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NIGHTMARE ALLEY

WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

RAVEN  BOOKS

Nightmare Alley was American writer William Lindsay Gresham's first book, and was a bestseller, subsequently being adapted into a film in 1947. The novel was in part inspired by conversations Gresham had with a former sideshow employee whom he befriended while volunteering during the Spanish Civil War.

Gresham followed *Nightmare Alley* with one further piece of fiction, and three works of non-fiction, but was unable to replicate the success of his debut. Gresham married three times, and his second wife, the poet and novelist Joy Davidman later (on her death bed) became the wife of British author C. S. Lewis. An early adopter of Scientology, which he later denounced, Gresham overcame his alcoholism via Alcoholics Anonymous but struggled with his mental health. Facing a diagnosis of terminal cancer, he committed suicide in 1962. In his pocket were found business cards reading, 'No Address. No Phone. No Business. No Money. Retired.'

James Smythe is an award winning novelist and screen-writer.

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

William Lindsay Gresham

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INTRODUCTION

When people ask us – readers and writers both – what we’re afraid of, the answers are usually the acceptable face of fear.

Wasps or heights, ghosts or spiders; things that are out of our control. But almost always we’re lying. Almost always, the things that really scare us are deep inside us: our own failures or foibles, the aspects of our personas and lives that we think could unravel us entirely. William Lindsay Gresham understood that. *Nightmare Alley* isn’t technically a horror novel – it’s a noir thriller: noir to the point of pitch dark and utterly thrilling to witness it unfold – but it is one of the most unsettling books I’ve ever read.

The novel opens directly on Stanton ‘Stan’ Carlisle, a carnival worker at the ‘Ten-In-One Show’, whose duties – alongside his own magic act – involve keeping the carnival’s resident geek inebriated. This is our introduction to a world that’s not our own: a world containing a creature from parts unknown who slurps alcohol from unmarked bottles, who howls and snarls in the dirt before biting the heads off snakes for an audience’s amusement. And through Stan, we gain a horrifying insight: the geek is not a creature at all, but a man, anonymous, feral and broken

and forgotten in a cage; and, just like us, part-curious, part-terrified, Stan can't stop watching him.

But the concept of the geek wasn't invented by Gresham. Gresham was serving as a medic for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, volunteering his life and skills, and while there, he met one Joseph Daniel Halliday. Over many, many drinks, Halliday told Gresham about a character he'd encountered at a carnival; a man so wrecked by the path of his life that he ended up captured, forced to entertain crowds as a freak, paid in the alcohol that both sustained him, and kept him enslaved. Gresham couldn't shake the story; he wrote it down so that he might pass on the horror of it. 'The geek was made by fear. He was afraid of sobering up and getting the horrors. But what made him a drunk? Fear. Find out what they are afraid of and sell it back to them.'

In the geek, Gresham saw with startling clarity how terrifying the reality of a man's collapse could be. And it must have played into his own fears: he himself was a man who struggled with alcohol, who suffered with a great many personal demons. When he returned from Spain, having experienced the traumas of war, those demons grew only more powerful inside him. He tried to exorcise them: first with psychoanalysis, then with a burgeoning fascination with mysticism, arcana; and finally, a combination of the two, via the writing of the text of *Nightmare Alley*.

Our entry-point to the world of the carnival is the same as Gresham's was, and our understanding of how it works runs alongside Stan's. It soon becomes clear that this is a

novel about no less than the language of persuasion, about the loss and collapse of the self, and about taking advantage of those who want to be helped out of the darkness, and into the light. Cold reading (faking psychic abilities to tell the secrets of somebody's soul), the spook racket (faking communing – even possession – by ghosts) and even psychiatry are dragged into Stan's path, and we're there alongside him – uncomfortably close, I would say – as his life is changed by his own desperate desire to further himself. Stan is, as he repeatedly admits, 'a hustler', a man who wants to use his own wiles to take advantage of others. He understands the tricks, but doesn't have the innate ability to pull himself out of his own potential collapse into darkness.

As with Stan, so goes Gresham. His own fears were written onto the page, primarily through his female characters. Mistress Zeena, a mentalist, represents the truth and mistrust of mentalism; the naive Molly Cahill aids Stan in his transformation into a phony preacher, using the mores of religion to ply his own cold readings; and finally Dr Lilith Ritter, one of the most terrifying creations in literature, whose manipulations and reality distortions echo Gresham's own distrust of psychotherapy's attempts to cure him.

