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20th Century Ghosts

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Extract

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The best time to see her is when the place is almost full.

There is the well-known story of the man who wanders in for a late show, and finds the vast six-hundred-seat theatre almost deserted. Halfway through the movie, he glances around and discovers her sitting next to him, in a chair that only moments before had been empty. Her witness stares at her. She turns her head and stares back. She has a nosebleed. Her eyes are wide, stricken. My head hurts, *she whispers.* I have to step out for a moment. Will you tell me what I miss? *It is in this instant that the person looking at her realises she is as insubstantial as the shifting blue ray of light cast by the projector. It is possible to see the next seat over through her body. As she rises from her chair she fades away.*

Then there is the story about the group of friends who go in to the Rosebud together on a Thursday night. One of the bunch sits down next to a woman by herself, a woman in blue. When the movie doesn't start right away, the person who sat down beside her decides to make conversation. What's playing tomorrow? *He asks her.* The theatre is dark tomorrow, *she whispers*. This is the last show. *Shortly after the movie begins she vanishes. On the drive home, the man who spoke to her is killed in a car accident.*

These, and many of the other best-known legends of the Rosebud, are false … the ghost stories of people who have seen too many horror movies and who think they know exactly how a ghost story should be.

Alec Sheldon, who was one of the first to see Imogene Gilchrist, owns the Rosebud, and at seventy-three still operates the projector most nights. He can always tell, after talking to someone for just a few moments, whether or not they really saw her, but what he

knows he keeps to himself, and he never publicly discredits anyone's story … that would be bad for business.

He knows, though, that anyone who says they could see right through her didn't see her at all. Some of the put-on artists talk about blood pouring from her nose, her ears, her eyes; they say she gave them a pleading look, and asked for them to find somebody, to bring help. But she doesn't bleed that way, and when she wants to talk it isn't to tell someone to bring a doctor. A lot of the pretenders begin their stories by saying, you'll never believe what I just saw. *They're right. He won't, although he will listen to all that they have to say, with a patient, even encouraging smile.*

The ones who have seen her don't come looking for Alec to tell him about it. More often than not he finds ***them****, comes across them wandering the lobby on unsteady legs; they've had a bad shock, they don't feel well. They need to sit down a while. They don't ever say,* you won't believe what I just saw. *The experience is still too immediate. The idea that they might not be believed doesn't occur to them until later. Often they are in a state that might be described as subdued, even submissive. When he thinks about the effect she has on those who encounter her, he thinks of Steven Greenberg coming out of* The Birds *one cool Sunday afternoon in 1963. Steven was just twelve then, and it would be another twelve years before he went and got so famous; he was at that time not a golden boy, but just a boy.*

Alec was in the alley behind the Rosebud, having a smoke, when he heard the fire door into the theatre clang open behind him. He turned to see a lanky kid leaning in the doorway – just leaning there, not going in or out. The boy squinted into the harsh white sunshine, with the confused, wondering look of a small child who has just been shaken out of a deep sleep. Alec could see past him into a darkness filled with the shrill sounds of thousands of squeaking sparrows. Beneath that, he could hear a few in the audience stirring restlessly, beginning to complain.

Hey kid, in or out? *Alec said.* Your lettin' the light in.

The kid – Alec didn't know his name then – turned his head and stared back into the theatre for a long, searching moment. Then he stepped out and the door settled shut behind him, closing gently on its pneumatic hinge. And still he didn't go anywhere, didn't say anything. The Rosebud had been showing The Birds *for two weeks, and although Alec had seen others walk out before it was over, none of the early exits had been twelve-year-old boys. It was the sort of film most boys of that age waited all year to see, but who knew? Maybe the kid had a weak stomach.*

I left my Coke in the theatre, *the kid said, his voice distant, almost toneless.* I still had a lot of it left.

You want to go back in and look for it?

And the kid lifted his eyes and gave Alec a bright look of alarm, and then Alec knew. No.

Alec finished his cigarette, pitched it.

I sat with the dead lady, *the kid blurted.*

Alec nodded.

She talked to me.

What did she say?

He looked at the kid again, and found him staring back with eyes that were now wide and round with disbelief.

I need someone to talk to she said. When I get excited about a movie I need to talk.

Alec knows when she talks to someone she always wants to talk about the movies. She usually addresses herself to men, although sometimes she will sit and talk with a woman – Lois Weisel most notably. Alec has been working on a theory of what it is that causes her to show herself. He has been keeping notes in a yellow legal pad. He has a list of who she appeared to and in what movie and when (Leland King, Harold and Maude,*'72; Joel Harlowe,* Eraserhead,*'76; Hal Lash,* Blood Simple,*'84; and all the others). He has, over the years, developed clear ideas about what conditions*

are most likely to produce her, although the specifics of his theory are constantly being revised.

