

An illustration of a theater marquee for the show 'SATURDAYS WITH HITCHCOCK'. The marquee is yellow with a decorative top and red vertical accents. Below the marquee, three people are walking on a sidewalk: a man in a blue jacket, a woman in a red and white shirt holding a bag of popcorn, and a man in a light blue shirt and shorts. The theater building is made of dark brick.

SATURDAYS
WITH HITCHCOCK

ELLEN WITTLINGER

★★

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For Morgan, beloved uncle to Rose and Jane,
and in memory of my own Uncle Walt,
never forgotten

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“Everything I learned, I learned
from the movies.”

—Audrey Hepburn





“Hey, you kids!” Mr. Schmitz yells up at us. “Yeah, I’m lookin’ at you. The movie’s over. Go home!”

I lean over the balcony. “We’re just talking.”

“Well, talk outside. I wanna close up.”

I shut my notebook, and Cyrus and I shuffle downstairs to the lobby. Mr. Schmitz is standing by the big double doors, a broom in his hand.

“How come you’re only open afternoons?” Cyrus asks him.

“Cause nobody comes downtown at night anymore. At night they wanna go to the multiplex at the mall.” The way he says “multiplex” sounds like he means “hellmouth.”

Not that many people go to the Lincoln Theater in the daytime either. There’s only one screen, and Mr. Schmitz likes to show mostly old movies.

Which is fine with me. Sometimes, on Saturdays, Cyrus and I are the only people in the whole place.

We do go to the mall once in a while. We saw *The Martian* there, and *Inside Out*, which we both loved, but the mall is too much about buying stuff. Cyrus and I never have money for much more than the film anyway, so we like a place where going to the movies is pretty much all you *can* do. Besides, we can't even see PG-13 movies, a classification we're about six months away from. Old movies aren't like that—they were made for everybody.

We're probably Mr. Schmitz's best customers, but he's not particularly nice to us. He always acts like he's annoyed he has to rip our tickets in half, like why are we making him go to all that trouble? And if we want popcorn, his eyes roll back in his head before he shovels some into a box.

We don't mind too much, though. I figure he knows more about movies than anybody else in New Aztec, Illinois, because he always shows the best ones. I'm probably second smartest about movies. Cyrus comes in third because he just doesn't put enough time into it. Of course, my uncle Walt would beat us all if he still lived here, but he's out in Los Angeles, because that's where you have to live if you're a screen actor.

We wave to Mr. Schmitz as we push through the glass doors, and he grunts at us.

“We got a good crowd today, huh, Maisie?” Cyrus says, as if the Lincoln Theater belongs to us.

“*Casablanca* always gets a crowd,” I say. “All the old people come.”

“Yeah, old people and us. What’s the matter with everybody else in this town?”

I shrug. “For some reason they think their actual lives are more interesting than movies. Which might be true if they lived someplace else.”

“Like Morocco,” Cyrus says. “I love that speech where Bogart says the problems of three people don’t amount to anything compared to the problems of the world.”

“Three *little* people,” I correct him.

“Right.”

“Of course the writing is good,” I say, “but what I love about *Casablanca* is the lighting.”

Cyrus snorts. “That’s all you ever care about. The *lighting*.”

“That’s not true. And anyway, lighting is one of the most important elements of film.”

Cyrus wrinkles up his nose. “I don’t want to do lighting, Maze. I want to be a director. I want to be the *boss*.”

“If you’re going to be a director, you have to know this stuff, Cy. Remember how the vines and plants throw deep shadows up on the walls in *Casablanca*?”

“So?”

“That’s Rembrandt lighting. The dark, twisted shadows echo how the characters’ situations are tangled together and complicated.”

“You just read that somewhere.”

“Of course I read it somewhere! And we’ve talked about it too, how bright lights and heavy shadows are exaggerated for emotional effect.”

“Okay, okay. Just because I don’t remember every little thing about lighting . . .” He socks me lightly on the arm and I return his punch, but we’re smiling. Cyrus and I never really argue.

We unlock our bikes from the parking meter out front and start pedaling home. There’s not much traffic in downtown New Aztec on a Saturday. Everybody is either at the mall or locked in their air-conditioned houses. It’s only the middle of May, but here in the Mississippi River valley it gets hot and steamy early.

In five minutes my bangs are sticking to my sweaty forehead, but at least my hair is short, so I can feel a little breeze on my neck. I’m practically the only girl in the sixth grade who doesn’t have long hair, but those massive hair blankets are hot and heavy, and I don’t see the point. I guess boys like girls to have long locks to swing around, but I don’t care what boys think. Except for Cyrus, of course, and he doesn’t care what I look like. We’ve

been friends for so long that Cy probably doesn't even *notice* what I look like anymore.

