

THE THINGS I HAVE FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

DEVIATION

a story by Richard Sleboe, New Orleans

FOUND IN: WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA

26°39'27.7"N 80°03'20.0"W

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a photographic project by Robert Götzfried and friends

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I'm at the Lake Worth Playhouse, watching *Alone*. It's my favorite movie, and I watch it whenever it is playing at a theater anywhere between Jupiter Island and Key Largo. *Alone* first came out almost twenty years ago. It gets screened less and less these days, and at ever seedier theaters, but as long as they play it, I will go see it. It's that good. I guess I could try to stream it, but that's not the same as watching it in a theater. Movies are made to be seen in theaters, not on TV screens or phone displays. In a theater, even an old movie looks new.

Alone is about a woman named Lucy. Lucy runs a small convenience store. She is behind the counter before dawn to sell coffee and cigarettes to the commuters on their way to work, and she keeps the store open way past midnight to cash in on the party crowd. Lucy is always tired, but she doesn't have a choice. Her husband has run off with a woman half her age, leaving behind nothing but broken promises and unpaid bills, and her mother is in a costly nursing home. The store is Lucy's life raft in a sea of bad luck. The store keeps her afloat.

About fifteen minutes into the screening, the image starts to flicker, and the sound gets all squeaky. Lucy's voice suddenly sounds like she is on helium. The screen goes dark, and the lights come on. The projectionist emerges from his booth at the back of the theater. He explains that there is something wrong with the sprocket holes that keep the film on track. He says that the copy is getting old, and the holes are all worn out. He says he will skip to the second reel. He says he hopes it is in better shape than the first. This means that I will miss the flashback to Lucy's wedding day, but I don't mind. The way I look at it, this kind of mishap is part of the appeal of seeing a movie in a theater. It's a real experience, and in real life, things go wrong.

Half-way into the second reel, Lucy's mother dies. Her mother's death yanks Lucy out of her rut. It's like a switch has been flicked inside her head. She buries her mother, sells the store, and buys a blood-red convertible. She sets out to track her husband down. She wants to make him pay. Towards the end of the second reel, Lucy stops to get gas at a roadside gas station. She pre-pays at the pump, unscrews the tank cap, puts it on top of the pump, and fills up the tank. When she is done, she gets back into the car and drives off. At this point, the movie cuts to a grainy close-up of the pump. The tank cap is still lying on top of the pump. Apparently, Lucy has forgotten to put the cap back on when she was done pumping. I don't remember this. The shot is no longer than a second or two, but I have watched the movie at least a dozen times. I don't see how I could have missed it every single time. Perhaps this is a different version of the movie. The director's cut. I make a resolution to ask the projectionist about it. The next scene is as I remember it, a tracking shot of the blood-red convertible pulling up to a motel.

Towards the end of the third and final reel, Lucy stops at a traffic light. The soft top of the convertible is down. The camera is right behind her. At this point in the story, Lucy has given up on trying to find her husband. He has covered his tracks too carefully, and she is too tired to keep chasing him. For all she knows, he might be dead. When the traffic light turns green, Lucy makes a left turn, pulls away from the camera, and drives the blood-red convertible out of the frame. This is strange. In the version of the movie I know, she makes a right turn, and the camera follows the car.

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What is going on? The rest of the movie unfolds more or less as I remember it, but Lucy is now missing from all the scenes. There is the birds-eye shot of the ramp that leads up to the freeway, but Lucy's car isn't in it. There is the scene that is set in a booth at a roadside diner, but Lucy's seat is empty. The waitress brings a burger to the table and sets the plate down in front of the empty seat. Enjoy your meal, the waitress says, as if she can see Lucy, but Lucy isn't there. In the next scene, the camera follows Lucy's ghost to the restroom. In the version of the movie as I remember it, Lucy spends a long time in front of the restroom mirror, touching up her makeup and rehearsing things she could say to the car dealer to get him to buy back the convertible. But without Lucy in the frame, there isn't much to see. Just an empty mirror. As I wonder how you keep the reflection of the camera out of this kind of shot, I find myself drifting off to sleep.

When I wake up, the screen is dark, and the theater is empty. I head to the projection booth. I knock on the door, but the projectionist doesn't answer. I open the door, ignoring the sign that says KEEP OUT, but the projectionist isn't there. The fan that cools the projection lamp is still running, but the spools that hold the movie reels during projection are empty. I am tempted to rummage around for the reels, but I resist. Instead, I step out into the lobby. The woman behind the ticket counter tells me that the projectionist has already left to take the film back to the distributor down in Boca.

Outside, late afternoon has turned into early evening. The sidewalk bouncers on Lake Avenue are kicking into high gear. Time for me to go home. I'm not getting any younger. When *Alone* came out, I was Lucy's age. Now, I'm closer to her mother's age. I get into my car, drive up K-Street, turn left onto Lucerne, and right onto the Dixie Highway. I95 is faster, but I don't care. I'm not in a hurry. I stop for gas at the Chevron between Hunter and Franklin. I get out of the car and step up to the pump. And there it is, sitting right on top of the pump: the tank cap Lucy left behind. How do I know it's hers? You have to take my word for it. It can't be, but it is.