As a young man, thoughts of her were always on his mind, or simmering just beneath the surface; she was his first and most strongly felt obsession. Then for a while he was better – when the theatre was a success, and he was an important businessman in the community, chamber of commerce, town planning board. In those days he could go weeks without thinking about her; and then someone would see her, or pretend to have seen her, and stir the whole thing up again.

But following his divorce – she kept the house, he moved into the one-bedroom under the theatre – and not long after the 8-screen cineplex opened just outside of town, he began to obsess again, less about her than about the theatre itself (is there any difference, though? Not really, he supposes, thoughts of one always circling around to thoughts of the other). He never imagined he would be so old and owe so much money. He has a hard time sleeping, his head is so full of ideas – wild, desperate ideas – about how to keep the theatre from failing. He keeps himself awake thinking about income, staff, saleable assets. And when he can't think about money any more, he tries to picture where he will go if the theatre closes. He envisions an old folks' home, mattresses that reek of Ben Gay, hunched geezers with their dentures out, sitting in a musty common room watching daytime sitcoms; he sees a place where he will passively fade away, like wallpaper that gets too much sunlight and slowly loses its colour.

This is bad. What is more terrible is when he tries to imagine what will happen to her if the Rosebud closes. He sees the theatre stripped of its seats, an echoing empty space, drifts of dust in the corners, petrified wads of gum stuck fast to the cement. Local teens have broken in to drink and screw; he sees scattered liquor bottles, ignorant graffiti on the walls, a single, grotesque, used condom on the floor in front of the stage. He sees the lonely and violated place

where she will fade away.

Or won't fade … the worst thought of all.

Alec saw her – spoke to her – for the first time when he was fifteen, six days after he learned his older brother had been killed in the South Pacific. President Truman had sent a letter expressing his condolences. It was a form letter, but the signature on the bottom – that was really his. Alec hadn't cried yet. He knew, years later, that he spent that week in a state of shock, that he had lost the person he loved most in the world and it had badly traumatized him. But in 1945 no one used the word trauma to talk about emotions, and the only kind of shock anyone discussed was 'shell-.'

He told his mother he was going to school in the mornings. He wasn't going to school. He was shuffling around downtown looking for trouble. He shoplifted candy-bars from the American Luncheonette and ate them out at the empty shoe factory – the place closed down, all the men off in France, or the Pacific. With sugar zipping in his blood, he launched rocks through the windows, trying out his fastball.

He wandered through the alley behind the Rosebud and looked at the door into the theatre and saw that it wasn't firmly shut. The side facing the alley was a smooth metal surface, no door handle, but he was able to pry it open with his fingernails. He came in on the 3:30 p.m. show, the place crowded, mostly kids under the age of ten and their mothers. The fire door was halfway up the theatre, recessed into the wall, set in shadow. No one saw him come in. He slouched up the aisle and found a seat in the back.

'Jimmy Stewart went to the Pacific,' his brother had told him while he was home on leave, before he shipped out. They were throwing the ball around out back. 'Mr Smith is probably carpet-bombing the red fuck out of Tokyo right this instant.

How's that for a crazy thought?' Alec's brother Ray was a self-described film freak. He and Alec went to every single movie that opened during his month long leave: *Bataan*, *The Fighting Seabees*, *Going My Way*.

Alec waited through an episode of a serial concerning the latest adventures of a singing cowboy with long eyelashes and a mouth so dark his lips were black. It failed to interest him. He picked his nose and wondered how to get a Coke with no money. The feature started.

At first Alec couldn't figure out what the hell kind of movie it was, although right off he had the sinking feeling it was going to be a musical. First the members of an orchestra filed onto a stage against a bland blue backdrop. Then a starched shirt came out and started telling the audience all about the brand-new kind of entertainment they were about to see. When he started blithering about Walt Disney and his artists, Alec began to slide downwards in his seat, his head sinking between his shoulders. The orchestra surged into big dramatic blasts of strings and horns. In another moment his worst fears were realised. It wasn't just a musical; it was also a *cartoon*. Of course it was a cartoon, he should have known – the place crammed with little kids and their mothers – a 3:30 show in the middle of the week that led off with an episode of The Lipstick Kid, singing sissy of the high plains.

