public image.

Clause 10: The artist agrees to conduct himself with due regard to public convention. He will not do or commit any act or thing that will tend to degrade him in society or bring him into public hatred, contempt, scorn or ridicule, or that will tend to shock, insult or offend the community or ridicule public morals, including lewd or deviant behavior, excessive drinking, extramarital affairs, or drug use.

Clause 14: The artist agrees that there is to be no baseball playing during regular work hours.

Clause 25: The artist acknowledges that any violation of these clauses is grounds for termination. Termination of contract would mean a total and complete halt on all current and future MGM and affiliated productions.

There were more. The contract was upwards of twenty-five pages. Joe had presented him the contract back in his Los Angeles office.

"It's fairly standard for a studio contract," Joe said. "It's not like they even enforce half of this stuff."

"But they could," Buster said. He knew he was being difficult and sullen, but he couldn't help himself. He knew MGM made a lot of noise about their morality

clauses and they clogged the media machinery full of fluffy stories about their stars volunteering at hospitals and their sweet family lives. Everyone in Hollywood knew those stories were all a load of crap. Billy Haines wasn't the straightest of arrows while Greta Garbo and Louise Brooks were rumored to spend time with both men and women. All three were still box office smashes.

But then again, Louis B. Mayer notoriously loathed MGM player John Gilbert for supposedly attacking him after LB made a quip at his girlfriend Greta's expense, most likely something about her abhorrent lifestyle, living in sin with John, but cavorting with women on the side. Everyone said that the reason why John was appearing in such terrible movies lately was because LB was assigning him the worst scripts he could get his hands on, payback for crossing Louis B Mayer's precious morality clause. Even if it wasn't legally enforced, LB made sure you paid the price for violation.

"Pick two things," Joe said. "Pick two things that you most care about and I'll try to negotiate them out."

"Why only two?"

"That's all we're going to get, if that," Joe said. "I'm going to tell them you're unhappy with a lot more than two."

"I am," Buster said.

"Right, but this is negotiation. You can only get so much."

Buster pondered the contract. What was most offensive to him was difficult to determine because everything seemed so absurd. Didn't everyone just want to make movies? Why all this other stuff about morality and deviance and the rest?

“I want to strike the morality clause,” Buster said.

“You won’t win that one,” Joe responded. “That’s one of LB’s favorite clauses.”

Buster ruffled in his chair. “Any others I won’t win in here? Just to save time. Is there anything in here that I can change?”

“Buster,” Joe said, that steely tone creeping into his voice. “I just want to remind you that the only reason we even really get a negotiation on this is because of Nick.” Nick Schenck, Joe’s brother, was newly appointed president at Loews, Inc., controlling owner of MGM. Hollywood, even though it peddled the idea that anyone could make it, was still largely a family affair. You had to know somebody, or better yet, be related to them. “You know as well as I do that Nick and LB do not get along, so asking Nick to strike a clause that LB insists on would not be good for business.”

“Because he’d do it,” Buster said.

“And then LB would be furious and guess who he would take that out on? My best bet would be you.”

Another knot that couldn’t be undone, Buster thought. With every frustration he came across, there were thousands of reasons to put up with it or at the very least, someone asking him to put up with it.

“They’re not going to enforce the morality clause,” Joe said. “So you like to drink. It’s not like you swing from the chandeliers or bust up speakeasies. Why would they go through the trouble of signing an established star only to trap him in a morality clause?”

It's not that Buster was worried about violating the clause. He knew it didn't mean very much. He tried to keep his personal life quiet anyway. It was just the fact that he was considering signing a contract that would bind him, publicly and privately. He didn't want someone to tell him what he could and couldn't do. He didn't even need one, really. But he also didn't want to be accused of following the damn thing either.

And it wasn't like the contract stopped at the morality clause, but this business with the publicist? The idea of someone coming into his life and rearranging it, casting things out and adding others in, telling him where to be seen and where not to, who he should and should not be friends with. There were rumors that stars from Rudolph Valentino to Mary Pickford were strongly encouraged to get plastic surgery by their publicists to thin out the nose, pull back the ears, stretch out that wrinkle. Greta Garbo once told him that in her contract, LB and her publicist had to approve of boyfriends and if she ever wanted to get married, they'd have to approve of the wedding. Not that she was interested, she said, but the power was there.

"I don't want a publicist."

"I can try for that one," Joe said. "What else?"

"Baseball."

"Out of all the things here and you want baseball?"

"Strike it," Buster said.

In the car on the way back from Battery Park, Buster worried. Would he be blamed for this stall in filming? It was Sedgwick's fault, but he could see the argument where it was Buster's fame that could be blamed. He couldn't tell how

eager LB was to throw Buster off the lot. Buster planned to call Irving that night to tell him about how the movie was progressing, or rather, not progressing, just to cover his bases. He couldn't afford to lose this contract.

Chapter 6: Chaplin Studios

1927

Buster Keaton.....The Little Fellow

Charlie Chaplin.....The Tramp

After an afternoon of filming one of the final scenes, Buster couldn't shake the conversation he had with Joe. He kept trying to think of other alternatives. There had to be other big studios looking for a comedian like Paramount or Warner Brothers. The more he thought about it, the more he was actually maybe coming around to the idea of a bigger studio. With Buster's reputation, a big outfit might even let him have his own production company. Not to mention, he'd actually have the resources to do what he wanted. At the very least, Natalie would be happy with the bump with the increased salary – nearly double what he made now at UA, so he heard.

But he felt nervous whenever he thought about MGM and fat LB Mayer sitting in his big plush chair, probably wearing a crisp suit made entirely of money, rejecting as many movies as he produced. LB's reputation was that he hated comedy and comedians, thinking them low-humor, essentially klutzes somehow allowed on screen. Buster had heard that LB was confused why comedies made money at all.

Buster got in his car parked on the street outside the studio. He cranked his window down and waved to a few men who were heading out as well. He sat there for a moment, key in the ignition.

He glanced at his watch. 6:15. He turned the key, pressed down on the clutch and headed north ten minutes to La Brea, to Charlie's studio. The Chaplin Studios campus was enormous, nearly five acres, housing tennis courts, a pool, several

buildings that all had the same English countryside feel, cream walls with crisscrossing dark wood beams.

“Hello, old boy,” Charlie said when Buster knocked on his office window.

“Drink?”

Charlie poured two fingers of bourbon for each of them. His office was more like a little apartment. It had a couch behind a coffee table, a bar, desk, bookshelves, photographs of his wife and two children. There were actually a lot of photographs of his family, which Buster found surprising since Charlie and Lita were going through a divorce. Not only that, but a divorce that people were actually writing about in the newspapers. Natalie was following it closely, and as much as Buster avoided hearing about it – truly, it made him feel grimy – news of it couldn’t be avoided. Word had it that it was going to cost Charlie over \$600,000. Buster couldn’t imagine a woman who was so terrible that he’d pay that much just to be rid of her. Natalie read him bits from the newspapers that Lita said Charlie pointed a gun at her and tried to get her to have an abortion. He was also accused in the papers of having an unnaturally high sexual drive and that he asked Lita to perform “perverted” sexual acts. Buster didn’t buy it. Charlie was aggressive, but not that aggressive. He wondered what it must be like to have your sex life discussed in papers – not just the women you’re seen out with, but your actual proclivities. It must be like having a spy hanging in on your most intimate moments. You are acting naturally, unwatched, and then suddenly, you realize you’ve been on-set the whole time.

“How are my hand-me-downs treating you?” Charlie asked, reclining on his couch. Buster had purchased the building and lot of Buster Keaton Studios from Charlie in '24, which Charlie never let Buster forget.

“Swell,” Buster said, evenly. “Are your boys recovered after last month?” Buster organized a baseball tournament between different Hollywood studios every year.

Charlie harrumphed. “We only lost because you hire your guys based on baseball stats instead of comedy.”

“Just got a guy who played for the A’s last year,” Buster said.

“Goddammit,” he said. “You come to intimidate me for next season?”

“It’s just an added bonus,” Buster said. “But actually, I came to ask your advice.”

“My advice?”

“Gloating is not your color,” Buster said. “Kidding aside, I am thinking of switching my contract. To a bigger studio, MGM, maybe Paramount.”

“Ha-ha, Buster. Very funny.”

“Yeah.”

Charlie adjusted, sitting himself up straighter. “Really?”

Buster shrugged.

“Don’t do it,” Charlie said. “That’s all I have to say.”

“They do have more resources,” Buster parroted Joe and Irving.

Charlie collapsed back on the couch. “Oh, someone’s got your goat, old boy. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is a machine, like any other. It’s going to gobble you up, put you on an assembly line, and spit you back out.”

“Joe said --”

“Your brother-in-law trying to pass the buck? Well, I guess he is a money man.”

Buster swirled his whiskey in his glass before taking his last gulp. He couldn’t remember why he came here suddenly. He hated that he sought Charlie’s advice, that he, in some ways, wanted his approval. Even though, whatever Charlie said – sign the contract, don’t sign the contract – Buster would want to do the opposite. Either way, Charlie would only serve to grind Buster’s gears.

“The money would be nice,” Buster said. “I can barely squeeze a penny out of United.”

“Let me tell you,” Charlie said. “Money mustn’t be our lord and master. We must do as we want, lest we lose our souls, our creative spirit. If you hadn’t caught it, I’m spending most of the money I have on divorcing Lita. But \$600,000 is nothing when compared to the imprisonment I lived through as her husband. As far as our films go, they must cost what they cost.”

When Charlie got on a roll, he could really monologue, turning the volume up on that British accent, like he was playing Hamlet, skull in hand. Charlie had a short memory if he said movies “must cost what they cost.” He was a founding member of UA, which nearly went bankrupt on his theory. Because of all the gossip in the papers, UA even put a hold on Chaplin productions.

Why had he come? Because Charlie was the highest grossing comedian? Because, if he had to admit it, he was a visionary in certain respects? He took the last swallow of bourbon and set it on the coffee table next to Charlie's feet.

"Don't do it, old boy," Charlie said. "You'll regret it. They'll hurt you by trying to help you. They'll throw writers and directors and actors at you so quickly that soon you won't even recognize the movie you're in."

Buster nodded. "Too many cooks?"

"Exactly."

