Alicia Cahalane Lewis

ROOM SERVICE PLEASE

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Tattered Script Publishing

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While the names of the famous ballroom dancer Irene Castle, the 1920's Hollywood starlet Agnes Ayres, and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel manager Lucius Boomer appear here, as do some "Social Notes" entries from *The New York Times,* June 18-21, 1922, *Room Service Please* is a work of fiction in its entirety.

For my daughter, Lydia, with love

Prologue

Sometime in that moment when life takes your hand and ushers you through a door, the door revolves, your hand gets pulled, and you step eagerly into an unknown. I won't say that this motion is an easy one, but one to behold for it happens to us all. We go through this door ushered in by only our absurd sense of self, our darn attitude, and our attempt at something reasonable, yet uncertain.

This was the way things were on the night of my sixteenth birthday. I never saw the door opening. I might have at one time seen only its closing, but once I stepped through that revolving door and into the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel foyer, I saw only opportunity. I was led from one realm and into another, and unbeknownst to me, ushered through one happy accident after another. Of course I knew nothing about hotels or foyers or steps that would take me across one room and into another. I knew nothing about men. I had only an idea of what they should be: attentive, passionate, eager.

Such naiveté. I use these words now, six years later, and laugh. Men are none of these things as they are all of them. They are absurd creatures I have come to appreciate. They are not easy to understand, but that is on me. I must continue to turn, to revolve, to look past obstacles that once stood before me and walk through new doors. I am a dancer. I dance. I feel certain that I will dance my way through this life easily putting one foot in front of the other, but I was not always this way. Where once I stumbled, I can now say I understand what it takes to high-step one's way through closed doors and accept the inevitable. Life is what we take, but more than that, life is what we are shown. It is on us to accept this. Or not.

ONE

June 18, 1922

Sunday mornings in New York City are placid. The night slips easily away to that rush of morning chill when inattentive minds awake slowly. There is motion in the street, but there is nothing to discern about the noise. These are the sounds one becomes accustomed to. They are nothing special. Nothing worth telling. Nothing. Does nothing have a sound? And if you were to describe nothing what words would you use?

Nothing should be black space. Emptiness. Regret. These words are necessary when describing the sound of nothing. But because my nothing once bore into me the way metal grinds on asphalt, my nothing was trolley wheels on a battered, slipshod rail. The shout of one lonely woman into the vestibule of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and the echo of her own voice returning to her. I couldn't understand what she was saying, but because there was nothing worth knowing about her, I turned to look out the hotel window just to be sure that nothing had not been superseded by something.

I had nowhere to go. I could have returned home, but that required taxi fare I did not have. My party shoes were soiled, my legs tired from dancing, and I did not have a penny to my

name to call my ma. There was nothing to do but wait. I would wait until the empty street began to fill again or some bigger nothing swallowed me whole.

I hadn't a care in the world. Or did I? You will want to know why I was in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in the wee hours of the morning. I should tell you that turning sixteen is complicated. Or perhaps you already know? You will know what I know. Feel what I once felt, grumbling and complaining in all the right places to let your ma know just how miserable your life really is. But then what? You turn sixteen, in a confectionary, on a dance floor, in a hotel foyer, in a gentleman's room. With a chaperone or without one. Let me think just how I will share with you what might have been the most unrehearsed night of my life.

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It was on the eve of my sixteenth birthday when, against all reason, Ma bought me a pair of head-turning party shoes. She pulled at a snag in her limp stocking, took a long look at me in those caramel-colored heeled slippers, ostentatiously adorned with large satin bows, and threw away caution. I saw the wheels in her mind turn the way a worn handle turns on a meat grinder pushing blood into a vice. She was once young, I reasoned, wanting something like a pair of new shoes. Hadn't she told me all those stories of Jersey City, and want? I didn't grow up to put my head down and walk in shoes not destined for me, I told her, but my ma, my God-has-plans-for-us ma, will always see the world differently.

Ma took the money she was saving for someone, God, I guess, and pushed those hard-earned pennies across a dime-store counter with the hope only a desperate mother could muster. I

was going to be escorted to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel confectionary, a highfalutin place where the rich rub shoulders with the rich, and where someone like me would need to hitch a ride on the coattails of someone like Charlie Harrison to be allowed inside. So to her this was going to be money well spent. The shoes hurt the minute I put them on. They were tight in the toe box, and too short for my still-growing feet. But these were the ones she wanted for me, so I slipped on the party shoes, and with that tossed aside every ounce of good sense my mother ever wished she had given me. She had plans. We both had plans. In New York City.

