

Alice sat in one of the hard plastic chairs in the lecture hall at McGill University; only when the lights went out did she feel comfortable. The movie started. No commercials. No previews. Just a faraway sound.

She was wearing black and a worn leather jacket that she thought was a moss green but other people had told her it was brown.

The movie came on. It was *The Graduate*.

She was just starting her Bachelor of Arts degree.

She loved the sixties though it was the early nineties now. Katharine Ross in the movie had straight long dark hair. Alice had long hair that was mostly curly and got frizzy in the rain. She liked Julie Christie hair and Ali MacGraw hair.

In the darkness, she could laugh out loud and sound like a duck.

In the movie, there was a shot where the camera zoomed from Dustin Hoffman's face to a monkey and Alice laughed again. Watching people was like watching monkeys at the zoo. Dustin Hoffman was driving around like a maniac with sideburns. She loved it.

She wondered if the day would come when a guy would drive up to her door panicked and she would smile because she knew their love was solid.

The Film Society showed movies for a dollar four nights a week from Wednesday to Saturday and Alice had been to every one that first week.

Movies made her forget that she was a virgin still. That she was only pretending to be an adult. That she still had so far to go.

Her room at the dorm was a closet at the end of the hall and was extremely white. It smelled like fresh paint. She was not good at decorating. Other girls on her floor brought lampshades that matched their bedspreads and their wastepaper baskets.

She ripped a photo of David Lynch, the movie director, out of a *People* magazine and taped it to the wall. In the photo, David Lynch was standing on the ground diagonally. It was impossible to stand like that. She looked at the photo lying on her bed with her head cocked to the side. Maybe it was possible.

It was a utilitarian room: a single bed, with a mattress that looked lumpy and had blue stripes going down it. A desk by the window with a view of a tree. A wooden dresser with a funky smell. The tiniest fridge by the closet, a fridge for a few cans of pop at best.

She took out a memo pad from her knapsack and wrote:  
*sheets.*

She plugged in her ghetto blaster but, for the first time, she didn't immediately put rock music on. She listened for new sounds.

Alice had come all the way from Toronto to go to school in Montreal. She couldn't believe her parents had let her go.

Her mom had cried as Alice was packing her duffel bag like she was going off to war. 'My baby, my baby, my baby,' her mom said.

Her mom was a romantic. She always waved at the door to loved ones until they were completely out of sight.

She said to Alice, 'I bet you get a boyfriend right away. I bet you can't live without one.'

Alice looked at her mom strangely. It was a weird thing to say. Alice had never had a boyfriend. She was quiet and had worn her dad's baggy sweaters to high school.

'I don't think so, Mom,' is what she said.

When her mom was mad, her dad would disappear until her mood changed. Her dad would raise his eyebrows so his eyes would pop out, his cheer-up face. His far-sighted glasses magnified his eyes so they looked even bigger. He was like one of Alice's stuffed animals with googly eyes. Her mom would eventually smile and Alice would breathe normally again.

Her dad had walked into the bedroom carrying what looked like a dead animal. 'Here, you can have my parka for those wintry days.' He put the coat in her arms. It weighed a ton. He was always trying to give her his things.

Alice said, 'This parka takes up a whole duffel bag by itself.'

'James McGill, James McGill. We are all the sons of James McGill,' he cheered and did a little dance. He had gone to McGill. Maybe that was why she was allowed to go.

'I'm a daughter,' Alice said, exasperated.

Her dad looked at her a minute and said, 'You are? Okay,' and smiled on. 'Let's see what else I can give you. You want to take this pen?' He held out a pen in front of her nose that was advertising someone's insurance business. She took the pen.

'Take this too,' her mom said. It was a baby-blue plastic laundry basket. Alice placed her ghetto blaster in it. 'It's a laundry basket.' Her mom looked worried.

Alice was a quiet sort. She had eccentric grandmothers to live up to and had never done her own laundry.

Now here she was, going to some nook and cranny in a Student Centre in Montreal; Alice felt like a little teacup full of fear.

The Film Society was on the third level of the Student Centre, past the yearbook committee, past the drama club, past the washrooms. The Film Society was on its way out.

She stood in the doorway gazing in. Kids had always said she had a staring problem.

The room was white with no movie posters. It had one metal cabinet with books on film theory from the sixties. There was a stack of phone books on the floor and a couple of bright orange seventies-looking chairs.

There was also a guy with a bike helmet on who was banging around in the cabinet. He said his name was William. He had been in the Film Society last year.

