

FORGIVE MY TRESPASSES
Confessions of a Studio Gatecrasher

By Rob McFarlane



“I need me them shoes.”

I’m sitting in a cell at Hollywood’s Wilcox Station. My cellmate, a burly Okie with confederate tats, is staring at my brand-new Velcro Adidas.

“Where you get shoes like that?”

They’re the first words either of us have spoken since my recent arrival, and I’m caught off guard. Trying to sound casual, I tell him the shoes were a birthday present from my parents. He gives a thoughtful nod. Sizing me up as a newb to the criminal justice system, he says his name is Blake and explains that, in jail, shoelace theft is a bitch (it’s 1983, and “prison issue” has yet to become a branding slogan for Velcro footwear). He asks my age. “Nineteen,” I mumble, suddenly feeling much younger. He sighs and shakes his head. “Boy, what’re you doin’ in here?” It’s a good question, and despite our brief acquaintance, I feel the need to unburden myself.

“I got busted sneaking into a movie studio.”

Blake’s brow furrows as he ponders the implications. Then his eyes drift back to my Adidas. “So what size you wear?”

For as long as I could remember, I’d loved the movies. Growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles during the 1970’s, I dreamed of becoming a filmmaker like my idols Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas. I was thrilled when, as a college freshman, I’d been chosen by my film studies professor to schlep prints of classic movies to and from the major studios for class screenings. Having never set foot on a film lot before, I was amazed by how easy it was to gain access. “Hi, I’m a student from Some Random College, and I’m going to Shipping and

Receiving to pick up a print.” Upon hearing these magic words, the guard would raise open the gate to Paramount, Warner Brothers, Universal, MGM, Disney, or Twentieth Century Fox and onto the lot I’d drive, winding my ‘78 Honda Accord down narrow streets flanked by massive soundstages, the rushing arteries at the heart of the world’s movie capital.

My film class ended but, having cracked the entry code, I found myself returning to the studios with increasing regularity. The early 80’s provided a steady stream of feature film production, and I quickly became adept at finagling my way onto movie sets.

On a typical day of illicit sightseeing, I’d begin by scanning the industry trades for promising productions before zeroing-in on a particular studio. Bluffing my way through the main gate, I’d ditch my car in an unmarked spot and set out on foot in search of an active film shoot. My standard attire consisted of a pair of old jeans and a Warner Brothers T-shirt, a simple but effective disguise that rendered me more or less invisible amongst the countless young grips, gaffers, and gofers that populate movie lots. Film sets tend to discourage visitors, but I had a knack for blending in and soon found that as long as I stayed out of the way and didn’t make a nuisance of myself I would be left alone to observe the filmmaking process in peace.

And observe I did.

From the summer of 1980 throughout the summer of 1983, I hit the studios as often as my school and work schedules would permit. The chronology of my visits would blur with time, but some moments remain seared in my memory: Shivering in the shadows of a refrigerated sound stage as Jeff Bridges kissed Karen Allen for the climax of *Starman*... Catching a smile from Diane Lane as she waited for Walter Hill to stage a shoot-out for *Streets of Fire*... Sucking up artificial smoke on the Warner lot as Harrison Ford chased Joanna Cassady down a retro-fitted alley for *Blade Runner*. There’s a tedium to feature filmmaking that professionals come to accept, but I remained stubbornly immune. Having worshiped movies from afar, the experience of being on a working film set was transcendent. The fact that I had no business being on the set of *Goonies*, *Gremlins*, or *Ghostbusters* was beside the point; I knew I didn’t belong, but some part of me felt like I did. Like the movies themselves, this was an illusion.

Blake is still staring at my shoes. He’s been lying on his bunk, partially obscured in shadow, but suddenly he sits up, and for the first time I see he’s bare-footed. Trying not to panic, I ask how he came to be a guest of the West Hollywood Police Department.

“Stabbed some shitbird in the eye,” he confides with a sheepish smile.

A commotion erupts in the next cell, transvestite hookers fighting over change for the pay-phone. Blake yells at them to shut up. They just laugh. The phone is a reminder that my parents are expecting me for dinner. There’s no clock in the cell, but I know it’s getting late... late enough for Mom to start worrying. A hollow clattering sounds as the phone, mounted to a rickety pedestal, is wheeled up to our cell. “Five minutes” the guard announces, retreating down the hall.