Gresham's interests and demons bled into more than the words of the text, as well. He structured the book around the Tarot's deck; cards which, depending on your point of view, provide either a semi-mystical insight into the natures and paths of people, or are just another form of wish-fulfilment bolstered by some light cold reading.

Chapter one is ‘The Fool’, the first of the Tarot’s trump cards. It’s not clear if Gresham let a randomised deck guide Stan’s story, or if he put the cards into place as he went, and it doesn’t really matter. The only reason we might use the Tarot, or visit a psychiatrist, is so we can be told to not be afraid any more. At one point, Stan reads a passage in a ledger written by Madame Zeena’s husband: ‘Human nature is the same everywhere. All have the same worries . . . They’re all afraid of ill health, of poverty, of boredom, of failure. Fear is the key to human nature.’ The words are there for Stan to discover them; a perceived truth about his fellow man. Gresham had lived through wars; he’d suffered as an alcoholic; he had violent outbursts; he had needed and then pushed away psychiatry. As readers, we try to keep a distance between authors and their characters, but sometimes it’s harder than others; the titular *Nightmare Alley* is found in the novel as a dream that Stan experiences, where he’s ‘running down a dark alley, the buildings vacant and menacing . . . there was something behind him, close behind him, getting closer until he woke up trembling and never reached the light.’

But the way in which Gresham’s emotional state infects this novel means that it sings. When we’re reading something that the world shouts about as being unsettling, we want to be unsettled. If somebody picks up a thriller or a horror, they want to be thrilled; they want to be horrified. So as *Nightmare Alley* progresses, we need to see the things that really unsettle us unfold, just as they unsettle Stan – and Gresham – in turn. By the end of its own Tarot

reading, the novel closes as a portrait of a character you'll have never read anything like before, while also speaking to something darker deep inside every reader.

Gresham's own darkness manifested itself pretty much incessantly. He spent much of his life searching for his own identity. 'Baptized an Episcopalian, raised an agnostic, in turns a Unitarian, a hedonist, a stoic, a Communist, a self-made mystic, and an eclectic grabber after truth, I had at last come home,' he wrote of himself when he found Christianity a few years after the publication of *Nightmare Alley*. But that didn't stick: Scientology was next, abandoned because he saw through its fundamentally hokey carny-ness; and then Alcoholics Anonymous, an attempt to wrestle back control of his demons. He, like Stan, hunted for a voice persuasive enough to hold him, to speak to the darkness inside him, to help bring his demons under control.

When Gresham developed cancer of the tongue, and began to go blind, it coincided with his second wife leaving him for the British author C. S. Lewis; and he took his own life, alone, in a hotel, a self-made business card in his pocket: 'No address. No phone. No business. No money. Retired.' ('Man Said To Be Author Is Found Dead In Hotel', ran the *New York Times*' article.) A quiet, sad death, his own darkness overwhelming him.

I won't tell you here whether the same can be said for Stan by the novel's end. Both men, author and his creation, running the alleyway, trying to escape from whatever it is that's chasing them. Both of them seeing the horrors around them, real and imaginary, and wanting to find a

way to talk their way out of them; or to find somebody who can do it for them.

Nightmare Alley's had a hard time, publication-wise. It's been edited and abridged – there's some content that's not for the prudish – and it's been out of print for a long time, as so many forgotten classics have found themselves. But that's changing. A reappraisal of it has seen it sitting amongst its peers, straddling two genres: the depression-era dramas of Steinbeck and Faulkner, and the noir-crime thrillers of Hammett and Chandler. And its DNA is present in so much twenty first century media: in the carnival folk and nightmares of *American Horror Story*, in the cold-reading and dust bowls of *Carnivale*, and in the twisted realities and corrupted souls of *True Detective*.

At the time of writing, an adaptation of the book is in the process of being filmed by Oscar winning director Guillermo del Toro. Del Toro's own work is so defined by darkness, by the darkness of men who are worse than the supernatural things that lurk in the corners. One of the reasons he gave for adapting the novel is that it's 'a real underbelly of society type of movie. No supernatural elements. Just a straight, really dark story.' And that's something Gresham would agree with; even if he ultimately found that darkness to be utterly overwhelming.

James Smythe
May 2020

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

To

JOY DAVIDMAN

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the
Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this
card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his
back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water . . .

—*The Waste Land*

For at Cumae I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl
hanging in a bottle. And when the boys asked
her, “What do you want, Sibyl?” she answered,
“I want to die.”

—*The Satyricon*

CARD I: THE FOOL



*who walks in motley, with his eyes closed,
over a precipice at the end of the world.*

S tan Carlisle stood well back from the entrance of the canvas enclosure, under the blaze of a naked light bulb, and watched the geek.

