

Matthew Shovlin

## The Burn Ward

I like to say mean things about people. It provides a sort of catharsis and makes me feel better about myself.

I'm not one of those introspective losers who question why they are the way they are and spend more time wondering what in their life made them turn out that way than they spend actually trying to be happy or at least satisfied. I don't need to know why I am the way I am—I just need to accept it and do what I can to cater to my needs without hurting myself or others.

That's why I started the Burn Ward. It's a blog that no one reads. Well, a few people read it. My personal record for views on a single post is nine. But I've always assumed those come from Bangladeshi bots that mine the internet for poorly protected credit-card information and Social Security numbers. So, for all intents and purposes, the Burn Ward is read by no one but me.

And that's perfectly fine. Unlike most recent college grads whose parents' money somehow directed them down a path of self-absorption and instilled a burning desire to share their opinions with people they don't know, I couldn't care less if no one reads my blog. In fact, I prefer it that way. I'd come off like an asshole—which I kind of am—but I'd still rather people not know that about me.

Of course, the things I write on the Burn Ward aren't written with malicious intent, *per se*. I'm not looking to hurt anyone's feelings or turn the general public against anybody. I'm simply venting. Some people get rid of their stress and frustrations by seeing a therapist, playing sports, getting high or drunk, or taking a Glock 19 to the shooting range, but I just write. It works for me.

I'll write about anybody, really. It doesn't have to be someone I know personally or even someone I dislike for any legitimate reason. It might be a

musician whose Grammy nomination I didn't agree with or an old acquaintance who pushed me from behind when I drove down the lane for an easy layup in a high school pickup game or a friend who overcharged me for my share of dinner last weekend. I don't see any harm in doing what I do considering my posts are no more likely to be seen than the thoughts inside my head.

There was one exception, of course. I wouldn't be writing this if there weren't an exception. His name is Kit Kritzer, the lead actor in a short film called *Punctual Intentions*, which was shown before the far-superior arthouse neo-noir *A Fine Day for Dining*, which I saw the night of its release at a little theater called Film Forum on Houston Street in Manhattan.

*A Fine Day for Dining* is as beautiful a film as there is. I understood virtually none of it, which gave me days of thought-provoking entertainment as I tried to piece together loose ends that seemingly had nothing to do with each other. It was pretty much exactly what every filmmaker aspires to achieve.

But while analyzing this wonderful film, as I was on the cusp of understanding how the latter portion of Act I related to the post-midpoint resolution twist, *Punctual Intentions* suddenly popped into my head. What a horrid excuse for art. And the main cause of the bitter taste in my mouth was the leading man, Kit Kritzer.

This is a guy who makes Tommy Wiseau look like Gene Hackman. He was such an absolute bore in *PI* to the point that I actually broke a particularly long toenail on the metal back of the seat in front of me just to make sure I could still feel something. You know that awkward feeling you have when you walk through a room full of people and everyone's seated except you and you kind of sense everyone watching you, even though they're not, so you try to remember how to walk normally but just feel like you're lumbering around like an idiot? That's a perfectly natural feeling to have for most people, but it's not a feeling that any professional actor should ever have on screen, and boy did Kit Kritzer have it nailed down. He gave off the vibe of a midpubescent girl with a cleft palate walking the runway while surrounded by the best Victoria's Secret has to offer. I was embarrassed just sitting there. I wanted to vomit or kill myself.

Anyway, this four-minute monstrosity absolutely ruined the joyous three-and-a-half-hour ambiguity of *A Fine Day for Dining*, and I just couldn't forgive Kit Kritzer for it. I knew the only way to move past this frustration and finally finish my internal analysis of *A Fine Day for Dining* was to let my frustrations out in the form of a blog post about Kit Kritzer, whose middle name probably also starts with *K* because he might as well be part of that gang—he's that fucking bad.