“Got change?” Blake asks.

“I’m good” I reply.

He repeats the question, and I realize the change is for him. I rifle through my pockets and hand him a couple quarters. For an instant, I consider asking him to keep the call short, then think better of it. He is, after all, a violent felon, and I'm just a trespassing film student. At least, that's what I'd told him. Given the circumstances that landed me in Wilcox, the description isn't altogether accurate. Yes, trespassing had been one of my crimes, but the more serious charge is burglary. This realization is accompanied by a sense of disbelief combined with a creeping sense of shame. How am I going tell my conservative, church-going, midwestern parents that their only son has been booked for a felony?

"I told you babe, I didn't steal the car, I just *borrowed* it..." Blake is trying to convince someone named Sadie to bail him out. Despite my unfamiliarity with the legal system, I'm pretty sure eye-stabbers don't qualify for bail. I decide Blake is an unreliable narrator. Sadie apparently agrees. Their conversation turns heated, and Blake slams down the receiver. Pleading with the guard for another minute of phone time, I dial my parents' number. My mom picks up and I explain that I've been arrested for sneaking onto a movie studio and stealing an old *Star Trek* boot, and my bail has been set at twenty-five hundred dollars, and I'm at Wilcox station in Hollywood, and I can explain everything if someone can just come pick me up.

"You stole a star truck boot?"

The guard ends the call before I can elaborate. Blake lets loose with a braying cackle, his own troubles momentarily forgotten. "Mommy, Mommy, please come get me!" The guard laughs too, punctuating my humiliation as the phone is wheeled away.

Hauling himself off his bunk, Blake leans in close.

"You ain't gonna cry, are you?"

"Piss off"

For a second I think he's going to hit me, but he just snickers and shuffles over to the urinal. My head is pounding. It's been hours since I've had anything to eat or drink, and the tiny cell is closing in on me.

"Fucking Steve" I think, the anger and self-pity welling up within me. "This is all his fault."

I'd met Steve Swanson a few months earlier at a local hobby shop catering to sci-fi geeks, military nuts, and Dungeons & Dragons nerds (I belonged to the first group). He was a couple years older than me and had a job designing graphics for a small visual effects company. Tall and thin, with dark eyes and a droll wit, he shared my passion for movies – especially movies involving spaceships, aliens, and robots. With his pale pallor and custom-silkscreened *Forbin Project* T-shirts, Steve was an authentic geek long before it was considered fashionable. Geek or not, he knew all about movie production and was the closest thing to an industry insider I'd heretofore encountered.

A few weeks after our first meeting, he invited me and a few hobby shop regulars to his apartment which I'd been told was filled with his collection of "cool shit." And so it was, but what made Steve's cool shit remarkable is that so much of it consisted of authentic movie props, costumes, and production artwork. These weren't cheesy fanboy reproductions like you'd see at

a local comic book convention; these were the genuine articles: a uniform from *Star Trek*... a biohazard helmet from *The Andromeda Strain*... a blueprint of the flying saucer from *Lost in Space*... It was like a small museum curated to excite the quirky passions of teenage sci-fi nerds. But how had Steve come by his cinematic treasure trove? When I broached the subject, he was vague. He had connections in the biz, he said, as if that explained how he'd come to own Charlton Heston's flight suit from *Planet of the Apes*. For reasons that would soon become clear, it wasn't something he was anxious to discuss, and I didn't press him.

As I was leaving his apartment, I spotted a scattering of photos on the coffee table. Had I kept my mouth shut, our acquaintance would most likely have ended then and there. Instead, indulging some need to show off, I complimented Steve on his shots of the Twentieth Century Fox backlot, adding that "I was just at Fox last week."

My film class had taught me that an "inciting incident" is the moment near the beginning of a movie when something unexpected happens to the main character that disrupts the pattern of life and sets in motion a chain of events leading inexorably to the story's climax. Sometimes this incorporates an element of choice, wherein the protagonist elects to pursue a particular, often ill-fated, course of action. By boasting of my studio exploits, I'd unwittingly made a choice which, within a couple months, would land me in jail. Not that I knew it at the time.