This geek was a thin man who wore a suit of long underwear dyed chocolate brown. The wig was black and looked like a mop, and the brown greasepaint on the emaciated face was streaked and smeared with the heat and rubbed off around the mouth.

At present the geek was leaning against the wall of the pen, while around him a few—pathetically few—snakes lay in loose coils, feeling the hot summer night and sullenly uneasy in the glare. One slim little king snake

was trying to climb up the wall of the enclosure and was falling back.

Stan liked snakes; the disgust he felt was for them, at their having to be penned up with such a specimen of man. Outside the talker was working up to his climax. Stan turned his neat blond head toward the entrance.

“... where did he come from? God only knows. He was found on an uninhabited island five hundred miles off the coast of Florida. My friends, in this enclosure you will see one of the unexplained mysteries of the universe. Is he man or is he beast? You will see him living in his natural habitat among the most venomous rep-tiles that the world provides. Why, he fondles those serpents as a mother would fondle her babes. He neither eats nor drinks but lives entirely on the atmosphere. And we’re going to feed him one more time! There will be a slight additional charge for this attraction but it’s not a dollar, it’s not a quarter—it’s a cold, thin dime, ten pennies, two nickels, the tenth part of a dollar. Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Stan shifted over to the rear of the canvas pen.

The geek scrambled under a burlap bag and found something. There was the wheet of a cork being drawn and a couple of rattling swallows and a gasp.

The “marks” surged in—young fellows in straw hats with their coats over their arms, here and there a fat woman with beady eyes. Why does that kind always have beady eyes, Stan wondered. The gaunt woman with the anemic little girl who had been promised she would see everything in the show. The drunk. It was like a kaleidoscope—the design always changing, the particles always the same.

Clem Hoately, owner of the Ten-in-One show and its lecturer, made his way through the crowd. He fished a flask of water from his pocket, took a swig to rinse his throat, and spat it on the ground. Then he mounted the step. His voice was suddenly low and conversational, and it seemed to sober the audience.

“Folks, I must ask ya to remember that this exhibit is being presented solely in the interests of science and education. This creature which you see before ya ...”

A woman looked down and for the first time spied the little king snake, still frantically trying to climb out of the pit. She drew in her breath shrilly between her teeth.

“... this creature has been examined by the foremost scientists of Europe and America and pronounced a man. That is to say: he has two arms, two legs, a head and a body, like a man. But under that head of hair there is the brain of a beast. See how he feels more at home with the rep-tiles of the jungle than with humankind.”

The geek had picked up a black snake, holding it close behind the head so it couldn't snap at him, and was rocking it in his arms like a baby, muttering sounds.

The talker waited while the crowd rubbered.

“You may well ask how he associates with poisonous serpents without harm. Why, my friends, their poison has no effect whatsoever upon him. But if he were to sink his teeth in my hand nothing on God's green earth could save me.”

The geek gave a growl, blinking stupidly up into the light from the bare bulb. Stan noticed that at one corner of his mouth there was a glint from a gold tooth.

“But now, ladies and gentlemen, when I told you that this creature was more beast than man I was not asking you to take my word for it. Stan—” He turned to the young man, whose brilliant blue eyes had not a trace of revelation in them. “Stan, we’re going to feed him one more time for this audience alone. Hand me the basket.”

Stanton Carlisle reached down, gripped a small covered market basket by the handle, and boosted it over the heads of the crowd. They fell back, jamming and pushing. Clem Hoately, the talker, laughed with a touch of weariness. “It’s all right, folks; nothing you haven’t seen before. No, I reckon you all know what this is.” From the basket he drew a half-grown leghorn pullet, complaining. Then he held it up so they could see it. With one hand he motioned for silence.

The necks craned down.

The geek had leaned forward on all fours, his mouth hanging open vacantly. Suddenly the talker threw the pullet into the pit with a whirl of feathers.

The geek moved toward it, shaking his black cotton mop of wig. He grabbed for the chicken, but it spread its stumpy wings in a frenzy of self-preservation and dodged. He crawled after it.

For the first time the paint-smeared face of the geek showed some life. His bloodshot eyes were nearly closed. Stan saw his lips shape words without sound. The words were, “You son of a bitch.”

Gently the youth eased himself out of the crowd, which was straining, looking down. He walked stiffly around to the entrance, his hands in his pockets.

From the pit came a panicky clucking and cackling and the crowd drew its breath. The drunk beat his grimy straw hat on the rail. "Get 'at ole shicken, boy! Go get 'at ole shicken!"