"Let's go to my house," I say. "Mom has Dr Pepper."

Cyrus doesn't argue. His mother has banned all sugary beverages from the premises at their place, diet or otherwise, so he has to get his fix at my house. Which is easy enough, since I've lived across the street from him my whole life.

We let our bikes fall on the backyard lawn, which I'll get yelled at for later, but it's so hot and we're thirsty. The minute I open the kitchen door, though, I can hear my parents arguing in the living room, and I shush Cyrus. The only way a person gets any information about what's going on around here is by eavesdropping.

Dad sounds aggravated. "I thought he had a girlfriend out there in Hollyweird. Can't she take care of him?"

"They broke up months ago," Mom says.

"Can't he stay with your mother?"

"On that old foldout couch in her back room? That would be torture," Mom says. I'm daring to hope I know who they're talking about.

"Well, he can't expect you to be his nursemaid! You've got a job!"

"I know that, Dennis. Don't get mad at *me*. I didn't invite him!"

I hear the springs squeak as Mom flops into a chair. “Don’t you have somewhere to be? Isn’t your bowling team practicing today?”

“We’ve got a game tonight,” Dad says. I can hear him pacing. “Look, it’s not that I don’t like the guy,” Dad says. “It’s just that every time he comes back here, you get all upset, and you end up taking it out on the rest of us.”

“I do not. I get upset with my *mother*, is all. The way she flutters around him like he’s the famous movie star he thinks he is—‘Wade Wolf’—and not just her useless son, Walter Hoffmeister.”

I turn to Cyrus and clap my hands silently. “My uncle Walt’s coming!” I whisper.

He gives me a thumbs-up. I’m excited about Uncle Walt visiting, of course, but not so thrilled about my parents arguing over it. Mom has been known to snarl when she’s angry, and while Dad usually stays calm and talks her down, that’s not happening today.

“How on earth did he manage to break his collarbone, anyway?” Dad asks Mom. *What?*

“Doing a stunt in some movie. Collarbone and two ribs.”

I pop around the corner in spite of myself. “Uncle Walt’s hurt? What happened?”

Behind me Cyrus salutes my parents. He always does that, for a joke, when they’re in their

uniforms. My dad's a mail carrier, and my mom is a parking enforcement officer. They don't have any badges or medals or guns or anything.

"Oh, Maisie, I didn't hear you come in," Mom says. "He'll be okay. He just needs someplace to rest up while he heals."

"And somebody to wait on him hand and foot," Dad mutters to his shirtsleeve.

"How'd he get hurt?" I ask.

Mom sighs. "He jumped off a high diving board in some silly movie—"

"Probably *Girls Gone Haywire* or some great work of art like that," Dad grumbles.

"—and apparently he hit the low board beneath him," Mom continues. "I don't even see how that's possible, but—"

"Does that mean he can't finish the rest of the movie?" I ask.

"I'm sure it does," Dad says. "They're not going to hold up filming for six weeks just because some second-string actor got banged up."

"He's not a second-string actor," I say. "He was Eddie in *Sometime Tomorrow*."

"One decent role in ten years doesn't make him a movie star. Besides, eleven people saw that movie." Dad heads for the kitchen to get himself his work-is-over beer.

Cyrus laughs, and I elbow him in the side. He

thinks my dad's funny because his own father is so boring, but nobody laughs at my uncle Walt.

"*Sometime Tomorrow* got a rave review in the *Hollywood Reporter*," I call after Dad, "and *Entertainment Weekly* said Uncle Walt was an exciting new talent."

Dad calls back. "That was five years ago. He's older now and a lot less exciting."

"He actually had a pretty good part in this movie," Mom says. "He was a swimming instructor who falls in love with Kristen Bell."

Wow. "Kristen Bell from *Veronica Mars*? That's huge!"

Cyrus has been eating peanuts from the can Dad left open on the coffee table, but this gets his attention. "Cool! I love Kristen Bell. She was the voice of Anna in *Frozen* too."

"Never heard of her," Dad says as he walks back in. Which doesn't surprise me. Dad's not a movie person, and most of the TV he watches involves men trying to keep some kind of a ball away from each other.

"Anyway," Mom says, "I'm picking him up at the airport tomorrow at noon. And I don't think we can make him sleep on that awful couch in the den with all his broken bones."