Having piqued each other's curiosities, Steve and I agreed to meet for lunch the following week, during which we discussed our mutual fondness for what we'd eventually come to call "studio busting." He asked how long I'd been at it. Not long, I admitted. He'd been at it a couple years, he said. We traded a few stories; I told him about the conversation I'd struck up at the Burbank Studios commissary with a young actor named Tom Hanks. "The guy's a huge *2001* fan," I confided. Steve told me about the time he'd bumped into Gene Roddenberry on the Paramount lot. "He thought I was somebody named 'Monty'" he recalled, smiling at the memory. "I think he'd been drinking."

Reaching into his satchel, he retrieved a copy of *The Hollywood Reporter*, which included a weekly production breakdown. He'd underlined the titles of several pictures currently shooting in town: *Ghostbusters*... *The Last Starfighter*... *Star Trek III*... *Untitled Steven Spielberg*... the list went on.

"So," he began in a casually conspiratorial voice. "What are you doing next week?"

Before meeting Steve, I'd never been much of a daredevil. Sneaking onto a film lot posed certain risks, to be sure, but I figured the worst that could happen is that I'd get caught and escorted off the premises. After all, it's not like I was sneaking into TRW or the Rand Corporation. I wasn't harming anyone. And while I enjoyed the rush that came from slipping undetected onto a sound stage, there were lines I wouldn't cross. I wouldn't, for instance, engage in anything that might be considered breaking and entering. I wouldn't violate the sanctity of someone's office or production suite. And under no circumstances would I drive off a film lot with anything I hadn't driven on with. However naively, I considered myself a guest of the studios and conducted

myself accordingly. Bullshitting my way past the occasional studio guard was a transgression I could live with, but I wasn't looking to push the envelope.

Steve had other plans.

The first hint that my new friend played by a different set of rules came one afternoon not long after our lunch date when I found myself crawling into a locked studio soundstage via one of the small, filthy, rodent-infested ducts used to run power cables through the massive building's thick, sound-proofed walls. We'd snuck onto the Burbank Studios lot to check out the sets of a mysterious new sci-fi pilot called *V*, only to find the soundstage doors padlocked shut due to a temporary production halt.

"No problem" announced Steve. "We'll crawl in through one of the power ducts."

He indicated an opening the size of a large dog door near the foot of the stage wall. I started to protest, but he was already wriggling his lanky frame into the narrow duct.

"Don't worry" he assured me as he receded into the darkness. "I've done this before."

I peered into the opening, waiting for some sign that he'd gotten stuck, or been electrocuted, or had his flesh punctured by a rusty nail. Instead, a faint, disembodied voice beckoned to me like something out of *The Twilight Zone*.

"Are you coming or what?"

The inside of the stage was pitch black when I extracted myself from the duct. Slick with sweat and covered with cobwebs, I fought to get my bearings. Was this breaking and entering? Technically we hadn't broken anything, but I couldn't shake the sensation that I'd crossed one of those lines I'd promised not to cross.

Steve switched on a work lamp, and we found ourselves inside the cavernous hangar bay of an alien mothership, surrounded by a half-dozen gleaming white spacecraft. Angling for a closer look, we discovered that the sleek, RV-sized vessels were little more than artfully decorated facades -- all, that is, except the "hero" craft which sported a full interior. The open hatch was all the invitation we needed to climb aboard and slip into the pilots' seats. All my life, I'd admired spacy stagecraft from afar, separated from the magic by movie and TV screens, or reduced to studying grainy photos in the pages of *Cinefantastique* and *Starlog*. Now, here I was seated behind the controls of a real Hollywood starfighter. The artifice made the experience even better; who needs NASA when you have Warner Brothers?

"This is nothing" said Steve as if reading my thoughts. "Wait 'til you see the *Star Trek* sets."

It will come as no surprise that Steve and I were Trekkies, both having grown up watching syndicated reruns of the 60's TV series. Following the success of *Star Wars*, Paramount had wasted no time relaunching *Star Trek* for the big screen. While never generating *Star Wars*-sized returns at the box office, the *Trek* pictures remained profitable in part because they recycled many of the same sets -- most notably those of the fabled Starship *Enterprise*. Steve had gotten a clandestine peek at those sets during the production of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and was

determined to return for a closer look. Intense fan interest had impelled Paramount to beef up security around the *Trek* sets during filming. Steve intended to time our visit accordingly.