Then a woman screamed and began to leap up and down jerkily; the crowd moaned in an old language, pressing their bodies tighter against the board walls of the pit and stretching. The cackling had been cut off short, and there was a click of teeth and a grunt of someone working hard.

Stan shoved his hands deeper in his pockets. He moved through the flap entrance back into the main ring of the Ten-in-One show, crossed it to the gate and stood looking out on the carnival midway. When his hands came from his pockets one of them held a shiny half-dollar. He reached for it with his other hand and it vanished. Then with a secret, inner smile of contempt and triumph, he felt along the edge of his white flannel trousers and produced the coin.

Against the summer night the ferris wheel lights winked with the gaiety of rhinestones, the calliope's blast sounded as if the very steam pipes were tired.

"Christ a-mighty, it's hot, huh, kid?"

Clem Hoately, the talker, stood beside Stan, wiping the sweat from the band of his panama with a handkerchief. "Say, Stan, run over and get me a bottle of lemon soda from the juice joint. Here's a dime; get yourself one too."

When Stan came back with the cold bottles, Hoately tilted his gratefully. "Jesus, my throat's sore as a bull's ass in fly time."

Stan drank the pop slowly. "Mr. Hoately?"

“Yeah, what?”

“How do you ever get a guy to geek? Or is this the only one? I mean, is a guy born that way—liking to bite the heads off chickens?”

Clem slowly closed one eye. “Let me tell you something, kid. In the carny you don’t ask nothing. And you’ll get told no lies.”

“Okay. But did you just happen to find this fellow—doing—doing this somewhere behind a barn, and work up the act?”

Clem pushed back his hat. “I like you, kid. I like you a lot. And just for that I’m going to give you a treat. I’m *not* going to give you a boot in the ass, get it? That’s the treat.”

Stan grinned, his cool, bright blue eyes never leaving the older man’s face. Suddenly Hoately dropped his voice.

“Just because I’m your pal I ain’t going to crap you up. You want to know where geeks came from. Well, listen—you don’t find ’em. You *make* ’em.”

He let this sink in, but Stanton Carlisle never moved a muscle. “Okay. But how?”

Hoately grabbed the youth by the shirt front and drew him nearer. “Listen, kid. Do I have to draw you a damn blueprint? You pick up a guy and he ain’t a geek—he’s a drunk. A bottle-a-day booze fool. So you tell him like this: ‘I got a little job for you. It’s a temporary job. We got to get a new geek. So until we do you’ll put on the geek outfit and fake it.’ You tell him, ‘You don’t have to do nothing. You’ll have a razor blade in your hand and when you pick up the chicken you give it a nick with the blade

and then make like you're drinking the blood. Same with rats. The marks don't know no different."

Hoately ran his eye up and down the midway, sizing up the crowd. He turned back to Stan. "Well, he does this for a week and you see to it that he gets his bottle regular and a place to sleep it off in. He likes this fine. This is what he thinks is heaven. So after a week you say to him like this, you say, 'Well, I got to get me a real geek. You're through.' He scares up at this because nothing scares a real rummy like the chance of a dry spell and getting the horrors. He says, 'What's the matter? Ain't I doing okay?' So you say, 'Like crap you're doing okay. You can't draw no crowd faking a geek. Turn in your outfit. You're through.' Then you walk away. He comes following you, begging for another chance and you say, 'Okay. But after tonight out you go.' But you give him his bottle.

"That night you drag out the lecture and lay it on thick. All the while you're talking he's thinking about sobering up and getting the crawling shakes. You give him time to think it over, while you're talking. Then throw in the chicken. He'll geek."

The crowd was coming out of the geek show, gray and listless and silent except for the drunk. Stan watched them with a strange, sweet, faraway smile on his face. It was the smile of a prisoner who has found a file in a pie.

CARD 2: THE MAGICIAN



*who holds toward heaven the wand of fire and
points with his other hand toward earth.*

“If you’ll step right over this way, folks, I want to call your attention to the attraction now appearing on the first platform. Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness one of the most spectacular performances of physical strength the world has ever seen. Now some of you young fellows in the crowd look pretty husky but I want to tell you, gents, the man you are about to see makes the ordinary blacksmith or athlete look like a babe in arms. The power of an African gorilla in the body of a Greek god. Ladies and gents, Herculo, the world’s most perfect man.”

