

101 PIECES OF ME



Veronica Bennett was an English lecturer for many years but now writes full time. Her interest in writing about early cinema was sparked by an article in a book about silent film actors. "I was struck by how very young the women were, though not the men," she says. "It seems that the seeds of movie culture, which even now demands youth and beauty from any aspiring actress, were sown right at the beginning. And sadly, so were the background stories we still read about every day, of betrayal, divorce, addiction. What would it be like, I wondered, to be a teenage girl living through the birth of celebrity culture?" Veronica lives in Middlesex with her husband, and has an adult son and daughter.



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VERONICA
BENNETT



WALKER
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For Victoria Birt

OPENING REEL
LIGHTS



As I sit here on this balcony, watching the sea, I wonder what was real and what was imagined. Memory is like a dream. Like a film.

Some of it is documented, I suppose. The film itself (whose title, *Innocence*, is not without significance in this story) serves as proof that I was there, and did those things. But those reels of celluloid reflect more than just a two-dimensional image of me. Like them, I am a collection of pieces, almost but not quite the same as one another, progressing towards The End – those white words on the black screen. And as I go, I pass by the light that brings the film to life. Not the artificial light of a projector, but the real light of the sun, the bleached buildings, and this enormous sky.

Did you know that for each second that we live, twenty-four frames of film pass over the projector's beam? It doesn't sound like very many, does it? Even a hundred and one frames, the number that made up my very first appearance before the camera, only produce just over *four seconds* of moving picture.

What can you do in four seconds? Not much, you might think. But that is the time it took for my life to be changed. A hundred and one pieces of me, paraded before the world without my knowledge. Those four seconds of film took me apart, frame by frame. But now, here I am, together again. And frame by frame, I'll tell you the story.



I've always been a dreamer. In the days when I was scarcely taller than the hay grass, I was never a skinny child in a faded frock and pinafore, but the Princess of the Hay Field, or Queen of the Kingdom of the Cowshed, or wherever I had trailed my father that day. And later, when other village girls began to “walk out” with village boys, their whispered *he said – I said* accounts left me unmoved. I was waiting for something else to find me. Something not necessarily *better* than my family life in Haverth, since I loved both people and place, but definitely *different*. Something that might happen to the people I knew who didn't live in Haverth but lived inside my head. They were not farmers or shopkeepers or blacksmiths. They were the people in the films.

Ever since I had seen my first moving picture as a little girl in the church hall at Aberaeron, I had never stopped being amazed by the sight of real people moving on a flat white screen. One of Mam's favourite stories was of her own first visit to what she called the “kinema”, years before. “We couldn't believe it!” she would say. “People were

running up to look behind the screen, trying to see where the pictures were coming from, and how they moved, just as if they were living. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry."

At the old "kinema", the people and horses in the film had walked jerkily, and unnaturally fast. The picture had flickered – brighter, then dimmer, then brighter again – as if illuminated by a guttering candle. It had seemed to struggle to stay within the bounds of the screen. "Bits of it would be on the wall," recalled Mam, "or on someone's face. It was funny, really, though marvellous as well. We were like children, watching those silly comic films that only lasted about five minutes, and clapping at the end, as if the people who made them could hear us!"

To me, even though the black and white made the world on the screen look so different from real life, it was still a miracle to see faraway places, sport and dancing and acrobatics, buildings and machines and animals. And what I loved best of all was that the pictures, or in my brother Frank's slang, "the flicks", were so *new*. They made you feel you were truly alive, striding through the twentieth century in a skirt shorter than any your mother or grandmother had worn, and with a head full of possibilities never before imagined.

Nowadays, the people on screen walk at the right speed, though the picture still flickers and jumps about a little, and even stops altogether sometimes. Frank, whose fascination for films leans more to the mechanical side than mine, met

my questions about this with scorn: “What, do you think a film is shown by some sort of magic, girl? No, they are shown by a machine, and a machine can’t see what it’s doing, can it?”

I had to admit the truth of this. “So if the film stops, and the machine goes wrong, a man has to be there to see to it, then, has he?”

“Of course,” said Frank, adding with authority, “he’s called the projectionist.” Then, with longing, “I think he’s got the best job in the world.”



Frank was two years older than me. We had always been companions, and unlike some brothers, he never excluded me from the things he was interested in. Though he was a farmer’s son, he was a “war child”, as I was myself. Born in the early years of the twentieth century, our lives had been changed by the Great War. Those four years stood like a monolith between the world of our parents and our own. The speed with which inventions were developing

was almost alarming. Mr Reynolds, the headmaster, and Reverend Morris, the vicar, had telephones, and a public telephone box had even been installed on the quay at Aberaeron. People flew in aeroplanes. Faster and faster trains went to every part of Great Britain and all over Wales, to Anglesey in the North and Pembroke in the South, bringing things we had never had before. Bananas were the latest; Frank couldn't get enough of them.

Everything had changed. For generations, Freebodys had been tenant farmers, along with most of the families around us. But Frank did not see himself as a farmer, and I did not see myself as a farmer's wife. Greater, or at least new, things beckoned in this new, mechanized world. For Frank, especially. He liked films, but more than anything, he wanted to be a motor mechanic. And just like me, he dreamed. He would pretend to kick-start his battered old bicycle as if it were a motorcycle, and *vrrmm-vrrmm* his way down the lane. I laughed, but I understood.

When I was fifteen and Frank was seventeen, our parents took us to the Pier Pavilion Café in Haverth to see *The Bohemian Girl*, with Gladys Cooper and Ivor Novello. My da, who was fond of quoting poetry, told me on the way home that the film was "such stuff as dreams are made on". And he was quite right. It was from that day on that films became the centre of my dreams. Not baffling, disjointed night-time dreams, but the dreams of stolen moments when I was alone. Throwing feed to the hens, I ceased to be

Princess Sarah of the Hen Run and became Gladys Cooper or Gloria Swanson or Mary Pickford, scattering corn against a backdrop of American, not Welsh, mountains, my dress billowing around my legs, my hair in curls, to be noticed by Rudolph Valentino or Ronald Colman and swept into love and adventure. Most often, whether I was doing my chores or sitting on the gate, or reading, or walking to the shop, I dreamed of my favourite actress of all, the beautiful Lillian Hall-Davis.

Her name sounded upper-class, though I knew that before she became an actress in the films she had been an ordinary girl like me. When she was on the screen, I was transfixed by the way she moved and smiled and interacted with the hero. She was bold yet ladylike, sweet yet fiery, and so attractive that I never questioned that he would, of course, fall in love with her. I dreamed of her whenever I was bored, which was often. And I envied her. She had made her escape from a poor area of London and become a famous actress, a “star”, as the film magazines said. I liked the handsome men in the films, but my imagination was filled with Lillian. And when no one was looking at me, I *was* her.