

Excerpt from

The Last Scene

by Alydia Rackham

Two men sat on chairs center stage, and an empty, funky-patterned couch stood near them, stage left. One man was thin with faded red hair, wearing black dress pants and a white collared shirt, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had a serious, angular face and a penetrating look. He had a booklet on his knee, and gestured delicately with a pencil between his fingers as he talked to the other man. I recognized him—and suddenly remembered the calm, regulated lilt of his upper-class English accent.

The other man was fat, with a round face, and his chortling laughter echoed out into the hall toward me. He had greying, combed hair and little eyes, and wore a grey suit and vest, with no tie.

Bracing myself, I started down the aisle, my feet silent on the thin carpet. Then, all of a sudden, they saw me.

“Miss Maple?” the fat one called, his voice booming out. He sat forward and shielded his eyes from the lights. “Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” I called back. “How do I get up there?”

“See, there’s a door off to the side, there, house left,” he pointed. “Take the set of stairs up and turn right, you’ll come out on the stage.”

“Okay, thanks,” I managed, waving. I headed to my left, pushed through the curtains—tried not to fall down in the dark—and turned toward the bright light coming from between the hanging stage curtains. Finally, I emerged out there with them, the lights flashing in my right eye.

They both turned to smile at me, and the thin man stood up and nodded.

“How do you do, Miss Maple?” he asked. “Do you remember me?”

“I do!” I said, taking his proffered hand. “You’re my dad’s friend, Aaron Highgate—I think we met at a football game once.”

He smiled broadly, now, and it did wonders for his appearance.

“Yes, I remember that,” he said, then waved to the other man. “This is my friend, and *The Ripple Experiment’s* director, Mr. Sam Everhart.”

“Forgive me for not standing up,” Mr. Everhart chuckled, extending his hand. “I just had knee surgery.”

“Oh, then don’t get up,” I said quickly, leaning in to shake his hand.

“Will you please sit down?” Aaron asked, indicating the empty couch.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, maneuvering around and then easing down on the couch in front of them, clutching my purse in my lap and trying to keep my hands from shaking. Both men rested

their gazes on me, and I could practically *feel* them thinking.

“I seem to remember you participated in theatre in high school and college?” Aaron prompted, crossing his legs and gracefully letting his hands rest on the note pad.

“Yes,” I answered quickly. “In high school I played Alice Sycamore in *You Can’t Take it With You*, um...I was Laurey in *Oklahoma!*, and Titania in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In college we did a lot of Shakespeare, which I loved—so I played Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*; Cordelia in *King Lear*; and Lady MacBeth in *Mac*—” I instantly stopped myself with a nervous giggle. “I mean, *The Scottish Play*.”

This made the men across from me laugh, and something in my chest loosened a little.

“And you won a few awards?” Mr. Everhart asked.

“Yes, for playing Alice, Laurey and Lady MacBeth.”

“And that success made you want to pursue acting?” Aaron wondered.

“Um...Well, no,” I confessed, feeling my face get hot. “I actually got my degree in speech therapy. I want to help people with speech and reading impediments like stammering, lisping, dyslexia, things like that.”

“A noble cause,” Aaron mused. He raised his eyebrows. “But you’ve had no luck so far getting a job in that field?”

“No, not yet,” I sighed, trying to smile. “It’s tough, in the city!”

“Yes, it is,” Mr. Everhart agreed, exchanging a look with Aaron. “But you’re willing to try *this*, instead?”

“Well, yes—if it’s agreeable to everyone. Including me,” I said, feeling my face get hotter, but saying it anyway. “I’d want to make sure it would be worthwhile, and that the people involved are good to work with.”

“That sounds wise,” Aaron said, suppressing a smile. “Have you had a chance to read the script?”

“Yes, I read it yesterday,” I replied quickly.

“What did you think of it?” Mr. Everhart asked. “Can you summarize it for us, give us your impressions?”

“Well...” My brow furrowed and my fingers curled on the top of my purse. “It’s about a sort of a mad, but endearing, scientist who comes back in time a hundred years on an experiment. About half of earth’s population in the future where he comes from is robots, and the other half lives in a very sterile, dark environment. And he thinks that’s wrong, and something’s *gone* wrong. He’s trying to figure out if something can be changed in the past that will change the future—he’s narrowed it down to this particular house at this exact time. He does various science and social experiments while he’s living in the present—some of which are pretty funny—in an effort to impact the future the way he wants. And, um...” I shifted in my seat. “The last scene is always completely improvised.”

“Do you know *why* it’s improvised?” Aaron asked, watching me carefully.

“Well...I’ve been considering that,” I admitted. “I think...I think it leaves the entire play up to different interpretations, and a chance for it to evolve and take on a life of its own.”

“All right, keep going,” Mr. Everhart urged, leaning forward. I shifted again.

“Well...” I said again. “The scientist’s focus is all on global—or at least national—events, but almost accidentally, he does things to change the life of the woman living in this house, and that *could* ultimately be what makes a difference in the future. Small things, like fixing a leak or throwing away a faulty toaster, to saving her from a bus, discouraging a bad relationship, protecting her from a creepy neighbor. And it could be *any* of those things. It’s why it’s called *The Ripple Experiment*. One, it’s his name; two, *he* is causing a ‘ripple’ effect; and three, those ripples impact everything else that comes after them. Because, in the scene before the last, he goes into his time machine again, and the last scene is the result of whatever discovery he decides to make about the future. Nothing changed, something changed, or everything changed—he can literally pull from any scene in the show.”