After a while he lifted his head and peeked at the screen through his fingers, watched some abstract animation for a while: silver raindrops falling against a background of roiling smoke, rays of molten light shimmering across an ashen sky. Eventually he straightened up to watch in a more comfortable position. He was not quite sure what he was feeling. He was bored, but interested too, almost a little mesmerized. It would have been hard not to watch. The visuals came at him in a steady hypnotic assault: ribs of red light, whirling stars,

kingdoms of cloud glowing in the crimson light of a setting sun.

The little kids were shifting around in their seats. He heard a little girl whisper loudly, 'Mom, when is there going to be *Mickey*?' For the kids it was like being in school. But by the time the movie hit the next segment, the orchestra shifting from Bach to Tchaikovsky, he was sitting all the way up, even leaning forward slightly, his forearms resting on his knees. He watched fairies flitting through a dark forest, touching flowers and spiderwebs with enchanted wands and spreading sheets of glittering, incandescent dew. He felt a kind of baffled wonder watching them fly around, a curious feeling of yearning. He had the sudden idea he could sit there and watch for ever.

'I could sit in this theatre for ever,' whispered someone beside him. It was a girl's voice. 'Just sit here and watch and never leave.'

He didn't know there was someone sitting beside him, and jumped to hear a voice so close. He thought – no, he knew – that when he sat down the seats on either side of him were empty. He turned his head.

She was only a few years older than him, couldn't have been more than twenty, and his first thought was that she was very close to being a fox; his heart beat a little faster to have such a girl speaking to him. He was already thinking *don't blow it*. She wasn't looking at him. She was staring up at the movie, and smiling in a way that seemed to express both admiration and a child's dazed wonder. He wanted desperately to say something smooth, but his voice was trapped in his throat.

She leaned towards him without glancing away from the screen, her left hand just touching the side of his arm on the armrest.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' she whispered. 'When I get excited about a movie I want to talk. I can't help it.'

In the next moment he became aware of two things, more or less simultaneously. The first was that her hand against his arm was cold. He could feel the deadly chill of it through his sweater, a cold so palpable it startled him a little. The second thing he noticed was a single teardrop of blood on her upper lip, under her left nostril.

'You have a nosebleed,' he said, in a voice that was too loud. He immediately wished he hadn't said it. You only had one opportunity to impress a fox like this. He should have found something for her to wipe her nose with, and handed it to her, murmured something real Sinatra: *you're bleeding, here*. He pushed his hands into his pockets, feeling for something she could wipe her nose with. He didn't have anything.

But she didn't seem to have heard him, didn't seem the slightest bit aware he had spoken. She absent-mindedly brushed the back of one hand under her nose, and left a dark smear of blood over her upper lip … and Alec froze with his hands in his pockets, staring at her. It was the first he knew there was something wrong about the girl sitting next to him, something slightly *off* about the scene playing out between them. He instinctively drew himself up and slightly away from her without even knowing he was doing it.

She laughed at something in the movie, her voice soft, breathless. Then she leaned towards him and whispered, 'This is all wrong for kids. Harry Parcells loves this theatre but he plays all the wrong movies, Harry Parcells who runs the place?'

There was a fresh runner of blood leaking from her left nostril and blood on her lips, but by then Alec's attention had turned to something else. They were sitting directly under the projector beam, and there were moths and other insects whirring through the blue column of light above. A white moth had landed on her face. It was crawling up her cheek. She

didn't notice, and Alec didn't mention it to her. There wasn't enough air in his chest to speak.

She whispered, 'He thinks just because it's a cartoon they'll like it. It's funny he could be so crazy for movies and know so little about them. He won't run the place much longer.'

She glanced at him and smiled. She had blood staining her teeth. Alec couldn't get up. A second moth, ivory white, landed just inside the delicate cup of her ear.

'Your brother Ray would have loved this,' she said.

'Get away,' Alec whispered hoarsely.

'You belong here, Alec,' she said. 'You belong here with me.'

He moved at last, shoved himself up out of his seat. The first moth was crawling into her hair. He thought he heard himself moan, just faintly. He started to move away from her. She was staring at him. He backed a few feet down the aisle and bumped into some kid's legs, and the kid yelped. He glanced away from her for an instant, down at a fattish boy in a striped T-Shirt who was glaring back at him, *watch where you're going meathead.*

Alec looked at her again and now she was slumped very low in her seat. Her head rested on her left shoulder. Her legs hung lewdly open. There were thick strings of blood, dried and crusted, running from her nostrils, bracketing her thin-lipped mouth. Her eyes were rolled back in her head. In her lap was an overturned carton of popcorn.