"They'll be done refurbishing the *Enterprise* interiors soon," he informed me. "Our best chance to see them is before shooting starts on *Trek III*."

Intrigued as I was by the thought of a self-guided tour through my favorite starship, I had concerns. I'd snuck onto the Paramount lot once before, and the place made me uneasy. Maybe it was the studio's location in central Hollywood, an area dodgy enough to warrant tighter-than-usual security. But my main concern was Steve. After our adventure aboard the *V* mothership, we'd visited a couple of other lots together – and while those excursions were mostly uneventful, I'd come to the conclusion that Steve was too fearless and unpredictable to be a trustworthy trespassing companion. As studio-savvy as he was, and despite our mutual interests, I had a feeling he was going to get us into trouble.

Things came to a head one afternoon in the empty parking lot of a small, ugly, non-descript cluster of buildings not far from Universal Studios. We'd come to Hartland Effects on a lark with no ambitions other than a dubious desire to visit the site where the visuals for *Battlestar Galactica* had been created. It was lunch hour and the place appeared deserted. We were about to leave when Steve noticed an open door leading to what appeared to be a small shooting stage. "Probably empty," he said. "But let's take a peek."

We strolled toward the door fully expecting to be intercepted by a guard and given the boot. Instead, proceeding inside, we discovered a virtual armada of miniature spacecraft scattered about the stage on a series of metal support stands. Several of the models, part of *Galactica*'s "ragtag fleet," had been loaded into wooden storage crates.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. Steve didn't answer. He was staring at one of the crated miniatures.

"You think that'd fit in your trunk?"

"Very funny."

"We'll never get another chance like this."

He ran a hand over one of the crates. Noting the gleam in his eye, I thought about the props on display in his apartment. Is this how he'd come by his collection of cool shit? Had he just walked away with it?

He drummed his fingers on the crate.

"So what do you think?"

I studied his face, trying to get a read on whether he was serious or not.

"I think you're batshit crazy."

He smiled. The smile of a bully who knows he's beaten you at a dare.

"Pussy."

I didn't talk to Steve for a while after that. It had been an eventful summer, but school would soon be back in session, and my interest in studio-busting was on the wane. I'd starting dating

one of my classmates, a punky art major with a low threshold for bullshit. When I told her about my trip to Hartland, she called me an idiot and warned me to stay away from Steve. On some level I knew she was right, but despite misgivings I still considered him a friend. When I hadn't heard from him after a few weeks I began to wonder if our Hartland visit had soured him on our relationship. Then, one afternoon in mid-August, he rang to see if I wanted to go to Paramount to check out the newly refurbished *Enterprise* sets. The next *Trek* picture was slated to begin the following week, he explained. "Right now, the stage is deserted, but in a few days it'll be crawling with guards. If you want to see the *Enterprise*, this is your chance."

Every film lot has a distinct personality. Paramount, long known for its sophisticated comedies and stylish thrillers, still felt like Old Hollywood -- with an emphasis on "old." By 1983, most studio lots had received modern facelifts in the form of sleek glass office towers. Paramount, with its pre-war wooden buildings, decaying facades, and rickety water tower, seemed trapped in the past; the Norma Desmond of movie studios. Regardless of the old timey vibe, the studio remained custodian to Hollywood's most beloved and enduring expression of the future. On the day Steve and I arrived for what would be our final studio-busting adventure, that future was scattered amongst a half dozen soundstages within which decorators and electricians were putting the finishing touches on the sets of *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. After much prodding, and despite lingering concerns, I'd agreed to accompany Steve with the understanding that I wouldn't have to crawl through any power ducts.

"We're from USC Cinema and we're going to Shipping & Receiving." It was barely noon and the temperature was already in the 90's when we bluffed our way through Paramount's Van Ness St. gate and began searching for a parking spot. "That looks good" Steve announced, gesturing to a space adjacent to one of the soundstages. It did look good. A little too good. My regular M.O. was to park on the backlot, far from the bustling soundstages and office buildings. Alas, Paramount no longer had a backlot, so our choices were limited.

