

On a muggy, slow Sunday in midtown Toronto, in a bungalow begging for some TLC, Marvin sat deep in his big, comfy chair. Maybe time had worked on him, his once almost athletic frame tending towards a more sturdy nature. But inertia, his old friend and foe, unintentionally relaxed its grip and he rose. This, he determinedly told himself, would be the day he cleaned up the closet under the basement stairs. He had made a dent in the jettison recently, or was it last year? Today he was back. Several cardboard boxes were pulled out, opened and examined then piled at the bottom of the stairs. He would take them upstairs for sorting, later, soon. He manoeuvred out a lovely dovetailed wooden box with a faded paper tag in a metal tag holder. Ah yes, he remembered, this was from his Aunt Addie who passed away several years ago. Inside was a projector, he had seen many films on it at her house as a child. Intrigued and quite willing to rationalize himself from continuing with his self-assigned task, he lugged the box upstairs. She had taught him how to operate it so that she would not have to, youthful enthusiasm helping her out. He put it on the table facing the eggshell white wall, turn it on and focused the bright white square. After clicking in place the empty take-up reel, he removed the metal canister with the label "Casual Acquaintances", removed the reel, put it on the supply side and threaded the film. Time to watch a film, the closet can wait. A light burnt smell drifted around as the dust heated off of the bulb. Credits started, volume adjusted and Marvin gratefully settled deep back into his comfy chair, absolved of having to do cleaning. The black and white credits rolled through with overly dramatic music. Finally, it began. A contemporary city street from maybe the 1940's, a few people walking on the sidewalk. Two couples strolling in opposite directions stop to chat. With fading interest, Marvin watches as they talk about banalities. A single woman stop to join them. Now five boring people, Marvin decided. He stares vacantly as they talk, slowly walking in a group. The droning sound continued like a fog. He settled in deeper, head back. Gradually his eyes slip closed then flicker open as he really tries to watch what must be his aunt's favourite movie. Lethargy and Morpheus inevitably wins.

A raccoon walks past him saying "Hello, Marvin". Hello yourself. "Hello, Marvin" it stops to repeat. With a thick mind slow to clear, he opens his eyes to soon focus on the single woman looking at him, breaking the fourth wall. "Hello, Marvin." she says, "How are you?". Images of raccoons drifting away, confused, he looks from the projector to the black and white image on the wall. She is still there, as if looking at him. Similar age to him but a fair bit lighter, she stands demurely with hands together, waiting. He waits. Nothing happens until she says "It is not polite to just sit there staring. You really should respond. Didn't Aunt Addie teach you any manors?", mildly chastising him. He sits, feeling quite awkward but can't look away from the film. "Well?" she asks. A quick glance left and right and he mumbles "Hi." She smiles. "There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" He shakes his head a tiny bit. People appear and walk around her on the sidewalk as she stands looking at him. "How are you?" she asks again. Extremely self-conscientiously he mumbles "Okay." With a smile she asks "Just 'okay'? Doing anything today?" she asks, glancing at the large dog being walked past her. He hesitates then mutters "Cleaning." without looking up. This is odd, he thinks, very odd. It is all too much to neatly fit into his secure little world. He blurts out "Who are you?". She smiles at his sign of a connection. "In the film I play Caroline, no last name. She is a minor character but she has lines so I get paid better. My name is Lucy, Lucy Morgan. You'll see my name in the end credits." Now sitting up and looking quite intrigued, he says "Aunt Addie made this, didn't she?" "No," Lucy replies, "she is not in the script, other than her name, a bit back, you remember?" "Emboldened, he asks "Why are you here, ...like this, talking to me?" She quietly laughs and says "It is in the script." She walks off screen and returns. Hold up a sheaf of paper, she tells him "See, it's all in the script." He blinks in not understanding and repeats "Why are you here, talking to me?" With a smile and a graceful sweep of her arm she says "To help you, if you wish. Or, as your Aunt Addie would say, a swift kick in the arse." She was obviously uncomfortable saying that and turned away.

This was too much to take in, just short of overload. Stunned, confused, muddled, he sat and stared at the film as the group strolled through the park, gossiping about mutual friends. She was there, Caroline, adding little tidbits that the others listened to intently. This was a film, yet she had spoken to him, directly. Maybe he was still just dreaming, must have, don't be stupid, of course it was.