Alec thought he was going to scream. He didn't scream. She was perfectly motionless. He looked from her to the kid he had almost tripped over. The fat kid glanced casually in the direction of the dead girl, showed no reaction. He turned his gaze back to Alec, his eyes questioning, one corner of his mouth turned up in a derisive sneer.

'Sir,' said a woman, the fat kid's mother. 'Can you move, *please?* We're trying to watch the movie.'

Alec threw another look towards the dead girl, only the chair where she had been was empty, the seat folded up. He started to retreat, bumping into knees, almost falling over once, grabbing someone for support. Then suddenly the room erupted into cheers, applause. His heart throbbed. He cried out, looked wildly around. It was Mickey, up there on the screen in droopy red robes – Mickey had arrived at last.

He backed up the aisle, swatted through the padded leather doors into the lobby. He flinched at the late-afternoon brightness, narrowed his eyes to squints. He felt dangerously sick. Then someone was holding his shoulder, turning him, walking him across the room, over to the staircase up to balcony-level. Alec sat down on the bottom step, sat down hard.

'Take a minute,' someone said. 'Don't get up. Catch your breath. Do you think you're going to throw up?'

Alec shook his head.

'Because if you think you're going to throw up, hold on 'til I can get you a bag. It isn't so easy to get stains out of this carpet. Also when people smell vomit they don't want popcorn.'

Whoever it was lingered beside him for another moment, then without a word turned and shuffled away. He returned maybe a minute later.

'Here. On the house. Drink it slow. The fizz will help with your stomach.'

Alec took a wax cup sweating beads of cold water, found the straw with his mouth, sipped icy cola bubbly with carbonation. He looked up. The man standing over him was tall and slope-shouldered, with a sagging roll around the middle. His hair was cropped to a dark bristle and his eyes, behind his absurdly thick glasses, were small and pale and uneasy. He wore his slacks too high, the waistband up around his navel.

Alec said, 'There's a dead girl in there.' He didn't recognise his own voice.

The colour drained out of the big man's face and he cast an unhappy glance back at the doors into the theatre. 'She's never been in a matinée before. I thought only night shows, I thought – for God's sake, it's a kid's movie. What's she trying to do to me?'

Alec opened his mouth, didn't even know what he was going to say, something about the dead girl, but what came out instead was: 'It's not really a kid's film.'

The big man shot him a look of mild annoyance. 'Sure it is. It's Walt Disney.'

Alec stared at him for a long moment, then said, 'You must be Harry Parcells.'

'Yeah. How'd you know?'

'Lucky guesser,' Alec said. 'Thanks for the Coke.'

Alec followed Harry Parcells behind the concessions counter, through a door and out onto a landing at the bottom of some stairs. Harry opened a door to the right and let them into a small, cluttered office. The floor was crowded with steel film cans. Fading film posters covered the walls, overlapping in places: *Boys Town*, *David Copperfield*, *Gone With the Wind*.

'Sorry she scared you,' Harry said, collapsing into the office chair behind his desk. 'You sure you're all right? You look kind of peaked.'

'Who is she?'

'Something blew out in her brain,' he said, and pointed a finger at his left temple, as if pretending to hold a gun to his head. 'Four years ago. During *The Wizard of Oz*. The very first show. It was the most terrible thing. She used to come in all the time. She was my steadiest customer. We used to talk, kid around with each other—' his voice wandered off, confused and distraught. He squeezed his plump hands together on

the desktop in front of him, said finally, 'Now she's trying to bankrupt me.'

'You've seen her.' It wasn't a question.

Harry nodded. 'A few months after she passed away. She told me I don't belong here. I don't know why she wants to scare me away when we used to get along so great. Did she tell you to go away?'

'Why is she here?' Alec said. His voice was still hoarse, and it was a strange kind of question to ask. For a while, Harry just peered at him through his thick glasses with what seemed to be total incomprehension.

Then he shook his head and said, 'She's unhappy. She died before the end of *The Wizard* and she's still miserable about it. I understand. That was a good movie. I'd feel robbed too.'

'Hello?' someone shouted from the lobby. 'Anyone there?'

'Just a minute,' Harry called out. He gave Alec a pained look. 'My concession stand girl told me she was quitting yesterday. No notice or anything.'

'Was it the ghost?'