I studied the vacant spot, searching for some indication that it was assigned or otherwise off-limits.

"What do you think?" I asked Steve.

"About what?"

"Do you think it's safe to park here?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

The absence of Star Wagons and foot traffic was a reliable indication that the stage was not currently in use. So what was I afraid of? Chalking it up to my chronic Paramount jitters, I angled my Honda into the spot.

Along with savvy wardrobe choices and a talent for blending in, the most important aspect of being an effective studio trespasser is attitude. It's important to look like you have someplace to be... as if an impatient executive has tasked you with tracking down a pair of wayward Wayfarers or scoring a dime bag of Peruvian flake. The look in your eyes should say "I'm on an

urgent mission, and God help anyone who gets in my way.” Steve and I embodied the Men on a Mission aesthetic as we strode purposefully toward the *Star Trek* soundstages. The *Enterprise* sets were located on Stage 31 -- the same stage used by the original *Star Trek* TV series.

Approaching the door, we were greeted by the words CLOSED SET, one of many such signs intended to ward off unauthorized visitors. Of course, such warnings barely registered on Steve and me; we were Men on a Mission.

“Shit,” said Steve finding the stage door locked. “We’ll have to find another—”

A burst of laughter cut him off as the heavy door swung open to reveal a pair of beefy security guards. Accompanied by a whoosh of industrially conditioned air, they paused to regard us in the midday sun. One of the guards smiled -- a little too intently it seemed to me -- and I caught the unmistakable scent of Juicy-Fruit.

“Going in?” he asked, holding the door for us.

“Thanks,” mumbled Steve, nudging me forward.

My ears popped as we passed through the soundproofed airlock. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out the wooden framework of a sprawling set that filled most of the stage. The smell of fresh paint was pungent. Industrial fans hummed in the distance. My heart pounded from our encounter with the guards, but I told myself to relax; nothing bad was going to happen because we weren’t going to do anything stupid.

“Our timing is perfect,” Steve announced. “Everyone’s at lunch.” Getting his bearings, he led us around one side of the enclosed set’s skeletal exterior to a narrow doorway. Visible within, I could make out a dimly lit expanse of smooth, grey wall.

“All aboard,” said Steve.

The *Enterprise* interior consisted of several “rooms” connected by a series of gently curving corridors. Stepping through the doorway, I was instantly overwhelmed by the feeling of being inside a “real” starship. I’d had some idea of what to expect from having seen the first two *Trek* movies, but as we prowled the deserted passageways I couldn’t shake the decidedly *Trek*-like feeling that I’d slipped through a wormhole into an alternate reality.

Rounding a corner, we came upon a small alcove which I recognized as the ship’s “turbo-lift” elevator. The walls were fitted with eggcrate-like panels comprised of what resembled foam soundproofing. Leaning in for a closer look, I pressed a finger into one of the panels, fully expecting the foam to give softly and retain its shape. Instead, the grainy material crumbled beneath my touch leaving a gaping hole. I was mortified. I’d visited a lot of sets by this point and had always been careful not to damage anything. Another rule broken.

“Nice going,” Steve chortled.

We pressed on, winding our way through a succession of familiar *Trek* set-pieces: Sick Bay... Transporter Room... Captain’s Cabin... etc. I tried to enjoy the scenery, but the experience was compromised by the damage I’d inflicted on the turbo-lift. Recalling how easily the foam had disintegrated, I felt a stab of resentment. What kind of sadistic set decorator installs foam panels that crumble when touched? Then again, maybe that was the idea... a seemingly soft and springy

boobytrap for the unwary intruder. It was an amusing thought, but I knew I wasn't the innocent victim in this scenario... I was the marauding saboteur.

As even the most casual Trekkie can tell you, the nerve center of the *Enterprise* is the Bridge, i.e. the legendary control room where Captain Kirk presides over his stalwart crew while facing a relentless onslaught of Klingons, Romulans, Doomsday Machines, and giant space-faring amoebae. The former set from the original series had been updated for the feature films including its most iconic feature: Kirk's command chair.