She wanted to go in and put her knapsack down; it was full of her new textbooks and weighed a ton. It was navy and had the big red and white McGill crest on it. Her dad had bought it for her when they checked the campus out together the year before.

‘Film Society elections are on Friday. Come back,’ William said, sizing her up.

‘What are the positions?’ she stammered.

‘President, publicity, events coordinator, accountant and secretary. But forget about president. I’m going to be that.’

*Secretary*, she thought. *I could probably do that*. She stood in the doorway hooking her thumbs under the straps of the knapsack like she couldn’t leave.

‘Okay, come back Friday,’ he said.

When Alice was little, her dad used to rent a film projector from the North York Fairview Library for her birthday parties. The films would be scary: pirates with rotting teeth who chased after children. One movie was an animated version of a child going to Hell. Her dad would unfold the screen up on the stand like a magic trick. He would let her clip the film before the projector ate it. Then she would watch the film go through the projector from the side of the machine. She would see her dad in front of the projector light, big as a mountain, waving his arm and saying, ‘All the kids on the sleeping bags.’

Alice was in love with the orange chairs in the Film Society room. They made her feel like she was at a birthday party in a kid’s playroom with plastic furniture or at least in the seventies, which had better fashion. She couldn’t wait to be back there.

Between classes and meals at the dorm cafeteria, she waited in bookstores. She hung out in the library. The library was her church. She prayed in the stacks that she could pass her freshman year. She felt the covers of some of the old cloth books.

Finally it was five on Friday and she was on one of those orange chairs in the Film Society office.

William was wearing a name tag for the occasion. There were five positions and only five people there, but William went through the motions.

‘Alice Charles for secretary. All those in favour say *aye*.’

A flare shot up inside her. Her fingers grabbed on to the seat of her orange chair. People said *aye*. She heard them.

Rally became the events coordinator. Rally was a girl with raven-black hair who never smiled and was reading Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume* before the meeting. She was eating some carrot-macaroni salad from a mayonnaise jar.

'Did you make that yourself?' Alice said.

'Yeah,' Rally said, like it was no big deal.

Robert became the accountant. He had slick short hair, khaki pants and a button-down shirt. He looked like Henry Fonda. He spoke quietly but in a way that showed he was dead sure he was right. Alice hated that kind of confidence. Everyone should know they couldn't always be right.

Casey, publicity, was wearing rollerblades and no helmet. He couldn't sit still. He probably rollerbladed in his sleep.

William reached out and shook hands with everyone. The boys got patted on the back as well.

William said, 'Okay, each of us will have to take turns selling tickets. Alice, you make some sort of schedule to make this happen.'

Alice watched Rally fishing out pens from the bottom of her weightless-looking over-the-shoulder messenger bag. Alice's knapsack had so much in it that it was crushing her toe.

William said, 'No, scratch that. I'll just take the schedule, post it on this wall, and everyone has to put their name on it at least two nights a week.'

Robert said, 'I have a list here of what movies we should run.'

Rally said, 'I'm the events coordinator; I'm picking the movies.'

'We're all picking the movies,' William said.

Alice ripped a piece of paper from her Abnormal Psychology notebook and, as the movies were mentioned, she wrote

everything down. She looked at her handwriting and how she wrote on the page. She was developing a handwriting style.

When she looked up, she caught Robert turning his eyes away from hers fast. Alice hated that. It made her feel like he didn't want her to exist. Like she might like him or something.

William said, '*Citizen Kane* is an important movie, but will anyone come out for that?'

'Who cares what the students want? We must go forth and educate,' Rally said.

'We have to survive,' William said, impatient with all of them already. 'It's 1991. People are starting to own VCRs and stay home.'

'It's not the same as seeing it on the big screen,' Alice said. They all looked at her. It was the first time she had spoken.

When she got back to her dorm, she called her parents with wild abandon. 'I'm secretary of the Film Society!'

'Hold on a second,' her dad said. 'Your mom got a dog to replace you and it's going to bite me.'

'He's not going to bite you.' She could hear her mom in the background.

'It's nipping at my leg,' her dad said, dropping the phone.

Alice stared at her baby-blue plastic laundry basket on the floor. It was piling up already.

The Film Society was showing *Bonnie and Clyde*. Alice had never seen it before. Her mother had given her a blank journal to write down all her expenses so she could budget herself. So far, all she had been able to do was write a list of movies she had to see before she died. *Bonnie and Clyde* was in there. Probably because her favourite high school English teacher, Mr. Krackle, had mentioned it.

‘It’s most unimpressive,’ Bethany said. Bethany was Alice’s high school friend. She was talking about the fact that they’d be watching the film in the uncomfortable chairs of the lecture hall.