'Heck no. One of her paste-on nails fell into someone's food so I told her not to wear them any more. No one wants to get a fingernail in a mouthful of popcorn. She told me a lot of boys she knows come in here and if she can't wear her nails she wasn't going to work for me no more so now I got to do everything myself.' He said this as he was coming around the desk. He had something in one hand, a newspaper clipping. 'This will tell you about her.' And then he gave Alec a look – it wasn't a glare exactly, but there was at least a measure of dull warning in it – and he added: 'Don't run off on me. We still have to talk.'

He went out, Alec staring after him, wondering what that last funny look was about. He glanced down at the clipping. It was an obituary – her obituary. The paper was creased, the

edges worn, the ink faded; it looked as if it had been handled often. Her name was Imogene Gilchrist, she had died at nineteen, she worked at Water Street Stationery. She was survived by her parents, Colm and Mary. Friends and family spoke of her pretty laugh, her infectious sense of humour. They talked about how she loved the movies. She saw all the movies, saw them on opening day, first show. She could recite the entire cast from almost any picture you cared to name, it was like a party trick – she even knew the names of actors who had had just one line. She was president of the drama club in high school, acted in all the plays, built sets, arranged lighting. 'I always thought she'd be a movie star,' said her drama professor. 'She had those looks and that laugh. All she needed was someone to point a camera at her and she would have been famous.'

When Alec finished reading he looked around. The office was still empty. He looked back down at the obituary, rubbing the corner of the clipping between thumb and forefinger. He felt sick at the unfairness of it, and for a moment there was a pressure at the back of his eyeballs, a tingling, and he had the ridiculous idea he might start crying. He felt ill to live in a world where a nineteen-year-old girl full of laughter and life could be struck down like that, for no reason. The intensity of what he was feeling didn't really make sense, considering he had never known her when she was alive; didn't make sense until he thought about Ray, thought about Harry Truman's letter to his mom, the words *died with bravery, defending freedom, America is proud of him*. He thought about how Ray had taken him to *The Fighting Seabees*, right here in this theatre, and they sat together with their feet up on the seats in front of them, their shoulders touching. 'Look at John Wayne,' Ray said. 'They oughta have one bomber to carry him, and another one to carry his balls.' The stinging in his eyes was so intense he couldn't stand it, and it hurt to breathe. He rubbed at his

wet nose, and focused intently on crying as soundlessly as possible.

He wiped his face with the tail of his shirt, put the obituary on Harry Parcells' desk, looked around. He glanced at the posters, and the stacks of steel cans. There was a curl of film in the corner of the room, just eight or so frames – he wondered where it had come from – and he picked it up for a closer look. He saw a girl closing her eyes and lifting her face, in a series of little increments, to kiss the man holding her in a tight embrace; giving herself to him. Alec wanted to be kissed that way sometime. It gave him a curious thrill to be holding an actual piece of a movie. On impulse he stuck it into his pocket.

He wandered out of the office and back onto the landing at the bottom of the stairwell. He peered into the lobby. He expected to see Harry behind the concession stand, serving a customer, but there was no one there. Alec hesitated, wondering where he might have gone. While he was thinking it over, he became aware of a gentle whirring sound coming from the top of the stairs. He looked up them, and it clicked – the projector. Harry was changing reels.

Alec climbed the steps and entered the projection room, a dark compartment with a low ceiling. A pair of square windows looked into the theatre below. The projector itself was pointed through one of them, a big machine made of brushed stainless steel, with the words VITAPHONE stamped on the case. Harry stood on the far side of it, leaning forward, peering out the same window through which the projector was casting its beam. He heard Alec at the door, shot him a brief look. Alec expected to be ordered away, but Harry said nothing, only nodded and returned to his silent watch over the theatre.

Alec made his way to the VITAPHONE, picking his way carefully through the dark. There was a window to the left of

the projector that looked down into the theatre. Alec stared at it for a long moment, not sure if he dared, and then put his face close to the glass and peered into the darkened room beneath.

The theatre was lit a deep midnight blue by the image on the screen: the conductor again, the orchestra in silhouette. The announcer was introducing the next piece. Alec lowered his gaze and scanned the rows of seats. It wasn't much trouble to find where he had been sitting, an empty cluster of seats close to the back, on the right. He half-expected to see her there, slid down in her chair, face tilted up towards the ceiling and blood all down it – her eyes turned perhaps to stare up at *him*. The thought of seeing her filled him with both dread and a strange nervous exhilaration, and when he realised she wasn't there, he was a little surprised by his own disappointment.