Slipping into the cushioned seat, I gazed at the blank viewscreen automatically conjuring visions of streaking stars and firing phasers. I considered pressing the armrest's control buttons but, remembering my turbo-lift mishap, I decided this would be pressing my luck. I looked over at Steve, who was peering into Mr. Spock's viewfinder and making faint "pew-pew" noises. He was clearly enjoying himself, but the sight of my friend's long, pale fingers playing over the freshly refurbished control panel made me uncomfortable. Catching my gaze, he smiled as if to say "How cool is this?" I managed a halfhearted nod recalling how the crumbling foam had left a small pile of powdery residue at my feet. I thought about the big guard with the intense smile, and how his breath had smelled like Juicy-Fruit. The sickly-sweet smell seemed to linger in the air... or was that paint? Snap out of it, I told myself. You're on the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*, kicking back in Captain Kirk's command chair... enjoy the moment!

A stage door banged open in the distance, the noise pulling me to my feet like a tractor beam. "We should probably get going," I suggested a little too emphatically.

Steve told me not to worry. "It's just the crew coming back from lunch." He made "the crew" sound like a group of friends who would be glad to see us.

A warning claxon sounded and was followed by the metallic squeal of a large stage door sliding open along its tracks. The phrase "Intruder Alert" flashed through my brain as the babble of voices grew louder, joined by a rising percussion of pounding hammers and buzzing power-tools.

"No, really," I said moving closer to Steve. "We should go." Despite the barely concealed urgency in my voice, he seemed not to hear. Still manning Spock's station, he was picking at one of the plastic buttons with his fingernail as if trying to dislodge it. I remembered the hole I'd poked in the turbo-lift and was immediately struck by a terrible thought: the returning stagehands will see the damaged foam panel... they'll see it and they'll start looking for the responsible party ("Intruder Alert, all decks!"). This was an overactive imagination talking, but I couldn't help myself – any more than I could help the sudden need to urinate. My fight-or-flight response had kicked in and the overwhelming urge to pee now rendered all other concerns secondary. I may have been a marauding intruder, but damned if I was going to drench my drawers on the Bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*.

"I'll meet you outside," I blurted, bolting for the door.

Nothing says Man on a Mission like a full bladder. Making my way to a restroom across from the stage, I promptly took care of business pausing at the sink to wash my hands and collect my nerves. Catching my reflection in the mirror, I felt a mixture of relief and embarrassment. In the past, I'd generally managed to maintain a cool studio-busting façade, but accompanying Steve to Paramount had turbocharged my Para-phobia. I knew he'd give me a hard time for abandoning ship so abruptly, but I didn't care. I'd wanted to see the *Enterprise* sets, and despite a minor panic attack, I'd accomplished my mission. I pictured Steve hunched over Spock's console picking at the plastic button with his fingernail. Was he really that desperate for souvenirs? But I already knew the answer.

Steve was waiting in the alley when I emerged from the restroom. Slouched against the wall, he gave the impression of having waited there for hours. "The rest of the *Trek* sets are in Stage 32," he said, gesturing toward a nearby soundstage. "Try not to break anything else." He started toward the stage then paused.

"You coming or what?"

My easygoing nature sometimes made me conducive to being bossed around, but this wasn't one of those times. I was hot, I was tired, and I was done being Steve Swanson's studio-busting wingman.

"I have to get back," I said.

He looked confused. "Back where?"

"I'm meeting my folks for dinner."

"But we just got here!"

"It's a long drive. I want to beat the rush."

He started to protest, but I'd already turned away and was heading back to the car. Sensing my resolve, he grew petulant. "This is bullshit. Mommy and Daddy won't mind if you're a little late." I ignored the taunt which made him even angrier.

"You're a real pussy, you know that?"

"So I've been told."

We walked on in silence. It wasn't like Steve to take no for an answer, but after a couple minutes he seemed to have accepted the situation. This was wishful thinking. Halfway to the car, he suddenly peeled off making a beeline toward a large barn-like building.

"Where are you going?" I called after him.

"I'll meet you at the car" he replied, heading for a door marked "Wardrobe."

"Ten minutes!" I yelled.

But he was already gone.

Arriving back at the car, I cranked up the air conditioning and glanced at the clock. It was a little after 4PM. "Ten minutes," I muttered to myself; after that, Steve could take a cab.