A couple said their goodbyes and shortly after the other couple too. Caroline was alone. She turned. "Hello, Marvin. Can we talk?" Stunned, frozen, he sat like an intent statue. "Marvin? Are you okay?" she asked, concerned. A minimal nod confirmed his albeit befuddled state, with a clearing of his throat in lieu of speaking. After a short and awkward pause, he said "Yes. Hi." With a relieved smile, she said "Your Aunt Addie had concerns about you. She was afraid that you would not be living up to everything you wanted to be, and do. May I ask, do you have many friends?" He quickly looked down. Since finishing university he had lost contact with many of his friends from there. It was a sore spot. "Well," he began, "it's not easy to keep in touch. Like, Bob married Susan and they went off making babies. And Don never calls anymore."

Ostensibly talking to her, this was just assuaging his guilt. After all, he never called Don, or anyone. Without admonishment, she said "Maybe you can call them? Revive old friendships. It doesn't have to be on them to call." He mulled it over. "Okay, I'll email them all, most, see if they answer." Brow slightly furrowed, she asked "You will what them?" "Email." he said. She just looked at him, confused. "Email." he repeated but no light came on over her head. "Well,

maybe you can just call them.” she said. He felt better, although of course awkward talking to a character in a film projected on his wall who was breaking the fourth wall. Yes, he will do that.

There was a pause as he expectantly waited for her to talk. “You were on a few sports teams in university, weren’t you?” she asked. He nodded. “Was it the track team and ...darts?” she said. Smiling, he replied “Running and fencing. I ran the long distance races, 10k and 20k, tried a couple of marathons but not my thing.” She smiled at his colloquialism. “Thing.” she repeated. “Didn’t something happen to you, an injury?” she asked. This was bringing back the good times, the team, camaraderie. Now a slight smile then “Yes. A fencing ...incident, let’s say. We were practising, I was up against the team leader, Ralph. What a prick.” A flicker from her made him flinch. “Oops, sorry. Ralph was not a nice guy, quite an ego. Anyway, his foil managed to get around my pants and got me on the ankle. Everyone watching said he did it on purpose so he was suspended for a while. I was okay, went to hospital, had a bit of surgery. But it healed okay. Stopped my running for a few months.” She began walking slowly in the park, listening. “Did you get back to running again?” she asked. “Oh, yes. That was my favourite, running. Actually, I never went back to fencing. Too much skill I didn’t have, never would. Ralph pointed me in the right direction without even knowing it.” That made him smile, memories of being back in school with all of his friends, his activities, the busy and exciting times. Maybe he will break out his running shoes and hit the road, soon, sometime soon.

Turning from his pleasant memories back to the screen, he said “Caroline?” as she met one of the couples going the other direction. No reaction from her. He watched as the three talked. Although desperately tempted to talk with her, this was just a boring old black and white film, again, and he knew it.

They droned on. He settled back in his big, padded chair, watching without interest to the dull gossip. Apparently the other couple, pleasant as they seemed, were having problems. So what, who cares, he thought. Shuffling a bit lower, wiggling in more comfortably, he slowed. Eyelids became heavy, flickered a few times as his breathing slowed.

He was running, Mercury’s winged feet happily slapping the ground as he grazed over the earth. He could fly if he wished, skip the need to touch to ground, but he wanted to run, to feel the blood pumping, the endorphins encouraging him on. The raccoon waves as he passes. He didn’t know that raccoons could smile, now he did. His feet slapping the ground as he ran, slap, slap, slap. This was the old times, running for the sake of running. He could run forever.

He turned and was running into the sun. It was bright, bright white. It made a sound, a repetitive whack or something. Opening his eyes, he could see a blank white square projected on the wall. The film must have run out. The takeup reel was spinning, the end of the film slapping against the projector. Pieces were breaking off of the dried out cellulose, bit by bit by bit. Frozen in place, with fascination he watched the last telomeres fly off the now empty takeup reel. Kneeling on the floor by the pile of cellulose, he held a piece up to the light. Yes, a couple of frames were visible, badly scratched. The film was gone.

With the projector off, sitting on the edge of his chair, Marvin pondered his past, his present. Smiling, he stood. Thank you Aunt Addie, he said to himself. Time to go for a run.