"He can have my room!" I yell. "I'll sleep in the den!"

Dad laughs. “You’ve got the only air-conditioned room in the house, and you’re giving it up? You’d do just about anything for that guy, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would!”

Mom shakes her head. “Just like your grandmother.”



Mom lets me ride along to the St. Louis airport to pick up Uncle Walt. We park the car and go inside to wait for him because he can't carry anything with his busted collarbone. I'm almost afraid to see what he looks like, all broken. Normally he's tall and strong and walks so fast I can't keep up.

I shriek a little the minute I see him heading toward us.

"Don't jump on him or hug him!" Mom warns.

"I *know*." Sometimes she treats me like an idiot.

He doesn't look as bad as I thought he might, but he's walking very slowly and carefully, and his face looks pale. He holds his upper body stiff, not moving his right arm, and I can see a bandage peeking out from below his shirt collar. He's got on

this slouchy felt hat, and he reminds me of Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—after he’s just gotten out of the snake pit.

As soon as he sees us, Uncle Walt starts smiling his usual enormous smile. It’s not like anybody else’s smile—it takes over his whole face and makes you feel like he’s thrilled to see you. He’s really good-looking too, with dark wavy hair that flops down onto his forehead. I don’t know why he isn’t a huge star—his smile alone should have made it happen. If he was older, he could have played Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid. He’s that cool.

I get to him first, but I’m not sure what to do. Normally I’d leap on him, and he’d catch me and twirl me around. Instead he just ruffles my hair with his left hand.

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

“Don’t worry, my dear. It’s just a flesh wound,” he says in a silly British accent. This is a reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which we watched together the last time he was here. At least he hasn’t lost his sense of humor.

He bends down a little, as if he wants to hug me, but I can tell it hurts him to do that, so I just put my arm around his waist and lean my head gently against his side. Mom gives him an air-hug, which is about all he’d get from her even if he wasn’t hurt.

“Thanks for coming to get me, Cindy.” He puts his arm around her waist for a minute, but she pulls away.

“Glad you made it.” She doesn’t sound all that glad.

“Wasn’t the best flight I’ve ever had. Those seats are uncomfortable enough when you *don’t* have broken bones.”

“Can you explain to me, Walter, how somebody can jump off a high dive and hit the board below him with his shoulder?” Right away she acts like she’s mad at him.

He winks at her, and his great grin sneaks out around the pain. “I guess I’m flexible.” But Mom keeps her mouth in a flat line as we head for the luggage carousel.

“What’s the name of the movie?” I ask. “Mom said Kristen Bell is in it. Is she as nice as she seems?”

“Nicer. And very funny. Didn’t I email you? I meant to. The movie’s called *Runaway*.”

Uncle Walt always thinks he’s told me things that he hasn’t. He gets busy and forgets. “Who do you play?” I ask.

“I’m a swimming instructor who falls in love with Kristen’s character when I’m giving lessons to her little boy. Well, I *was* the swimming instructor. I heard they got Milo Ventimiglia to do it now.”

“I love him! He was in *Heroes*! And *Gilmore Girls*!” I say.

“You watch too much television, Maisie,” Mom says. This is about the two-hundred-and-eleventh time she’s said this to me, so I put her on mute. It’s not even true. I watch a lot more movies than TV shows. Not that I don’t like TV; I do. Uncle Walt got me a Netflix subscription so I could watch older stuff like *Freaks and Geeks* and *The X-Files*. But you can’t watch TV on an enormous screen from the balcony of a huge room with your feet up on the seat in front.

“It must have been a pretty big part if they’re giving it to Milo,” I say.

“Medium big,” Uncle Walt says. “It could have been my breakout role.”

“You broke out, all right.” Mom smirks at her own joke.

“At least now you get to visit us for a while,” I say. “You didn’t come for Christmas this year. We haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I know, but, hey, you liked my present, right?”

Uncle Walt sent me a small handheld video camera, just about the best present I could ever imagine.

“Oh my God! I love it so much!” I say. “Cyrus and I have already made a bunch of short videos, and we’re planning to write a screenplay for a longer movie.”

“It was too extravagant a gift for a child,” Mom

says. I don't know why she always has to ruin things with her crabbiness.

"It wasn't that expensive," Uncle Walt says. "Besides, who else do I have to buy stuff for? At least Maisie appreciates the things I give her. I bought Courtney a bracelet she wanted, and she broke up with me anyway. If I'd known she was gonna dump me on New Year's Eve, I wouldn't have stayed in LA for the holidays."

