

The Magik Cinema

Val asked Kat, "Are you sure it's shut down?"

"What? The Magik? Pretty sure. Why do you ask?"

"It's just, I was doing my walk yesterday and I thought I heard music coming out of it."

"What kind of music?"

"Does it make a difference? Piano music, like a dance. Robbie heard it too."

"You're a right pair," said Kat. "That place is done and dusted. Literally. Full of dust."

"Such a shame."

The Magik Cinema was in a tiny square, set back from the wide pavement of Portbridge's Market Street. A modest stone Dissenting Chapel for two hundred years, until a shrewd businessman snapped it up for a song in 1919. He had spotted its potential. The Chapel congregation was falling away. The public need for entertainment was stronger than ever after a long bruising War. And Motion Pictures were clearly not a passing fad...

Some protested the change of use and the blasphemous new name. But the long queues spoke for themselves. So the Magik Cinema flourished, drawing people from the county, and beyond. Until...

"I had some of the happiest times of my life in the Magik," said Val.

"I know. We both did," said Kat. "Then we grew up. I stayed here while you moved away."

"But now I'm back. And the Magik was one of the main things I came back for. And when I come back... It's gone!"

"Were you too busy to read my letters? I wrote you it closed after you left town. Perhaps its heart broke when its favourite daughter deserted it."

"What! Are you blaming me? Nothing to do with telly and all the other... technology stuff that came along? Oh I wish it could have kept it going. It was special."

"But at least they didn't knock it down. You can still see it and remember. So the poor old Magik was the main thing that drew you back, was it?"

"Of course not. There's the sea, and the sand and the cliffs. And, what else? Err... Um... Oh, yes. Well, you, of course."

"And Robbie?"

"You know I only met him when I got back here. Do you want to join us on one of our walks?"

"Ta. But those times are special for you two. Enjoy them,"

Val wiped a single tear away and Kat hugged her.

"You're sure you heard music?" she asked.

In these Spring days Val and Robbie did the same walk morning and evening. Down Market Street, over the roundabout, right through Harbour Walk, and out onto the dunes and the tireless sea. The rising sun lit the waves to the West and gladdened their hearts, while the setting sun dazzled and sobered them. Their way back took them past the Magik, with its blacked-out windows and chained door. And, as they did every evening they stopped to look at it.

But...

"Is that jazz?" said Val. "What kind? Swing? Or... I don't know about that stuff. And how would you know, Matey?"

Robbie said nothing.

"I'll ask Kat."

"Meet us there tonight?" said Val. "Prove I'm not crazy."

"Too late to do that, love. But honestly, why do you always go on about that place? Just because your parents dragged you away from London and you missed all the fun..."

“And how many times do I have to tell you? London's not just one big circus of fun. It wasn't then, and it isn't now. But the Magik was fun. And more than that. And not just the Magik. Look, I don't want to go all lecturer on you, but in its day the cinema changed lives. It showed the world outside your home town. It showed other people, other ways of living, new ways of thinking...”

“New ways of dancing? Carrying on? Cheating? New ways of being miserable?”

Robbie came running back towards them over the dunes.

“Let's not argue,” said Val. “Not in front of Robbie, anyway. He's sensitive.”

But Robbie ran past them to splash in the water.

“Come on, Kat. You're really telling me we never have good times there?”

They had laughed at the Saturday morning adventure films. Val said *You can tell which one's the hero. His hair's always exactly the same. Fresh and neat from the barber shop along with his clean chin. Where do they find these barbers in the jungle? Or in space, or the desert.*

And they laughed so loud it gave the Boys in the row behind an excuse to pull their hair. Which got them slapped by strong-armed Kat, the farmhand's daughter. Though one of the Boys liked it well enough to ask her to a dance a few years after... And she went, even though she knew he was married.

But before that dance it was Kat who told Val just why her older sister Clemency hung around in the alley behind the Magik. And why she always needed to put her foot up on the old Milestone to tie her shoe laces when Dan the Projectionist came out for his smoke.

So for the rest of Whitsun Val got helpless giggles every time she saw sister, or even her plimsolls. Which worried her parents. And earned her a good thumping later that night from Clemmy herself.

Val said, “I know the Magik showed a lot of rubbish old films. They must have got them cheap or something. But we made up our own versions, didn't we?”

“Two gunslingers walk slowly toward each other down Main Street. When they're close enough to see each other's eyes they sweep back their coats to show their six guns...”

“And one spits out her cigar and says: 'Shall we do Paper Scissor Stone instead?' and the other girl says, 'OK. That's much more fun. Best of three?'”

“Deep in the jungle, Tarzan is screaming 'JANE! JANE! HELP ME! HELP ME!!'”