Buster looked at Charlie sitting on the couch, which he realized was indented and crumpled because Charlie had been sleeping on it. Charlie's clothing, too, was wrinkled, his hair sticking up in the back. He looked tired, slightly gray around the eyes and his shoulders sagged.

He wasn't sure this was the man he should be listening to, in particular because it was difficult for Buster not to conflate Charlie with his on-screen Little Tramp. People often mentioned to Buster the similarity between Charlie's Little Tramp and Buster's Little Fellow, but Buster didn't see it. Just because they were both down-on-their-luck and short in stature didn't mean they had the same moral code. The Little Fellow was an innocent, the uncorrupted underdog. The Little Tramp was a cheat, willing to trick and steal what he desired. Was Charlie telling him the truth? Or was he trying to get Buster to stay at UA so that Buster's movies would remain low-budget and therefore low-quality? Charlie was the top earner, but Charlie also got more money to make his pictures.

More and more, Buster was convinced that the Little Tramp had become a political vehicle for Charlie, which Buster had no patience for. Charlie was always hoping his films would *mean* something; communicate some kind of important message. He acted like he was the only one who did anything worthwhile in his films. But the crying! The snickering! The Little Tramp broke Buster's cardinal rule of comedy: You don't laugh at your own jokes.

Chapter 7: The Keaton Italian Villa

1927

Natalie Talmadge Keaton.....The Wife
Buster Keaton.....The Husband

The Keaton Italian Villa, as the family started calling it, was midway down the palm tree-lined block. Buster was coming home from picking up cigars for the party at his house that night. He drove down Lillian Way, passing the homes of neighbors Gloria Swanson, Rudolph Valentino, the famous home of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks called “Pickfair”, Lionel Barrymore, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd. Chaplin always called their massive houses “Breakaways” because they seemed to be springing up so fast and were nothing like the quality of a finely constructed British castle. But out of every house on the block, Keaton’s was the biggest.

Every time he drove his car up the long, ivied drive, he was impressed with its grandiosity. He felt like he was royalty every time he drove up or walked the lavish outdoor staircase to the front door. He still had a hard time believing all of this belonged to him. Buster sunk all of his savings - \$300,000 - on the house, but Joe assured him, property was always an investment. After his latest conversation with Joe, however, Buster drove up the drive gripping the steering wheel tightly, wondering what each stone in the driveway cost.

The paved drive let out into a white-stoned courtyard, a circular fountain in the middle. The house itself was constructed in the Italian style, per Natalie’s preference after a trip to Italy as a teenager. All the walls were smooth and cream colored with stucco red shingles and dark mahogany windows and doors. Each

doorknob and window latch was made of glossy brass. The entire downstairs was lined in smooth Italian tile, the color of which reminded Buster of a perfectly baked piecrust.

Upstairs, Natalie occupied the west wing, not wanting the morning sun, so she could sleep late. She had the largest master bedroom, her bed on a platform that raised it above the floor. There was a little cove for her vanity and built-in closets and shelves. She also had a dressing room filled with hat boxes, tea dresses, gowns, long kidskin gloves, jewelry, shoes, stockings, furs, tennis skirts, riding pants, and light cotton blouses. She also had a sewing room and a parlor where she took her tea.

Buster occupied the east end of the house, having his own handful of rooms, but he really only used his bedroom, slightly smaller than Natalie's. The walls were navy with green plaid curtains. Natalie decorated it, wanting to make it look like a hunting getaway, even including a stuffed boar's head on the wall that probably cost an arm and a leg. Buster made no comment, but thought it might be overkill. But he liked the view of the backyard from his bedroom window and the early morning light.

Between them were the boys' rooms. Each had their own and then a playroom which connected both. The nanny's bedroom was across the hall.

The two maids had a bedroom on the ground floor by the kitchen. Natalie wanted to make the den off of living room into a room for the gardener because there really were so many flowers.

Before they had the Italian Villa, almost two years ago, Buster had built another house in Westchester Place, designing it himself. He chose every square of carpet, wood, wallpaper, and doorknob. He stood on the plot of land to see which

angle would get the best morning sun, which the best view of sunset. He worked closely with an architect and his technical director Fred Gaborie. The place was built when Buster and his family were up in Oregon filming *The General*.

When they all got back to Los Angeles, Buster drove them straight from the train station to the house on a quiet street. He handed Natalie the keys to the house and said, “What do you think?”

“How lovely,” she said. “But who is it for?”

“For us,” Buster said, hoisting little Buster on his shoulders.

“Oh no, Buster,” she said. “It’s too small. There’s no room for the servants. Where would the nanny sleep? I can already tell there’s no room, just from the outside.”

He sold the damn thing to Eddie Mannix and his wife. He didn’t lose anything in the deal – he actually made out. But that house had become more than a building. In his mind, it was the ideal place to raise his sons, a dream house where he imagined nothing could go wrong. It was a place he wanted to try to get back some of that happiness he and Natalie once had, like when they first got married.

He walked up the front steps and entered into the foyer, a large open area lined with archways to other parts of the house. He put his box of Cubans, hat and keys on a side table.

“Nate?” he called, as he walked into their sunken living room.

“Hello, dear,” she said, coming from a room away.

He went in search of her, looking in the kitchen and glancing out in the backyard before he found her in the bar. He finally found her unloading a box, pulling things out and letting the paper shred fall to the floor.

“What are these?” he asked.

“New champagne glasses. Crystal, like the Marion had at her last party. Don’t you remember how beautiful they looked in the candlelight on the table? All us girls were talking about them at the time.”

“I didn’t remember.”

“Why would you?” she said, still unearthing each glass from its landscape of shred.

“How much were they?” he asked, trying to sound even. Just a query, just wondering.

Her movements slowed and he could trace the movement of her left eyebrow, arching high.

“I’m sure not much more than those hunting rifles you bought last week,” she said, sweetly. She grinned at him, in a tight way, her upper lip not even curling under. Natalie had started to keep score. She had always liked to go shopping with her mother and sisters. But lately, it seemed she shopped and spent money out of spite. Every time he bought something – hunting rifles, a new suit, a trip up to San Francisco – she matched him with a pearl bracelet, expensive riding boots for the boys, fine silk dresses.

“Just checking,” he said, putting his arms in a defensive position.

“I think this is going to be our best barbeque yet,” she said, doubling down on her unloading efforts. “I bought a new dress, I’ve got that caterer you like, and Marion and WR are coming. Plus, both my sisters are in town and have given me their unequivocal RSVP.”

“Sounds fine,” he said. “I’m going to go check on the boys and then go change.”

“Don’t wake them if they’re napping,” she said, carefully setting the last glass on the bar counter.

He watched for another second, unpacking the three boxes. Plucking each glass, holding it up to the sunlight out the window, dusting it off with her fingertips. She found one with a smudge and she cradled it, licked her thumb and began rubbing at the spot. Held it up. Rubbed. Held it up. Perfect.

He wasn’t sure when Natalie got so finicky. Perhaps it was always there, but he had never noticed. They had been married for seven years. It had been about five since he could last remember touching Natalie in any real way. It was mostly while dancing at some party or during an accidental brush that they would both apologize for.

He couldn’t pinpoint what he had done wrong along the way. Natalie had proposed to him in a letter, so maybe he had started making mistakes even before they were married. He still remembered it: *Dear Buster, If you care for me at all, you’ll send for me. Yours, Nate.*

It’s not as if they had promised anything to each other at that time – he moved to Los Angeles and she stayed behind in New York. They had been on a few dates,

but Buster had been going on a lot of dates at that time. But there was something about the boldness of that letter that struck him, coming from a girl who usually waited two beats before she responded to him, her eyes wide and slightly frantic.

Days later, he kept thinking about it and he started carrying it in his jacket pocket. He asked Joe what to do. All Joe said was “welcome to the family.” Buster and Natalie were married a month later.

Chapter 8: The Party

Natalie Talmadge Keaton.....The Wife
Buster Keaton.....The Husband
Joe Schenck.....Brother-in-Law
Norma Talmadge.....Sister-in-Law
Constance “Dutch” Talmadge.....Sister-in-Law
Irving Thalberg.....Boy Wonder
Norma Shearer.....Mrs. Wonder
Dorothy Sebastian.....Uninvited

That evening, Buster stood by their bar near the back patio. The doors and windows were open and the summer air was breezing through, turning to nighttime. They had hung oriental lanterns crisscrossing the backyard that let off a soft yellow glow. Candles were everywhere, giving off their small flickering light. Buster jokingly told Natalie how they were going to burn the whole house down and their guests too. She gave a small smile and then informed Delores, their maid, that guests would be arriving momentarily and all the candles were not lit and the boys were still running around without dinner.

“We’re about to have over a hundred guests over. Can you please brighten up? You look miserable,” Natalie said.

“That’s just my face.”

She exhaled swiftly. “I’m going to go see about the caterer.”

Buster poured himself a drink. He hated the beginnings of parties. Actually, he hated the middle of parties too. But at least in the middle, there was some cover, some people you could hole up with in the billiards room until guests started to leave. But at the beginning, you’re just waiting in a tux for people you may or may not like to show up.

They had a Sunday barbeque every month. At first, Natalie invited just a few friends over for a barbeque, kept it casual, but over the years the party grew. The hors d'oeuvres changed from a plate of olives and cheese to fancy asparagus tips au gratin and canapé of anchovies. They still called it their Sunday barbecue, but it became black tie. It seemed right though, calling their black tie event a casual affair. Then, if anyone showed up with a sweater tied around their shoulders or a day dress, you knew they didn't really belong.

But this Sunday, Buster wasn't in the mood. He couldn't stop thinking about what Joe said at lunch about nixing the flood. He had been thinking what would be a good enough substitute. Hurricane? Twister? Did it even really need to be a natural disaster? Any of those would likely offend Joe's sense of what the public would like. He had looked it up and hurricanes killed more people this year than floods.

And then there was the idea of switching contracts to MGM. He kept worrying Joe made the move sound like a suggestion, only to later realize that the deal had already been made. But Joe had never led him astray before. He had only ever given him his honest opinion and, every time, Buster trusted him, and it ended up turning out for the best.

Slouching over the bar, Buster concluded it would be one of those nights that he would drink in the hopes that it would make the evening fun. He poured himself a bourbon and pulled at his bowtie.

"Loosenin' your bowtie at the beginning of the night? That can't be a good sign," he heard a woman's southern drawl behind him.