"Why would anybody dump *you*?" I ask.

"Yeah, why would they?" Mom says. "An unemployed actor who waits tables for a living. Every girl's dream."

I can't believe it. Uncle Walt is barely off the plane, he's injured and in pain, and Mom *still* can't stop running him down. "He's not unemployed! He's an actor between jobs," I say.

Uncle Walt laughs good-naturedly. "Well, your mom's right that it's more or less the same thing. Until you get your big break."

"But you're in a movie with Kristen Bell. That's big!"

"*Was* in a movie," he says. "Past tense. I really blew it this time." He winces and moves his neck in a circle, as if it hurts.

The carousel whooshes to life, and bags start tumbling out.

"Here it comes. That blue duffel," Uncle Walt

says. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to carry it, Cindy."

"I know." Mom grabs the bag when it comes close, and heaves it up over the side of the conveyor belt. "Jeez, what's in here? Rocks?"

"Gold doubloons," Uncle Walt says, winking at me. "That's how they paid us on the last *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie." He didn't have any lines, but he was the pirate who accidentally knocked Jack Sparrow overboard. Cyrus and I saw it three times.

Mom hoists the bag onto her shoulder and starts walking all bent over. "Why can't you get a wheeled suitcase like a normal person?"

"Because he doesn't want to be a normal person," I say. "Right, Uncle Walt?"

"Right, Hitchcock." He always calls me that, ever since I told him two years ago that Alfred Hitchcock was my favorite director. Actually these days I'm more into Howard Hawks and Wes Anderson, but I still like Hitchcock and I love the nickname. I'd probably like any name Uncle Walt gave me.

He rests his left hand on top of my head as we slowly follow Mom out to the parking garage. I'm sorry he's hurt and everything, but I'm so glad he's here. His hand on my head feels like it's steering me. As always, Uncle Walt points me in the right direction.



Grandma is waiting at our house. The minute the car pulls into the driveway, she throws open the front door and comes running out.

“Walter!” she screams as we open the car doors. It takes Uncle Walt a minute or so to figure out how to hoist himself out of the front seat with the least amount of pain, but Grandma can’t wait. He’s barely upright before she’s trying to hug him.

“Ma!” Mom yells. “Don’t squeeze him, for God’s sake. He’s got broken ribs!”

“Hey, Ma,” Uncle Walt says, grimacing. “Careful there.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re home!” Grandma says, tears running down her cheeks. “Please tell me you’re back for good. Those movies are no good for you! They’re killing you!”

“Ma, calm down. I just broke a few things.”

“It’s a sign you should stay here now. With us. If Cindy hadn’t moved me into that little condominium place, you could stay with me.”

Mom sighs as she holds open the front door, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I thought you *wanted* to sell your big old house, Ma,” Uncle Walt says gently. Even I remember when that happened. She couldn’t wait to get into a condo where somebody else was in charge of fixing the plumbing and mowing the grass.

“Well,” Grandma continues, pushing Uncle Walt into the house, “at least Cindy and Dennis have room for you here.”

“Not *forever*, we don’t,” Mom says. “Maisie has to sleep in the den.”

“Hitch,” Uncle Walt says, “you’re my hero.”

“I don’t mind,” I assure him. I would sleep in the garage if it meant Uncle Walt could stay longer. In the garage underneath the car, even. Of course, I don’t want him to stay here forever like Grandma does. I want him to go back to Hollywood and get his breakout role and be famous. I want his dreams to come true.

“Oh, who needs a *den*?” Grandma says. “What do you do in a den, anyway?”

“My piano is in the den,” Mom says. “There’s no other place—”

But Grandma isn't listening. Whenever Uncle Walt is around, he's the only one Grandma seems to be able to hear.

"Sit down!" she orders him. "Cindy, go get him a beer or something. You want a beer, honey?"

Uncle Walt sits carefully in a big chair and looks up at Mom. "Sure. That would be great if you've got one, Cin."

"It's barely two o'clock in the afternoon," Mom says.

"He's *hurt!*" Grandma yells. "Get him what he wants!"

Mom throws up her hands and stalks out of the room. "Sorry. I forgot for a minute that His Majesty, Prince Walter the Great, had returned. His wish is my command." Even though Mom acts like it's Uncle Walt she's mad at, it's really Grandma, I think. Nobody gets on Mom's last nerve faster than Grandma does.

I perch on the arm of his chair, and Uncle Walt winks at me. "Hey, Cindy," he calls to Mom, "it doesn't have to be a beer. Iced tea is fine too. Just something to wet my whistle."

