



MOLTEN MILTON

a novel

John Ginsburg



Milton Rose is a nineteen-year-old Winnipeg college student. He's an introspective, sensitive young man, whose personal life is frustrating and confused. In the spring of 2019, Milton is living on his own, having been raised by his grandparents. Only now is he coming to terms with his mother's tragic death when he was a toddler. As the novel begins, Milton and his friend Tina Lindell are working at a downtown cinema, where two starkly different events occur. First, Milton submits a paper to a Banff film festival competition, where he wins a prize. Not long after, Tina is victimized by the disgusting sexual advances of their creepy boss. Determined that the man will be held responsible, Tina convinces Milton to give false supporting evidence to police. As they await the outcome of the police complaint, Milton, Tina, and Tina's boyfriend drive out to the film festival in Banff, to collect Milton's prize. There, Milton's world converges with the world of two young drifters from Florida, Shane Williams and Arlene Pratt. The two have been restlessly moving from place to place, waiting tables in Orlando, Miami and Saint Petersburg, eventually becoming small-time criminals, engaging in credit-card fraud. Their film festival scam jeopardizes Milton's prize money. Back at home, Tina's sexual harassment case meets with considerable difficulties, as Milton tries to move on with his own life.



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Molten Milton

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This is a work of fiction. The people and events depicted are entirely fictional.

Also by John Ginsburg

Fine Times (2011)

The Case For Barbara (2012)

How I Almost Married A Russian (2013)

The Last Straw (2014)

PHiDelity (2015)

20 Mile (2016)

Appearances (2017)

Loretta and The Drones (2018)

The Honey Bear and other children's stories(2018)

- It's obvious what should be allowed and what shouldn't. Anything that doesn't harm somebody else. That's the only rule we need.
- Okay. And what if someone breaks that rule? What are the consequences?
- That's definitely more complicated. But it has to be up to the victim to a large extent.

College Law and Justice Class

1 Standing Up

City Cinema, Winnipeg
Sunday, May 5, 2019

Two hours inside the cramped, stuffy projection room wasn't exactly torture, but still... There was just no good reason to stay in there all that time. There was hardly ever any problem with the movies. And you could always go back in there right away if there was. But that's what old man Cooper wanted. And he was the boss. He could get pretty bent out of shape when things didn't go the way he wanted. Whatever. It was a decent job for the time being.

It only took a few seconds to look up and down the rows of the small theatre. As usual, there were a few popcorn boxes and plastic bottles to pick up. Into the bin they went. Then another quick look around. Lights off.

Now came the best time of the night, what he so much looked forward to; meeting Tina in the lobby and then hanging out; sitting together on the long bus ride home. Luckily, her boneheaded boyfriend Rob had lost his licence, otherwise he would have been picking her up.

From the theatre to the front lobby was just a short walk, across a squeaky, worn, hardwood floor. When he reached the heavy, panelled inner doors, he quickly checked for the bus pass in his jacket pocket, even though he'd already checked for it earlier. He was totally OC in some ways, he thought. Then he checked his phone. Dumb Instagram posts from people he'd never heard of; pictures of people eating, somebody's new truck, somebody's birthday, somebody vaping and blowing smoke rings. There was a days-old YouTube notification he still hadn't looked at. It was his former classmate Benny Gesser's channel; his band. They pretty much sucked. He ignored it again. There were tweets he might look at later. And there was an email from Pinhead Dietrich: *Can you read this and tell me what you think.* Oh no. He was probably submitting something.

To the right of the doors stood a narrow oak table, containing stacks of glossy brochures and other promotional material. This was another part of his job; adding and removing whatever Cooper wanted, and re-sorting after every film. The brochures were mostly about upcoming films at City Cinema, but there were also notices about film events in other places, and announcements from other local arts groups. On this night, both houses had been quite small, and it looked like the brochures hadn't even been touched. He stopped for a moment and picked up a particular brochure from one of the stacks, wistfully looking it over, back and front, as he'd done many times before. It was on this notice that he'd found out about the contest, when it had first caught his eye, back in November. He could recite it from memory: *The Rocky Mountain Film Festival in Banff, Alberta featuring the films of Steven Soderbergh... including a forum on social issues in contemporary filmmaking... interested participants are invited to submit a paper on any topic having to do with contemporary film... Four outstanding submissions will be selected for publication in Film World Online, with their authors to be awarded cash prizes...*

Who would have ever guessed that his paper would be selected? But it was, four weeks after his submission. He was pretty proud of himself. He didn't want to brag about it, but he kind of

did when he told Tina. She was really happy for him. He carefully returned the brochure to its position in the stack and tidied the table.