“And Jane swings in to the clearing to find an Elephant whacking Tarzan against a palm tree with her trunk. Coconuts falling everywhere. 'Hello,' says Jane. 'What's he done now?' 'Hi Jane, the prat was making fun of my ears.' 'Well they are enormous.' 'I know that. But he just went on and on about it.' Jane sighs. 'Fair enough. Three more times and then let him go? He hasn't swept my tree house for days.' 'Fair do's,' says the Elephant. 'I think I can pitch him straight into the kitchen from here.' 'When have you ever missed, Liz?' says Jane. And when he's gone Jane swings herself – Splash! - into the pool to play wrestle with the crocodiles.”

But Kat said, “You don't really believe that, do you? About films changing people's lives?”

“Didn't they change your life?”

Kat stopped and kicked the sand. “You mean Ted, don't you? Why are you always throwing that in my face?”

“No...”

“You are. You said I only went with him because he looked like... that film star.”

“No...”

“You did. You made a joke of it. You were always making jokes.”

“No, I didn't mean your husband...”

"Ex-husband. You were always..."

"No, listen. I meant 'Nursilda'..."

'NURSILDA' UK, 1958. B&W

When Hilda Goodways comes top of her nursing class she turns down the best British hospitals to work in a remote Clinic in South Africa. But she needs all her faith and courage to deal with what she finds there. Not just the sickness and poverty she expected but the hostility of the native Shaman who turns the superstitious locals against her. The District Officer drinks too much and does nothing to help. When a smallpox threatens the town the Shaman puts the blame on Hilda and her medicines. A Crowd gathers outside the Clinic, determined to smash the batch of vaccine that could actually save their lives. Hilda has no one to turn but...

"I know, I know," said Kat. "She saves the Shaman's son. She vaccinates the village. She shames the D.O. into giving up drink. She leads him to God. He takes her up the aisle. And all the children shout 'Hurrah Nursilda!' What a load of cobblers!"

"I know all that. But you so wanted to be Nurse Hilda."

"And you so desperately wanted to be..."

"Please don't remind me..." said Val, turning red.

"So bloody what anyway? I always meant to go into nursing."

"That's not what you said at the time. Look, Kat, be honest. Are you jealous of Robbie?"

"Honest? How can you say... And... Jealous? He's just a stupid... Aaaargh!"

Val saw Kat take a deep breath and hold it and knew she was counting to... What? 50? That meant awkward. 100? That was awful.

Val stopped counting around 120.

Kat deflated and hissed, "You always know everything, don't you?"

"I'm sorry."

They walked on and on and at last Kat said, "I'm sorry too."

But this time their formula didn't work. Damage was done.

They stopped calling each other.

Val changed her walk to avoid Kat's house.

Kat took up the long-standing offer of an extended coast walk with another friend.

And so the summer passed.

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Then one chill September morning Val stood listening outside the Magik – *Can that be an orchestra?* - when someone said, "Do you remember the last..."

"... film we saw here?"

Robbie looked up, pleased to see Kat talking with Val again. But he flinched when they both shouted: "THE BOTTOM DRAWER!"

'THE BOTTOM DRAWER' UK, 1937. B&W

Directed by... Courtney Lansdowne. Starring: Heather Beauchamp, Clarice Cramer-Webb...

Drama based on a one act play by Ashley Tankerton-Webb.

In the kitchen of a nameless Northern Town a Mother is preparing supper. Her Daughter enters, grim-faced. 'Nice day, love?' says Mother. "You must be tired." - 'They've offered me promotion, Mother.' - 'Oh, dear.' - 'So... I have to tell you. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I know all the work you've put in to it, but I've made up my mind. I can't marry Ted. I won't.' - 'That's just nerves, love. Perfectly normal. Toad in the Hole for supper tonight, love.' - 'It's NOT nerves, Mother. It's my own decision. I have a good job, good prospects, good friends. So I'm going to live my own life and not, not...' - 'Not what, dear?'

But they both know that she means: Not turn into you, Mother, trapped forever in the

kitchen. Sacrificing yourself to Children and Menfolk.

So when Mother wipes her hands on her apron and says, 'Come upstairs with me, dear. I have something to show you,' Daughter cannot refuse.

Mother's bedroom has a huge chest of drawers. She bends down with a groan and pulls the lowest drawer open. '

'I was saving this for the wedding, love. It's your Bottom Drawer. Things we saved over the years for you to make your new home with.'

She places piece after piece on the eiderdown - linen, clothes, cutlery, plates - telling the story behind each one. With the help of flashbacks, her tales build into a family saga of joy, sadness, courage, low humour, and womanly fortitude and selflessness.

