

Ehud Havazelet

Natalie Wood's Amazing Eyes

I will not forget what Doug has given me. Not small things. When I clear out time to think about it, I know he has given me a lot.

Doug gave me the movies. I had always enjoyed them, but in a random, unspecific way. I would forget movies I had seen, and be just as willing to be terrified or sentimental the third time as the first. I didn't know names. It was the blonde with the hair over her face, or the one who looked like Spencer Tracy, but not exactly. Doug had books. He knew behind-the-screen stories. One of the first things Doug showed me was a picture of himself at a table with Martin Scorsese. It is quite a big table and Scorsese is all the way on the other side.

Doug has given me this house to live in. It is a ridiculous house; Doug's boss, Ernie Fike, built it for his bride, Mona. The automatic garage door plays "Amazing Grace" when it opens. There are mirrors over the bed and a ditch in the back yard where Fike was digging a pool. Fike's napkins say things like: "To our wives and sweethearts. May they never meet." He has glasses decorated with women whose clothes disappear when you tilt them. In the bathroom, upstairs, the light switch is a woman's breast. You have to press the nipple to turn on the light. When I told Doug I didn't think I could touch it, he put a Band-Aid over the top.

Fike and Mona lived here six months before she ran off to Las Vegas. Fike told us to move in because the memories were too painful, but I'm sure it was the pictures. They still come, every week or so, each showing Mona with a different man. Sometimes they're having drinks on a verandah or toweling off after a dip in the pool. Most of the time, they're in bed. The men look like young doctors in the soaps, and Mona's eyes are closed and her head back, in every shot. Fike moved after Mona had some of the photos made into postcards. She wrote, "Thinking of you," and signed them, "Mrs. Ernie Fike." Fike swears he heard the postman giggle and two tellers talking about him at the bank. Since he doesn't want them, I keep the pictures now. I look at Mona's clothes and try to see what she and her friends are drinking. I wonder if they're at The Sands or Caesar's Palace. I'm happy for Mona and would miss it if she stopped writing.

Fike says we can stay as long as we like it here. There is talk of a big promotion for Doug in the works and if things keep going well, Fike says,

we'll be able to buy this house outright in no time at all.

We love them all, not just the famous or critically acclaimed. We've seen *Stella Dallas* six times, *Laura*, four. We laughed so hard at *The Palm Beach Story* we made ourselves sick and had to leave. We know whole sections of *The Thin Man* by heart, though none of our friends are interested any longer, and certainly, none are willing to come with us into Manhattan for the Nelson Eddy-Jeanette McDonald operettas the Thalia puts on as a joke. We've lost friends who've tired of our Spring Byington or Edward Arnold birthday parties, and I've been told point-blank that something must be wrong with anyone who gets so much from the movies, unreal and in the dark as they are.

Doug showed me where to look. In the beginning, he was patient, and there was all the time in the world. He loved it, that I'd go back with him a second or third time to the same movie, and when he told me things, I remembered. I remembered Bruce Dern's first appearance, *Wild River*, and Dustin Hoffman's, *The Tiger Makes Out*. We would cry, if we wanted, and afterwards we could talk or just be together, quietly. We were in the old place then, on the West Side. We walked for hours and hardly said a word, and the whole city was like a movie.

Doug's job is the break we needed. When I met him, he was carrying a case full of screenplays and talking of impossible things. Now, Fike treats him like a son and tells him there is always room at the top, for those who know how to climb.

When Doug was mentioned for a promotion, he decided to begin working nights. We talked it over, and I brought up our movies. Of course, I would never stand in Doug's way. Still, I was hurt when Doug didn't seem to realize what this would mean. I'm not sure what I would have said if he told me, "No, Caroline, I turned them down. The evenings are ours," but as we picked our way silently through our Salad Nicoise, I heard him say something like that over and over in my head.

Doug encourages me to go to movies alone. He still hangs the schedules over the breakfast table and puts arrows near the ones that shouldn't be missed. At night, if he's not too tired, we talk about the movies I've been to. When I told him I noticed an aborigine wearing Adidas in *Apocalypse Now*, he seemed pleased, so I've been telling him other things, some of them not true. I can't know how he misses the movies, Doug says. He likes to think about me there, and to know I'm happy.