Pulling open the heavy wooden doors, he walked into the small vestibule area, with its original marble floor, heavily stained and worn by decades of use. Movie bills and ads were tacked up on the walls to his left and right. Some were years old. Some were for films they'd recently shown. Woody Allen, the Hitchcock series, the Kubrick series, local films, indigenous films, Quebecois films... Glancing at the stylish black and white poster for BBSFF always brought a smile to his face. The Best Bad Sex Film Festival. He'd dutifully worked all those films himself. They were bad all right. But at least some of them were funny-bad, like *Hung Jury*, which was actually about a court case, with a jury made up of twelve gay men, all with huge schlongs. And *Doctor Whoomb*, a weird and wild butch/lesbian combination of *Doctor Who* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. But most of them, like *Platypussy*, were just plain bad.

It was a cold, dark night and the view out onto the street was somewhat less than inspiring. Nothing but a few cars passing by in the dim streetlight. Even though it was still a few minutes before midnight, the streets were almost completely deserted.

He looked back through the inside doors, toward the darkened concession area. Tina was always a few minutes later than him. She had to empty and clean the popcorn machine and count the cash. Their 12:15 bus stopped right beside the cinema, so they usually just sat on the outside steps and talked until it came.

Before long, Tina appeared, wearing a striped touque and zipping up her quilted black jacket as she walked toward him.

Mostly hidden from view as he was, he felt free to look at Tina as directly and intently as he wanted. As far as he was concerned, she was as beautiful as a girl could possibly be. As beautiful as a *woman* could possibility be. He was almost twenty now; he had to remember to say *woman*. She was just gorgeous, that's all there was to it. Tall and thin, with sweet blue eyes and long blond hair, and absolutely perfect skin. Not to mention a dazzling smile that would just knock you over. And long, sexy legs. She looked amazing no matter what she was doing, no matter what she was wearing, no matter where she was. Of course he could never even dream of being with a girl like her. A *woman* like her. Not even in his wildest fantasies. A nerdy loser like him? Hardly. But he was sure glad they were friends. They'd been friends for over two years. Good friends. Ever since the spring of grade eleven, when they'd worked together on the school website. They talked about all kinds of things. Even about her boyfriend. She made him feel like he mattered, like she trusted him. He felt like he could be himself around her.

As Tina walked up to the doors, it was obvious that something was going on. Usually, at the end of the night, she would bop across the room in her jeans and black leather boots, light-hearted with a big smile on her face. Not on this night. Her eyes had kind of a frozen look, looking straight ahead. And she was walking much more stiffly than usual.

'Hey Tina.'

'Hey Milt.'

It was hard to tell from the tone of Tina's greeting, whether she was steamed about something or maybe just bummed. But she was definitely upset about something. She walked straight past Milt, to the outside doors.

'What's up?' said Milton, quickly scrambling to keep up and follow her out.

Tina was in a hurry, speaking under her breath. 'I'm outta here. Come on. Let's go. Let's go.' She pushed open the big doors and headed outside, down the stairs.

Milton followed her out, reaching into his pants pocket for a set of keys. He locked the outside doors, pulling on them twice to make sure they were locked. By then, Tina had turned to face him, her angry words bursting out in a loud, shrill voice. 'What a frickin' perv! Why did I waste a minute of my life around an asshole like him?'

'Who? Rob?' were the words that came out of Milt's mouth, which he instantly regretted.

'Cooper! Old man Cooper!' said Tina. 'Jeez Milton! Like where's your head?'

Milton was deeply embarrassed by his hasty, mistaken answer. But in the face of Tina's uncharacteristic anger, and the stunning disclosure to come, he was going to have to wait until later to properly beat himself up about it.

'He came on to me! He frickin' came on to me! I feel sick. He's a dirty, slimy perv. He touched me. He put his hand on my shoulder.'

'When? What happened?'

'Just now. A minute ago. I was counting the cash, putting it in that metal box. He walked up behind me. Filthy perv!'

'What did you say? What did you do?'

'He asked me what I was doing after I finished up tonight. I said like, nothing, just going home. He said he had a collection of old posters and movies I should check out. In his apartment on the third floor. We could have a few drinks and then he'd drive me home. Have a little fun. I just fucking froze. I froze. I couldn't believe it. That's when he put his hand on my shoulder. He was standing right behind me. Like about an inch away.'

'Holy crap! What did you do, Tina?'

'I said "no thanks" and told him to please take his hand off my shoulder. And then he said if I was nice to him then he'd be nice to me. He said I'd been doing a good job and there could be a nice big raise in store. Fuck, Milton! I'm still in shock. I - '

'Then what happened?'

'I told him I thought he was sick. That's exactly what I said: "You're sick, Mr. Cooper." Then I said "Get away from me, please. You can't do that to women. You can't treat women like that." I told him he could go to jail for talking to me like that.'

