



"H"

by Cari Lynn

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Actress Peg Entwistle jumped to her death from the Hollywoodland sign in 1932 at the age of 24. Here is a fictional imagining of her final journey. 2,319 words. Illustration by Thomas Warming.

Immortality is a tricky business. I am sorry for being a coward. Though, in the moment, I always felt myself to be one of the bravest women in the world. Standing alone in the spotlight. Embodying fears and dreams and convictions. Compelling strangers to feel something.

But those moments were fleeting. And then you spend the rest of your moments, and hours, and days search-

ing for that spotlight again. Maybe it was never bravery at all. Maybe I wasn't doing any of it for the strangers. Maybe it was I who needed to feel something.

The ladder is narrow and crude. Steel spurs nip me. My hands, nails perfectly polished, speckle with blood. I count as I climb. *One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi.* My heartbeat pounds the seconds in my ears. I stop at fifteen.

Fifteen goddamn seconds. Maybe I say this aloud. Maybe I scream it. It doesn't matter when no one is around to hear. A woman on a stage with no audience.

I feel brave having climbed up here, all the way to the top. From my perch, Tinseltown glitters and twinkles, just like the rest of the world thinks it does. Hard to believe it was only several months ago that butterflies fluttered in my stomach when I first glimpsed the Hollywood sign, a beacon of shiny white against the mud, a real-life picture postcard informing me I was here. The new face in town, the Broadway actress, *a real actress*, who desired to be in pictures. All this seemed much longer ago. Another season. But there are no seasons here.

I had thought it brave to come to California. To traverse such distance for my craft, my calling. But I was nothing more than a squirrel trying to hoard acorns. It's autumn in New York, soon to be winter, and who can much think about Broadway in the year 1932 when people are starving to death. Yet, I'd gone to the train station this morning for a one-way return to New York. Only to burn with humiliation as I counted pennies at the ticket window, and still came up short.

So, here I am. Standing alone in the spotlight. Looking out into the darkness. Hearing the rhythm of the crickets. Interrupted by the pitchy, haunted howl of a jackal. I am sorry for being a coward. I am sorry this is the performance of my life.

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My first role was a walk-on. But back then, when I was too dumb to know better, the gods blessed me with superb timing, and through someone my late father knew, there I was, walking onto the Broadway stage in *Hamlet*. I carried the poison cup. It strikes me that perhaps I carried that cup so well it sealed my fate as a harbinger of death. My acting career truly launched with Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. As Hedvig, I turned a pistol on myself. And received delightful reviews.

Proudly, I became a member of the New York Theatre Guild and performed in ten Broadway productions. Life was grand.

Until it wasn't. *The Uninvited Guest* received an uninvited scorching by *The New York Times*. So what that the review mentioned my performance was "considerably better than the play warranted." What was I to do with that when the play closed after a mere week?

All I could do was go on the road with the Theatre Guild, changing characters as often as cities. Yes, I was acting, but my roles were cotton candy. There was no pitch I could work up to, which quickly grew tiresome. Being onstage felt no more a challenge than smiling pretty while spraying perfume samples at Macy's.

I was miserable. And the country was miserable. It was 1928 and 1929 and 1930. For so many people, a square meal was a luxury, not seeing a play.

With the money I saved from touring, I returned to try my luck again in New York City, where certain blessed circles, opting to ignore the depressing state of things, still showed up to Broadway, in jewels and furs no less. I knew equanimity was a myth, a farce even, especially in the theater, but when I was cast in J.M. Barrie's *Alice Sit-By-the-Fire* opposite the acclaimed Lurette Taylor, it suddenly equaled out the years of dues paying. Meet-

ing the beautiful Miss Taylor at rehearsals, I could barely keep from squealing. I asked what advice she might give someone like me who admired her so.

“Never be afraid to use your imagination, dear,” she imparted. “One thinks it might be enough to craft a performance fully with one’s heart and soul.” She raised a delicate finger. “Craft it, dear, with your mind.” Then, her doe-eyes lowered onto me, and I felt what Noël Coward must have when he cited her as his muse. “But,” she cautioned, “never let them *see the acting.*”

As if the good company wasn’t enough to gloat about, my contract included, for the first time, not just a salary but a percentage of the box office. Laurette Taylor had the longest runs in history, her plays uninterrupted for years on end. At last, I fell asleep to the sweetest of dreams.