Even if you hadn't met a person, there were traits assigned to them, things that you had heard. If you were loose, if you were boring, if you were a drunk, if you were cheap or beautiful or rich. Everyone, like fireflies, let off a certain glow. Rarely was there someone whom nobody had heard of. If you hadn't heard of them, they probably weren't worth hearing about.

Of course, Buster knew who Dorothy Sebastian was. He knew she was Southern, and deep Southern too. Her accent palpable, people said. But when Buster heard it just now, he felt like it was exaggerated. Buster had spent time in the South off and on his entire childhood and he'd never heard such gaudiness in an accent.

Word had it that this Dorothy tried to make it in the New York theaters a few years ago, but they said no one wants an Ophelia who calls her lover "Haymlet." So maybe the accent was authentic. Regardless, in the pictures, it doesn't matter what you sound like. She got on the MGM payroll and apparently she did not miss a party.

"I'm Dorothy Sebastian," she said extending a hand. Underneath the twang, Buster noticed first was how smooth it was. Velvet and self-assured. Perhaps the phoniness he was detecting was just a symptom of leaning into the accent instead of suppressing it.

She wore a black sleeveless dress with a skinny diamond rimmed collar, sheer black fabric covered her collarbones with a darker fabric underneath which dipped into a sweetheart top. The thin line of diamonds trailed down the bodice of the dress in swirling patterns that made her look like a piece of whimsical architecture. She wore a thick scarf around her forehead with a sparkling diamond brooch like a swami. Her hair was curled and tufted around it. Her eyes were dark, like her hair,

and her lips as well. He had never seen her on screen, but he could tell she must be captivating.

“I don’t usually show up this early to parties, but I figured since I don’t know the host, I may as well. Joanie—Joan Crawford told me to come.”

“Buster Keaton,” he said and took her hand. “Uninvited is the best kind of guest, Ms. Sebastian.”

She laughed in a completely unpracticed way, too loud, too wide. “Please, call me Dorothy. Sebastian’s not even my real name,” she said. “How’s about fixing a girl a drink?”

“What’ll you have?”

“What kind of bathtub you got here?”

“I assure you, it’s all real. Or at least, mostly,” he said, waving a hand over the selection like the garcon in a French restaurant.

“You know, it’s funny, but I actually kind of like the bootlegged stuff. Ever had something called Pink Murder?”

“It sounds delightful,” he said.

She laughed that big laugh again. “Want to try it?”

“I think I have to.”

She got behind the bar and took two glasses from the pile at the end like a regular barkeep. “You got raspberries?”

“Should have, I think. Back there somewhere.” He motioned at the fully stocked wall behind the bar of every kind of alcohol, bitters, vermouth, jars of onions,

olives, a cup of celery stalks, a few different salts, and then an entire counter of bar tools.

“That’s really helpful,” she said, giving him her best Buster Keaton deadpan. She rifled around near the lemons and limes that were spliced into delicate fan arrangements on silver plates. “Got ‘em,” she held them over her head like a prize.

She started to muddle them with a mortar and pestle.

“I saw that movie of yours, the one about the trains,” she said.

“*The General*. What did you think?”

“I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or to hold my hat, to be honest with you. But I thought it was just swell, really genius.”

Another flippant accolade. People always told him they couldn’t tell if he was a comedian or an acrobat. Was he supposed to be amazing or funny? If you couldn’t tell, well it made you a genius somehow. Chaplin was satisfied to be called a genius. Buster, all he wanted was to make people laugh.

“I hear the South didn’t take too well to it,” he said. “Which is funny because it shows the South winning for once.”

“Why did you make it that way?”

“I like an underdog.”

She didn’t laugh, but she looked like she was about to. “You’re a funny one, Mr. Keaton. I know some northerners who do not see it that way.”

“I’m not a northerner,” he said.

“Horseradish.”

“I was born in Kansas, but I travelled more than I stayed put. This house, this is the place I’ve lived the longest.”

“So you’re a true Californian?”

“I like California.” He paused for a moment. “You know, when we moved out here, my wife used to say that Hollywood was just a colony of New York.”

Dorothy sputtered out a laugh. “Why would anyone want to be in New York when you can be here? Then again, a girl from Alabama is just happy to be anywhere.”

She handed him the glass filled to the brim with ice bathed in a muddy pink liquid. They clinked glasses and he took a sip of the sour, pungent drink.

“This tastes like turpentine,” he said placing the highball squarely on the wooden bar.

She held hers up with a flourish. “But it’s pink.”

Guests started to trickle in and then, it seemed, the rest got there all at once.

Buster was beckoned away from the bar with Dorothy to the foyer with Natalie to greet the guests. Of course, Buster’s guys showed up first because none of them were famous enough to worry about being late. Fred Gabourie who everyone called Gabe, Clive Bruckman, Dev Jennings, Bert Haines, Carl Harbaugh, and Al St. John.

“Natalie, you got any of those sugar coated almonds this time?” Al asked as he clambered in the doorway.

“By the piano, in the den,” she said.

Natalie shot Buster a look. He knew she thought his crowd was a bunch of ragtag lost boys who came for the booze and food, having no etiquette or sense of occasion. As the group passed back into the living room, she said, “I hope they don’t bang so much on the piano tonight.”

“They like to play some ragtime,” Buster said, remembering how much fun they all had last month, feet tapping to some pseudo-ragtime beats. None of them knew how to play the piano, but they did have enthusiasm.

“The piano was completely out of tune for little Buster’s lesson,” she said. “If they keep it up, we’ll have the piano tuner on retainer.”

“Sounds expensive,” Buster said.

“That’s not my fault.”

He remembered once when Natalie would have been right there with them, trying to bang out a tune. Sure, she was always shy, but at least she used to be game. Now, it felt as if her only mode was irritation. Buster thought that she was that way because she decided to be, for one reason or another. No one else he knew was so committed to seeing the world and her life as something that is irksome. Even this party, which she was throwing for fun, was annoying to her, every step of the way.

There had been so many of these nags, these tiffs between them. It felt like Natalie didn’t even care to try to negotiate anymore, not that she ever did. He felt they were living two separate lives, in two separate houses, having two separate parties, but they overlapped in time and space, without anyone realizing, carrying on as if this

blending weren't fantastical. They were on two different trains, on parallel tracks, but heading in the opposite directions.

The doors swung open, no knock, and in blew Norma Talmadge, Natalie's older sister. Norma insisted on outdoing every other lady at the party with her clothing and jewelry. In fact, the society papers called her one of the best-dressed women of the century. Tonight was no exception, though Buster thought she was prone to going over the top. Tonight she was wearing a dusty blue gown, with a three-foot train and a diamond headband, her dark hair piled on top of her head. Her eyes were so charcoaled that it almost looked like she had been given two black eyes. Her eyelashes were like scraggly tree branches, clumping and twisting, like she had gone over them with a mascara brush one or ten too many times.

"Natalie, dear," she said, grasping both her shoulders and kissing her on the cheek. "The house looks simply stunning."

"Buster," she said, clipped, as usual. Norma and Buster had never warmed up to each other. "How nice to see you."

"Norma, quite an outfit," Buster said.

"Aren't you sweet," Norma said, grimacing.

Joe followed behind her. When Joe and Norma first got married, people always remarked on the age difference between them. Even Norma called him Daddy, making it a joke. At the time, she was twenty-two, but looked sixteen and he was thirty-eight but looked forty-five. Now, she was thirty-three and it seemed like she was trying to cover what few wrinkles she had collected with globs makeup. It made her look not only older, but out of touch with the fresh-faced twenty year old starlets

that were on screen now. Joe, standing behind her, didn't seem like he could be that much older than her anymore.

"Where can a girl get a drink?" Dutch shouldered into the doorway between Joe and Norma.

"Dutchy, you can get a drink in the barroom," Natalie said.

"You're an angel, Nate," Dutch said. Dutch, as she was called, was a little sportier than her sisters with her sleek bob haircut and a straight, ankle length dress. She had just been divorced for the second time and was spending some time in Los Angeles to "heal" as their mother Peg called it. To Buster, it seemed like she was just getting sloshed every night and trying to find husband number three.

Buster noticed Joe, rolling his eyes. Norma elbowed him. "Daddy," she said, but Buster didn't think it was that cute anymore. "She's in pain."

"She will be tomorrow, at least," Buster said. Joe laughed, but Natalie and Norma both shot him that identical ice-cold look.

Joe interrupted the tension by adding more. "Buster, I wanted to apologize for perhaps saying too much at lunch," Joe said. "It's been a long week and I guess I snapped. I meant to tell you in a better way."

"Not to worry," Buster said. "I'll try to talk to Irving tonight."

"Atta' boy. I knew you'd come around. And it's really going to be better for you," Joe said.

"What's he talking about, Buster?" Natalie asked. "Irving Thalberg?"

"Nothing to worry you about just yet," he said.

"Tell me," she said. "Please."

“Norma, we should get out of their way,” Joe said, guiding her by the waist down the hall.

“Has this got something to do with MGM?”

“Natalie, not now,” Buster said, irritation rising.

But then Natalie’s crowd started coming in full force. Marion Davies and WR Hearst, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Louise Brooks, Colleen Moore, Clara Bow, Greta Garbo, and Joan Crawford.

“Okay, Nate,” Buster said after what seemed like the hundredth kiss on the cheek. “I’m going to get a drink.”

“Not even half the people are here yet,” she whined.

“And when they get here, I’ll see them at the bar,” he said.

Buster had finally reached a point when the alcohol had settled in his limbs, making them feel heavy and relaxed. He felt a fresh wave of energy and the party seemed like it might be fun after all. He was about to grab one more and try to find that Sebastian girl. Ever since he’d had that terrible drink, he’d been thinking about her, trying to catch her eye across the yard, tracking which room she was in.

As he headed to the bar, he bumped into Irving and his wife, Norma Shearer.

“Buster,” Irving said and gave him a stiff handshake. Buster took Norma’s gloved hand and kissed it.

“Congratulations to you both,” Buster said. The pair had gotten married only a few weeks earlier in what was the biggest, and likely most expensive, party of the

year. Women everywhere celebrated because the gorgeous Norma Shearer had been waiting for Irving to propose to her for years.