Bethany stood around fidgeting while Alice sold tickets right outside the lecture hall. Red tickets went out of Alice’s hand like she was giving people candy. The students came in groups, dropping large bills like it was nothing to them. William scrambled to get change from customers in line. Most people wore blue jeans and had their hands comfortably in their front pockets. When they got inside the lecture hall, they hurdled over the backs of the lecture chairs and fell into them.

‘What’s this film about?’ Bethany asked Alice. ‘Is this a horror film? I can’t handle a horror film.’

‘It’s not *Friday the 13th*,’ Alice said. ‘I heard it’s about bank robbers. But it’s okay because they’re in love.’

The movie started. All the movies the Film Society got were old and crackly. The sound came across as if travelling down a long corridor. Alice leaned in the doorway. ‘Go sit down,’ she said to Bethany.

‘You’re not going to sit with me?’

‘I have to wait for stragglers,’ Alice said. Bethany took a seat. ‘It’s a decent turnout,’ Alice said to William.

William was counting heads. There were maybe twenty people there. He said, ‘We had to pay the projectionist. We had to rent the copy of the film. We’re way in the red, Alice. Give me the cash box.’ William left with the cash box. It was a little kid’s piggy bank. And there were stragglers. The stragglers got in for free.

Alice walked down the thin lecture-hall steps, trying to find her balance in the dark, and joined Bethany.

‘You guys should really sell popcorn at these movies,’ Bethany said.

‘Uh-huh,’ Alice answered, but she was already absorbed by the movie.

In the movie, Bonnie wore a negligee in her first scene. She spoke to Clyde in this negligee and thought nothing of getting in the car with him and driving off. It quickly became a movie of a girl running away from home.

‘No girl would really get in a car with a stranger,’ Bethany whispered.

Alice thought that it would be so hard for her to make a final break from her own parents. A guy would have to come up to her bedroom and carry her out. The guy would have to be pretty fearless.

A few times Bethany said ‘That’s disgusting’ or ‘Alice’ as if Alice were hurting her. Sally Struthers was showing cleavage and eating a chicken leg in one scene. In another, somebody lost an eye. Bethany was putting her hands over her eyes and making

freak-out sounds. It was making Alice a nervous wreck. She felt responsible for whether or not Bethany liked the film.

There was one scene where everyone looked like they were in heaven, right before they died.

‘The director filmed this scene with a silk stocking over the camera,’ Alice heard a guy two rows down say. She made a mental note to go to the fifth floor of the McLennan Library and look for books on the director, Arthur Penn, sometime soon.

Then there was a shot of tumbleweed rolling and a shot of birds flying out of a tree.

After the movie, Alice was spinning. ‘What an ending, can you believe it? The birds were their souls! The birds were their souls flying out of the tree like a soul flying out of the body.’ She wanted to crash right into Bethany.

Bethany was stewing. ‘Honestly, I think movies should make you laugh. Movies should just entertain – that’s it,’ she said. ‘Honestly, that movie was just about violence.’

‘I’ve never met a guy named Clyde. Have you?’ Alice asked her.

‘Who cares? Now I wouldn’t want to.’

‘Bethany, that was a great movie.’

‘I feel gross. I want to go home and take a shower.’

There were no birds in the night air on Alice’s way home. They were all in her head.

Alice undressed for bed thinking of Bonnie's negligee. She had only one piece of lingerie, a cream-coloured slip her mother had bought for her to wear under a party dress when she was thirteen.

Some people could wear those things to bed, she guessed. She always wore a T-shirt and men's pyjama bottoms.

She walked out of her room and into the hallway barefoot. She liked to walk around barefoot. Socks always felt like they were saran-wrapped to her feet. The dorm had a sickly grey carpet and was well-heated; otherwise she probably could not have pulled this off.

Allegra's door was open; she was in the room beside Alice's and Alice went in. Allegra was an artist. She saved gum wrappers for future art projects. On the wall, she had collages made of prints of old art reproductions, stolen menus and shiny parts from the gold and red foil off rich chocolates. It was her version of quilting, Alice guessed. She lay her head down on one of Allegra's purple throw pillows on the floor.

Allegra kept reading her book of poetry with the German original lines on the left and the English translations on the right as Alice stared around the room.

The first time Alice had seen Allegra she was wearing a body-fitting red Chinese silk dress with combat boots and her hair uplifted so her bottle-blond strands poked out perfectly. Alice just stared at her in the hallway, holding on to her own elbows. The guy who had come to pick Allegra up looked at her and nodded but acted like her outfit was nothing extraordinary. And they were just going to movies.