But things were different in real life. Laurette Taylor had, it seemed, taken her own advice quite literally to *never let them see the acting*. For two nights we waited in the wings for Miss Taylor to arrive. Producers hissed and sweated and took turns ringing her apartment. I caught the whispers — what began as *tardy* and *under-the-weather* turned to *inebriated* and *out cold*. The din from the restless audience grew louder and louder until finally an announcement was made that all ticket-holders would be refunded. The play promptly closed, deeply in the red. Without any box office there was no percentage of the box office. The producers treated it as generous that we cast members received an entire week’s pay.

The times had caught up to me. A square meal became a luxury.

I had no one to turn to in New York. Long before my memories stuck, my dear father divorced my mother and all I knew was that the court agreed he should take me from London to America, as far from mother as we

could get. When I was but a teenager, tragedy struck — the worst timing of all — a car hit my beloved father. Robert Entwistle, a stage actor himself, was pronounced dead on the curb of Park Avenue and 72nd.

Thoughts of my parents tended to move in when I was out of work. With nothing but time, I replayed learning of my father's death. With nothing but time, I tried to exhume an image of my mother, wondering if I looked like her. Wondering if I might one day go crazy as she had.

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I did have a husband. Once upon a time, I married a Broadway actor who shared the same name as my father. Arguing was our pastime, drama seeping from our pores, each of us clawing for the spotlight. And then he clawed me, grabbing a shock of my hair and leaving my scalp showing through. Dare I say I flaunted that horrid bare patch at the courthouse as I filed for my freedom. The details of my marriage's hair-pulling demise were so wickedly delicious the newspapers wrote of it. I had always wanted to kiss the papers for featuring me, but not that time.

My father had a brother in California, and I wrote to him. Then, I pawned some jewelry for train fare, said goodbye to Broadway, and cried my way across the country. Right before I left, I received a note from a young woman who'd just been cast as Hedvig in a new production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. She wrote that she and her mother were in the audience when I had played Hedvig, and that my performance impressed her so deeply she was inspired to become an actress. I looked at her careful signature, Bette Davis, and felt a little flash of guilt that I had inspired an impressionable soul into this tumultuous life. But maybe her luck would prove different than mine.

It didn't take long after I arrived in Los Angeles for my

luck to turn. Maybe it really was the City of Angels. At RKO Pictures, Mr. David O. Selznick himself peered at me through his spectacles, caressed his fleshy chin, and cast me in *Thirteen Women*, about sorority sisters and sin.

My role as Hazel Cousins was nuanced and gritty: after she kills her husband, she falls in love with a woman, but the affair dies and Hazel is committed to a sanatorium, where she starves herself to death. I dug within my heart, soul and mind for the resources and was both relieved and horrified to readily find all I needed.

Thirteen Women was adapted from the bestselling book of the same name but, presumably, for budgetary reasons, only eleven roles were written into the script. In even more ridiculous fashion, three roles landed on the cutting room floor, shearing the film of *Thirteen Women* to eight women. But the angels were once again looking out for me, and my role survived the carnage.

A week before the premiere, I received a call from Mr. Selznick's man saying that Mr. Selznick had received a call that, "The lesbians must go."

"What?" I yelped. "Why?"

"The code," he replied. "But, don't worry. Mr. Selznick told them, 'Show me in the code where it says we can't portray lesbians.' Well, it doesn't say anything about lesbians in the code. So he hung up."

"Oh, that's a relief."

"They called back. Said we could leave in only a little bit of lesbianism."

"A little bit of lesbianism?"

"That's what they said. But Mr. Selznick told them he wouldn't budge. So, don't worry."

I hung up, very worried.

When the phone at my uncle's home rang again, I answered to the familiar French accent of our director, Mr. George Archainbaud, and immediately knew I'd been right to fret.

"Darling, we have waged the battle," he said. "Mr. Selznick is on our side in spirit, but he fears boycotts from the public if we don't budge. These are lean times already. Think what a boycott would do to ticket sales. Anyway, darling, we had to do some trimming. Show only a little bit of lesbianism."

"What," I asked, my voice shaking, "is a little bit?"

"Fifteen seconds."

My heart sank. "Only fifteen seconds of the scene between Hazel and her lover?"

"No, darling. Of you."

After this, the phone had the gall to ring again. It was a nasally voice from the contracts department informing me that RKO would not be renewing my option.

I put on my black and tan silk jacket, took my purse, scrawled a little note, and left for the drugstore. But I didn't walk to the drugstore. Instead, I turned to face the Hollywoodland sign and walked up into the hills.