Bruno Hertz: If only once she would over here look while I have the robe off I would be glad to drop dead that minute. *Um Gotteswillen*, I would cut my heart out and hand it to her on a plate. Cannot she ever see that? I cannot get up courage to hold her hand in the kinema. Why has a man always to feel over some woman like this? I cannot even tell Zeena how crazy I am for her because then Zeena would try to put us together and then I would feel a *dummkopf* from not knowing how to say to her. Molly—a beautiful *Amerikanische* name. She will never love me. I know it in my heart. But I can tear to pieces any of the wolves in the show such as would hurt that girl. If one of them would try, then maybe Molly could see it. Perhaps then she could guess the way I feel and would give me one word for me to remember always. To remember, back in Wien.

“... right over here, folks. Will you step in a little closer? On account of this exhibit ain’t the biggest thing you ever seen; how about it, Major? Ladies and gentlemen, I now present for your edification and amusement Major Mosquito, the tiniest human being on record. Twenty inches, twenty pounds, and twenty years—and he’s got plenty of big ideas for his age. Any of you girls would like to date him after the show, see me and I’ll fix ya up. The Major will now entertain you with a little specialty number of his own, singing and tap-dancing to that grand old number, ‘Sweet Rosie O’Grady.’ Take it away, Major.”

Kenneth Horsefield: If I lit a match and held it right close under that big ape's nose I wonder if I'd see the hairs in his nose-holes catch fire. Christ, what an ape! I'd like to have him tied up with his mouth propped open and then I'd sit back smoking my cigar and shoot his teeth out one after another. Apes. They're all apes. Especially the women with their big moon faces. I'd like to sink a hammer in 'em and watch 'em splash like pumpkins. Their great, greasy red mouths open like tunnels. Grease and filth, all of them.

Christ, there it goes. That same crack. The one woman makes it to the other behind her hand. If I see that same hand come up and that same routine once more I'll yell the goddamned place down. A million dames and always the same goddamned crack behind the same goddamned hand and the other one always champing on gum. Some day I'll blast 'em. I don't keep that equalizer in my trunk to play Boy Scout with. And that's the dame I'll blast. I'd of done it before now. Only they'd laugh at seeing me hold the butt with one hand and work the trigger with the other.

Joe Plasky: "Thank you, professor. Ladies and gents, I am known as the Half-man Acrobat. As you can see, my legs are both here but they're not much good to me. Infantile paralysis when I was a kid—they just naturally never grewed. So I just made up my mind to tie 'em in a knot like this and forget about 'em and go on about my business. This is the way I get upstairs. Up on the hands. Steady. Here we go with a hop, skip, and a jump. Turn around and down we go, easy as pie. Thank you, folks.

“Now here’s another little number I worked out by myself. Sometimes in a crowded trolley car I don’t have room enough to stand on both hands. So up we go. Steady. And I stand on one! Thank you very much.

“Now then, for my next number I’m going to do something that no other acrobat in the world has ever attempted. A full somersault from a handstand back onto the hands. Are we all set? Let’s go. It’s a good trick—if I do it. Maybe some of you folks in the front row had better move back a couple steps. Don’t bother. I’m just kidding. I’ve never missed yet, as you can see, for I’m still in the land of the living. All right, here we go—up—and *over!* Thank you very much, folks.

“And now if you’ll just step right in close I’m going to give away a few little souvenirs. Naturally, I can’t get rich giving away merchandise, but I’ll do my best. I have here a little booklet full of old songs, recitations, jokes, wheezes, and parlor games. And I’m not going to charge you a dollar for it, nor even a half, but a cold, thin dime. That’s all it costs, folks, a dime for a full evening of fun and fancy. And with it I’m going to give away, as a special inducement at this performance only, this little paper shimmy-dancer. Hold a match behind the paper: you see her shadow; and this is how you make her shake.

“You want one? Thank you, bud. Here you are, folks—brimful of assorted poems, dramatic readings, and witty sayings by the world’s wisest men. And only a dime. . . .”

Sis wrote me the kids are both down with whooping cough. I'll send them a box of paints to help keep them quiet. Kids love paints. I'll send them some crayons, too.

"Sailor Martin, the living picture gallery. Ladies and gents, this young man that you see before you went to sea at an early age. He was shipwrecked on a tropical island which had only one other inhabitant—an old seafaring man, who had been there most of his life—a castaway. All he had managed to save from the wreck of his ship was a tattoo outfit. To pass the time he taught Sailor Martin the art and he practiced on himself. Most of the patterns you see are his own work. Turn around, Sailor. On his back, a replica of that world-famous painting, the Rock of Ages. On his chest—turn around, Sailor—the Battleship *Maine*, blowing up in Havana Harbor. Now if any of you young fellows in the audience would like an anchor, American flag, or sweetheart's initials worked on your arm in three beautiful colors, step right up to the platform and see the Sailor. No sissies need apply."

