Three Blunders

Rosanna Nunan
It is a useless corollary of my way of life that if I catch a glimpse, sometimes mere seconds, of a movie on TV, a movie that I have never seen before, I can usually guess the title and have some vague notion of the plot by virtue of the elaborate framework of movie knowledge that has constructed itself quite by accident, occupying valuable space, in my brain. So when Keanu Reeves walked into a bar to sweet-talk a lady on TBS this afternoon, looking all deceptively charming with longer, floppier hair than he had in, say, The Devil's Advocate or A Walk in the Clouds (both of which, to my shame, I have seen), and with a certain song playing in the background, it was not totally erroneous for me to guess that this film was The Watcher (very late nineties or early two-thousands I would estimate), about a floppy haired guy who sweet-talks ladies in bars looking all deceptively charming before stalking and chopping them into bits, starring Keanu Reeves.

The song playing in the background at the time I turned on TBS goes like this: “Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break, every step you take, I’ll be watching you.” The song is “Every Breath You Take” by the Police. It is a love song. It is actually kind of a nice sounding love song, but you can see how it would be very misleading given the circumstances. Yes, it would have been a bold move for the makers of The Watcher to include such a heartfelt yet lyrically creepy ballad in their film. It would have suggested an impressive subtlety of execution that, to say the very least, is unusual in the realm of Keanu Reeves movies, but I was willing to entertain that possibility.

Imagine a potential outcome of this scenario. If I had changed the channel after the scene had ended, one day I would have found myself at Blockbuster experiencing the all too familiar sadness of a person who has not yet been on the earth for two dozen years but nevertheless has difficulty finding movies that she hasn’t seen before. She thinks about the decades and decades to come in which there will be thousands of empty hours and no new movies to fill them up with, and in this highly vulnerable state she zeroes in on The Watcher. She has never seen it before but she has a dim recollection that she has attributed to it an uncharacteristic subtlety of execution and feels strangely relieved. She rents it, thinking that the world has come through for her one last time, only to discover,
upon putting it into the DVD player, her grave, grave error.

Thankfully, I avoided such a fate by maintaining attention long enough to realize in the next scene, when a troop of football players in red, white, and blue uniforms scattered itself across the screen, that this movie was not The Watcher, but The Replacements, another Keanu Reeves movie that I have also never seen and intend to keep that way. All the subtle charm of “Every Breath You Take” was lost when I realized that it was simply part of the obligatory romance in yet another underdog rides again sports flick.

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Ever since I can remember, my grandfather has had the head of a rabbit mounted on his wall. This rabbit has antlers glued very convincingly to its head. I swear that I saw a photograph of another such rabbit, alive and hopping, in National Geographic or some other less reputable glossy publication when I was eight or nine years old. At seventeen, I had a conversation with my dad in which the rare and elusive jackalope came up.

“Jackalopes? A rabbit with antlers—are you serious? Those things don’t exist.”

“What?!! Sure they do. They roam free on the prairies out west. In Wyoming. I read about it when I was a kid.”

“Um, no. Really. Those things don’t exist.”

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My dear friend Chrissy Bailey is much more knowledgeable about popular music than I have ever been, and, with the exception of an incident that occurred about two years ago, I have never challenged her expertise. My mother has always listened to the oldies station in the car, and the result is that I know the lyrics of all the songs from the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s but have absolutely no idea who is singing them. This became readily apparent that summer day in 2006, when Chrissy and I sat on a tiny balcony in Pittsburgh and she was threatening to call her dad to corroborate her assertion that “Killing Me Softly with His Song” was not written or sung by Joni Mitchell.

“It’s Joni Mitchell. I know it’s Joni Mitchell.”

“It is not Joni Mitchell. It doesn’t sound anything like Joni Mitchell.”

“It is.”

“What are you even basing this information off of?” shaking her head at me wide-eyed, “You don’t know anything about music!”
I was basing this information off of two mutually exclusive events. Number One: My mother had told me that Joni Mitchell sang this song. This is one of three specific conversations I remember having with my mother in the car when I was young. She not only told me that Joni Mitchell sang this song, but that Joni Mitchell wrote this song for Don McLean. Why would I have any reason to doubt such a delightful backstory when my mother had just explained all the clever allusions in McLean’s “American Pie” (further supporting her legitimacy as someone who is likely to know the writers and singers of oldies)? Every time I heard “Killing Me Softly with His Song” up until two years ago I would think “Joni Mitchell,” so deep was the effect of this could-not-possibly-be-imagined conversation.

Number Two: In the movie About a Boy starring Hugh Grant, various characters must mention Joni Mitchell in relation to Toni Collette’s character at least three times. They talk about how much her character loves to sing Joni Mitchell songs out loud in the house with her son, and in one scene Hugh Grant goes into their house and what do you think they are they singing?

I kind of halfway explained this to Chrissy, and she seemed halfway convinced.

“God, maybe it is Joni Mitchell,” she said, looking absolutely astonished, “It just doesn’t sound anything like her. Are you sure she didn’t just re-record it or something?”

I shrugged. Truth be told I had no idea what Joni Mitchell sounded like because “Killing Me Softly” was the only song I knew of hers.

After this I think google was consulted. And when I still didn’t capitulate she finally did call her dad, whose decisive “ROBERTA FLACK” rang out loud and clear through the receiver.

(Post-anecdote codicil: After writing this I had an itching suspicion that something was not quite above-board about the whole Joni Mitchell/About a Boy relationship that is necessary for the success of these little blunders. So, after investigating the matter it turns out that although Joni Mitchell is actually never mentioned in the movie, her name appears multiple times in the book, which I read way back in the eleventh grade and completely forgot about. In the first forty-three pages alone Joni Mitchell comes up three times and the final moments of the novel revolve around the main character’s dismissal of this singer, which is obviously supposed to signify a great change in him, boy becomes man, etc.: “You
love Joni Mitchell.” “I don’t. Not anymore. I bloody hate Joni Mitchell.” The book also includes a “Killing Me Softly” scene that leaves the true artist unmentioned. This amounts to the same effect in the book that I have been mistakenly attributing to the movie for several years now. Also, I’m convinced that the importance of Joni Mitchell in the book and the importance of “Killing Me Softly” in the movie exacerbated the false connection in my mind, and if anything I think this merely indicates a larger complexity of organized blundering that I am beginning to believe may follow some mystical plan).

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I am interested in the interconnectivity of events. At the moment I am particularly interested in the way the little, interconnected clues leading up to these three events all deliberately conspired to put me on the wrong track. What I’ve taken away from watching a minute and a half of The Replacements on TBS this afternoon is that you can apply your best reasoning skills to a situation and still come out a fool. The floppy hair, the stalker song, the mounted head, the glossy photo, my mother’s claim, a movie scene, all pointed to logical conclusions that will never be right. No more worries about blunders, big or small, clearly the world was designed for them.