We talk a lot, Doug and I, sometimes over the phone during the day. I tell him about my life. I tell him if we're going to stay in this house, certain changes must be made. I tell him the living room is all wrong, the kitchen too cluttered, not at all right for people of our sort. We talk about things to do in the city, things to draw me out of the house, my options. There's school, I could always finish school, and there's my old job at the clinic; there are any number of things I could do, Doug says. If I get serious, he wants to know. Just tell him and he'll make the time to discuss it.

I haven't told him this.

I've been going to Times Square, to the houses where they show movies all day. Some of these movies are decent, but most are Kung Fu or sex. I'm not going to say I go only to the worthwhile ones, either.

The theaters are wonderful. Huge caverns with balconies and footlights, felt seats, and massive curtains folded like sculpture to the sides of the screen. Many were built for vaudeville, and entering them you feel as if those days were preserved somehow, like when you turn on an old radio and expect to hear Harry James. It never wears off, the shock of coming in from the noise and the glare, the heat, to a cool dark chamber, hundreds of seats, shadows, eyes, cigarette ends. It's a separate world. The air is full of possibilities.

I sit there and watch the movies. Sometimes, they are entertaining, spy movies with Charles Bronson or Clint Eastwood as a lean killer. Other times, I don't pay attention. From the dark around me come noises. There is snoring and whispering and from far off in the balcony, quiet sounds like crying. There are moans and the sound of lips on skin and, sometimes, the frank spill of water on the floor. The air carries many smells, and though I stay for hours, I cannot grow accustomed to it. If I look around, there is movement by the walls, figures pass through the exit light's dull red.

I have had encounters in these theaters.

Once a man sat behind me and talked to me for a long while. I looked ahead but I was not watching the movie. When I didn't answer, he undid his pants and then I heard his breathing change. When he got up to leave, he pushed his hand through my hair and said, "Bitch."

Another time, I heard sirens and voices from the foyer. People dragged themselves to look. On the screen, a naked woman lay on the bed as two young men approached. When the noises grew louder, I went out, too. A man was sitting by the wall, under the movie posters with their frame of flashing lights, and where the top of his head should have been were only blood and white bits of bone. I could not take my eyes off him until a cop began to move us away. When he put a hand on my arm, I started to run. It

was Columbus Circle before I could make myself stop.

Maybe I should have been talking to Doug. There are things it's his responsibility to know. I wanted to tell him about the man in pink, but I couldn't.

He was over six feet, dressed completely in pink, from boots to suit to wide-brimmed hat. He stood under the exit sign, black skin luminous, as if it were taking light out of the air. When he sat in the section next to mine, several rows ahead, the screen grew brighter for a moment, and I could see he was looking at me.

He moved into my section, a few rows in front. The climactic fight scene was beginning; bodies careened through the air and a Samurai in a white robe watched from a hillside. The audience started to cheer. He stared directly at me, back almost full to the screen, openly, calmly, and when the Samurai sent a severed head flying, the audience screamed, and he moved into the seat next to mine.

He stared, as if I was across the theater, still. He had a trim mustache and very white eyes and when the reflected light changed, they were all I could see of his face. A scent came from him that I had never smelled before, and I found myself wondering what it could be, his fragrance, watching to see if he would smile.

I sat there until he put a hand out and lifted my skirt. He did not move then, did not come closer or reach farther with his hand. He held the hem of my skirt up as if he would bend toward me, but he didn't. I felt the theater air wind up my thighs and I watched his face in the dark.

Afterward, I stood on the street outside Doug's office building. Many windows were blank, but on the fourth floor, I could see the firm library lit. I stood on the street for several minutes debating whether to go up, and then for several more, willing Doug to the library window. I left then, went home and to bed. When Doug returned later, I pretended I was asleep.

From now on, this is all I will remember:

In *The Searchers*, Natalie Wood has been made impure by living with the Indians. John Wayne tracks her down to kill her but just at the end, something, maybe something in her amazing eyes, changes him. He takes her in his arms and says, "Let's go home, Debby."