Now Allegra had on her signature black silk men's pyjama top and men's wool pinstriped pants with combat boots. She was so happy that she had found coffee beans called Boom. She kept telling Alice her coffee was called Boom. Alice liked how Allegra swallowed up her favourite words like bonbons. *Boom* was just one of them; she also liked *decadent*, *divine* and *luscious* and she referred to talking on the telephone as being on *the blower*.

From the way Allegra's room was positioned, Alice got a full-size view of the big light-bulbed cross that stood on Mount Royal and was lit up in the night.

'How can you sleep with that cross in the window?' Alice asked her.

'I love it.' She smiled a big lipstick smile. 'It makes me think I'm living in a cathedral.'

Allegra had red votive candles along her window ledge. There was a diaphanous lilac scarf draped over the window. There was seductive lighting from vintage lamps. There was so much to look at.

Maybe Alice was staring too long. Allegra's room was really a wonderland, complete with fairy dust in pill bottles and feathers and notes in jars.

'I need some more Boom,' Allegra said and got up from the bed.

Alice would see Allegra walking down the hall with a coffee pot all the time. Allegra would float down the hallway with it and then return to her room and shut the door. Allegra drank coffee all day and shook all night like a butterfly caught between two panes of glass in a window. When she flipped pages in her address book, her hands would slightly tremble.

When she was gone, Alice rolled over and looked into Allegra's shoebox of tapes which she kept under the bed. She had every Tom Waits album. Some Nick Cave. The Pixies' *Supernova*.

Allegra came back with the coffee pot and Cricket rushed in after her. Alice quickly took her hand out of the shoebox.

'And then I laughed in the salesperson's face and demanded he give me another plant for free,' Cricket said. Her voice was extremely loud. Cricket wore skirts that rustled when she sped down the hall or rugby outfits with Christmas colours and stripes. Alice didn't think she was artsy enough to be in the same room with Allegra. 'Come, help me place these plants in my room so they get the most light,' Cricket said to Allegra.

When they came back, Alice still hadn't moved.

'Can you fucking believe the editors of *Cosmo* want us to tape our breasts for cleavage?' Cricket was still shouting in Allegra's ear.

'I think the standing in the shower under ice-cold water for fifteen minutes to make your breasts as perky as possible was worse,' Allegra said.

'Allegra, you are my best friend,' Cricket said. 'Next semester, we've got to leave all these losers in this dorm and get our own place.'

Alice wondered if Allegra and Cricket liked her at all.

Cricket woke up three times a week at five in the morning to play rugby. Alice had seen her jog back at seven with an orange segment in her mouth like a mouthguard.

Cricket screamed when she got her period, and then Allegra started doing it too. They hugged each other dramatically.

Allegra would take walks on the mountain alone, even though legend had it that a naked guy in a raincoat flashed people there.

Who were these girls and where did they come from?

Allegra ended up being from Nova Scotia where she hadn't learned French at all. However, soon she was dating a French guy who didn't speak more than ten words of English. Once Alice saw Allegra making out with the French guy in the hall. Alice must have slowed to a full stop.

'Don't look at me like that,' Allegra said to Alice as the guy kissed her neck.

One day Allegra had gotten the French guy's watch. She just slipped it off his wrist and put it on hers and then she owned it. It was a man's watch, metal and clunky and big, and Alice thought Allegra looked powerful wearing it. Women's watches were dainty with a thin strap and numbers too small to read.

'That's it,' Alice said. When she wanted something it took over her mind. She went down to St. Catherine Street where all the main stores lined up in a row. She bought herself a man's watch very similar to the one Allegra had. She could hear her mother's voice in her ear saying that she had no identity of her own, that she was just copying everyone else. *At least I'm copying an artist*, she told herself.

She started showering at night to avoid everyone in the morning.

The best thing about being away from home was using her mail key on the square metal mailbox next to everyone else's and getting letters.

Her dad typed his with his two index fingers because his handwriting was so illegible. He wrote things like 'Dinner tonight was salad with lettuce.'

Her mom wrote ones that were flowery and many pages long. She also wrote what she made for dinner.

A lot of times in the mailbox there would be another pizza place advertising its menu. Alice hadn't ordered one yet but she'd seen a few people do it and the pizzas always came with this dough ball in the middle that seemed to be holding the pizza box up. She'd never seen that in Toronto.

The worst thing about the dorm was the noise level, which unnerved her, especially from this one guy who seemed to turn into a cowboy when he was drunk. When there was a McGill football game, the shrieking got unbearable. Cricket came back from one game with her face painted half white and half red. She could have been an extra in *Apocalypse Now*.