New York City has run its course. Every bit of it will one day decay back into the rotten ground from whence it came two-bit brick by two-bit brick. I wish I'd known yesterday what I knew today. That all good girls, who once hoped and dreamt big, knew that a thing hoped for diminishes before your very eyes the moment it is wished for, and that anything worth having should be appreciated for what it is. Sixteen years didn't teach me the ways of the world. I knew better than to pin my hopes on days that might not come, and this is why I felt my birthday night was mine to do with as I wished. It was mine, after all. Wasn't it? Moments seized become experiences that no one can take from you, and overlooked shoes sitting in a dusty torn box on a dime-store shelf only become undervalued if forgotten. If Ma thought this she didn't say.

I hated those new shoes. I wouldn't tell Ma this. I would tell her that I really was the envy, because I was. That the shoes helped me dance the best, because they did. That the wine stains would come out easily. That this was arguably the happiest sixteenth birthday party a girl has ever had. I would share only the details of the night that she would understand: that orchids die, that soda drinks get spiked, and that curls fall. I wouldn't tell her that Charlie couldn't be responsible for me. She would never have agreed, but that down-on-his-luck Charlie wasn't

capable of accompanying a sixteen-year-old girl, on the verge of becoming a woman, to a hotel candy counter. He was just a boy.

I turned images from the night before over in my mind like the clattering wheel, the worn handle, and the memory began to sharpen as the champagne fog lifted. There was a pair of unwanted shoes, a missing pair of perspiration-stained white gloves, and a torn frock. I lay down uneasily on an aging settee in a hotel foyer too tangled to move. There was a dark-haired man, not Charlie, lying in a tousled bed upstairs too drunk to know who spent the night with him, but I knew. The wheel continued to grind. My mind returned to the dark-paneled room and to the sun-kissed man.

Sunlight awakened sooty glass panes as it streamed through the oversized arched windows into the hotel foyer and made elongated geometric patterns on the black-and-white tiled floor. I tucked my swollen feet under me and curled up into a ball. I closed my eyes so that I could see more clearly. A mother should be out looking for her daughter when she realizes she has not come home, but only if she is your ma. My ma would not be out searching near empty streets, under-lit alleyways, nor rain-swollen gutters. She would not frantically inquire about me by telephone, or telegram, or by some desperate knock on a stranger's door simply because she trusted Charlie, Charlie's pedigree, and Charlie's overpriced orchid corsage.

If I tell you how Charlie Harrison, of all people, wound up bringing me to my destiny on the night of my sixteenth birthday, June 17, 1922, will you promise me you will take off your ill-fitting shoes and pull up a chair? I have one for the story books. Charlies are a dime a dozen and men like the one in the corner suite deserve recognition and to have their stories told. Not because they seduce, and can make a young girl's life a living hell if she winds up pregnant and

thrown out onto the street, but because dapper men in the very prime of their life, like the expensive-looking man from the upstairs apartment, see only nothing in a world too blinded by nothings, and are wanting something. Like me.

TWO

Ma eyed the party shoes, I thought, running my slender fingers over the wine stains, like the eye of a hungry hawk on an unsuspecting chick. She found them sitting in a broken box on the top shelf of a Woolworth's lost in semi-darkness. In shadow. When she spied that dusty brown box she cried, "Edie!" and pulled in her breath sharply. "Would you just look!"

"At what, Ma?" I answered, dusting off the boxes at eye level.

"Just looky there. Right there. Right in 'em shadows. Baby, look," she cried again. "Get up there and get me that box."

"That old one?"

"Get up there."

"Shouldn't we ask…"

"And let 'em know they've got somethin' in here they shouldn't be havin'? Absolutely not. Besides. We're dealin' with the hoi polloi down here. Says so right up there on that sign."

I turned to look at the mottled cardboard sign which read SELF-SERVICE in faded red letters. "I don't understand, Ma."

"That's no ordinary box," she chirped. "You see any other box in this piss-poor store lookin' anythin' like that one up there?"

I looked at the display of drab-colored boxes and answered her. "I don't see anything else looking like it. Not in here."

"That's because this," she said, pointing to what we could now see was a bright orange box the closer we inspected it and our eyes began adjusting to the dim light, "ain't some five-and-dime box." Curious, I pulled on the wooden stepladder and positioned it closer to the box. "If my suspicions is correct we got us a find," Ma squealed. "And it might be gold! Got that? No one deserves this more than you, baby girl. And on your birthday!" She said this with the sing-song voice of a child herself.