Music began: at first the wavering skirl of violins, rising and falling in swoops, and then a series of menacing bursts from the brass section, sounds of an almost military nature. Alec's gaze rose once more to the screen – rose and held there. He felt a chill race through him. His forearms prickled with gooseflesh. On the screen the dead were rising from their graves, an army of white and watery spectres pouring out of the ground and into the night above. A square-shouldered demon, squatting on a mountain-top, beckoned them. They came to him, their ripped white shrouds fluttering around their gaunt bodies, their faces anguished, sorrowing. Alec caught his breath and held it, watched with a feeling rising in him of mingled shock and wonder.

The demon split a crack in the mountain, opened Hell. Fires leaped, the Damned jumped and danced, and Alec knew what he was seeing was about the war. It was about his brother dead for no reason in the South Pacific, *America is proud of him,* it was about bodies damaged beyond repair, bodies sloshing this way and that while they rolled in the surf at the edge of

a beach somewhere in the far east, getting soggy, bloating. It was about Imogene Gilchrist, who loved the movies and died with her legs spread open and her brain swelled full of blood and she was nineteen, her parents were Colm and Mary. It was about young people, young healthy bodies, punched full of holes and the life pouring out in arterial gouts, not a single dream realised, not a single ambition achieved. It was about young people who loved and were loved in return, going away, and not coming back, and the pathetic little remembrances that marked their departure, *my prayers are with you today, Harry Truman,* and *I always thought she'd be a movie star.*

A church bell rang somewhere, a long way off. Alec looked up. It was part of the film. The dead were fading away. The churlish and square-shouldered demon covered himself with his vast black wings, hiding his face from the coming of dawn. A line of robed men moved across the land below, carrying softly glowing torches. The music moved in gentle pulses. The sky was a cold, shimmering blue, light rising in it, the glow of sunrise spreading through the branches of birch trees and northern pine. Alec watched with a feeling in him like religious awe until it was over.

'I liked *Dumbo* better,' Harry said.

He flipped a switch on the wall, and a bare light bulb came on, filling the projection room with harsh white light. The last of the film squiggled through the VITAPHONE and came out at the other end, where it was being collected on one of the reels. The trailing end whirled around and around and went *slap, slap, slap*. Harry turned the projector off, looked at Alec over the top of the machine.

'You look better. You got your colour back.'

'What did you want to talk about?' Alec remembered the vague look of warning Harry gave him when he told him not to go anywhere, and the thought occurred to him now that

maybe Harry knew he had slipped in without buying a ticket, that maybe they were about to have a problem.

But Harry said, 'I'm prepared to offer you a refund or two free passes to the show of your choice. Best I can do.'

Alec stared. It was a long time before he could reply.

'For what?'

'For what? To shut up about it. You know what it would do to this place if it got out about her? I got reasons to think people don't want to pay money to sit in the dark with a chatty dead girl.'

Alec shook his head. It surprised him that Harry thought it would keep people away, if it got out that the Rosebud was haunted. Alec had an idea it would have the opposite effect. People were happy to pay for the opportunity to experience a little terror in the dark – if they weren't there wouldn't be any business in horror pictures. And then he remembered what Imogene Gilchrist had said to him about Harry Parcells: *he won't run the place much longer.*

'So what do you want?' Harry asked. 'You want passes?'

Alec shook his head.

'Refund then.'

'No.'

Harry froze with his hand on his wallet, flashed Alec a surprised, hostile look. 'What do you want then?'

'How about a job? You need someone to sell popcorn. I promise not to wear my paste-on nails to work.'

Harry stared at him for a long moment without any reply, then slowly removed his hand from his back pocket.

'Can you work weekends?' he asked.

In October, Alec hears that Steven Greenberg is back in New Hampshire, shooting exteriors for his new movie on the grounds of Phillips Exeter Academy – something with Tom Hanks and

Haley Joel Osment, a misunderstood teacher inspiring troubled kid-geniuses. Alec doesn't need to know any more than that to know it smells like Steven might be on his way to winning another Oscar. Alec, though, preferred the earlier work, Steven's fantasies and suspense thrillers.

He considers driving down to have a look, wonders if he could talk his way onto the set – Oh yes, I knew Steven when he was a boy – *wonders if he might even be allowed to speak with Steven himself. But he soon dismisses the idea. There must be hundreds of people in this part of New England who could claim to have known Steven back in the day, and it isn't as if they were ever close. They only really had that one conversation, the day Steven saw her. Nothing before; nothing much after.*

So it is a surprise when one Friday afternoon close to the end of the month Alec takes a call from Steven's personal assistant, a cheerful, efficient-sounding woman named Marcia. She wants Alec to know that Steven was hoping to see him, and if he can drop in – is Sunday morning all right? – there will be a set pass waiting for him at Main Building, on the grounds of the Academy. They'll expect to see him around 10:00 a.m., she says in her bright chirp of a voice, before ringing off. It is not until well after the conversation has ended, that Alec realises he has received not an invitation, but a summons.