Visible through the windshield, the cast of *Cheers* smiled down at me from a large billboard. A lone figure stood on the street below. At first, I thought it was Steve, but closer inspection

revealed a bald man in a dark suit. He was standing in the billboard's shadow about thirty yards away and seemed to be looking in my direction. As I watched, he held something up to his head then turned abruptly and disappeared around a corner.

Despite the heat, I felt a sudden chill. Had the man been speaking into a walkie-talkie? I waited for him to reappear, but the street remained empty save for the cast of *Cheers* who continued to smile down at me. Did they know something I didn't?

The car door slammed behind me. "Home, James" cracked Steve, all smiles as he made himself comfortable on the back seat. His chipper mood should have sounded an alarm, but I was distracted.

"Did you see that guy?" I asked.

"What guy?"

"He was staring at our car. I think he had a walkie-talkie."

Steve gave a dismissive snort and told me I was being paranoid. Glancing once more down the street, I decided he was right. The sooner we were off the Paramount lot, the sooner I could stop stressing.

It didn't take long to realize we had a problem. Winding our way back through the labyrinth of soundstages enroute to the Van Ness gate, we spotted a pair of guards parked on the opposite side of the road in a golf cart. The driver was speaking into a walkie-talkie.

"They're looking right at us," I said.

"Just be cool" said Steve trying to sound cool.

As we drove past, the cart pulled a sharp U-turn and proceeded to follow us.

"Still think I'm being paranoid?" Steve didn't answer.

We passed an intersection, and I watched in the rearview mirror as the first golf cart was joined by a second. And then a third.

"Should I stop?" I asked.

"No!" replied Steve, and for the first time I heard fear in his voice.

We drove on with the guards maintaining their pace behind us. "Almost there" said Steve as the gate came into view. To our relief, the red and white barrier was already raised in anticipation of departing traffic. Glancing at the trailing guards, it dawned on me that their goal all along may simply have been to escort a pair of unwanted guests off the lot. It was a comforting thought but also a delusional one.

"Shit!" said Steve as the barrier came down directly in front of the car. As if on cue, the pursuing golf carts closed the gap behind us making it impossible to back up.

"Ram it!" Steve shouted, and for a panicky moment I considered plowing through the gate. But the moment passed and we quickly found ourselves surrounded by a half dozen guards. One of them rapped his knuckles against the window.

"Turn off the engine and step out of the vehicle."

Resigned to our predicament, I killed the engine.

“Don’t open the door!” Steve pleaded, his eyes wide with anxiety. “We have rights! They can’t search the car if we don’t let them!” Hearing but not fully grasping the desperation in his voice, I said I was pretty sure the guards were within their rights to search the car, but it didn’t matter because we had nothing to hide.

“You don’t get it,” he insisted, his voice dropping to a whisper. “*If they catch me again I’m going to jail.*”

A guard banged his nightstick against the window, once again ordering us out of the car.

“Don’t worry,” I assured Steve as I unlocked the doors. “No one’s going to jail.”

Blake is snoring. The sound reverberates off the cinderblock walls, fueling my headache. How long have I been at Wilcox? Four hours... maybe five? Laying on my bunk, I stare at the ceiling while pondering the day’s events and tormenting myself with if-only’s. *If only* I hadn’t let Steve talk me into going to Paramount... *If only* I’d spotted the boot-shaped bulge beneath his shirt when he’d returned to the car... *If only* I’d known that our unmarked parking space had recently been assigned to a newly hired executive...

The studio guards had found this last oversight especially amusing. As one of them explained, the maintenance crew had not yet had time to stencil the new exec’s name on his space. Had Steve and I delayed our visit by a day, the space would have been clearly marked, and we’d have kept looking for alternative parking. Instead, the exec had discovered a strange Honda in his space and promptly alerted Security. In such cases, studio protocol was clear: having nabbed two trespassing Trekkies with a pilfered boot, the guards summoned the LAPD.

“Where everybody knows your name” the arresting officer quipped while helping his freshly cuffed perps into a waiting patrol cruiser.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s your next stop, Robert.” He nodded toward a nearby *Cheers* poster. “A place where everybody will know your name.”