Here's a short excerpt from what I wrote about him:

*If I had a nickel for every time Kit Kritzer's performance made me want to shoot myself in the dick, I'd be the wealthiest man in New York City, yet merely thinking of his performance would still make me want to*

*light my fortune on fire and jump in the flames. He should be tried and convicted of the attempted murder, albeit indirect, of everyone who saw his film. Had Coca-Colas been served in glass bottles at Film Forum that night, the theater would have been littered with slit throats and broken glass by the time A Fine Day for Dining's opening credits rolled. If you want to die but don't have the balls to kill yourself, see this film, and rest in peace.*

I will admit that I was a bit harsh, but I didn't think a Bangladeshi bot would care. But I guess I made a mistake in forgetting about the vanity of a D-list actor who feels he's far too talented for the projects he's cast in. People like this tend to Google their names on a daily basis and click the "Next" button until the ten Os in Goooooooooooooogle at the bottom of the page are no longer enough to show what page of search results they're on. And while the Burn Ward is difficult to come across in search results, if someone I've written about is bursting at the seams with vanity, it *is* possible to find one of my posts.

I sprang to my feet one day upon hearing my doorbell, as I had just ordered some lunch from A+ Lollipop, the funniest-sounding Chinese restaurant on Seamless. I opened my apartment door, peeked down the hallway, and saw some *Matrix*-looking motherfucker walking right at me. He was in a black suit with sleek shades—as I said, some Hugo Weaving *Matrix* vibes—and didn't have any Chinese food.

I withdrew into my apartment and swung the door closed, but a hand prevented it from shutting all the way. The impact must have broken at least one of his digits, but the man was entirely unfazed.

"I'll call the cops," I bluffed, as I was too high to remember where I had placed my phone. "Police station's right down the street."

He didn't care. I began to think he actually was an agent from the *Matrix*. Unfazed by broken fingers and threats of police arrests? That's not human behavior.

Next thing I knew, my head was in the corner of my couch, sniffing the Cheez-It crumbs and marijuana stems that I never quite reached with the vacuum. I was gasping for air; and finally, the man, who may have been more than human, spoke.

"What do you think gives you the right?"

I tried to say *The right to what?* but merely mumbled into the couch, soaking saliva into the cushions and making the Cheez-It crumbs all soggy.

"Kit Kritzer is destined to be the greatest actor of our generation. How dare you defame his name."

Ah, it all made sense now; wait, no it didn't. I keep close tabs on the Burn Ward's page views, and my Kit Kritzer post—one of my more popular—racked up a whopping eight. I was being treated like the adulterer of a mob boss's sister because eight people (at least one of which was the man himself) saw my review of a fucking Kit Kritzer short film? The situation suddenly made less sense than ever.

"If you can't see what makes the gifted thespian Kit Kritzer so uniquely talented, we'll show you."

We?! Who the fuck else was he talking about? And how in god's name were they going to show me?

*Bzzzzzzzzzz.* My doorbell rang so unexpectedly that both I and my assaulter jolted.

Finally, with enough room to speak, I said, "That's my friend from down the street. He's a private investigator. He carries a gun."

The man backed away into the corner, unsure of what to do. I had him right where I wanted him—of course, I didn't really, because I didn't know a single private investigator or gun owner, and the man at my door was probably carrying two plastic bags full of egg rolls (I'm not really one for variety). So I buzzed the person in and walked to the door totally unsure of what I was going to do.

"Chinee?" an older man said as I opened my apartment door.

"Sir," I whispered, "I need a huge favor. I need you to come in here and yell at the man in my apartment. Tell him to get the fuck out. Say exactly that. Please."

"You need sign." He handed over my receipt.