A goateed P.A. meets Alec at Main and walks him out to where they're filming. Alec stands with thirty or so others, and watches from a distance, while Hanks and Osment stroll together across a green quad littered with fallen leaves, Hanks nodding pensively while Osment talks and gestures. In front of them is a dolly, with two men and their camera equipment sitting on it, and two men pulling it. Steven and a small group of others stand off to the side, Steven observing the shot on a video monitor. Alec has never been on a movie set before, and he watches the work of professional make-believe with great pleasure.

After he has what he wants, and has talked with Hanks for a few minutes about the shot, Steven starts over towards the crowd where Alec is standing. There is a shy, searching look on his face. Then he sees Alec and opens his mouth in a gap-toothed grin, lifts one hand in a wave, looks for a moment very much the lanky boy again. He asks Alec if he wants to walk to craft services with him, for a chilli dog and a soda.

On the walk Steven seems anxious, jiggling the change in his pockets and shooting sideways looks at Alec. Alec knows he wants to talk about Imogene, but can't figure how to broach the subject. When at last he begins to talk, it's about his memories of the Rosebud. He talks about how he loved the place, talks about all the great pictures he saw for the first time there. Alec smiles and nods, but is secretly a little astounded at the depths of Steven's self-deception. Steven never went back after The Birds. *He didn't see any of the movies he says he saw there.*

At last, Steven stammers, What's going to happen to the place after you retire? Not that you should retire! I just mean – do you think you'll run the place much longer?

Not much longer, *Alec replies – it's the truth – but says no more. He is concerned not to degrade himself asking for a handout – although the thought is in him that this is in fact why he came. That ever since receiving Steven's invitation to visit the set he had been fantasising that they would talk about the Rosebud, and that Steven, who is so wealthy, and who loves movies so much, might be persuaded to throw Alec a life preserver.*

The old movie houses are national treasures, *Steven says.* I own a couple, believe it or not. I run them as revival joints. I'd love to do something like that with the Rosebud someday. That's a dream of mine you know.

Here is his chance, the opportunity Alec was not willing to admit he was hoping for. But instead of telling him that the Rosebud is in desperate straits, sure to close, Alec changes the subject … ultimately

lacks the stomach to do what must be done.

What's your next project? *Alec asks.*

After this? I was considering a remake, *Steven says, and gives him another of those shifty sideways looks from the corners of his eyes.* You'd never guess what. *Then, suddenly, he reaches out, touches Alec's arm.* Being back in New Hampshire has really stirred some things up for me. I had a dream about our old friend, would you believe it?

Our old— *Alec starts, then realises who he means.*

I had a dream the place was closed. There was a chain on the front doors, and boards in the windows. I dreamed I heard a girl crying inside, *Steven says, and grins nervously.* Isn't that the funniest thing?

Alec drives home with a cool sweat on his face, ill at ease. He doesn't know why he didn't say anything, why he couldn't *say anything; Greenberg was practically begging to give him some money. Alec thinks bitterly that he has become a very foolish and useless old man.*

At the theatre there are nine messages on Alec's machine. The first is from Lois Weisel, who Alec has not heard from in years. Her voice is brittle. She says, Hi Alec, Lois Weisel at B.U. *As if he could have forgotten her. Lois saw Imogene in* Midnight Cowboy. *Now she teaches documentary film-making to graduate students. Alec knows these two things are not unconnected, just as it is no accident Steven Greenberg became what he became.* Will you give me a call? I wanted to talk to you about – I just— will you call me? *Then she laughs, a strange, frightened kind of laugh, and says,* This is crazy. *She exhales heavily.* I just wanted to find out if something was happening to the Rosebud. Something bad. So – call me.