I did as Ma said and stepped up onto that paint-splattered ladder, but only because I really was curious. The air was thick with dust and I pushed it away with a wave of my hand. The box was broken. It fell apart in my hands when I took ahold of it, but it was once a beautiful sculpted box with capitalized chocolate brown letters displayed across the top. I ran my fingers over the expensive department store words. "It says Bonwit Teller."

"Open it," she begged.

I lifted the lid and let it fall to the floor. Ma threw her hands to her underfed hips and stood on the tips of her toes to peer inside. "Mother Mary," she sang. "I knew it." I looked at her crossly. Mother Mary wasn't having anything to do with this and I didn't think Ma should be using her name that way. "Get down from there before you fall," she croaked. "Try 'em on. Try 'em," she chimed, pulling out a flimsy grey shoebox from the shelf. She emptied it and shoved a

pair of ugly black pumps and the broken Bonwit Teller box back onto the shelf where they disappeared into the dark.

The shoes were stiff, brand new, and had never been worn. I touched the satin lining with my slender fingers and paused. These shoes were going to be too good for me. Too posh. I could never wear them. Ma put her hands on her hips once more and then snuck a quick look behind her. “Try ‘em, Edie,” she urged.

“I don’t know, Ma. I’m not…”

Ma took one of the shoes, knelt down before me, and like a knight playing his dutiful part in the quest, pushed that errant shoe onto my foot.“We’re buyin’ these,” she pronounced, quite satisfied with herself. I kicked off the shoe and frowned, but Ma stuffed those slippers down into the borrowed box and closed the lid with a definitive slap.

I complained. “They’re too small.”

“You buttered piece of French toast. All fat and full of air. These,” she said purring, “are your ticket outta here.”

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We stepped away from the peeling red linoleum floor, from the rancid smell of body odor, and out into the afternoon light. It hit me squarely in the eye and I lifted a hand to my face. “I know you think I’m a thief,” said Ma, taking my arm and pulling me down the pinched sidewalk. “But no one’s a thief when they’re payin’ their dime for what *obviously* no one else wants. You got that?”

"I don't want them," I tried.

Surprised, Ma looked up at me and complained. "Don't want 'em? Of course you want 'em. Charlie's takin' you high-steppin', baby girl. Got that? And high-steppin' requires high-steppin'." She demonstrated by picking up her battered brown boats and stepping over the cracks in the sidewalk. "Don't doubt your ma now. I know a thing or two about 'em fancy shops. The ones we can't never afford."

"That's a double negative, Ma."

"Oh hush your mouth. No one asked you about my words, wise head. Them's mine." She hugged the shoes tighter to her chest.

"You practice using my words," I offered, "and see if you don't get yourself a seat at the Waldorf-Astoria candy counter." I rolled my eyes. "With Charlie Harrison."

"I'm offended," she barked. "I made this happen, you know." She put her hand to her heart and said some kind of prayer as she looked up at Woolworth's fraying red awning.

"It's going to be too posh, Ma," I complained. "Are you certain this is a good idea?"

Ma raised her voice. "Goin' to be posh? Of course it's goin' to be posh. Isn't that the whole idea? Isn't it time you went someplace, baby girl?" she chided, pulling me away from the leering shadow of the bulging brick building.

"But I am someplace, Ma," I said, sweeping my hand down the street indicating the familiar tenement buildings with their broken facades, peeling window sills, and overpopulated stoops. "Where else would I go?" We passed a tobacco shop and I peered inside. There were three young men dressed down in soiled t-shirts smoking Luckies, smacking cards, and sharing

some joke. They laughed and hit their hardscrabble hands to their knees. I was still looking over the men as we continued walking past, and their eyes, now turned eagle, were looking onto me.

Ma snorted and pulled me away. “You never gonna see yourself steppin’ out on a Broadway stage, Edie? Hoofin’ it with all the other pretties? Makin’ yourself useful?”

“No, Ma,” I complained. Stepping onto the balls of my feet, I skipped across the busy cobblestone street, nearly getting hit by one of the lumbering delivery vans. I turned around and shook my head at the driver, but he threw out a greasy hand to dismiss me. I wasn’t going to have this conversation again. Ma ran up beside me, shoved her thin arm into the crook of mine, and purred. “No, Ma,” I continued. “No. Why would I want that?” I argued. “Broadway’s too big. Too grand. Too…something, Ma. I don’t even know.”

