

This is a sample of the published prose of Edith Speers
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Watching Casablanca

Mum comes in with the refugees. She missed the bit where they show a map of Africa and say it's important to keep the Americas free.

"Oh good," she says. "I love this movie."

I'd got the video version, not coloured-in yet, but then I'm a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to movies.

"That map sure has changed," I say. "Ha - Unoccupied France, they call Morocco. It was occupied by the French, though."

My mother doesn't sigh, but there is the absence of a sigh, the sort of silence she makes when I'm about to get political. So I shut up, and stay shut up, for all of the scene where the French are shoving people around, rounding up suspects because two German couriers have been killed. I wonder how come the French were helping the Germans, but I don't bother asking Mum. She has never been political. It gets her upset.

"Hey - that's a Carmen Miranda hat," I finally blurt out, by way of apology.

I can sense Mum's smile. She has told me about her Carmen Miranda hat.

"Now we get to Rick's Place," she says, accepting my peace offering.

We like to talk, just a bit, during videos. It's sociable. We never have talked much, face to face, but somehow side by side we seem to get along better. For the next ninety or so minutes we are as companionable as we've ever been. Mum, of course, has seen this movie many times. For me it's the first time.

"Hey, it's a big saloon. How come I've always imagined it empty? It's full of people..."

"It gets empty later."

Briefly, she is the authority, the one who knows more. But I can't help myself. I'm the sixties generation - civil rights, socialism, and all that. Besides, Dad was a union man and though he died when I was a child, I'm still my father's daughter too.

"Fat chance that black guy, Sam, would refuse double pay."

"It's loyalty. It's not like today. When you had a good boss, in those days..."

She knows well enough to stop at that, before I get wound up. Neither of us know any black people anyway.

"He's from Prague, that Victor. He'd still be in strife today in Czechoslovakia. New bosses, same old story."

"The Norwegians were brave. They're still free."

I don't know anything about Norway, so I let her have that round. Wasn't there a guy named Quisling...?

Then Mum can't help herself. Never has she been able to understand how a daughter of hers could possibly wear jeans all the time. So unfeminine.

"Oh, look at her dress! She's so lovely, Ingrid Bergman. The older I get, the lovelier she seems."

"She's nothing special. And you know she was heaps taller than Bogart - see how they don't show them standing together? Bloody oath! Did you hear that? She said 'Who's that boy playing the piano?' She just called Sam a *boy!*"

"Shh! It's the Song!"

"She didn't say 'please', either - just ordered him to play it..."

But I mutter this quite softly, because the Song is being sung. Sam is singing 'As Time Goes By' and my traitorous ridiculous eyes are watering. I wasn't even born till after this war was all over, so why do my eyes go misty on me?

The moment passes and I have to reassert my lack of sentimentality.

"Is that captain gay, or what?"

"Of course not. That didn't happen then."

"The way he talks about if he were a woman he'd fall in love with Rick. What do you mean that didn't happen then...!?"

"Well, it didn't happen in movies."

"And Sam keeps calling Rick 'Boss'. It's all 'Yes, Boss', 'No, Boss'..."

"Well, he works for him, so Rick is the Boss."

I clam up with a truculent stare at the screen. This is supposed to let Mum know I could pursue my point to victory if I chose to. Having succeeded in shutting me up, Mum is generous in victory and willing to make friends again.

"We always used to dance under those glittering balls - every place had one - the big ball with all the little mirrors on it."

Accepting the truce, I say, "They've still got 'em."

"Oh, really?" Mum is pleased to hear this. She smiles. She was young during the Depression and World War Two, but never speaks of the hardship. All her stories are about the music, the dancing.

At the moment, the war on the screen is not going well.

"American blundering. That's what your Dad always said. We were in it right from the start, right from 1939."

She means Canada, not Australia. My dad was in the Canadian artillery. He drove a munitions truck in France. He drove 'with no headlights, at night, over pot-holed roads, one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding a grenade'. He was carrying ammunition for the front-line troops who had to clean out the villages before the Americans showed up in tanks for the parades and the flower-throwing. By the time pretty girls were kissing GI's, he and his buddies were miles further into enemy-occupied territory. He hated American war movies. He reckoned he got sick of bailing out the Yanks and doing their dirty work. My mother and I sit together in loyal silence, united by this memory.

Then it really is too much for me again.

"Where does she get all those outfits. And gloves! Gloves, in that weather. Where would a refugee get all those outfits?"

"Probably Edith Head. She did wardrobe for all the big films."

I giggle, then squelch it quickly, and look sideways at her to see if she actually meant it as a joke. I'm not sure. I let it pass.

"Cute guy, that captain. Now he's going to exploit that girl, I suppose."

With my mother I would never use any specific sexual terms. But 'exploit' is a word she is used to hearing from me, and it irks her, so it does the job. She knows what I mean.

"Well, now we know he's not gay, anyway."

This time I know she's scoring off me. But then, before I can consider tactics, she almost sighs.

"We called it America, too, though it was only Toronto, then Calgary. America is where you went to be free and rich."

My mum and her family came from Holland to Canada in 1925, when she was a child. I'm the one who decided on Australia.

"Ha - see what I mean by propaganda! They have to show how the Marseillaise beats the German song. Even that Yvonne has gone all patriotic."

"A good thing, too. They shaved their heads, later. The girls who collaborated with the Germans. People shaved their hair off to brand them."

There she goes, see. She says collaborate instead of screw... But she won the battle years ago, so why bother

now. Besides, as she had said, the saloon is empty now.

“Ah - here’s where they close Rick’s Place,” I say.

Engrossed, I do not notice that there has been a long silence until, out of the blue, Mum surprises me.

“You’re right. She does have a lot of outfits. Unbelievable - and never the same one twice.”

“Gee, I almost had a hat like that. A real fedora. Remember Aunt Emily’s green velour?”

The memory still saddens me, and I missed out on this hat over twenty years ago. It was so gorgeous. I sigh.

“A size too small...”

But the movie is nearing its end and I stare at the screen, rapt. It is startling to have Mum interrupt the almost religious ceremony of the closing scenes.

“God - another outfit and another hat.”

“Shit! He’s really dobbed them in! Oh no...”

“It’s okay. There - see!”

“Ah!”

Then a bit later I’m worried again.

“Oh no. The captain is warning the Nazi.”

“Hmm. This Morocco is desert, isn’t it? Where’d the fog come from? Ha - at least they’ve got a palm tree.

They’ve got palm trees in Hollywood. The fog must be L.A. smog.”

“Mum!”

“Look - Victor’s got a new suit and hat, too.”

“Shh.”

“Well, there they go. Flying off into the smog.”

I can’t believe her cynicism, even if she did see the movie a dozen times before. But I have to do something to show that I am my usual detached self, scornful of blatant romanticism and never to be sucked in by it.

Inhaling deeply to cover a sniffle, I say with dismissive finality, “Bogart was better looking.”

I heave myself up off the sofa and cross the carpet to push buttons. The tv screen fades. The video lights shut their little eyes for the night. I’ll rewind later. I gather up my wine glass on the way past the coffee table, drain the last sip, and head for the kitchen. On my way out of the lounge, I turn off the light switch by the door. The room behind me is empty, of course. My mother died many years ago, in the land where she never became rich or free. She always said I should see Casablanca.