There's a knock on the front door, and I know who it is. Cyrus was probably watching for our car to pull into the driveway.

"Come in!" I holler.

"Maisie, get up and answer the door," Mom says.

She hands Uncle Walt his beer without really looking at him.

But by the time I get to my feet, Cyrus has already opened the door and walked in. And then I see who's with him. Ugh. It's Gary Hackett. Wouldn't you know? It's like he's Cy's stalker these days.

"Um, Gary was at my house," Cyrus says. "He wanted to know if he could come over too."

"Hi, Maisie," Hackett says.

I glare at Hackett, but I speak to Cy. "Why'd he ask you if he could come to my house?"

"Maisie! You're being very rude," Mom says. "Come on in, Gary. Hi, Cyrus. Would you boys like something to drink?"

"Dr Pepper?" Cyrus looks hopeful. Hackett just nods like a bobblehead doll.

"I think I've still got some." Mom turns around and goes back to the kitchen.

"Can I have some too?" I call after her.

"You can get your own."

I follow Mom into the kitchen, though I hate to leave Cyrus and Hackett in there with Uncle Walt for long. The only thing Hackett wants to talk about lately is the movie *Blade Runner*, and I don't want him to get Uncle Walt all tired out talking about science fiction movies, which he and I don't even like that much. There's not enough Dr

Pepper left, so I just get myself a glass of water and race back into the living room.

Too late.

“You’re lucky you live in Los Angeles,” Hackett says. “I love how LA looks in *Blade Runner*. All rainy and gloomy and weird.” He’s sitting on the edge of the couch, leaning way over into Uncle Walt’s airspace.

“It doesn’t really look like that,” I say. “It’s hot and sunny most of the time.”

“I know.”

“Why do you always want to talk about that one movie?”

“I can talk about other stuff,” he says. “I just like talking about *Blade Runner*.”

“Well, maybe my uncle doesn’t,” I say.

Uncle Walt winks at me. “Ease up, Hitch. It’s fine.”

I’m not sure why Hackett bothers me so much these days. He’s been in school with Cy and me for years. We played together sometimes when we were little kids, but the past few weeks he’s been hanging around Cy all the time, and it’s really annoying. Cyrus is too nice a person to ignore him, so I have to put up with him too. Also, Hackett’s gotten really tall all of a sudden, which is weird because now I have to look up to him, which I don’t like. He doesn’t seem like the same kid he used to

be. These days he reminds me of Logan Lerman in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a movie I didn't think I'd like, but then I did.

I'm kind of on the short side, and I look like—well, imagine Alyson Hannigan in her *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* days, only with short brown hair. Anyway, I'm used to Cyrus, who's about the same height as me and looks kind of like Noah Hathaway, who played Atreyu in *The NeverEnding Story*, which has been one of our favorite movies since forever. I always feel *right* with Cyrus, but when Hackett's around, everything feels different. Off balance.

Uncle Walt's good arm is trapped in both of Grandma's hands. She's pulled her chair so close to his that she's practically tipping over into his lap.

"You've seen *Blade Runner*, haven't you?" Hackett asks Uncle Walt.

"Oh, sure," he says. "I liked it." I'm sure he didn't. He's just being nice.

And then Cyrus jumps in. "Do you think Deckard was really a replicant too? I don't think he—"

"Yes, he was!" Hackett yells. "There are clues all through the movie!" This is their favorite argument and one of the reasons I don't like to hang around with Hackett. He gets Cyrus talking about stuff I'm not even interested in.

“Who cares?” I say. “It’s a dumb movie! I mean, what’s that stupid unicorn doing in the middle of it, anyway?”

Hackett starts to open his mouth to answer me, and I realize I’ve made a serious mistake by asking a question. Fortunately Mom interrupts him.

“Since you’ve got an audience already,” she says to Uncle Walt, “I’m going into my useless den to play the piano.”

“Okay. Thanks again, Cin.”

Mom grunts and disappears. I can see Hackett is dreaming up another idiotic question for Uncle Walt, but this time Grandma derails him.

“Walter, you should go lie down and rest,” she says, petting Uncle Walt’s arm like it’s a small animal. “This has been a tiring day for you. I’ll tuck you in and then go on home and see what Art’s up to. I don’t know why he didn’t come with me this afternoon.”

The room goes quiet and nobody moves. Uncle Walt looks up at me, and his eyes ask a question I can’t answer. Art was my grandpa, and he’s been dead for three years.