Ma softened. “It’s not for you to say, baby. It’s on Mrs. Harrison now.” She looked at me and winked.

I turned away from her and lifted my feet over a discarded wad of wet newspaper. I had no use for the news, unlike Mr. Jaffee, the fish seller, who used the papers to wrap up the day’s catch. His papers were always littering the sidewalk forcing us to sidestep rotting remnants of mackerel or cod. “I said I’m going, Ma.” I rolled my eyes again and made a sour face. “But Charlie?” Ma barked out more tunes about opportunity, heritage, and horse racing. “I said I’d go.” I looked down on her definitively. “But only this one time.”

Ma shuffled her short legs next to mine as we passed the greengrocer. There were two dark-haired men, the Moroz brothers, standing side-by-side in the doorway dressed in their matching white aprons shooing away some child’s dirty hand from their wares. They moved in unison over their worn wooden tables as if their lumbering bodies were doing a deep knee-

bending Cossack's dance. I wanted to pluck one of their fat cabbages right out from under their watchful eyes and give it to the child. He was hungry. As we passed by they looked me up and down and then folded their pimply arms across their bulging bellies. Ma and I shared a look for we both knew there was no getting fat on boiled cabbage.

I turned around to look at the Russian dancers one more time even though what I was looking for wasn't here. I knew that. Ma took my arm again, sternly, as we continued tripping over one another's sentences. Me complaining about Charlie's pimples and his two left feet, and Ma promising me that Mr. Florenz Ziegfeld was personally scouring the streets looking for pretties. I would never believe her when she told me, repeatedly, that I was good enough for the stage. Because I wasn't. When I finally let myself find the right words, the words I knew Ma was waiting to hear, I spun them out as best I could like candied sugar on a stick. "Thank you," I lied, "for the party shoes, Ma. They're just what I wanted. Everyone coming to the candy counter will love them."

Ma smiled buoyantly and pointed her toes as if she was the one stepping out onto a Broadway stage making a spectacle of herself. "They're better than anythin' anyone else will have. Got that? And I acquired them," she said, pausing to admire the shoes. She was proud of herself, and her choice of words, I could tell. "Just like your pa always said, Edie. 'What goes 'round comes 'round.'" She was remembering Pa. "And to think we got ourselves a piece of yesterday's finery." She pronounced it *fine-er-ee*. Like *yes-sir-ee*. "Still lookin' top notch."

I couldn't help but remember him too. I was always remembering Pa. I pulled her in close and gave her a a playful tug on her arm. My ma. If only Mr. Ziegfeld would find her he'd see how irresistible she could be with those sparkling blue eyes. Despite the long hot days she

spends on her hands and knees, those eyes still shine brighter than any one of Mr. Ziegfeld's stars. We both turned this time and craned our necks to look at one of the blackened fire escapes that came down the side of a listing tar-covered building. We scanned it, without missing a step, taking our eyes all the way up to the greying laundry on the roof and then dropping them back down again. As I pushed for a closer look, Ma pulled.

New York City, without a doubt, is what you find it to be. If you find it to be good, then New York City will be good. If you find it to be your due, well, then New York City becomes your due, but personally, I find the city sleepy. They say it is the city that never sleeps, what with all the dancing, follies, back alley parties, bootleg whiskey, and girls. Sleepy, I imagine, not because everyone is sleeping off some rabble-rousing gin-soaked night, but because no one has a mind of their own.

"You know, Ma," I tried, "if it wasn't for you cleaning those dance floors and polishing them up the way Mrs. Harrison likes, I never would have needed a new pair of party shoes."

Ma stopped in her tracks and looked me in the eye. "You go to this birthday party, Edie, and you take my advice. I seen the way Mrs. Harrison looks at you. She wants somethin' from you."

"I don't like the way Charlie looks at me."

"Oh pshaw," she hooted. "Charlie's the one to get you outta this hellhole."

"He's fourteen, Ma. His voice hasn't even changed."

"That's enough, Edie. He's gonna make you shine. Now listen."

I looked beyond the narrow row of raked buildings and squinted into the bright blue sky. "You're dreaming, Ma."

"Mrs. Harrison has 'em emerald eyes on you," she continued. "For whatever reason she got, and that woman, she got a reason." She winked again. "Might be she wants you for her boy."