Prior to being arrested, my exposure to cop humor was limited to Joseph Wambaugh. Now, cooling my heels in jail after being fingerprinted, photographed, and strip-searched, I find myself struggling to see the funny side of incarceration. I recall what Steve said about being caught “again” and how, after our arrival at Wilcox, he’d been escorted into a separate room by a pair of detectives. How much trouble is he in, I wonder? I want to be angry at him, or at least angrier than I am. Plucking a plastic button from Spock’s station is bad enough, but Christ, who steals a boot? At the same time, I know I have only myself to blame for my present plight. I’d been aware of the risks of accompanying Steve to Paramount. And while I’d told myself that studio-busting was a harmless pastime sneaking aboard the *Enterprise* had been a Bridge too far.

In the movies, jump-cuts are used to propel characters forward in time. As I write these words, it is 2022, almost forty years since Steve and I got busted at Paramount. What at the time had felt like a life-shattering legal calamity now seems like little more than youthful folly, one dumb stunt amongst the countless choices, actions, and events -- dumb or otherwise -- that make up a

life. And yet, my studio-busting antics linger in my memory precisely because of their youthful dumbness; a brief interval between adolescence and adulthood when the worst thing I could imagine was spending a few hours in jail with a shoe-coveting redneck.

To my surprise, my parents had taken the incident in stride chalking it up to their son's obsession with movies. In time, that obsession would lead to a career in motion picture advertising, but in 1983 my future success was anybody's guess. Fortunately, the Los Angeles District Attorney had bigger perps to prosecute, and after a couple stressful weeks my Burglary charge had been reduced to misdemeanor Trespassing.

Steve hadn't gotten off so easily. Even after all these years, the details remain vague. I tried to reach him in the days following our arrest, but for whatever reason he dodged my calls. I later learned through the hobby shop grapevine that the police had raided his apartment and confiscated part of his collection. Several more weeks passed with no further word. I was beginning to fear the worst, but then Steve left a message on my answering machine, breezily explaining how, thanks to a smart lawyer, he'd been spared additional jail time. Amazingly (or not), he was already planning his next studio reconnaissance. "Give me a call if you wanna check out this new *Back to the Future* thing they're shooting at Universal." I made a mental note to ring him back, but I never did.

It would be almost thirty years before we saw each other again.

The occasion was a party hosted by a mutual friend. Steve and I had lost some hair and gained some weight since our last encounter but we recognized each other at once. He seemed happy to see me and we fell effortlessly back into our familiar groove, catching up on work and family, arguing about pop culture, and expressing a mutual disdain for the growing tendency in some quarters to refer to movies as "content." Left unspoken was any mention of our Paramount misadventure. I still had a lot of questions about what had gone down that day, but I wanted him to be the one to broach the subject. When he didn't, I decided not to press the matter. Now that we were back in touch, we'd have plenty of chances to discuss ancient history.

We did keep in touch over the ensuing years, but we never got around to talking about that fateful day in Hollywood. Given enough time, maybe we would have. But I doubt it.

Our last conversation took place on New Year's Day in 2022. Covid restrictions had started to lift, and I floated the idea of meeting up for a post-pandemic lunch. He told me he'd like that and suggested a burger joint we'd frequented back in the day. A date was set, but the lunch never happened. On April 19, 2022, Steve suffered a fatal heart attack. He had recently retired from the visual-effects business and had been planning a move to Nevada to be closer to extended family. Having never married, he left no children. He was sixty-four.

The movie industry has always been volatile. With the advent of streaming, the communal experience of seeing feature films in theaters has fallen increasingly out of vogue. As saddened

as I am by the decline of Big Screen venues, I can't help but appreciate the convenience of watching high-definition features in the comfort of my own home. I was watching one recently when my 19-year-old son wandered into the room.

"Are you watching a *Star Trek* movie?" he asked, mildly amused.

It dawned on me that he was the same age I had been when Steve and I paid our visit to Paramount. Smiling at the memory, I fast-forwarded to a closeup of Captain Kirk in the turbo-lift. Visible in the background was a small hole where some careless intruder had poked a finger into the lift's foam-paneled wall.

I hit freeze-frame and turned to my son.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I got arrested sneaking into a movie studio?"

Los Angeles
May, 2022