“It’s been such a rush. I couldn’t even take time off to go on a Honeymoon,” Norma said.

“Norma’s in Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg*. Have you seen it yet? Norma is so impressive,” Irving said, beaming at his wife.

“Stop,” Norma said, but laughed. “Anyone looks good when the budget’s a million bucks.”

“A million?” Buster sputtered.

“Uh-huh,” Norma said, though she was more focused on admiring Irving’s profile. They were less annoying before they were married, when Norma had a temper like a matchstick and Irving could be found miserable on a couch somewhere.

“Buster,” Irving said. “Joe told me he’s talked to you a little about MGM.”

“He has,” Buster said. “But I’m not sold. I made an appointment with Paramount next week, see if we could work something out.”

“Didn’t Paramount just pick up Harold Lloyd?”

Buster’s heart sank. No way Paramount would take two comedians, especially that close together. Damn. He felt one of the last tethers of hope, unfurl and disappear.

“Well, it never hurts to explore options,” Buster said, parroting Joe.

“Yes, yes,” Irving said. “Well, I’d love having you at MGM. Don’t believe the rumors. LB’s not that bad. Plus, I’ve just got to say, I am such a fan of your work. In

The General, when you're pumping that little dingy of a train car along, I could barely breath that's how hard I was laughing."

"It's true," Norma said. "Irving's the first in line for your pictures."

He couldn't tell if this was flat-out false flattery or perhaps it was genuine. Irving didn't seem like he knew what guile was. He seemed too chipper and clear-eyed to be setting a trap.

"I won't keep you to talk business at your own party, but do consider it. I would take it as a personal accomplishment to get to work with you."

"Wow," Buster said. "Thanks. I'll give it some thought."

"Let me know how your Paramount meeting goes," Irving said. If anybody else had said this to Buster, he would have been furious and embarrassed, but Irving didn't seem to mean anything by it. He wasn't trying to get a dig in, wasn't trying to embarrass him.

"Will do," he said. "Enjoy the party."

Dorothy was right and after a few, Pink Murders really do taste pretty good.

Buster had found Dorothy chatting animatedly with Joan Crawford, but he pulled her onto the dance floor and then to the bar and then back to the dance floor. They started passing out Pink Murders to everyone they could convince and even pulled a prank on Fairbanks by switching out his scotch for one.

The dance floor was on the patio right outside the glass doors to the living room and bar overlooking their long pool. Natalie had lighted candles floating in the water and had the gardener string up lights in the high trees around the property so it looked as though the party were taking place under a sky of stars brighter than the

real thing. The dance floor was a kaleidoscope of couples, shifting and turning, jumping, spilling drinks and laughing about it.

“Whoops,” Dorothy sang as someone splashed her with something out of a martini glass as their partner whipped them in a turn. The entire drink was now soaking through her elbow length gloves. Dark splotchy stains grew down her arm.

“Can I get a cloth for you?” Buster asked, hoping this snafu wouldn’t spoil the fun. He tried to gauge how upset she might be.

“No matter,” she said and slid the glove off, throwing it behind her. “Gloves are a little stuffy anyway.”

She put her newly naked hand in his. It was smooth and dry. Her fingers were long and spindly, knobby even, with nails clipped short. He liked the feeling of her hand in his, the way she braided her fingers in his as they danced.

The band finished one of their upbeat songs, the dancing crowd taking a momentary breather. A few people clapped, someone gave a whistle. The band started again, but this time with a slow number, something wistful and dreamy. Couples formed and they laid into each other, swaying.

Buster took Dorothy’s hand and with the other, her waist. She nestled in closely, leaning her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelled like oranges and vanilla. Beneath that, there was the slight sour odor of sweat, but he liked that even better. He liked knowing a secret about her.

He knew it was far too public, far too careless to behave so intimately with another woman, but he really didn’t care. He usually guarded the division between Natalie and other women well, per his agreement with her family. But for the first

time, he felt like being careless. He felt like careless was well covered territory for Dorothy. He felt good. She made him feel light and carefree, for the first time in quite a while. He gripped her waist more firmly, leaning his chin on the crown of her head.

“Buster.” He glanced around and found Natalie right behind him. He let Dorothy’s hand drop as he turned to her, instinct. “Care to dance?” she asked, smiling. Then, “dear.”

“Of course,” he said. He turned back to Dorothy.

“Thanks for the dance,” she said, giving Natalie a deferential nod, then exiting the floor.

Natalie assumed position and Buster placed his hand on her waist and met her hand in the air. They spun, keeping time with the music. Natalie looked around at the faces passing by, smiling close-lipped, nodding at their guests.

“The band is swell,” he said.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked.

“Just a new kid, doesn’t know many people.”

“Please don’t embarrass me,” she said quickly, still not meeting his eye.

“What—“

“You know what I mean,” she said.

He did know, but he, until this moment, didn’t think that she did.

Natalie had difficult pregnancies, both boys. She was bedridden for Robert, in the last few months. She insisted she and Buster take separate rooms in the house, just so she could sleep. She hated the way her body changed and how difficult it was to

move or dress or go out of the house. She didn't have, what you would call, a mothering instinct. Buster remembered once when he came home early right after Robert was born, he found Natalie alone with him in the living room, without the nanny. He thought that was unusual. But he stayed undetected in the doorframe and watched her watch Robert. She held him away from her body, holding his neck as the nanny always instructed. She just stared at him, head cocked, as if trying to decide what she thought about him. Even with their first born, Buster Jr., she wasn't a nurturer.

Soon after Robert was born, Buster thought they should start sleeping in the same bed again. He came into her bedroom one night, assuming it would be okay, but she refused. She said she would never be pregnant again. She couldn't do it.

"That's okay, Nate," Buster had said. "We don't need to have more children."

She looked relieved, like she had been worried about telling him. Buster still made to get into bed with her and that relief vanished.

"Buster," she said. "Didn't you understand what I said?"

"Just because we don't want more children doesn't mean we can't share a bed."

"Yes," she said. "It does. I can't take any risk."

"There are other ways," Buster said.

"But none of it is effective one hundred percent of the time," she said. Then she started to cry. "I can't do it again, Buster." He tried to comfort her, but she told him to go.

As they danced, the music warbled out the final note of the song, carrying it louder, then soft. The crowd clapped and the band started up again, the trumpet blasting out a note and the rest of the band joined in, bashing out a rollicking tune.

“I have to go check on,” Natalie said, taking her hand back. “Something.” She walked through the crowd back into the house. She glanced back to survey the party, making sure everyone was taken care of, blinking quickly, her eyes wide and glossy.

Chapter 9: Roscoe Arbuckle's Bungalow

1927

Roscoe Arbuckle.....The Accused
Buster Keaton..... The Friend

Buster found Roscoe's front door wide open.

He called in "Roscoe?"

There was no answer.

He crept inside, looking around corners.

"Roscoe?"

A shirt and socks were dumped on the floor in the dining room where the dining room table and chairs had disappeared. A stack of five or six crusty plates were stacked on the table. A glass had spilled and the wine smelled sour, leaving a sticky dried-blood colored stain on the hardwood.

He ventured further in the house, seeing the same little messes along the way – crooked golden pictures on the hallway walls, crumbled and used napkins, an empty bottle of hooch, pants, suspenders, a bowler. Buster followed them like breadcrumbs to the backyard. There was smashed glass on the patio. Roscoe had turned his garage into a viewing room and the door was ajar.

"Roscoe?" Buster said into the darkened room. He saw a flicker of white light and heard a projector going.

"Fucking bitch," Roscoe snarled.

Buster edged into the room. He found Roscoe on the floor, Indian style, staring up at the screen. It was an old picture of his – *The Life of the Party*, Buster guessed. There was a scene where a car pulled up full of young women in light

breezy dresses and floppy summer hats. They all preened out of the car, where Fatty was waiting. They stroked him in a parade. And then, just for a second, one of the girls – hair obsidian, eyes smoky black – turned her famous face to the camera. It was Virginia Rappe.

Roscoe threw a full glass of brown liquid at the projection screen. It thumped and spilled and thudded on the carpet floor.

“Fucking bitch!” He said louder.

Buster joined him on the floor. He pushed aside a few plates of half eaten chicken drumsticks. He grabbed one of the bottles from Roscoe’s stash.

“This is whiskey, right?” he asked.

He grunted a yes. Roscoe smelled like old sweat and alcohol and grease. He looked, even in the dim light, like he had gained weight since the last time Buster saw him. His face was bloated and deeply pink so that when Buster looked him in the eyes, it was like they were the small beady eyes of a piglet. His hair, the little of it that was left on top of his head, was mussed and sticking up at odd angles. Yes, he was drunk, but it was more than that. He was tired.

“I see you’ve been doing some redecorating,” Buster said cautiously.

“Fired ‘em all,” Roscoe said.

“The servants?” he asked.

“They deserved it,” he slurred. “Selling my secrets, they were.”

“You don’t have any secrets,” he said.

“Course I don’t. But they were selling my champagne bottles. They were selling my sheets. Telling people I have always loved ice in my drinks. Bastards. All because of that fucking bitch.”

Roscoe heaved up onto his feet and scurried back to the projector to rewind the film to that moment when you can see Virginia’s face. Buster wondered how many times he had re-watched this very clip.

What happened on that Labor Day of 1921 was difficult to understand, even now, six years later. But Roscoe was the collateral damage, practically quarantined to his small home, raving and brooding.

Roscoe had gone up to San Francisco that Labor Day weekend to host a party at the St. Francis. From what Buster heard, it was so hot that Roscoe declared it an afternoon pajama party and people came draped in bed sheets and breezy cotton bathrobes. They plopped ice cubes in their martinis and orange blossom cocktails. They had the concierge of the St. Francis bring up as many glasses as possible but that proved to be too few still and people resorted to drinking out of empty liquor bottles, the punch ladle, teacups, someone even had a flower vase, the roses flung to the carpet.

But because no one was paying attention, because every one was two seas over, nobody saw what happened to Virginia Rappe. Or rather, people said they saw, but the accounts were varied and changed over time. Some people said Roscoe followed her into the bedroom. Others said she pulled him in with her. Virginia’s friend, Maude Delmont, who came with her to the party said that Roscoe attacked

Virginia, raped her, and because of his enormous weight, he ruptured her bladder, which lead to her death two days later.

During the trials, the newspapers spewed out damning headline after headline.