I thought of Mary Pickford, blasted for the unspeakable act of having bobbed her hair. I didn't imagine Miss Pickford much cared. She had her millions of dollars and, anyway, she declared all her films be burned after her death. But Hollywood cared. If it had seemed stifling that actresses were ordered what to wear, and what not to eat, and who to be seen with, and what nights of the week we should cloister ourselves at home, now it was written into contracts to seek permission to touch one's own hair. Had I a contract, though, I

doubt anyone would much care about my already-bobbed tresses. I was considered attractive, don't get me wrong. But my eyes were too deep-set, my nose a bit round, my lips thin. I wasn't pretty enough to be *stunning*, or ugly enough to be *interesting*, or interesting enough to be *sultry*. I had to, instead, rely on my acting.

But talent will only get you so far in Tinseltown. I didn't glitter enough. My face never upstaged me. And what, possibly, is one to do about this flaw?

Gladys Smith had twisted her long hair into iconic curls and become Mary Pickford. I was born Millicent and called Peg and became... Became *who*? Became *what*? I was 24 years old and had spent my life being anyone other than myself. Who was I, really? I had no idea. Or, maybe, I was too terrified to find out.

I am sorry, I had written, for being a coward.

My shoe caught on a rung and fell off. New kid leather, a gift to myself, along with my silk jacket and fine purse, in celebration of my film role. If I was to be a movie star, I had to look the part in real life, too. My shoe lay on the ground far below, like Cinderella's lost slipper. Without the hope of landing in a prince's hand. For I had no Prince Charming.

Immortality. Is it only for the extraordinary good or the exceptionally diabolical? Perhaps, but I was convinced of another vastly crucial element, though impolite to mention, for it left one feeling merely a pawn in a game of the gods. Just as a bullet through an archduke set a worldwide war in motion; just as Mr. Edison beat Mr. Tesla to the punch; just as the actress delivered a line so perfectly the audience quaked with laughter. Timing, you see, is everything.

Was everything. Timing had not served me. It had taken from me my work, my father, my chance.

I loomed fifty feet high. But couldn't count past fifteen.
I hovered there. Peering out over the letter "H." Lit
from the blinding spotlights below. Feeling an odd
sense of resolve that, at last, I knew my fate.

For a moment, Hollywood seemed a romantic business.
For a moment, this seemed a romantic end.

About The Author:

Cari Lynn



Cari Lynn is a journalist and author. She wrote *Becoming Ms Burton*, the memoir of criminal justice activist Susan Burton which hit bookshelves May 2017. Random House published her non-fiction book *Leg The Spread* about commodities trading. At the request of the movie's producer, she wrote a book about the subject of *The Whistleblower*. Penguin published her historical fiction debut *Madam*.

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11 comments on “'H'”

DANA E. Wed Nov 9, 2016 at 12:11pm PDT

Lovely and dark. Suicide as the final performance!

Cindy BG ... 'H' Sat Nov 5, 2016 at 1:41am PDT

Cari, you invoked the fate of the creative soul too soon given to despair. Such wonderful writing.

Sarah ... 'H' Fri Nov 4, 2016 at 7:20pm PDT

Wonderful piece. Captivating and brilliantly written. Extremely enjoyable and interesting to read.

Steve ... 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 11:06pm PDT

Exceptionally poetic piece; an extract of Hollywood's past that can still inform the present. It's a tough business, and the author did a great job of capturing that in a bittersweet bit of prose. Enjoyed it...

Lori ... 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 5:04pm PDT

Felt as though I stepped back in time to the "Roaring 20's" of old Hollywood . Felt pulled right into the story and sympathized with the girl grappling between becoming a Hollywood legend or another nobody.

K . . . 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 5:01pm PDT

Great story! Very well written. Will have to read more from this author!

JJ Readnstuff . . .
'H'

Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 4:57pm PDT

People were looking at me on the train as I'm calling out to Peg wanting to give her a hug as if I was standing next to her through her journey. Bravo!

Rich Parkerson . . .
'H'

Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 4:29pm PDT

Perspective is everything. No matter what our circumstances, we never know how many Bette Davises we're inspiring along the way. Great story Cari!

Sarah . . . 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 2:46pm PDT

"H" Love this, so well written! Want to see more from this author.

Sandy . . . 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016 at 2:44pm PDT

Nice piece! Especially with the abundance of people and events true to that era. Sounds like author researched quite a bit to portray the details of P.E.'s time. Heavy on imagery which makes it really easy to picture the life and circumstances of the perished starlet. Bravo Cari!

Quendrith . . . 'H' Thu Nov 3, 2016

at 5:01am PDT

My toast burned reading this...