Francis Xavier Martin: Boy, that brunette working the electric-chair act is a beaut. Have I got what would make her happy and moan for more! Only Bruno would land on me like a ton of tomcats. I wonder if I'll hear from that redhead in Waterville. God, I can get one on thinking about her yet. What a shape—and knowing right where to put it, too. But this brunette kid, Molly, is the nuts. What a pair of bubbies! High and pointed—and that ain't no cupform either, brother; that's God.

I wish to Christ that kraut Bruno would bust a blood vessel some day, bending them horseshoes. Goddamn, that Molly kid's got legs like a racehorse. Maybe I could give her one jump and then blow the show. Jesus, it would be worth it, to get into that.

“Over here, folks, right over here. On this platform you see one of the most amazing little ladies the wide world has ever known. And right beside her we have an exact replica of the electric chair at Sing Sing prison. . . .”

Mary Margaret Cahill: Don't forget to smile; Dad always said that. Golly, I wish Dad was here. If I could only look out there and see him grinning up at me everything would be hunky dory. Time to drop the robe and give them an eyeful. Dad, honey, watch over me. . . .

Dad taught Molly all kinds of wonderful things while she was growing up and they were fun, too. For instance, how to walk out of a hotel in a dignified manner with two of your best dresses wrapped around you under the dress you had on. They had to do that once in Los Angeles and Molly got all of her clothes out. Only they nearly caught Dad and he had to talk fast. Dad was wonderful at talking fast and whenever he got in a tight place Molly would go all squirmy inside with thrill and fun because she knew her dad could always wiggle out just when the others thought he was cornered. Dad was wonderful.

Dad always knew nice people. The men were sometimes soused a little but the ladies that Dad knew were always beautiful and they usually had red hair. They were

always wonderful to Molly and they taught her to put on lipstick when she was eleven. The first time she put it on by herself she got on too much and Dad burst out laughing loud and said she looked like something from a crib house—and jail bait at that.

The lady that Dad was friendly with at the time—her name was Alyse—shushed Dad and said, “Come over here, darling. Alyse’ll show you. Let’s take this off and start over. The idea is to keep people from knowing that you have any makeup on at all—especially at your age. Now watch.” She looked at Molly’s face carefully and said, “This is where you start. And don’t let anybody talk you into putting rouge on anywhere else. You have a square face and the idea is to soften it and make it look round.” She showed Molly just how to do it and then took it all off and made her do it herself.

Molly wanted Dad to help her but he said it wasn’t his business—getting it off was more in his line, especially on the collars of shirts. Molly felt awful, having to do it all by herself because she was afraid she wouldn’t do it right and finally she cried a little and then Dad took her on his lap and Alyse showed her again and after that it was all right and she always used makeup, only people didn’t know about it. “My, Mr. Cahill—what a lovely child! Isn’t she the picture of health! Such lovely rosy cheeks!” Then Dad would say, “Indeed, ma’am, lots of milk and early to bed.” Then he would wink at Molly because she didn’t like milk and Dad said beer was just as good for you and she didn’t like beer very much but it was always nice and cold and besides you got pretzels with it and everything. Also Dad

said it was a shame to go to bed early and miss everything when you could sleep late the next day and catch up—unless you had to be at the track for an early workout, to hold the clock on a horse, and then it was better to stay up and go to bed later.

Only, when Dad had made a real killing at the track he always got lit and when he got lit he always tried to send her off to bed just when everything was going swell and because other people in the crowd were always trying to get her to take some, Molly never cared for liquor. Once, in a hotel where they were stopping, there was a girl got terribly drunk and began to take her clothes off and they had to put her to bed in the room next to Molly's. There were a lot of men going in and coming out all night and the next day the cops came and arrested the girl, and Molly heard people talking about it and somebody said later that they let the girl go but she had to go to the hospital because she had been hurt inside somehow. Molly couldn't bear the thought of getting drunk after that because anything might happen to you and you shouldn't let anything happen to you with a man unless you were in love with him. That was what everybody said and people who made love but weren't really in love were called tramps. Molly knew several ladies who were tramps and she asked Dad one time why they were tramps and that's what he said: that they'd let anybody hug and kiss them either for presents or money. You shouldn't do that unless the guy was a swell guy and not likely to cross you up or take a powder on you if you were going to have a baby. Dad said you should never let anybody make love to you if you couldn't

use his toothbrush, too. He said that was a safe rule and if you followed that you couldn't go wrong.