'But we won't be needing them now, I suppose. So take them down to the Salvation Army for me will you, dear?'

Daughter says, 'You didn't say anything about that ebony box. What's in it?'

'Oh that? That's nothing, love. An old-fashioned thing. Your great grandmother Edie's. I didn't think you'd be interested. She brought it back from India after all the trouble there. That box, a gift on her wedding day. That and the burnt clothes she stood up in, was all she had left. All else lost: Husband, House, everything.'

And Mother opens the box to show a pair of pearl bracelets. Daughter stares as they gleam in the gaslight.

'I've never seen anything like that before,' she says.

'Try them on just the once, love. Afore they're gone for good.'

Daughter holds out her hands. And...

Val shouts out, “DON'T BE A SILLY COW! CAN'T YOU SEE THEY'RE HANDCUFFS?!”

“That got us barred us from the Magik,” said Kat. 'All thanks to you.’

“No! Not all me. You did that with your revenge. Not saying it wasn't brilliant.”

That evening Kat kept guard while Val changed the letters on the Magik's Programme Board. Then they watched from a doorway as people stopped, stared, laughed, or strode angrily away from the sign which now read, beneath a signed picture of smiling star Clarice Cramer-Webb:

THE MAGIK CINEMA PROUDLY PRESENTS: “HER RAW BOTTOM”

Showing All Week at 2:30, 4:30, 6:30, 8:30.

“Worth it though, wasn't it?” said Val

“Easy for you to say. You went off to London. I still had to live here.”

“Didn't you say it made you famous?”

“I was the talk of the town. But it's not good to be the talk of a very small town. Still, never mind that now. Can you remember... what was the Daughter's last line? I didn't catch it when the Manager threw us out.”

“It was something like, *Teach me how to do a proper Sunday roast, Mum*. Then the sound of wedding bells ringing over the credits.”

And Kat and Val laughed as if the years, or anything else, had never happened.

When the time came, as they knew it would, for Val to leave the hotel she moved in with Kat, who found rooms for Robbie nearby so he could visit. Then, too suddenly, it was Christmas and Kat was on the pavement outside the Magik with Robbie, who just stood staring at the old place.

“You got a dog now, Katie?” said a voice from way back. “Never thought that'd happen.”

“Stranger things happen, Frank.”

“For sure. Was sorry to hear about your friend.”

Frank bent down to make a fuss out of making a fuss of Robbie. Who returned the favour.

Kat saw exactly what was going to happen: Frank would have to go now - Frank would drop by her place tomorrow just to say hello to Robbie – the next day Frank and Kat would take Robbie for a walk - The day after that, another walk – The day after that Kat and Frank would be upstairs in bed while Robbie paced the kitchen wondering what was going on...

And why not? thought Kat.

Val stood at the back of the Magik Cinema, as if for the first time.

As if she wasn't... herself. Or knew any way to be herself.

It was exciting, but scary. It was dark, but busy. There seemed to be people around. But where? What were they like? What were their rules? Would they accept her? Was it too late to go...

“Welcome back to the Magik Cinema, Val,” said the Manager, suddenly beside her.

“Am I still barred?” she asked.

The Manager stepped back and smiled.

“You? Of all people! Of course not! Enter. Enjoy. Take whatever seat you want. Your view will be perfect, seat comfortable beyond belief. Now is that something for me you have in your hand?”

Val held out the three off-white plastic squares with the letters D, E, and T.

“So you looked after them,” said the Manager. “Thank you.” He took them and bowed.

“What's the programme?” said Val.

“Anything you like... The choice is yours. Something seasonal? 'White Christmas'? 'Home Alone'? 'Paddington'? 'Scrooge'? Anything you like, Val.”

“Oh, I really don't know... Yes, I do! I'd love to see... I missed it when it first came out.”

“What's that?”

“*BeBop Zombies of Brooklyn.*’ Bet you don't have that.”

“That classic? Of course we do. Good choice. Great Music. Coming up. Just for you. Sit back and enjoy.”

'BEBOP ZOMBIES OF BROOKLYN' US, 1957. B&W

Dir. Siggie Donal. Starring: Tank Trask, Donna Conway, Courtney Lansdowne.

1 EXT. NIGHT Manhattan skyline.

V/O “New York – The City that never sleeps...”

Close in on apartment block windows where figures are dancing to hot jazz.

V/O “But some may not see the dawn...”

And outside on the pavement, right on cue, Frank pats Robbie and grins, “Lovely feller, isn't he? Nice seeing you, Katie my old love. Must be on my way.”

But...

“Wait a minute, Frank,” says Kat. “Can you hear music?”

“Not anything I'd call music,” he says and leaves.