

THE SCREEN

Like a giant tooth, the enormous white concrete structure that was the super-screen of the Ridge Drive-In Theater jutted up from the artificial embankment atop the low hill. Tonight, like every night for the last sixty-three years, Curt Jones sat by the rear window of his bedroom, patiently staring at the screen almost a half-mile away. Between his window and the screen, an

abyss known as the Westport Quarry occupied, if one could say a hole occupied, almost half the distance to the screen.

The drive-in had opened on Curt's tenth birthday. Since the opening flicker of the first movie shown on the screen, Curt had never missed a show. He even watched the annual repainting needed to keep the screen's surface bright and reflective.

Over the years, he had watched thousands of movies, newsreels, cartoons, coming attractions, solicitations for War Bonds, requests for charitable donations, and the advertisements for popcorn, hot dogs, and soft drinks. Almost everything Curt knew, he learned by watching the drive-in screen from his bedroom window. His view of the world and opinion of mankind was shaped by the contrived plots of movies which, being so far away, were always silent movies.

Curt learned to read the lips of the actors and imagined all the other sounds in the films. Explosions, screams, bullets, footsteps, passionate whispers and all the rest of the myriad of words, sounds and noises in tens of thousands of scenes were all conceived and supplied by Curt's own imagination.

In his minds-eye, the voice of every actor or actress was the same as any other. Mae West spoke no differently than Sophia Loren; Bette Davis laughed exactly the same as Katharine Hepburn. Clark Gable, sneering "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," was no different than Porky Pig stuttering "Th... that's all, folks." No doors creaked to send chills up Curt's spine and

he didn't hear the thump of footsteps to heighten the tension of a mystery. The only real sounds Curt heard while watching the movies were those made by owls in the woods surrounding the quarry below his house, infrequent traffic on the quarry road, and the occasional freight train rumbling by.

This was enough for Curt. The drive-in movies provided all the emotional needs and stimulation he wanted with none of the hurt, complications or disappointments of the real world. Even though fewer and fewer movies were shown at the drive-in over recent years, their sheer intensity of action, passion, destruction, mayhem, sex, and nudity satiated Curt. The occasional, all-night blood and guts films were sufficiently intense to satisfy Curt's meager emotional needs for a month.

Curt never had anyone he could or would call a friend. In the local community, his father's well-earned reputation for drinking and foul temper had been sufficient to scare off the handful of children with whom he could have been friends. Except for a mongrel dog Curt's father had brought home for his ninth birthday, the very day his mother ran away from home with the quarry foreman, he had no one to play with. The gift of the dog was, as best as Curt could remember, the only act of kindness his father had ever shown him. When, a few months later, the dog was crushed beneath the wheels of a quarry truck, his one source of love and affection was lost. It was then that Curt refused to go to school. No amount of threats or punishment could

make him attend or keep him there even when he was dragged along by the truant officer. After a month or two of trying, everyone gave up, and Curt was left alone.

As a teenager, he started working at the quarry as a highway signalman, a solitary sentinel where the rail-spur intersected the quarry road. He spent the days of his life manipulating a signal flag when the occasional train or truck approached, and his nights waiting for the movies to appear on the screen. After his retirement, Curt deliberately remained as isolated as he had been before. He didn't know any better and was quite satisfied.

He was well into his sixties when the played-out quarry was abandoned. Runoff water soon turned the massive hole into a deep, cold, dark lake few people ever visited. The very steep and slippery rock-faced surfaces at the water's edge made almost any approach to the water perilous.

Each night, Curt stood his lonely vigil by the bedroom window, expecting the distant white screen to come to life. When it did, he was content. When it didn't, he would simply go to bed and wait for the next night. He became so accustomed to the increased delays between movie performances over the years that when both summer and autumn passed without seeing any films, he was disappointed but still expectant. Since he did not read the newspaper or listen to the radio, and rarely spoke to anyone during his infrequent shopping visits to town, Curt had no way of knowing the drive-in had been closed down for good and the land sold for a housing development.

Early this past winter, Curt was by his window, patiently looking at the empty, still white screen, doing his usual solitary vigil. The moonlight reflecting off a recent snow fall reminded him of the winter scenes in the movie, "Dr. Zhivago." Suddenly, Omar Sharif's face appeared on the drive-in screen, his eyebrows and face encrusted with rime as he trudged through the Siberian snows searching for Julie Christie. Curt remembered this scene; it had been one of his favorites of the entire movie... cold and desolate... almost as good as the winter scene with Henry Fonda in "War and Peace." Curt blinked as the image on the screen changed to Henry Fonda stuffing the half-frozen puppy into his greatcoat after the retreating French guards shot his friend. Curt watched intently as the Cossacks attacked the column and the young Russian cadet was killed. Curt smiled when Henry Fonda embraced Audrey Hepburn amid the ruins of the once noble house of Romanoff. When he went to bed, Curt was pleased that after his long wait, the drive-in had finally played some films, and one of his favorites at that.