Molly could use Dad's toothbrush and often did, because one of their brushes was always getting left behind in the hotel or sometimes Dad needed one to clean his white shoes with.

Molly used to wake up before Dad and sometimes she would run in and hop into his bed and then he would grunt and make funny snorey noises—only they sounded all funny and horrible—and then he would make believe he thought there was a woodchuck in the bed and he would blame the hotel people for letting woodchucks run around in their joint and then he would find out it was Molly and no woodchuck and he would kiss her and tell her to hurry up and get dressed and then go down and get him a racing form at the cigar stand.

One morning Molly ran in and there was a lady in bed with Dad. She was a very pretty lady and she had no nightie on and neither did Dad. Molly knew what had happened: Dad had been lit the night before and had forgotten to put on his pajamas and the girl had been lit and he had brought her up to their rooms to sleep on account of she was too tight to go home and he had intended to have her sleep with Molly but they had just fallen asleep first. Molly lifted the sheet up real, real careful and then she found out how she would look when she got big.

Then Molly got dressed and went down and got the racing form on the cuff and came back and they were still asleep, only the lady had snuggled in closer to Dad. Molly stood quiet in a corner a long time and kept still,

hoping they would wake up and find her and she would run at them and go “Wool!” and scare them. Only the lady made a low noise like a moan and Daddy opened one eye and then put his arms around her. She opened her eyes and said, “Hello, sugar,” all slow and sleepy, and then Dad started kissing her and she woke up after a while and started to kiss back. Finally Dad got on top of the lady and began to bounce up and down in the bed and Molly thought that was so funny that she burst out laughing and the lady screamed and said, “Get that kid out of here.”

Dad was wonderful. He looked over his shoulder in one of his funny ways and said, “Molly, how would you like to sit in the lobby for about half an hour and pick me a couple of winners out of that racing form? I have to give Queenie here her exercise. You don’t want to startle her and make her sprain a tendon.” Dad kept still until Molly had gone but when she was outside the door she could hear the bed moving and she wondered if this lady could use Dad’s toothbrush and she hoped she wouldn’t because Molly wouldn’t want to use it afterwards. It would make her sick to use it.

When Molly was fifteen one of the exercise boys at the stable asked her to come up in the hay loft and she went and he grabbed her and started kissing her and she didn’t like him enough to kiss him and besides it was all of a sudden and she started wrestling with him and then she called, “Dad! Dad!” because the boy was touching her and Dad came bouncing up into the loft and he hit the boy so hard he fell down on the hay as if he was dead, only

he wasn't. Dad put his arm around Molly and said, "You all right, baby?" And Dad kissed her and held her close to him for a minute and then he said, "You got to watch yourself, kidlet. This world's full of wolves. This punk won't bother you no more. Only watch yourself." And Molly smiled and said:

"I couldn't have used his toothbrush anyhow." Then Dad grinned and rapped her easy under the chin with his fist. Molly wasn't scared any more only she never strayed very far from Dad or from other girls. It was awful that had to happen because she could never feel right around the stables any more, and couldn't talk to the exercise boys and the jockeys any more in the old way and even when she did they were always looking at her breasts and that made her feel all weak and scarey inside somehow even when they were polite enough.

She was glad she was beginning to have breasts, though, and she got used to boys looking at them. She used to pull the neck of her nightie down and make like the ladies in evening dresses and once Dad bought her an evening dress. It was beautiful and one way you looked at it it was light rose and the other way it was gold and it came down off the shoulders and was cut low and it was wonderful. Only that was the year Centerboard ran out of the money and Dad had the bankroll on him to show and they had to sell everything they had to get a grubstake. That was when they went back to Louisville. That was the last year.

Dad got a job with an old friend who ran a gambling place down by the river, and Dad was his manager and wore a tuxedo all the time.

Things were going fine after a while and as soon as Dad squared up some of his tabs he registered Molly at a dancing school and she started to learn acrobatic and tap. She had a wonderful time, showing him the steps as she learned them. Dad could dance a lot of softshoe himself and he never had a lesson. He said he just had Irish feet. Also he wanted her to take music lessons and sing, only she never could sing—she took after Mother that way. When the school gave a recital Molly did a Hawaiian number with a real hula skirt somebody had sent Dad from Honolulu and her hair falling over her shoulders like a black cloud and flowers in her hair and dark makeup and everybody applauded and some of the boys whistled and that made Dad mad because he thought they were getting fresh but Molly loved it because Dad was out there and as long as he was there she didn't care what happened.

