

Eva

The Ghost of "The Strand"

"Grandma?" I asked. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

My grandmother, over eighty and nobody's fool, looked at me over the newspaper.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

I shrugged and felt foolish. It was stupid, probably nothing. I spun my pencil on my Social Studies home work. "Some kids at school," I said, "say that they've seen things in the old theater." I looked at her and she looked back, frowning slightly, no sign of laughter anywhere.

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"Tracy said that sometimes the marquee sign comes on by itself and once she saw... she saw someone through the door."

"What kind of someone?" asked my grandmother. I shrugged.

"Someone with thick glasses, perhaps?" she said.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Because I used to see her quite frequently myself," she said. "A lot of us older ones have."

"Tell me about it," I breathed. "Please?"

My grandmother looked at me, suddenly stern. "This isn't a story to frighten little children before bed," she said. "It isn't a joke. It takes a lot of misery for them to come back. It's a tragedy, not some macabre entertainment."

"I'll be serious," I said, "if you are. Do you mean it? Are ghosts *really* real?"

My grandmother gave me an assessing sort of look. "Yes," she said. "Most definitely. Although they're rare. And it's always sad when it happens, unhappy souls. But this one is sadder still, you see: the ghost in the theater, I used to know her."

She paused and smoothed her paper. I waited. Finally, in a soft voice she said:

"Her name was Agnes Mitty and she was a funny little thin, a few years older than me. Rather stupid and dumpy, with thick glasses. Her family was very poor, and this was the Depression, so times were hard for even the well-off. Anyway, she had a job working in Sapienza's grocery.

I suppose Mrs. Rosalia felt sorry for her. Agnes never was good at her job, too clumsy and helpless at making small talk with the customers. Too awkward, and she stuttered. But every week, no matter what was playing, Agnes took her wages and went to the movies. Oh, she love the pictures! She even did her hair up once to look like Clara Bow's. It looked dreadful, just a frizzy mass of curls, and we tease her about it. We teased her terribly. Called her names. Some of the boys used to chase her and, well it's horrible, but they threw rotten food at her and called her terrible things. I made fun of her too."

She stopped again and looked at me. "You never know what it's like for a person," she said. "You forget, your own life seems so important. Poor Agnes, I think the pictures were the only escape she had from an unhappy life."

"How did she die, Grandma?" I asked.

My grandmother stopped taking and gave me a look.

"Sorry," I said. "Please tell me."

“That was terrible,” she said. “I was there, that Halloween night. She got hit by a motorcar right outside the theater. Died instantly. Her last glimpse of this world was the marquee over the theater. Just those word in yellow lights: ‘The Strand.’”

Suddenly, I saw Agnes lying there, like a scene from a movie. Her glasses askew with one lens broken. A halo of frizzy, badly dyed hair, the glare of yellow light from the marquee, and the broken glass all around shining like diamonds.

“She started appearing after that,” my grandmother said, “every Friday, in the theater. She got her revenge on everyone who teased her. Never let a single one of us watch the movie in peace. Oh, she was terrible. Pulled our hair, pinched our feet, flung our popcorn into our laps. Sometimes you could even see her, flickering in the light of the projector and grinning, just a few rows behind you.”

My grandmother leaned towards me. “I expect,” she said, “that she’s mad about the theater being closed, nothing for her to do on Friday nights any more, is there?”