FATTY ARBUCKLE CHARGED WITH ACTRESS'S MURDER: FILM STAR
DENIES ALL DEATH BLAME

PRETTY VICTIM OF ARBUCKLE'S GIN FROLIC MURDERED

"HIS MONEY WAS CAUSE" DELCARES STEPMOTHER OF MOVIE STAR
NOW ACCUSED

ARBUCKLE FACES GALLOWS

The papers said that their once most favorite movie star, Fatty Arbuckle, was now a sick, perverted monster. The studio pulled all present and future Fatty Arbuckle pictures from movie theaters and from production. People came out of the woodwork, flies to a dead animal, and started talking, telling stories of Roscoe as a child and how he might have gotten so twisted. They said that it was Roscoe's luxurious lifestyle that made him feel as if he could do what he did. They said he used the neck champagne bottle to penetrate her and used stuck ice cubes inside of her.

Buster made a statement to the press as soon as he got word about what had supposedly happened. "Roscoe Arbuckle has been my good friend for years. He is a king of a man. There is no possibility in which Roscoe would commit this horrendous crime. People take advantage of him because he is 'Fatty Arbuckle,' but I know him first as my friend, Roscoe. His character is spotless. Let us not allow this unfortunate

and unjust accusation obscure the joy he has brought to thousands of people across the country and the world.”

He would have given the same statement every day. They tried to shoot Zey Prevon for supporting Roscoe. They screamed “whore” at Alice Lake and threw rocks in her direction as she left the courthouse after she testified. Buster would have marched up, pushed himself between the mass of people, flashbulbs popping, and given his support for Roscoe every day of the week, of the month, of the year.

But then there would be that inevitable question: “Were you there the night of the crime?” That question was like biting down on your fork by accident. It was like missing a step on the stairs in the dark. It was like falling and not knowing when the end was coming. No, he wasn’t there. He had been working at the time on *The Goat*. But for the amount that he thought of it, though, he felt like he was.

In 1924, Roscoe was acquitted and was judged innocent of all accusations. The jury even apologized to Roscoe for putting him through two years of trial that they needed to make their decision. That day, though tired, Roscoe was thrilled. He walked out of the courthouse a free man. He regained a sort of lightness that Buster used to remember him for. He could go back to work and get some movies churned out.

But when he walked on set the next week, Joe Schenck had to let him down. No one wanted to see a Fatty Arbuckle picture anymore. Nothing had changed.

“But I’m innocent,” Roscoe said. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re innocent in the eyes of the law,” Joe said. “Not in the eyes of the public.”

He was damaged goods and no studio in Hollywood would open their doors to him.

In '24, knowing Roscoe was blackballed from appearing on screen, Buster offered him a director's position on *Sherlock Jr.*, but a week into filming Roscoe could barely make it through a day of shooting without getting plastered and then going ballistic on the crew, pushing over cameras and throwing set pieces. When Buster told Roscoe he was off the picture, Roscoe already knew. Buster directed the rest of the film himself.

Buster understood his anger, even though most people had cut ties with him over the years. One too many conversations Roscoe blacked out, one too many missed engagements, one too many reputation-ruining newspaper stories about socializing with a "deviant." Buster could forgive all that because he and Roscoe had a kinship that nobody else could match. Roscoe had given Buster his start.

In 1917, Buster had just broken away from his family's vaudeville act at nineteen and was twiddling his thumbs in New York on Broadway until Roscoe offered him a bit part in *Butcher Boy*, a Fatty Arbuckle two-reeler. After that, Buster appeared in nearly every Fatty Arbuckle film until 1921 when Roscoe blessed Buster's new studio and his solo career.

It was difficult to think of Roscoe the way he was on that day when they had opened Buster Keaton Studios. He was so energetic then, so passionate and caring. Joe popped a bottle of champagne and the foam guzzled out of the bottle. Everyone stuck their glass under the pouring amber and lapped up as much as they could get.

"To Buster," Roscoe said. "Who's funnier than all of us combined."

They all were so carefree – he and Natalie had just gotten married, Roscoe was the biggest comedian in the world, Joe was shelling out production money as fast as he could write the checks. There were ideas and resources and possibilities as far as he could see into the future. It seemed that Buster’s life, in that moment, was on the verge of happiness, though he didn’t recognize it at the time. Or perhaps not on the verge, maybe that was it. The happiest he had ever been. Thinking back, however, that is the moment Buster pinpointed as the time when everything could have gone right, when everything was slanted in a favorable direction.

So soon after, came the day the laughter stopped.

He looked at his friend now, huddled in a darkened theater room, grease staining his clothes, sweat prickling out of his reddened skin, face looking like it had ten years of baggage pulling on his jowls and the grayish purple creases under his eyes.

“That bitch,” he snarled as he watched her face flicker on screen. “She knew what she was going to do to me, right from that very moment.” He coughed, a flemy chesty cough, before his head tilted forward and he either passed out or fell asleep.

Buster took the bottle from his hand and set it gingerly on the floor. Buster tried to heave Roscoe up, but he was too bulky, he couldn’t get a handle. He tried to arrange him so he would be the most comfortable in the theater chair. He grabbed a box used to deliver Roscoe wine as a footstool, so he could at least be a little stretched out. He turned the projector off, the room suddenly seeming so quiet. There was only the sound of Roscoe’s labored breathing.

He was about to leave, but he stopped in the doorway, looking back at his friend. Roscoe had been like this for years, this visit was no surprise. But Buster suddenly felt extremely sad, a feeling of homesickness overtook him like a wave of nausea. Buster credited Roscoe with so much in his life – gave him his start, taught him about movies. Buster even credited Roscoe for his family because Roscoe is the one who introduced he and Natalie, who in 1917 was Roscoe's script girl.

Natalie used to come with Buster to visit Roscoe. She owed him just as much as Buster did. But Natalie's patience had lately been wearing thin with Roscoe. Yes, Roscoe drank too much and didn't take care of himself as well as he should, but it seemed like to abandon him, to put conditions on the friendship was the worst way to deal with someone going through his kind of pain.

When they worked together in Fatty Arbuckle movies, people often remarked on the difference in Buster's and Roscoe's physicality, saying you couldn't find two more different bodies. That was part of their magic together, that Buster could play a tiny pseudo-straight man to Roscoe's larger than life performance and size. Roscoe could only be so larger than life when positioned next to someone who was small and compact.

People asked if their battling on-screen was carried over off-screen, but that was such an inane question. Buster and Roscoe were the same. They wanted to make people laugh, they wanted to work, they wanted to have a good time doing it together. Buster still felt that way, and he suspected Roscoe did too. But how could Roscoe jump back from something like this? The sands had shifted underneath him and, quite arbitrarily, he was cast out. Buster's Pop always warned him that the audience was

fickle and easy to distraction. That's why, he always said, you have to keep reinventing yourself.

Buster closed the door and walked back into the dark room. He took a seat next to his friend and leaned against his shoulder and he sat there for a long time, hearing Roscoe's breathing and nothing else.

His mind drifted to MGM, to United Artists, to Joe. He needed to have something confirmed by the time Joe pulled out from producing altogether. He needed to continue forward or he too, would be trapped here with Roscoe.

Chapter 10: The Ambassador Hotel

1928

Buster Keaton.....The Cameraman
Ed Sedgwick.....Director
Ed Brophy.....Unit Manager
Elgin Lessley.....Cameraman
Reggie Lanning.....Cameraman
Marceline Day.....The Girl
Irving Thalberg.....The Exec
Dorothy Sebastian.....The Phone Call

That night, the night of the bungled day of shooting, they moved to the Ambassador at Buster's insistence.

"There's no privacy at The Pierre," he said. Not that there was much more privacy at The Ambassador, but he hoped that word had travelled that he was staying at The Pierre for the week and so people would be waiting there to catch him. The Ambassador dining room was not as exclusive as at Sherry's, so he hoped by moving that it would at least buy them the evening.

They sat in a corner booth in the dining room. Sedgwick's dinner consisted mainly of bromides and a glass of ice that he chewed, spewing droplets all over the table. Everyone else just had gin and tonics disguised in soda bottles and picked at bread, too exhausted from the day to eat a full meal.

"Nothing," Sedgwick moaned. "We have nothing."

They still had, according to MGM, at least two months of shooting to go.

"I'll be back," Buster said. "I need cigarettes."

"I've got a whole pack," Brophy offered.

"That's alright," Buster said, really just needing the walk. He wasn't much of a smoker, but it was an easy out, a thing that no one ever seemed to question.

He grabbed his hat from the rack in the foyer and walked through the revolving brass doors to the sidewalk outside. He kept his hat low over his face and walked down Fifth Avenue. He kept going over what had happened that day and replaying the scenes in his head, feeling the panic and the irritation all over again.

He thought back to a summer a few years before when he felt the same kind of snag and the feeling of being stuck. Bob Sherwood, a writer for *Life*, came out to write a scenario for one of Buster's features.

They had figured that there would be a crew of people working on a new, half-finished skyscraper in the heart of New York City. Buster's little fellow would be but a humble elevator operator taking the workmen to their various posts up and down the building. When the architect's beautiful daughter wants to take a tour of the building, Buster would bashfully offer to show her around. As they reach the highest point on the building, they would lean against a rail to take a look at the view. In the meantime, unbeknownst to them, the workers would call for a strike, leaving the building and shutting off the power. The elevator wouldn't work, they couldn't get down, it would be the middle of winter and there would be a forecasted blizzard on the way!

They would try to call down to the people below, but the passersby would simply wave back. The Little Fellow would write a message using the girl's lipstick, but the boy who would pick it up thinks it's a joke and would throw it in the corner wastebasket. The Little Fellow would make a shelter out of sheet metal and tarp, trying to catch pigeons for them to eat, and setting up a makeshift rainwater bucket.

But what about the blizzard? Once it snowed, they would be done for. The rules of nature still apply in slapstick. There couldn't be an easy solution either. He couldn't just discover a drain pipe he could slide down. Buster and Bob thought perhaps a dirigible could pass by and the couple could grab onto a low-hanging ladder, but that wouldn't do either. It had to be the little fellow. He had to be the one doing the saving, otherwise all that buildup would be for nothing.

Bob's two weeks ended and he had to catch a train back to New York. Buster drove him to the station and in the car, they tried to think of a way to get the little guy on the ground again. But they couldn't and never did.