The two men smiled at each other.

“Yes, the people playing Dr. Ripple *and* Wendy would pull it from any scene in the show,” Aaron reminded me.

“That’s...actually what scares me,” I said, feeling my cheeks burning, now. They both frowned at me.

“Scares you?” Mr. Everhart repeated.

“Mhm,” I said, gripping my purse. “I never did any improv. Everything was very memorized, very blocked out. And I mean—well, a lot of it was Shakespeare! You don’t improvise Shakespeare!”

“No, you don’t,” Mr. Everhart chuckled.

“And...you don’t think you can do that part of it?” Aaron pressed.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “I really don’t.”

“Do you think you might try?” Mr. Everhart peered at me. I bit my lip.

“She should!”

I nearly hit the ceiling when a bright, young male voice shot through the silence behind me.

The next second, someone leaped over the back of the couch and landed sitting right next to me. My breath caught and I gaped at him.

He looked about my age, maybe a couple years older. He wore a short sleeved maroon polo shirt with the top buttons undone, baggy khaki slacks, and yellow socks. No shoes.

He had a bright, clever face, with a smattering of freckles across his nose; dark, expressive eyebrows and long lashes, and an impish smile. His features might be oddly handsome if he allowed a cloud of seriousness to pass over them. Actually, he probably could be dashing at the right angle. But right now, his vivid blue eyes—like lightning—lit his whole being with an almost wild brilliance. He had brown, reckless curls that caught the stage lights, and, as if in complement, the lights illuminated them in a flame-red halo. In a ridiculous instant of memory—though the next instant, it

didn't seem so ridiculous—I remembered Shakespeare's description of Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: the “shrewd and knavish sprite,” “that merry wanderer of the night.”

“Um—hi!” I giggled breathlessly.

“Hi, don't mind me, I just dropped in,” the stranger beamed, sticking out his right hand. Cautiously, I took it—and he suddenly brought mine up and kissed it.

“*Enchanté!*” he said crisply.

“Ha!” I laughed, shocked.

“Miss Maple, this is my nephew, Peter Wren. He's playing Dr. Edward Ripple.” Mr. Everhart motioned to him. “Peter, this is—”

“Anne Maple, yes, I know, I've been listening the whole time,” he said, turning toward me eagerly, fixing me with those sky-bright eyes. “Are you going to do the show?”

I suddenly sensed Aaron and Mr. Everhart go completely still.

“Well, I'd...I'd like to,” I stammered—surprising myself. “I was just telling them about how I don't know how to improv.”

“Oh, shoot, it isn't that hard,” Peter waved it off. “You're improv-ing right now, aren't you?”

“Ha, well...” I rolled my eyes. “I guess so?”

“You can walk, talk and chew gum at the same time?” he pressed narrowly.

“Um—well, sure—”

“You're not deaf, blind, have a third eye somewhere?”

I burst out laughing.

Peter's eyes suddenly twinkled with an almost fiendish light.

“Yep,” he said. “I like her.” And with that, he leaned over, kissed my cheek—

Shot up, headed around the couch toward stage left, ramming his hands in his pockets and whistling “Everything's Up to Date in Kansas City.”

Baffled, I twisted in my seat to watch him stride toward backstage like he was strolling through the park. The shadows of the curtains swallowed him.

“I hope this means you have your part memorized, Peter,” Aaron called after him, arcing an eyebrow.

And Peter laughed.

That ringing, thrilling, innocently-delighted sound straight from my Picture.

My lips parted, and I couldn't speak.

“Well, Miss Maple, if we could,” Mr. Everhart called me back—and I had to struggle to turn around and face him.

“Could we hear you read a little bit?” Mr. Everhart finished. “Aaron can read Dr. Ripple for you.”

“Oh! Okay, sure,” I nodded, taking the script they handed me.

“Why don't we start with act two, scene two?” Aaron asked, pulling reading glasses out of his breast pocket and slipping them on.

“Okay,” I said again, flipping to that page.

We started the read, and I did my very best. The written dialogue was lively and natural, and of course I’d read it already, so it wasn’t all that difficult once my fingers stopped trembling.

But all the while, though I never turned to look, I kept wondering if Peter Wren was watching us from the wings.

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Anne’s whole life has been “by the script”...

Until fate calls her to improvise.

To play with the possibilities.

To go a little mad.

Anne studied to be a speech therapist, and she lives in a little apartment in New York, actively searching for a job in a non-scary school system. She has a steady, reliable boyfriend named Jim.

She also has premonitions. She secretly calls them “Pictures,” and she’s never been able to stop even one from coming true.

Now, her dad has suggested she try out for a role in a play written by his old college friend—a play about a time-traveling, mad scientist. And the last scene is always improvised. Battling her doubts and inexperience, Anne tries out, and is stunned when she gets the part of the female lead.

As production begins, Anne is pulled into the orbit of a luminous, fiendishly-innocent young actor named Peter Wren, who teaches her how to fire her own imagination, and leads the show into mind-blowing popularity.

But what happens when Anne begins to care deeply for Peter and the show, at the expense of her relationship with Jim? And what does she do when she begins to have Pictures of Peter’s reckless drug abuse? Now, Anne is caught between the fear that this venture may ruin all her plans for the future—and the knowledge that trying to save Peter Wren may be the role of a lifetime.