'Good for you, Tina. Holy crap! What a total perv! Then what happened?'

'I just grabbed my jacket and stood up and walked away. And then he fired me.'

'He fired you?'

'He fired me. When I started to walk away, he said "Don't bother coming in after tonight. I'll send your final week's pay by email." I didn't even turn around. I just kept walking.'

'Slimeball! Are you okay? I can't believe you just went through all that. And here I was, just standing in the lobby like it was a normal day. Wow!'

'I hate him. He was standing so close to me. He put his hand on my shoulder. What a sick creep. He's not going to get away with this.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I don't know. Fuck, Milton. It just happened. But I'm not going to let him get away with it, that's for sure. I mean, I don't give a crap about the job. But the way he talked to me, what he tried to do...'

'What can we do?'

'I should probably call the police. Charge him.'

'Good idea.'

'He'll probably deny it, but it'll still be a huge embarrassment for him.'

'We should post it all over the internet. We can shut him down.'

Tina thought for a moment. 'I've got an idea' she said. 'But you have to help.'

'Okay.'

'If I tell the police what happened and if he denies it, what's going to happen?'

'I don't know. Hopefully they'll believe you.'

'No. You know what'll happen? Nothing. Zero. A big fat zero, that's what. They'll be like, all sympathetic to me - oh, you poor little girl; we feel so bad for you; we really believe you, but you know what? There is nothing to stand up in court to support your statement. No evidence. He's got no criminal record. He's been in business for a long time. And he denies it. But thanks for coming in, miss. You're so brave and it's so horrible and...''

'Maybe not.'

'I *know* that's what will happen. But that's where you can help.'

'Okay. How?'

'If *you* saw it... If you saw him put his hand on my shoulder; if you saw him standing behind me; if you overheard some of the things he said to me. Then we'd have him.'

'Yah, but unfortunately, I wasn't there.'

'I know. But you could *say* you were. It's no big stretch, Milton. I mean like, you work here. So you could have just walked over to the booth on the way out and witnessed the whole thing. You could have been standing just in front of the booth, waiting for me.'

'You want me to lie to the police? I don't know, Tina. I don't know if I could.'

'Can we just think about it? Talk about it? We could have your statement down rock solid. They would never know. Let's think about it. Okay? That's what he deserves.'

Tina's provocative suggestion seemed to hang in the air, as they both fell silent. A moment later, the number 11 bus pulled up at the corner.

There were only a few other people on the bus. The two found a seat at the very back.

'It wasn't the first time, you know' said Tina.

Milton was very much stunned by what had happened. For the moment, he just sat quietly, looking at Tina and listening.

'He tried the same trick before. I mean like, he never tried to touch me before, but he tried the same kind of sick come-on. Two weeks ago. Saturday night. I was cleaning up. He asked me if I wanted a ride home. I said no thanks. He goes "We could stop somewhere for a drink. Talk about how the job's going". I said no thanks again. He goes "Maybe another time. I don't bite. Not usually, anyway." That's what he said. My skin was crawling. I said no thanks and finished cleaning up. He kind of just walked away.'

'That's sick. You should have told me. We should have quit right then.'

'I thought of telling you. But you know what? That's just what men do. All the time. They're just trying it out. Seeing how you react. Looking for an opportunity. You just have to let them know you're not in the least interested. Usually they'll leave you alone. Not this guy, though.'

'Did you tell your mom? Or Rob?'

'If I'd even said one word to Kathy about it, she would have like, totally lost it.'

Tina's mom liked Tina and her friends to call her Kathy. She was just 19 years older than Tina, and people often thought she was Tina's sister when they were out together. But Milton always called her Mrs.Lindell. He loved going to Tina's house, because Mrs.Lindell always fed him and made him feel so much at home. She was almost as beautiful as Tina; maybe even more beautiful. And she was so warm and friendly and calm, even though Tina didn't think so. She knew so much about everything. And you could count on her. Not like the women his age that he

knew. They were all so nervous and hard to understand, and so changeable. He was so envious of Tina. She was so lucky to have a mom like that. He wished he had a mom like her. Or any mom, for that matter.

'You have to tell her now.'

'I know. She is going to have a frickin' stroke. Rob will like, pretend to be all offended for me. But he'll mostly just be jealous. He thinks all the attention people are paying to sexual harassment and #MeToo has gone way too far. We have arguments about it. Whatever. He doesn't have much of a brain anyway.'

So why are you going steady with the guy, Milton wondered to himself. Tina always said things like that about Rob. Milton didn't know the first thing about girls or relationships or sex. But it always seemed so confusing when she talked about her boyfriend like that.