I turned to see the sharp-dressed man in the corner getting more comfortable, likely catching on to the farce I'd put together, so I did all I could think to do. I pushed the Chinese delivery man out of my way and sprinted down the hall. I'd get outside, run to the police station, and tell them everything. It was easy! I had the guy's skin and fingerprints all over me, right? And he seemed like an experienced hoodlum—I was sure he'd be in the system. In a matter of hours he'd be apprehended, and I'd be free to enjoy a fully packed bowl of weed and two dozen egg rolls. But when I burst through the door to the sidewalk, the first thing I saw were two black-suited men with sleek shades converging on my helpless, shaggy robed ass—oh yeah, I was wearing a raggedy robe through all this. I thrashed and screamed as they forced me into the back seat of their car, pleading for help, but in certain areas of Brooklyn, people never acknowledge anything they hear when in the supposedly safe confines of their own apartments.

"So you'd rather die than watch me act—is that right?"

"No, no, of course not," I told Kit Kritzer from a cold metal chair that reminded me far too much of every shitty cop drama on television. My wrists were bound to the backrest with those zip ties that are only ever used to restrain people and keep babies from drinking the bleach under the sink.

"Well, it sure seemed like it based on your article."

"I wouldn't call it an 'article.'"

"Well, what would you call it?"

"A blog post, if that. It's a goddamn free website. Its URL starts with 'blogspot,' and I've never marketed it or told a single person about it. I use it to vent and blow off steam. Nothing in there is even remotely serious or genuine. It's like the equivalent of slapping the table when you get mad; you're not actually *mad* at the *table*—you just need to hit something."

The wannabe actor mulled over my words, which I figured were probably too complex for him to understand. He then said, "But why?"

“I just told you—to vent, to get out my frustrations.”

“No, I know that. But why *me*?”

“Because I was in a bad mood and had just been to the movies. I had to pick something to rip on. It just happened to be your film.” I was lying. I deliberately picked Kit Kritzer and meant every word of my blog post. But my lies made more than enough sense for him to back off, or so I thought—I once again underestimated the vanity of a D-list actor.

“You picked *me*.”

How was I supposed to respond to that? “Yeah. I mean, that’s not really up for debate. I’m sorry you were the one I picked, but it didn’t mean anything. I’ve bashed Nelson fucking Mandela on that blog. It doesn’t mean I think you’re actually a bad person or bad at what you do.”

(The Mandela thing seems like a lie, but I had actually posted about him before. I think he did plenty of good for the world, but we have some fundamental disagreements about a select few things, and that’s all I’m gonna say about the matter.)

“Do you know who my father is?” Kit Kritzer asked with unsettling despair. “You probably don’t—Wikipedia keeps taking my page down. But let’s just say he’s...important. I can do anything I want in here, and my father will be sure to see that it never leaves this room.”

“What? Wait, no. Why? Why do you—I mean, why *would* you want to do anything to me? I’m meaningless. I don’t do shit. No one even reads my blog! How would doing anything to me help your acting career?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You think this is about my acting career? So naïve, my friend.”

“What’s this about, then?”

“You should understand. This is how I vent. This is how I blow off steam. This room is my Burn Ward.”

I suddenly felt like I had never been afraid until this moment. Everything that came prior was some sort of timidity, not true fear. Now I was afraid. This man was crazy, insane, psychotic. He hired henchmen, presumably with his dad’s money, to torture or kill someone who made fun of him to eight people—one of which was himself, and the rest of which were probably bots. And perhaps most concerning was that his father seemed to be okay with this type of behavior. Kit Kritzer was raised by a man who didn’t mind his son spending money to torture critics.

As I stared at Kit Kritzer with tears welling in my eyes, one of those *Matrix* boys clasped the back of my neck and drove me toward the wall, which was particularly uncomfortable considering I was still tied to the chair. With my face against the cement blocks, Kit Kritzer unholstered a pistol that had apparently been resting in the waistband of his corduroys all along, and he pressed it straight into the space between my eyebrows.

I won’t quote my pleas for mercy because, to be quite honest, they’re fairly embarrassing. But trust me, I said things I never thought I’d say, pleading for my life until Kit Kritzer finally lowered his weapon and spoke.

“How’s that for acting?”