In *Only Angels Have Wings*, Cary Grant is in love with Thomas Mitchell, but there's nothing he can do about it. When Mitchell is dying, Cary Grant lights a cigarette and puts it between Mitchell's lips, a parting kiss.

In *The Big Heat*, all the women are eliminated. Glenn Ford's wife is

blown up and his daughter taken away. Gloria Grahame, in atonement, has her lovely face splashed with boiling coffee. She dies. When Ford returns to the squad room, not a woman left in his world, he says, "Keep that coffee hot, Hugo."

When Doug invites Fike and one of his girls for dinner, I serve them heart. The cookbook describes it as "a homey treat." Slice the heart, across the grain, into quarter-inch pieces. Pour into ovenproof dish of boiling water. Add carrots, celery (with leaves), onion, salt (to taste), green pepper. Cook until tender, one and a half to two hours. Add, if you wish, lemon juice or dry wine. Goes well with rice or potato dumplings.

Doug, Fike, and Rhonda have drinks while I finish cooking. Doug told Fike to bring whatever he liked. He brought a bottle of Scotch and a bottle of gin, two kinds of bourbon, light and dark rum, and a melon liqueur that Rhonda says is dreamy over ice cream. All the bottles have been opened, and Fike is showing Doug how to use the ice machine that freezes little plastic nudes into the cubes.

After I serve the food, Rhonda takes a bite and asks what it is. I tell her and she runs from the table. Doug looks down at his plate. I can see his face changing. Fike continues eating and says he knew right away. I go after Rhonda and Doug grabs my arm in the kitchen.

"What are you trying to do?" he says.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Wasn't it good?"

"Ruin your own life, Caroline. Don't try to ruin mine."

Rhonda is all right after she washes her face a few times. Doug has cleared the table and Fike is freshening the drinks. He comes into the kitchen while I make the dessert.

"That wasn't a very nice thing to do to Rhonda," Fike says. "She's sensitive. She cries when dogs get killed on T.V."

I add caramel to the sauce. This is the hard part, the cookbook says. It should simmer but must not boil. I bring the wooden spoon around slowly and watch the sauce for signs of trouble. Fike lifts his glass and makes breathing sounds as he drinks.

"I liked it though," he tells me. "I like all the organs."

The sauce has started to thicken. I reduce the flame and bring the spoon around faster.

"That looks good, too," Fike says. "Let me help you."

Doug comes into the kitchen just as Fike puts a hand on my breast. I see Doug stop for a second, then take a carton of ice cream from the freezer. He returns to the living room where Rhonda has started to sing. Fike pushes my breast in small circular motions.

"Is this helping, Caroline?"

The man in the ticket booth knows me, or says he does when I ask. He tells me the theater is closed for cleaning. They close every morning, for two hours, for cleaning. I tell him I just want to wait inside. He looks at the money I've put down and then at the way I'm dressed, and gets up to open the door.

The foyer is cool and I walk past the darkened movie posters into the theater. Dim lights shine from the front of the auditorium, and I can see that the carpeting and seats are green. The high walls are covered with gods and goddesses, Egyptian by the look of them, that I have never been able to see until now. They carry fruit, animals, and dishes filled with fire toward the stage. Over the stage are a long boat, and the sun, and two elegant dogs crouching. It is all very well done, beautiful, I think, gilded except where the plaster walls have erupted in long ugly patches. The curtains are still drawn, and in the light I can see the screen is torn and stained, but in the dark, I know, it will be mended.

I find a spot in the first balcony, arrange my coat, and sit. A man is sweeping, but he soon finishes and I am left alone in the theater. Delicate sounds carry to me, soft rumbling and a fine hiss like a soothing voice whispering. The air is still in this massive room, but it can seem to be moving. It is easy to imagine in here. I scan the empty seats, row after row ready for the show to begin. The lights grow dim. They will be gathering now, waiting to get in, the men with the weak smiles and stunned eyes, lining up for the dark. I can see them in their coats, their wide-brimmed hats, walking up the carpeted hallway past the movie posters now dazzling, toward the steel doors with the gold handles, toward the quiet and dark. I see them in flanks, in long shambling columns, coming to where I wait. Let them come to me.