

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 1st Corinthians 13

My memory prior to age five retains many fragments of experience but there is one whose mystery had lingered with me, haunting me for years. I can only assume that my mother had decided to take me with her to a Saturday matinee despite my tender age. (It must have been around 1933.)

There would recur this image of a young man in a roadster driving down a narrow road behind a two-door coupe driven by a woman. The young man is frantic because he can see that a truck parked on a hill has lost its brakes and begun to roll toward the road. Try as he might, the young man cannot get the attention of the woman who stares stonily ahead. Then comes a terrific collision. The truck crushes the coupe. The woman dies.

In all the subsequent years of my more conscious existence the scene kept coming back to me. It returned in moments of idleness, isolated from any fuller remembrance of the circumstances in which I first beheld it. Indeed, there have been times when I wondered whether it was a morbid product of my own imagination – that it never happened.

And then along came cable television with its old movie channels and I thought: “Maybe that scene will pop up one day in some TV revival.” It never did. Of course, what were the odds that would happen? A million to one? I mean we are talking about one scene out of one film made between 1928 and 1933. And we’re assuming that, if the movie still existed and the movie channel actually selected to show it in the course of a year, I would be present at that precise moment to catch it. Not likely!

But then on a Friday in April of 2001 while wasting some time before supper, I turned on an old movie channel. A 1933 W.C. Fields feature was ending, to be followed by one of those old Saturday matinee shorts. I watched it casually, not even stimulated by the topic of mental telepathy. A young man, having overslept, is groggily preparing to go to work. He pays passing notice to his mother’s photo on his dresser and then descends to his roadster and pauses. He thinks he hears his mother’s voice saying, “John! John!” But she is in far away Chicago. He dismisses the thought and goes to start his car and realizes he has left his key by his mother’s picture on the dresser. Irritated, he goes back for it and then sets off to work (ho hum!).

Now he is driving through a residential area and out on to a narrow highway. (I sat up on my couch.) Ahead of him was a gray coupe driven by a woman in a bell-shaped hat. (“This is it!” I shouted, leaping to my feet.) At the top of a hill a truck’s brakes give way and down it comes. The young man looks helpless. The truck smashes the coupe. A crowd gathers around the woman lying dead on the road. The young man then realizes he was spared the same fate by the delay initiated by what he thought was his mother’s voice.

But what moved me more than my recovery of the film’s actual story or its theme was how – after almost seventy years – all the pieces of the puzzle had come together for me around the one fragment I had retained. In some way I felt fulfilled – a closure that released me to face today and all my tomorrows unburdened by – in this case – the shadow of a doubt.

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