The next evening, Curt was again at the window, hoping to see a different film, but perfectly willing to enjoy "War and Peace" again. While he waited, he tried to remember how many movies he had seen in which the character of Napoleon was portrayed. The first one that came to his mind was *Desiree*, starring Jean Simmons and Marlon Brando. Almost immediately, the drive-in screen flickered to life and he saw Marlon Brando, dressed in his artillery officer's uniform talking to Jean Simmons, the shopkeeper's daughter.

"Isn't that a coincidence?" thought Curt, *"the very movie I was thinking about."*

As he watched *Desiree*, he recalled how different Brando looked when he played the role of Don Corleone. In a blink of an eye, the scene on the screen changed to one of Marlon Brando being riddled with bullets by a rival Mafia gang. Before the night was over, Curt was able to watch all three films in the "Godfather" series until the first light of dawn began to creep over the wooded ridge. Curt was very happy that night and for the next several months because the drive-in seemed to be showing many of his favorite films, including Charlie Chaplin features, Buck Rogers serials, and Tom Mix cowboy movies he remembered seeing when he was a youngster.

In the early spring, Curt heard the sound of bulldozers and the tap-tap of hammers. What he had not yet realized was that development of Ridge Estate Homes had commenced. On the downslope side of the ridge, below and in the shadow of the giant screen, construction work was taking place. By the end of summer, some fifty homes had been completed and occupied. Curt ignored the daytime construction activity as he did many activities of a normal life. He was only impatient for nightfall, and the delights and comfort the distant screen would provide.

Phase Two in the development of Ridge Estate Homes began a week after Labor Day. It was almost noon before the first swing of the heavy steel wrecking ball ended with a solid thud into the top center of the enormous white screen. Like a giant piece of frosted glass, the concrete

screen shattered into millions of small, glittering pieces of white rubble. Front-loaders immediately filled the trucks hauling the broken concrete to the nearby quarry for a quick disposal. In few hours, only some scattered fragments of the screen remained at the former drive-in site. The rest had been expeditiously and unceremoniously dumped into the cold, deep, dark waters of the quarry.

That night, Curt sat at his bedroom window, his eyes staring at the empty spot where the screen once stood. He had heard the rumble of the dump trucks passing below his house on the quarry road and had seen them roiling the placid waters by disgorging their glittering loads into the lake, but he had not known what it was they were dumping.

Suddenly, Curt was frightened and intensely aware of a morbid sense of loneliness... feelings he never experienced before. The giant screen, his companion and his anchor for almost all his life, was gone. It was the last thing he saw each night and the first thing he looked for each morning, and now it was no longer there. The quarry and the screen were the twin bedrocks of his existence, two constants, the foundations whose presence had kept his solitary world stable and in balance.

Lonely and panicking, Curt rushed to his front porch to reassure himself of the continued presence of the quarry lake. In the light of a quarter moon, the cold, black water was mysteriously phosphorescent. Millions of bright, tiny white pieces of multiple coats of paint

from the shattered drive-in screen had floated up from the depths to reform and coalesce on the surface.

Suddenly, Curt saw something moving across the glittering quarry lake. It was Moby Dick, the giant white whale. He could see the rusty and corroded harpoons sticking out of the massive body and the powerful fluke silently striking the water. The whale's movements made the water's surface dance and sparkle in the dim moonlight. High up on the whale, near the spouting blow-hole, he saw Gregory Peck, his limp body a stark contrast to the white skin of the whale. Peck's arm beckoned Curt, loosely swinging in an arc that signaled, "Come. Come with me. This way. Come this way."

Leaving the porch, Curt went down the steep path to the rock cliff at the water's edge. Gregory Peck... there was a man he knew well, a friend, a man he had seen so many times on the screen. "*I'm not alone,*" Curt thought, "*he's calling me.*"

Plunging eagerly into the cold, liquid movie screen, Curt allowed himself to sink deeper and deeper, his eyes wide open as millions of individual scenes and images from thousands of movies reflected off tiny bits of the once-enormous screen. They surrounded his body, warming him with their familiarity. Natalie Wood, Spencer Tracy, Marilyn Monroe, Boris Karloff, Buster Keaton, Zazu Pitts, and many hundreds of other actors, all of them old friends, welcoming him. Their hands reached out to pull him closer, to touch and comfort him. Curt smiled and was

content to drift with them in silence forever.

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