Poor Little Fellow arrested in his storyline, storm coming, girl depending on him. Thinking of it made Buster unreasonably sad and was embarrassed that his breath snagged in his throat.

He kept walking around the block, passing pharmacists and luncheonettes and storefronts thinking about that plot puzzle anew, but no solutions came to his mind. There came breaking points with stories where you had to ditch ideas or change them into something else, but that was always tough for Buster to do. Every story can work if you do it the right way.

Maybe even *The Cameraman*, he thought.

He walked back through the hotel doors and went to the concierge's desk, asking for the telephone.

He knew the number and jabbed his finger in the dial, spinning it like a combination lock.

"Hello?"

“Irving, it’s Buster.”

“Buster! How’s New York treating you?”

“Uh,” he started, not having thought about what words he would use exactly.

“It’s,” he started. “Well, to be honest, we didn’t get a single usable shot today.”

There was a slight pause. “Oh?”

“Everywhere we go, we’re mobbed. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“I thought we had scheduled time in for delays.”

“Apparently not enough.” Buster sighed and geared up to say what he had been saying the whole eight months of scripting. He was fighting the losing battle, he knew, but he just couldn’t stop himself. “Look, most of the present script revolves around these New York shots, but they’re just not going to happen, at least not in the way they’re on paper.”

“Why wasn’t this taken into consideration earlier?”

“I told the writers, but they said filming on-location gives the film a sense of reality.”

Irving remained silent on line. “So you’re telling me the whole trip is a waste. That we can’t do any on-location.”

“I propose we retool the script so that we don’t have as much on-location. We’ll still get some stuff, but you have to let me do it my way.” Buster hoped that his voice didn’t sound pleading.

Irving sighed. Buster could tell he had probably lifted his glasses to the crown of his head so he could rub his eyes. He was what everybody called “The Boy

Wonder,” not only because he was twenty-four and already had creative control at MGM, but also because he had an uncanny knack for aligning what would be commercially successful with quality filmmaking. He was Buster’s best shot.

“Listen, I’ll refigure, merely edit, the script so that a lot more can be done on the studio lot in Hollywood.” Still sensing some hesitation, Buster added, “I’ve done this well enough without a script before. Otherwise I wouldn’t be on MGM’s payroll.”

“I would just feel more comfortable knowing what the plan is,” Irving said.

“And you will, especially because I’ll make it so we’re right on the MGM back lot. Right under your nose.”

Irving didn’t respond right away, letting the buzzing static of the telephone line cloister in Buster’s head.

“Remember that card game we played at Fairbanks’?”

“Yes,” Irving said warily.

“Everyone else had folded and it was just you and me, pot as big as the lottery. You had a full house, a safe hand, a good hand.”

“I remember,” he said.

“But I took that pot home,” Buster said.

“Your face is very hard to read,” Irving said.

There was humor in his voice and Buster’s heart leapt, like working on opening a jar that’s just about to give. “Irving, I’m not bluffing. This picture’s not going to work unless you let me do it. Unless you would rather spend double the budget on location shots. Every day that we go over the schedule is going to cost a lot

more money.” No matter how much credit Irving got for creativity, at the end of the day, he had to answer to Louis B. Mayer and the bottom-line.

“Buster,” Irving said. “You’re sure you can get something out of New York?”

“Positive,” he said.

“As soon as you get back here, I want word on the progress of the film and daily updates. Daily. I’m serious now.”

“I can do that,” Buster said, trying to sound calm even though his knee had started to shake and relief and excitement and that delicious creative energy started to flood his chest and arms.

“Have a good night,” Irving said and hung up. Buster placed the phone back on its dock and stared at it for a moment, wondering if that conversation really happened. He didn’t have his own studio, not by a long shot, but who’s to say that if this movie didn’t go well that an independent studio would be out of the question?

He felt like he should call someone to tell them the news. The only person back at the table who would understand what a pivotal turn this was would be Elgin, who’d been with him since his two-reelers in the teens. But he wanted this news to travel, coast to coast. He thought of his wife Natalie, but then thought again. She would give a lukewarm reaction at best and tell him whether or not he was in charge, he should be happy to have a contract at all. And then she’d tell him about what she and her sisters had been up to – shopping and rubbing elbows with Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo. He thought he could call Pop, but he wasn’t very good about answering the telephone. And really, there was only one voice he wanted to hear.

“Hello, this is Dorothy.” The Alabama twang, even through 3,000 miles of telephone wire, felt like it slapped it you in the face. It felt like welcome physical contact, which he craved. He imagined her answering the phone in her kitchen, watching the orange tree outside her window turn auburn with the fading of the sun, and wrapping the telephone cord around her knobby forefinger. He thought of the skin behind her ear and the vanilla and citrus smell of her hair, the way it fell after a shower in a curly bob.

“I miss you,” he said without thinking, without deciding.

“Hello to you too, Buster,” she said. “How’s things?”

“Not great,” he said. “But I think it might get better. Coming home earlier than expected.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said.

After he hung up with Dorothy, he went back to the table feeling buoyed. He was a little nervous that Sedgwick wouldn’t believe him that the film’s control had now passed back into Buster’s hands.

Sedgwick’s face fell when Buster told them the news.

“Irving Thalberg approved this idea?” he asked, aghast.

Buster nodded.

“This is very unorthodox,” he said, his eyes narrowing toward Buster.

“Call him if you like,” Buster said. “But we’re moving on. We need to figure out where we can shoot.”

“But we’re still filming some scenes in New York?” Elgin asked.

“Yes,” Buster said. “But we have to figure out where in New York City I either won’t be recognized or that will be completely empty.”

“Where in New York is completely empty? Really, Buster,” Sedgwick scolded.

“Where are the Yankees playing this week?”

“What?”

“Grab that paper, will you?” Buster pointed to the next table where a copy of the *New York Times* sat used and folded under a coffee cup.

Marceline handed him the paper and he flipped to the sports section.

“They’re in Philadelphia until the 8th,” Buster said.

“So?” Marceline said.

“So Yankee Stadium will be empty.”

Once they had established a shooting location for the next day, the crew went up to their rooms one by one until it was only Buster left at the table. He had been having club soda and pretending there was gin in it, hoping to hold to his no drinking rule now that things were looking brighter. He needed to be alert tomorrow, ready to tackle the challenge of shooting and of proving that he was right, that his way of making movies was the only way.

He finished the glass and slid out of the booth, walking toward the elevator, thinking again that elevator operator scenario. Maybe, he thought, he’d go up the elevator and never come down.

The doors slid open and there, framed between them was Sedgwick.

“Oh,” he said, looking startled at seeing Buster standing there. “I wasn’t sure if you were still awake.”

“Heading up now,” he said, taking a step inside.

“Actually,” Sedgwick said. “I was coming down to, well, to talk to you.”

“Tomorrow’s a big day,” Buster said. “Can we save it?” There was no way he could endure another lecture from Sedgwick tonight.

“I just wanted to tell you,” Sedgwick said. He seemed nervous, fidgety. “I just wanted to tell you that I loved you in *The Butcher Boy*. In fact, all of your films.”

Buster couldn’t help but laugh. *The Butcher Boy*? That was his first ever film back in 1917 with Fatty Arbuckle. He hadn’t thought of that in years. Probably nobody had. Except Sedgwick, it seemed.

“Quite a memory you’ve got,” Buster said. “I was barely a featured player in that one.”

“I knew who you were, you see,” Sedgwick said. “I saw you on vaudeville, must have been somewhere around 1913, 1914. I was a player on vaudeville too. With my family. We were called The Five Sedgwicks. My father practically jumped out of his skin whenever he found out we were going to overlap with The Three Keatons. He could never figure how you always kept your face so still.”

Buster stared at Sedgwick, dumbfounded. How had he not known about this? The Five Sedgwicks did ring a bell, but there were so many family acts over the years, he couldn’t remember if he’d ever seen them or not. For a moment, he thought Sedgwick must be lying. A man like him didn’t seem like the type you’d find

backstage in a vaude theater. He was so to-the-letter, so exacting. Vaudeville was rough and tumble, not careful, like Sedgwick.

“Forgive me, I have a hard time believing this,” Buster said.

“I know I’m not your ideal director,” Sedgwick said. “I gave up performing after vaude, you know, besides some bit parts here and there. I saw what the performers life was like with my parents and that wasn’t for me.”

They had reached their floor level. The elevator door opened and they stepped out, but Sedgwick kept talking.

“My father wondered how you kept your face so still,” he repeated. “But any performer knows there are tricks, biting the inside of your cheek, clenching your jaw. I never wondered about how you did it, but why you did it.”

The way Sedgwick was looking at him made Buster want to fill the silence after he was finished talking. “My father always told me it was never funny to laugh at your own jokes,” he said.

Sedgwick stared more, Buster feeling uncomfortable, eyes darting anywhere but Sedgwick’s serious face. He looked like he was trying to solve a puzzle, forehead wrinkled, eyes squinting, mouth slightly slack jawed. “It was more than that,” he said. “It was like somehow, even though there was all of this shit going on around you, I don’t know. It was like you were telling the audience that you understood, that your performance on stage was like their lives.”

Buster sighed. “Listen, I’m really tired.”

“Right,” Sedgwick said. “Of course.”

As Sedgwick started to walk down the hall to his room, Buster called after him. “Hey,” he said. “Don’t read too much into that blank face stuff. When I was really little I would come out of a fall grinning like a lunatic, but it wasn’t funny. The stone face just makes people laugh, that’s all.”

Sedgwick seemed to ponder for a moment. “But why does it make people laugh? It shouldn’t, if you think about it.”

Buster shrugged and Sedgwick returned in kind before heading down the hall, turning and disappearing from sight. Buster retrieved his room key from his pocket and turned the lock, feeling unsettled by Sedgwick’s appraisal of him. He had been doing the stone face shtick for practically as long as he could remember, since he was a child on the vaudeville stage. He remembered the night he started, or rather, the night he committed to the face. He had been thinking about it more and more, since coming to MGM, since he went to the doctor’s office a week before the trip to New York.

Chapter 11: MGM Physician's Office

1928

Buster Keaton.....Patient

“Were you aware,” the doctor asked, tracing a line with his finger down an X-Ray, “that you’re spine has healed incorrectly?”