I shook my head. "She's only using me," I explained, extending my sinewy thin arms to Ma and showing her the waltz step, "for display." I was beginning to realize just what kind of place Harrison's Dance Emporium was turning out to be. Sure, it was a place for high-steppin' it with the well-heeled, but at what cost? There I could do what I did best, which was to dance, but only so that Mrs. Harrison could do what she did best, which was to show off. Ma was just as eager to make sure Mrs. Harrison still had what it took to look the part, and somehow they both thought this was going to be on me. I looked at the way Ma was holding onto those brand new shoes. It was as if she was clutching gold.

Ma turned to look at me. If she knew what I was thinking she didn't say. She was unapologetic and she spit out the words as though for all my life she'd been waiting for this moment to say them. "You know I can't afford you." It sounded like she was spitting out the taste of rotten egg on toast. I was stunned, my eyes wide, but her words were clear.

"Ma!" I cried. "What are you saying?"

This time she paused. I watched her scan the street as if she was still looking for Pa when she turned back abruptly and pounced, "You're costing me too much, Edie."

"But Ma, I'm doing what I do best. What I want to do…"

"You you you," she complained, pulling on my arm sharply.

We stepped wide behind a dawdling old brown mare. "Ma! Not Charlie. Not anyone. Not now, Ma. Please. Not while I'm still waiting…"

Ma winced. “I’ve been at ‘em floors for sixteen years, Edie. Sixteen. Puttin’ you right. Givin’ you everythin’ a ma can give her baby girl. Youdogoodbymeyouhear,” she said, talking so fast and sharp her jumbled words spilled out like rosary beads knotted on a string. “You do good. You do right. Youdorightforme.”

We were both jarred suddenly when we came upon a dark-haired man, probably about Pa’s age, stretched out on one of the broken crates along the sidewalk. He was dressed in a pair of soiled coveralls reading a crisp white newspaper, not just studying the thin pages feigning interest, but reading them with concerted effort. He wasn’t turning the newspaper over in disgust like Pa used to do. I couldn’t help but notice how he lifted his coal-colored eyes to me when we passed. I shuddered. This was as close as we’d ever come to seeing someone who looked like Pa.

“I will do good, Ma,” I promised, stumbling. “I know what you’ve sacrificed, but not marriage. Please. It’s not for me.” Ma shooed me away with a calloused hand as she turned to take another quick peek at the man. He lifted a lock of his hair with a dirt-stained fingernail and nodded. “I know it hasn’t been easy going without, and all for me, but I promise you I’ll take on more responsibility.” How many times had I said these very words? Too many.

Ma turned us away from the man. She lifted her hand and ran it down the length of my dark ringlet curls. “Then you take ‘em dance steps someplace,” she said. It wasn’t a suggestion. “Or you do right and marry.” But I cringed. I wanted her to stop pushing me up onto some Broadway marquee or pushing me right back into Charlie’s jodhpurs. Didn’t she know that what I wanted was right here? “I don’t know just what sights Mrs. Harrison’s got for you with her Charlie,” she continued, “but ‘em sights is what God’s gonna be doin’ right. And it might be

she's groomin' you, like one of her overpriced fillies, for her boy." Ma snorted. "I'm gonna be needin' God too, Edie. For once."

I know my ma, and she would have dropped to her knees right there on the sidewalk if she dared. "God. You gonna be doin' us right," she barked. Ma clawed around into the pocket of her smock for her rosary and lifted it to the sky. "Got that. 'Em's mighty words." She was missing one of her bottom teeth. "Yessir," she sang, pulling me in close. "You gonna outshine all 'em fancy girls. All of 'em. You hear me? We got luck. All 'em dancin' lessons. 'Em party lessons. All 'em books." She looked at me, and in all seriousness said, "Be gettin' on now with your life, Edie, the way God intended. It's time."

"No Ma," I winced. "You're telling me to go? Why? I won't. I can't."

She turned around again and gave that man the longest look I'd ever seen her give any one of the men we'd passed. Disappointment after disappointment, day after day, but this one could have been my pa. It just could have been. "You did somethin' right to please that old bat," she continued. "I don't know what she sees, but she sees it. Got that? You got yourself your own star, Edie, but Mrs. Harrison…I know her. She's gonna see to it that star shines brightest." Ma put her arm around my narrow waist and I saw that she had acquired another tear in her smock, the baby blue one covered in faded red and white chrysanthemums. "Foryouyessir," she sang, slipping her words together again. "That's God's work, baby girl. And God is right where you are."

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God was not here, I winced, looking into the panes of early morning light dancing on the black-and-white mosaic tiled foyer of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. He left me sometime around midnight.