

HERB CAEN



Nightmare Alley

"I REJECT the diagnosis that there is a fatal sickness in our society" — Lyndon B. Johnson in New York, May 20, 1968.

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THE UNITED STATES, where assassination has become the American way of death. We are all walking in the crosshairs of somebody's telescopic sight. Assassin: The word still makes you think of the Balkans and Mittel European terrorists in bulky overcoats, throwing the cartoonists' version of a sputtering bomb into the Archduke's open carriage. Today, it's only in America — except for the West German who shot Red Rudi Dutschke. His inspiration, he said, had been the assassination of Martin Luther King. The FBI, even with Efrem Zimbalist Jr. in service, still can't find that killer . . .

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WEIRD, WILD unbelievable. Only a few hours earlier on Tuesday night, I had scribbled a note on my pad, a squib from Correspondent Charles Michelmore of Fairchild Publications. Out at Hunters Point, a Negro had told him: "No, I didn't vote for Kennedy. I don't want him to win. If he gets elected he'll be killed, just like his brother and Dr. King" Earlier at Enrico's, Kennedy Aide Dick Tuck had been saying to a group of us: "Senator Kennedy is the No. 1 assassination target in this country." Howard Gossage responded: "Then why does he expose himself to crowds so recklessly?" Tuck: "Ever since Dallas, I don't think he cares any longer about his safety."

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UP UNTIL THE newsflash at 12:15 a.m. yesterday, it had been a pleasant evening as Election Nights go. The Kennedy workers gathered at California Hall, where the drinks were free and plentiful, the bartenders hard-working and heavy-handed. When the big blackboard showed Kennedy running slightly behind McCarthy, a girl chalked above the figures, "Still Better Than Oregon!" Pandemonium as Ted Kennedy arrived. "A great night," he said. "California is coming through for us" At a party in an old house on a hill, the pro-Kennedys and the pro-McCarthys were getting along well. There were even drunken vows to switch support to the winner. But the main topic was the archaic law that closes the bars on Election Day. "The only day you can see guys shaking bull dice for Calso," grinned Glenn Dorenbush. . . . And then came the newsflash. Time stood still and everybody froze except one girl who ran to the bathroom to throw up . . .

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IT WAS AN EERIE replay of November, 1963. Wandering lost in the electronic maze — radios crackling, TV sets ghost-lighting dark rooms through the long night. The confused and conflicting reports, the incoherent eye-witnesses, the strained voices of newsmen. As is always the case in times of paramount tragedy, the electronic forces were magnificent — especially the team at KNX, the CBS station in Los Angeles. Its men seemed to be everywhere in that wasted vastland. Good Samaritan merged inescapably with Parkland in Dallas, the bullet in the neck seemed an overpowering coincidence. The words of almost five years ago were heard again: "I thought it was firecrackers" . . . "I'm not sure how many shots there were. The echoes, the ricochets —" . . . "Yeah, we got him out of there in one piece and we got him locked up where nobody can get at him — there won't be a Jack Ruby in Los Angeles . . ."

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THE CITY OF San Francisco, quiet, so quiet under the wintry fog of early summer — quiet in spite of all the sets going, the coffee pots perking, the rooms full of sleepless people sitting in the various attitudes of despair: backs bent, heads down, drawn faces in hands. A very real smell of guilt, frustration and shame. Cigarettes piling up in the ashtray, the occasional strangled "What's the USE?" the sudden groan aloud from people who had to break the choking silence somehow . . .

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AT 5 A.M., there was NBC's Sandor Vanocur in what they call Election Central in Burbank; his face puffy with fatigue as he struggled to recount — this time for the morning watchers in the East — what he had seen that night at the Ambassador Hotel, which now goes into history with Dealey Plaza, the Book Depository, the grassy knoll and the other landmarks of insanity and disgrace. In his tired voice, Vanocur said "And now back to the 'Today' show," for time does march on, but there was no switchover. He kept sitting there, facing the world hopelessly, and then the camera drew back for a shot of the entire huge studio. Empty, except for Sandor Vanocur and the debris, the desks and the typewriters, the figures on the wall that showed Robert F. Kennedy was winning in California. . . .

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AND LET'S hear it for the print newsman who elicited this quote from a sad young GI in Vietnam: "I'm glad I'm over here where it's safe." And let's hear it for the gun lobby, with its out-of-date Americanism, its phony portrayal of The Rugged Individual armed with a gun, defending his inalienable right to shoot. Let's hear it for Dr. Max Rafferty, too, who is forever complaining that education in California is not what it should be, and whose victory proves it. And let's hear it for the good citizens of Dallas, who complained in November, 1963, "It could have happened anywhere." They were right.