“Healed?”

The doctor stared at him. “This kind of malformation suggests that the spine was broken and then either healed incorrectly or that the break wasn’t treated at all. You’re saying you can’t remember breaking your neck?”

Buster thought back, reviewing his catalogue of pain. In the hazy photograph on the doctor’s desk, he could see his neck, the shadows of vertebrae twisted like at the roots of an old oak tree. He pressed his fingertips into the back of his neck. It was true. He could feel the gnarled bones between his shoulders veering from center. He had never thought anything of it before.

He flicked through possibilities, discarding some and considering others.

His first thought was that it could have happened when he was a boy, performing on vaudeville with his parents. He thought of this night often, more and more often, in fact.

The doctor looked at him expectantly.

“Well, in my line of work, it could really be anything,” he said. “You know, I think it was on *Sherlock Jr.* in ’24. There was a gag where I grabbed onto a water tower –the kind that cools down train engines -- but the damn spout was busted and

more water gushed out than I thought. It sent me eight feet down to the ground and then pummeled me with water.”

“And you didn’t go to the hospital?”

“I just thought I had a crick in my neck,” he said. “You’d think a broken neck would hurt more than that.”

Buster felt so satisfied by the doctor’s flinch.

“We’ll be more careful with you at MGM, I can assure you,” the doc said.

“Care’s got nothing to do with it,” he said. “We done?”

The doctor nodded and gave him a manila folder with a copy of the X-Ray inside.

Buster had walked to the doctor’s, a small outpost on MGM’s lot, really only a few blocks from his bungalow. Regular physicals were required now for all artists in the MGM stable, just one more thing that made Buster feel like a product on an assembly line.

Buster sauntered out of the office, nodding at people passing by, but quickly retreated back to his quarters. Elmer, Buster’s 170-pound St. Bernard, greeted him at the door, jumping up and then circling around his legs.

“Hey, hey,” Buster said and collapsed on his couch, Elmer laying parallel to him on the floor.

Buster took the X-Ray out of the folder and stared at it more intently and the more he stared, the more he felt the uneven knobs at the base of his neck, almost like they were shifting under his skin. He adjusted on the couch. From time to time, he did

feel pain there, right at the base of his neck. Sometimes he would turn his head too quickly or let it fall awkwardly in a gag and he'd feel a wince or a flash of heat right at that spot.

He suspected this break wasn't from falling from the water tower, even though it was true the spout broke and sent him flying in its waterfall. But the pain from that fall wasn't the kind of pain when something breaks.

The real break came in 1907 and Buster was eleven. He remembered standing in the wings of the stage with his mother, waiting for their cue. Dancers in spangled costumes and acrobats in leotards rushed by them, trying to ready themselves for showtime. He shifted from one foot to another, feeling the floorboards accommodate his weight, hearing them sigh. His head was hot and itchy from the bald cap he wore. The glue was starting to melt slightly from his cheeks where red whiskers had been applied.

Some comedian was on stage at the moment, but Buster wasn't paying attention to the jokes. He looked out at the audience – full that night. Laughter swelled like a hushed roar. He didn't know the punch line. Had he missed it?

He watched his mother next to him, absent-mindedly fiddling with the valves on her saxophone and staring at something he couldn't identify.

“*The Three Keatons* are next up,” the manager hissed. “Where's the third?”

“In the bathroom,” he answered.

“He better piss fast,” said the manager before he went to wrangle another act.

Where was Pop?

Another laugh from the audience.

He and his father were about to perform their famous knockabout routine where they were both Irishmen – one a boozy strongman and the other a rough-and-tumble midget.

Mom sidled closer to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Her other hand still pressed the valves, which reminded him of when someone merely mouths the words without saying them. He looked up at Mom whose eyes were on the comedian. Worry spun her forehead into a knot.

The stage door clanged open. Even the comedian on-stage flinched and quickly glanced into the wings. Buster looked behind him and saw Pop leaning against the metal door. His shirt was hanging out of his pants and was buttoned haphazardly. His hair was thrown onto his forehead, which the boy saw was shiny from sweat. Pop breathed heavily for a moment or two, then lumbered forward and put an arm around each of them. He looked like he'd been forty years in the desert.

“Ready kids?” he barked, then laughed slightly.

“Joseph,” Mom tried to look him full in the face.

“Can’t a man have a little fun?”

“Pop,” Buster said. “Can you do it?”

“Course!” He laughed again, but not in his usual earnest way. “Your Pop’s always ready.”

“Thank you folks!” The comedian bowed and ran off into the wings, glancing toward the three of them. Pop tried to pat him on the back as he passed, but missed.

“Sonofabitch,” Pop said.

Mom wrapped her entire hand around the saxophone until her fingers turned white.

“Next up, ladies and gentlemen, is an act that has traversed the entire country from New York City to Tuscaloosa to Portland. Please welcome the inimitable, the familial, the wonderful *Three Keatons!*” the manager announced from the stage.

Mom walked out first and nodded to the clapping audience. They quieted and she began to play. Buster loved to hear his mother playing. Mom was the first ever female saxophonist to grace the stage in the US. Her fingers moved with such confidence and dexterity across the valves. The only way you could tell she was even breathing was by the way her shoulders picked up at exactly the right moment so that the music never paused. She blew life into the thing.

The boy could hear Pop’s bones creaking as he swayed. Or maybe it was just the ragged breathing. It was louder than Mom’s sax. Pop was drenched in a sweet and salty odor – whiskey and sweat and day-old clothes. Buster fixated on a white button that had loosed itself from Pop’s shirt. A thin white thread kept it attached, but it swung with Pop’s uneven sway, like a pendulum, like an acrobat, like Tarzan. It swung over the landscape of cloth, stained and soaked and ravaged.

There was polite applause as Mom curtsied on stage. Buster remembered looking at her face and it was like it was etched in stone, grim. She only permitted a small smile before she began to walk stoically off-stage. The boy could tell her jaw was clenched as she tried to evaluate Pop.

“Ready, old boy?” Pop snarled.

The boy nodded. They'd be fine, he told himself. Pop was playing a drunk, so he might as well be drunk. When Pop was as blotto as he was tonight, the throws and the hits and the stunts came more quickly and more aggressively than usual. He was a bull on nights like this. But Buster thought of the routine like a dance, and he was a damn good dancer.

"Joseph, you maybe shouldn't tonight," Mom whispered as she came off stage, but it sounded like a shout. The audience's applause was waning.

He made a sound like pfffft. "Don't be ridiculous."

Before Mom could make any more protests, Pop stumbled on-stage, waving to the crowd like a hammy politician. Buster and Mom shared a glance before she gestured for him to go on, shrugging her shoulders. "Be careful," she said. "Smells like whiskey tonight." Whiskey meant he'd be in a throwing mood, which was better than vodka, which meant punching. The boy knew how to roll out of a throw, take a fall, even when they came unexpectedly.

A stage-hand had moved their set on stage – a basic living room with a kitchenette in the corner. Pop banged around the kitchen at the start of their act. He threw pots and pans, searched in drawers and cupboards. "Where's the liquor?" he said with a thick Irish accent.

A smattering of laughter.

The boy walked in the prop door.

"Where's the liquor?" he asked again. The boy shrugged and went rummaging himself. "This kitchen is such a mess! It's no wonder I can't find anything."

Pop grabbed the mop and bucket from the corner. "Guess I'll clean up."

He started mopping, but Buster “accidentally” got in his way. Pop pushed him to the ground and growled “Get out of me way!” Then he jabbed Buster in the belly with the end of the mop, harder this time than it normally was, even when he was that deep in drink. Buster gasped, but then held his breath. His hands cupped the end of the pole, so that when Pop started using him as a human mop, rubbing him around the wooden floor, the handle pressed into his hands instead of his stomach. Buster turned his face out to the audience, who by that time usually was too shocked in their horror instead of laughing. Once they caught a look of the boy’s blank, affectless face, however, they started to giggle, which snowballed through the audience until they were howling. Pop shoved him here, there, waltzing with the mop with a boy stuck at the bottom.

When the bit was through, Buster got up and begrudgingly straightened his jacket, feigning belligerence. Pop then said, “Well, where have *you* been? Here I’ve been cleaning and all you’ve been doing is sitting on your *arse!*”

The audience ate it up.

Buster got huffy, then. He stomped around and pointed to the floor and then to his chest and shook his fists up at Pop. The height difference always got ‘em.

Pop started ranting and raving about how useless Buster was. Slurring. Then Pop pushed him. Buster ran through Pop’s legs and tried to dodge.

In a flash, Pop picked him up by the seat of his pants and hurled him like a shot at the painted country backdrop behind them, off-set, but still on stage. Buster braced himself, allowing his body to go slack for the impact. He tucked his head so he could roll against the backdrop, but instead of feeling the soft resistance of the cloth,

something solid jammed into the top vertebrae of his spine. A wrenching pain seared through his neck and hammered down his back and inside his head. He slid listlessly down onto the wooden stage. Buster clenched his jaw and slid his tongue over the back of every single tooth, trying to take his mind off the deep throb. He turned over and looked at the audience trying to keep his face composed, not letting the tears drip. His lip quivered and his throat became unbearably tight. He wanted to run off stage to his mother. He wanted to cry, was about to break character and start bawling. He was about to.

Pop came over and looked at him puzzled, his red-rimmed eyes squinted slightly. He lifted up the backdrop to reveal a brick wall behind it. Understanding washed over Pop's face like a sobering cold shower. He had thought the backdrop was further downstage, the brick wall should have been yards behind it.

In that moment it was as though the entire audience shared in a communal gasp, breath held, waiting to be told that it was okay to laugh, that this was all part of the act. Buster remembered wanting to scream at them that he was just a boy. He felt as though they were asking for it to be an act, otherwise, they would be partly responsible for what had just happened to him, conspirators. He looked up at Mom in the wings, biting her lower lip. Then he looked at Pop again.

Pop was sweating so much that it began dripping to the stage. He looked like he was about to cry too. Buster gave him a nearly imperceptible shake of the head. Keep it together, that shake said.

Buster had fallen asleep on the couch, waking up just as the sun was setting. He felt groggy and disoriented. He had fallen into that memory so often lately, but now the memory had become something different.