She was sixteen and all grown up when things went to smash. Some fellows from Chicago had come down and there was trouble at the place where Dad worked. Molly never did find out what it was, only a couple of big men came to the house one night about two o'clock and Molly knew they were cops and she went all weak, thinking Dad had done something and they wanted him but he had always told her that the way to deal with cops was to smile at them, act dumb, and give them an Irish name.

One said, "You Denny Cahill's daughter?" Molly said yes. He said, "I got some mighty tough news for you, kid. It's about your dad." That was when Molly felt her feet slip on glass, like the world had suddenly tilted and it was

slippery glass and she was falling off it into the dark and would fall and fall forever because there was no end to the place where she was falling.

She just stood there and she said, "Tell me."

The cop said, "Your dad's been hurt, girlie. He's hurt real bad." He wasn't like a shamus now; he was more like the sort of man who might have a daughter himself. She went up close to him because she was afraid of falling.

She said, "Is Dad dead?" and he nodded and put his arm around her and she didn't remember anything more for a while, only she was in the hospital when she came to and somehow she was all groggy and sleepy and she thought she had been hurt and kept asking for Dad and a cross nurse said she had better keep quiet and then she remembered and Dad was dead and she started to scream and it was like laughing, only it felt horrible and she couldn't stop and then they came and stuck her arm with a hype gun and she went out again and it was that way for a couple of times and finally she could stop crying and they told her she would have to get out because other people needed the bed.

Molly's grandfather, "Judge" Kincaid, said she could live with him and her aunt if she would take a business course and get a job in a year and Molly tried but she couldn't ever get it into her head somehow, although she could remember past performances of horses swell. The Judge had a funny way of looking at her and several times he seemed about to get friendly and then he would chill up. Molly tried being nice to him and calling him Granddad but he didn't like that and once, just to see what would happen, she ran up to him when he came in and threw her

arms around his neck. He got terribly mad that time and told her aunt to get her out of the house, he wouldn't stand having her around.

It was terrible without Dad to tell her things and talk to and Molly wished she had died along with Dad. Finally she got a scholarship to the dancing school and she worked part time there with the young kids and Miss La Verne, who ran the school, let her stay with her. Miss La Verne was very nice at first and so was her boy friend, Charlie, who was a funny-looking man, kind of fat, who used to sit and look at Molly and he reminded her of a frog, the way he used to spread his fingers out on his knees, pointing in, and pop his eyes.

Then Miss La Verne got cross and said Molly better get a job, but Molly didn't quite know how to begin and finally Miss La Verne said, "If I get you a job will you stick with it?" Molly promised.

It was a job with a carnny. There was a Hawaiian dance show, what they called a kooch show—two other girls and Molly. The fellow who ran it and did the talking was called Doc Abernathy. Molly didn't like him a bit and he was always trying to make the girls. Only Jeannette, one of the dancers, and Doc were steady and Jeannette was crazy-mad jealous of the other two. Doc used to devil her by horsing around with them.

Molly always liked Zeena, who ran the mental act in the Ten-in-One show across the midway. Zeena was awfully nice and she knew more about life and people than anybody Molly had ever met except Dad. Zeena had Molly bunk in with her, when she stayed in hotels, for company, because Zeena's husband slept in the tent to watch the props, he said.

Really it was because he was a souse and he couldn't make love to Zeena any more. Zeena and Molly got to be real good friends and Molly didn't wish she was dead any more.

Then Jeannette got nastier and nastier about Doc's paying so much attention to Molly and she wouldn't believe that Molly didn't encourage him. The other girl told her, "With a chassis like that Cahill kid's got you don't have to do no encouraging." But Jeannette thought Molly was a stinker. One day Doc whispered something to her about Molly and Jeannette started for her looking like a wild animal with her lips pulled back over her teeth. She smacked Molly in the face and before Molly knew what was going on she had pulled off her shoe and was swinging at her, beating her in the face with it. Doc came rushing over and he and Jeannette had a terrible battle. She was cursing and screaming and Doc told her to shut up or he would smash her in the tits. Molly ran out and went over to the Ten-in-One and the boss fired Doc out of the carny and the kooch show went back to New York.

"Fifteen thousand volts of electricity pass through her body without hurting a hair of the little lady's head. Ladies and gentlemen, Mamzelle Electra, the girl who, like Ajax of Holy Writ, defies the lightning...."

Glory be to God, I hope nothing happens to that wiring. I want Dad. God, how I want him here. I've got to remember to smile....