And every week there seemed to be a new health problem going around, like pink eye or this sickness that gave you white spots on the back of your throat. This week it was the worst: crabs. Allegra swore she got it from a toilet seat.

Alice always thought she was coming down with something but she never missed a class.

Alice had signed up for Children's Literature though she had never had an affinity for children. It was supposed to be a bird class, a no-brainer.

The class was in the same lecture room where the Film Society showed movies, the Leacock Auditorium, but the room was a little more intimidating during the day.

The lecturer had pages and pages of notes. He looked like a Santa Claus who didn't give a shit.

On different levels going up like a coliseum, there were about two hundred students around him in chairs with right-hand armrests. The students were a flock of birds in front of him flapping pages.

There was one guy who had caught Alice's eye. He had long piano hands that he'd slowly rub together when someone else was talking. He sat in the last row near where she walked in. He slouched in his chair but always had his chin tilted up like the overhead lights were giving him a tan. He always sat next to mean-looking friends who snickered.

She sat near him but never next to him. She felt contagious around him. She just wasn't cool enough.

She told Bethany about him. He had a name but now his name was the Children's Lit guy.

'The Children's Lit guy snubbed me again today,' she told Bethany. 'I'm going to the movies to feel better.'

Alice went to the movies at regular theatres on top of Film Society showings, sometimes even alone. Nothing could have prepared her for *Wild at Heart*. Not even that *People* magazine profile of its director, David Lynch. She was so thankful Bethany hadn't been with her; there was one scene where a guy's head was bashed on the floor. If she had taken Bethany, their friendship would be over. While Alice sat through the movie, the contact-lens solution in her bag leaked on her arm and she didn't even notice until the credits were on.

At night in her dorm room, she didn't think anyone would listen to her as a film director. She cried on the phone to her father that she would really prefer to be at a film school somewhere like maybe New York or even Toronto where her high school friend Walker went to Ryerson for film, but her father said no; it would lead nowhere and she needed a university degree. Her mom agreed. After the conversation ended she did somersaults on the bed to shake up the sadness that was in her head.

She called Walker. Walker was cavalier. In her mind, Alice was always begging him, 'Send me mixed tapes, tell me what movies to watch, tell me what you learn in film school.' She wanted to know.

When Alice's dad had dropped her off at high school in the mornings, she would go straight to the cafeteria. Walker was also

dropped off early. He would sit up on a cafeteria table before the first bell rang and push back his black fifties glasses up the bridge of his nose. He used his hands a lot while describing his film shots at the dramatic moments of the story, and almost every moment was dramatic. His hair which was long and brown would flip back like a hi-hat on a drum set.

She would watch those hands and that hair and smile.

He would make films using super 8 cameras that did not record sound. He relied on facial expressions to tell his story.

He let Alice float around him but he kept his distance. She had never been over to his house, for instance.

One time, just to know him a little better, Alice interviewed him for a class assignment. She used a hand-held cassette recorder and everything. He talked through the whole ninety-minute tape. He talked Kubrick, Penn, Scorsese and Coppola. He talked Jim Morrison. He talked Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller. The play button popped out and the tape stopped rolling and then the interview was over. And Alice was sad it was over because she didn't think she could ask him any more personal questions after that without the pretense of an interview.

Somehow their relationship carried over into their freshman year. She couldn't say why. Relationships were the greatest mysteries of all time. She would never figure them out.

When she called Walker from her dorm room long distance, he always made her wait while he made a cup of coffee or lit a cigarette.

This time he asked her, 'So, have you lost your virginity yet?'

She laughed nervously. 'What?'

‘Well?’ This was someone who had already pulled a lot of girls.

‘No,’ she said.

‘I’m dating a model.’ He had never offered to have sex with Alice. She was very aware of that. She waited for more about the model. ‘Only this model has a boyfriend, but she keeps jumping me in the elevator at school. I think she might even be married.’

‘There’s a Children’s Lit guy I like.’

‘What’s a Children’s Lit guy?’

‘Someone in my Children’s Literature class.’

‘Do you picture having sex with him?’

‘No, it stops at kissing. It’s like I want to reach out and touch a wave but I don’t want it to wash over me.’

‘Do you have any sexy underwear?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Maybe that should be your first step.’

After that conversation, Alice opened the top drawer of her wooden dresser and checked out her underwear. She had about ten cotton pairs that her mom had bought her in bulk. She got out a pair of scissors and cut the little bows off all of them.