Buster had always believed that the body was a physical record of a life. Pop's hands were perpetually calloused from years of hammering wooden posts into the ground for tents or nailing up two-sheets and four-sheets on vaudeville. Mom never wore lipstick because she claimed her lips were forever chapped red from her sax mouthpiece. Natalie said that no matter how many creams she used or doctors she saw, she would always have unsightly stretch marks up and down her abdomen from her pregnancies. Buster had a scar across his ankle from the time his shoelace got caught in a mechanized staircase while filming *The Electric House* and a missing fingertip from a time as a child when he got too invested in a clothing ringer and the machine snipped it right off.

He picked up the photograph that had fallen to the floor, partially hidden by Elmer's fur. That night when his Pop threw him into that wall, he had been broken. He imagined the impact again and again, the spine snapping and then lodging together like two cars colliding. Car hoods accordioning, metal shrapnel and gears littering the road. Hot smoke rising out of the engines and the burnt smell of skidded rubber.

He couldn't help but see his body as a machine, like any other. It has a design, the skeleton made of muscle and angles. He was always able to figure out machines by taking them apart and reassembling once he knew the shape, the way pieces went

and worked together. Machines could be fixed, made better. Buster believed the body was just the same.

He got up and walked across the long bungalow to his office area – big desk, chair, and bookshelves – and tacked the picture to the wall. Elmer followed and stared with Buster at the image.

He had been broken, yes. And if he thought about it, he still was broken, the bones having never set right. He felt that familiar unease whenever he remembered laying on that stage floor, but he was also somehow thankful that there was a physical record. He felt as though his body remembered in a more meaningful way than his mind.

On stage that night, he turned on his side, trying to keep his head and neck perfectly still, and faced the audience, all still waiting for the outcome. In this instance too, Buster's body reacted for him.

Don't cry, it said to him. Keep the face. Keep the face.

And the audience laughed. It was all part of the act. He thought he would be angry at them, but he wasn't, couldn't be. This audience, this changing room of darkened faces, those fluttering hands that clap and those gaping mouths that laugh, had raised him in some way. They taught him what was funny.

Chapter 12: Yankee Stadium

1928

Buster Keaton.....Ballplayer

Buster oriented one camera near the home team dugout. He looked through the lens of the camera and saw that he that he could capture the whole scope of the field. As he determined the camera angle, he felt as if he had snapped back in place, like stretching in the morning and hearing every vertebrae pop back into alignment. The other camera he set up on home plate, a beautifully symmetrical shot with a direct line cutting to the pitcher's mound.

He walked toward the mound and called to Elgin to check his placement. Standing in the center of the baseball diamond was the first time since being in New York that Buster didn't feel crowded. It would make a gorgeous shot, the entire empty stadium with a cluster of buildings cropping up behind them and The Little Fellow in the middle, wide open space around him. Buster had always envied professional baseball players for their privilege of playing the game and being paid to do it, but right now, more than anything, he envied them because at least they got a field's worth of space from their fans.

"What are you planning to do?" Sedgwick asked from the dugout, next to Marceline who was thumbing through a *Ladies' Home Journal*.

"We'll see," said Buster. Sedgwick looked baffled and irritated, but no longer had the authority to comment on what Buster decided to do. Buster had an idea of what he wanted and had talked it over that morning with Elgin and Reggie, the

second cameraman. Elgin was quick to understand Buster's conceit only because they had worked together for so long.

"Reggie, just follow Elgin's lead on this one," Buster said. "He'll know when I want you to pan."

Buster had placed the cameras and had given direction for the cameramen, and now he was set to perform. It was almost as if the last eight months hadn't happened, that they were some kind of bad dream.

For the scene, Buster figured that The Little Fellow will have thought there was a game he could film that day, but in fact, there wasn't. With the cameras rolling and outfitted as a cameraman, he stumbled up to the pitcher's mound and set the camera up anyway.

After marveling at the hallowed ground on which he stood, he wound up for a pantomime pitch, lifting one leg, an imaginary ball curled back in his right hand. He stood where just last year in the 1927 World Series, Pittsburgh Pirate Emil Yde ran for Yankee Earl Smith in the top of the seventh, where in that same game Yank pitcher Johnny Milijus threw a wild pitch, hit out of the park by Combs winning the series for the Yankees, the only game in history that was won from hitting a wild pitch.

Still standing on the mound, Buster looked at his invisible catcher, nodded at the sign he gave that they had some base runners on their hands. He darted his eyes around the field, giving warning glances to the phantom runners. He pitched and lost

a few bases. His hand shot up and he shifted around some outfielders, just a smidge to the right. He winds up again.

The train entered the frame; Buster could see when he glanced behind him, chugging along the top of the stadium. That'll look good, he thought.

He wound up for another pitch. The batter hits it, the ghost runners sprint the bases, Buster waits by home plate, watching the passing of the baseball across the field, the runner is coming, there's no time, but then Buster jumps in the air, catches the ball, and slides headfirst into the plate. And he's out!

Buster's turn up at bat, his camera acting as pitcher. He dusts up his hands and takes a few practice swings, aligning his bat. He's just in position when – he's hit with a foul ball, dropping to the dust around home plate. He tells the pitcher off. *Real nice buddy*, his gestures say.

He lines himself up once again, swiveling his foot in the sand, shrugging his shoulders trying to get loose for the next pitch. Here's the pitch, the swing, and it's out of there! He takes off around the bases, Elgin pivoting the camera to watch his mad dash. Buster had been to every World Series right here at Yankee Stadium since 1919. As he rounded the bases, it felt as if the tracks of the greats were before him – The Great Bambino, Ray Chapman, Lou Gehrig, Rogers Hornsby - that he was stepping in their shoes.

He slid into first, but clumsily, letting his back bend and his curved body sent his legs up into the air as he halted on the base. He stood, staggeringly, humbly, and nodded to the cheering crowds in the empty stands. He takes off his newsboy cap and

waves it, relishing the silent applause, until the camera pans slightly and Buster sees the Stadium manager has watched him the whole time.

They cut the cameras and Reggie started to clap.

“I’ve never done anything like that,” he said.

“You just have to follow him,” Elgin said. “You don’t need a plan if you do that. He’s got the plan in his head.” He rapped his head a few times.

“When you panned over to the manager?” Reggie said. “That was like a punch line, a visual punch line.”

“Good work, fellas. Now, how’s about a real game?” Buster said.

“In this dress?” Marceline called from visiting dugout where she’d been waiting.

“Sure,” Buster said.

“But,” Sedgwick started. On his face, it was clear that he was rewatching the scene in his mind, Buster running the bases, slugging an imaginary ball, playing a full game by himself. His eyes flickered around the bases. “How did you –“ he trailed off.

For a moment, Buster thought he could fire off a comeback about how if only Sedgwick had listened to him from the beginning, giving him a good I-told-you-so. That would feel good, the kind of vindication would feed the self-righteous part of him. But looking at Sedgwick, seeing his eyes still flickering around the bases, he didn’t feel like getting even today. He was curious and that was always something that Buster could appreciate.

“You have to use the visual to its fullest potential.”

“Right,” he said.

“Now for some real baseball,” Buster said and put up his arms for the manager to throw him a ball.

The lot of them rushed the field and they played a pickup round, right there at Yankee Stadium.

On the way home late that afternoon, as they drove from the Bronx to Midtown along the East River, Buster remembered coming through New York as a child. They stayed in boarding houses where he and Mom and Pop would all share a single bed, Buster normally relegated to the foot. The way Mom’s nose whistled as she slept and Pop snored were nothing compared to the sounds of the city streets, of cars blundering down the potholed alleyways, horns honking into the night, the clack of heels and voices chatting down on the street below. When they would go to the theater where they were to preform, Pop lead them along the grid of the streets, turning suddenly right or left, somehow knowing innately where to go.

By the time Buster was a teenager, he too was able to navigate, having memorized the layout of the Manhattan streets. It was like a machine, New York. It was something that was gray and cantankerous and was designed to accommodate all these people. There were columns of white steam blustering out of manholes, people followed their prescribed routes to work and back home again, the way at certain times, even the footsteps of people around you started to feel like clockwork, as if everyone was helping to grind the gears that made smoke rise out of chimneys that climbed and conglomerated into one big overcast sky.

“You did it,” Sedgwick interrupted his thoughts. “You found the only deserted place in all of New York City. But what now? Surely you can’t think we can keep finding stadiums to shoot in.”

“I think that’s all we needed,” Buster said.

The whole car stared back at him.

“We’ve only got one scene,” Sedgwick said. “The movie is set in New York City.”

“But we don’t need New York City to have a movie set here,” Buster said, all good will he felt toward Sedgwick evaporating. “We can do the rest in LA on a soundstage.”

“I’m sorry, Buster, but there’s no way you can recreate New York on a soundstage. The audience will know right away.”

“So what if they do? They’re already suspending disbelief by going to a movie at all. You don’t have to go through all of this because setting isn’t the main thing.”

“Production value,” Sedgwick said, irritated. “That’s what MGM wants here.”

Buster had never put a premium on location shooting, like some others did. He thought building sets was more practical and that way, you could design your location to look like whatever you needed it to be. There was no hassle of travel, no crowds, no moving of equipment. And the audience didn’t care so long as you gave them a good picture that approximated the setting of the film. On the west coast, there was such a diverse array of settings that going all the way to New York seemed excessive. Buster had mocked Mississippi at the Sacramento River for *Steamboat Bill*

Jr., they created the Civil War era south in the woods of Oregon for *The General*, and a Roman coliseum was made out of LA's own Memorial Coliseum for *Three Ages*.

You had to be smart about setting, but insisting on the real thing was ridiculous.

"I thought we could use some old MGM newsreel to show the Lindbergh ticker tape parade last year, as if it's happening now. We'll cut it so it looks like our little cameraman is there and therefore in New York City," Buster said.

Elgin brightened. "That's perfect," he said.

"I thought you'd like that," Buster said. Elgin was one of his most technically savvy guys and would love the idea and challenge of incorporating actual newsreel footage into a feature. In '22 Elgin created this contraption for the lens of the camera that would allow for Buster to appear nine times in a single frame in *The Playhouse*. People still asked Elgin and Buster how they did it.

Sedgwick had nothing more to say and his eyes stared straight out of the car window. When they got back to the hotel, Buster called MGM and had them get flights out for the next morning back to Los Angeles.

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