

Dear Judith,

I think I mentioned in my last letter that I had recently been a guest of the local hospital for a short time. My sojourn there was followed by a period of home convalescence.

Now, I have to be completely honest here and say that the wonder drugs that they stuck into me made me feel pretty well pretty quickly. However, my First and Current Wife knows me too well and laid down some ground rules. First, rest. Naps in the afternoon are not a sign of weakness. Then, forget your volunteer work for a bit. Somebody else can pick up the slack (or, as she so eloquently put it, "Keep your mouth shut and your hands in your pockets."). Finally, don't worry about things around the house. They'll get done eventually. What husband wouldn't take advantage of that last one?

Luckily, we have a cable TV channel that plays lots of old movies. I like old movies. They are more than just entertainment, more than just a crime story or a "duster" or an action flick. The historian in me sees in them glimpses of bygone lifestyles. The story lines in old movies frequently can be hackneyed and variations on common themes. But the most intriguing part for me is the location, attitudes or the things the filmmaker or actors take for granted as a reflection of their surroundings. It's the simple things that jump out at me and intrigue me - artifacts of an era past.

Those movies that are filmed in black and white, mostly in the mid to late 1940s, are often works of art in lighting and camera angles. Hitchcock must have laid awake nights dreaming up new techniques. A good cinematographer could impart the feeling of fear or tension or excitement without actually showing it on screen. And I'm more than willing to suspend belief, movie fan that I am.

Sometimes the plot or dialogue in older films tends to drag a bit for those of us used to today's whiz-bang, high tech, computer-generated cinema for a modern attention-deficit society. That's when I find myself looking for the continuity blooper. You know, the guy is smoking a cigarette when he's talking to somebody but with the next camera angle the cigarette is missing, and then it magically re-appears in his hand when the next camera angle is edited in. Detecting these goofs takes close observation (or more time on

your hands than one would normally want to admit). Besides, the leisurely pace of these old movies allows more scrutiny of the background and props in a scene. It drives my wife nuts when I point out one of these incongruities. The goofs are so quick to pass by that we used to argue a bit about whether or not I had not been mistaken. DVDs are useful for winning the point in these cases because you can rewind, pause and go slowly. I sometimes wonder how many continuity people on set got fired.

There is just one thing that bothers me a bit. Occasionally - actually, more frequently than I would want to admit - some of the things that I see on the screen I, personally, don't automatically recognize as benchmarks of times past. They are often things with which I am, or was, familiar in my own life. Rotary phone dials, chunky oversized electrical switches, small computer monitors, manual typewriters, cars without signal indicators, policemen directing traffic, pay phone booths almost everywhere, double-breasted suits and fedora hats, big propellers on small airplanes; the list goes on and on. My daughter's normal response to my, "I remember those (fill in the blank)," is to glance sideways to see who I may have mortified by exposing my age and then slowly to roll her eyes. I can just read the body language, "Here we go again..."

Rainy days don't bother me. Snowstorms provide the perfect excuse. And a period of convalescence has its silver lining for a Doddering Old Man. Put on the kettle and brew up a pot of tea. It's almost time for "The Thin Man" or "G-Men" or Bogart or an Errol Flynn flick. Pardon me while I lose myself in the silver screen.

Yours,

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