The next message is from Dana Lewellyn who saw her in The Wild Bunch. *The message after that is from Shane Leonard, who saw Imogene in* American Graffiti. *Darren Campbell, who saw*

her in Reservoir Dogs. *Some of them talk about the dream, a dream identical to the one Steven Greenberg described, boarded-over windows, chain on the door, girl crying. Some only say they want to talk. By the time the answering machine tape has played its way to the end, Alec is sitting on the floor of his office, his hands balled into fists – an old man weeping helplessly.*

Perhaps twenty people have seen Imogene in the last twenty-five years, and nearly half of them have left messages for Alec to call. The other half will get in touch with him over the next few days, to ask about the Rosebud, to talk about their dream. Alec will speak with almost everyone living who has ever seen her, all of those Imogene felt compelled to speak to: a drama professor, the manager of a video rental store, a retired financier who in his youth wrote angry, comical film reviews for The Lansdowne Record, *and others. A whole congregation of people who flocked to the Rosebud instead of church on Sundays, those whose prayers were written by Paddy Chayefsky and whose hymnals were composed by John Williams and whose intensity of faith is a call Imogene is helpless to resist. Alec himself.*

Steven's accountant handles the fine details of the fund-raiser to save the Rosebud. The place is closed for three weeks to refurbish. New seats, state-of-the-art sound. A dozen artisans put up scaffolding and work with little paintbrushes to restore the crumbling plaster moulding on the ceiling. Steven adds personnel to run the day-to-day operations. He has bought a controlling interest, and the place is really his now, although Alec has agreed to stay on to manage things for a little while.

Lois Weisel drives up three times a week to film a documentary about the renovation, using her grad students in various capacities, as electricians, sound people, grunts. Steven wants a gala reopening to celebrate the Rosebud's past. When Alec hears what he wants to show first – a double feature of The Wizard of Oz *and* The Birds *– his forearms prickle with gooseflesh; but he makes no argument.*

On reopening night, the place is crowded like it hasn't been since Titanic. *The local news is there to film people walking inside in their best suits. Of course, Steven is there, which is why all the excitement … although Alec thinks he would have had a sell-out even without Steven, that people would have come just to see the results of the renovation. Alec and Steven pose for photographs, the two of them standing under the marquee in their tuxedos, shaking hands. Steven's tuxedo is Armani, bought for the occasion. Alec got married in his.*

Steven leans into him, pressing a shoulder against his chest. What are you going to do with yourself?

Before Steven's money, Alec would have sat behind the counter handing out tickets, and then gone up himself to start the projector. But Steven hired someone to sell tickets and run the projector. Alec says, Guess I'm going to sit and watch the movie.

Save me a seat, *Steven says.* I might not get in until The Birds, though. I have some more press to do out here.

Lois Weisel has a camera set up at the front of the theatre, turned to point at the audience, and loaded with high speed film for shooting in the dark. She films the crowd at different times, recording their reactions to The Wizard of Oz. *This was to be the conclusion of her documentary – a packed house enjoying a twentieth-century classic in this lovingly restored old movie palace – but her movie wasn't going to end like she thought it would.*

In the first shots on Lois's reel it is possible to see Alec sitting in the back left of the theatre, his face turned up towards the screen, his glasses flashing blue in the darkness. The seat to the left of him, on the aisle, is empty, the only empty seat in the house. Sometimes he can be seen eating popcorn. Other times he is just sitting there watching, his mouth open slightly, an almost worshipful look on his face.

Then in one shot he has turned sideways to face the seat to his left. He has been joined by a woman in blue. He is leaning over her.

They are unmistakably kissing. No one around them pays them any mind. The Wizard of Oz *is ending. We know this because we can hear Judy Garland, reciting the same five words over and over in a soft, yearning voice, saying – well, you know what she is saying. They are only the loveliest five words ever said in all of film.*

In the shot immediately following this one, the house lights are up, and there is a crowd of people gathered around Alec's body, slumped heavily in his seat. Steven Greenberg is in the aisle, yelping hysterically for someone to bring a doctor. A child is crying. The rest of the crowd generates a low rustling buzz of excited conversation. But never mind this shot. The footage that came just before it is much more interesting.

It is only a few seconds long, this shot of Alec and his unidentified companion – a few hundred frames of film – but it is the shot that will make Lois Weisel's reputation, not to mention a large sum of money. It will appear on television shows about unexplained phenomena, it will be watched and rewatched at gatherings of those fascinated with the supernatural. It will be studied, written about, debunked, confirmed, and celebrated. Let's see it again.

He leans over her. She turns her face up to his, and closes her eyes and she is very young and she is giving herself to him completely. Alec has removed his glasses. He is touching her lightly at the waist. This is the way people dream of being kissed, a movie star kiss. Watching them, one almost wishes the moment would never end. And over all this, Dorothy's small, brave voice fills the darkened theatre. She is saying something about home. She is saying something everyone knows.