

In a Lonely Place

Dorothy B. Hughes



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For Charlotte

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It's in a lonesome place you do
have to be talking with someone,
and looking for someone, in the
evening of the day.

–J. M. Synge

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In a Lonely Place

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I

It was good standing there on the promontory overlooking the evening sea, the fog lifting itself like gauzy veils to touch his face. There was something in it akin to flying; the sense of being lifted high above crawling earth, of being a part of the wildness of air. Something too of being closed within an unknown and strange world of mist and cloud and wind. He'd liked flying at night; he'd missed it after the war had crashed to a finish and dribbled to an end. It wasn't the same flying a little private crate. He'd tried it; it was like returning to the stone ax after precision tools. He had found nothing yet to take the place of flying wild.

It wasn't often he could capture any part of that feeling of power and exhilaration and freedom that came with loneliness in the sky. There was a touch of it here, looking down at the ocean rolling endlessly in from the horizon; here high above the beach road with its crawling traffic, its dotting of lights. The outline of beach houses zigzagged against the sky but did not obscure the pale waste of sand, the dark restless waters beyond.

He didn't know why he hadn't come out here before. It wasn't far. He didn't even know why he'd come tonight. When he got on the bus, he had no destination. Just the restlessness. And the bus brought him here.

He put out his hand to the mossy fog as if he would capture it, but his hand went through the gauze and he smiled. That too was good, his hand was a plane passing through a cloud. The

sea air was good to smell, the darkness was soft closed around him. He swooped his hand again through the restless fog.

He did not like it when on the street behind him a sudden bus spattered his peace with its ugly sound and smell and light. He was sharply angry at the intrusion. His head darted around to vent his scowl. As if the lumbering box had life as well as motion and would shrink from his displeasure. But as his head turned, he saw the girl. She was just stepping off the bus. She couldn't see him because he was no more than a figure in the fog and dark; she couldn't know he was drawing her on his mind as on a piece of paper.

She was small, dark haired, with a rounded face. She was more than pretty, she was nice looking, a nice girl. Sketched in browns, the brown hair, brown suit, brown pumps and bag, even a small brown felt hat. He started thinking about her as she was stepping off the bus; she wasn't coming home from shopping, no parcels; she wasn't going to a party, the tailored suit, sensible shoes. She must be coming from work; that meant she descended from the Brentwood bus at this lonely corner every night at – he glanced to the luminous dial of his watch – seventy-two. Possibly she had worked late tonight but that could be checked easily. More probably she was employed at a studio, close at six, an hour to get home.

While he was thinking of her, the bus had bumbled away and she was crossing the slant intersection, coming directly towards him. Not to him; she didn't know he was there in the high foggy dark. He saw her face again as she passed under the yellow fog light, saw that she didn't like the darkness and fog and loneliness. She started down the California Incline; he could hear her heels striking hard on the warped pavement as if the sound brought her some reassurance.

He didn't follow her at once. Actually he didn't intend to follow her. It was entirely without volition that he found himself

moving down the slant, winding walk. He didn't walk hard, as she did, nor did he walk fast. Yet she heard him coming behind her. He knew she heard him for her heel struck an extra beat, as if she had half stumbled, and her steps went faster. He didn't walk faster, he continued to saunter but he lengthened his stride, smiling slightly. She was afraid.

He could have caught up to her with ease but he didn't. It was too soon. Better to hold back until he had passed the humped midsection of the walk, then to close in. She'd give a little scream, perhaps only a gasp, when he came up beside her. And he would say softly, 'Hello.' Only 'Hello,' but she would be more afraid.

She had just passed over the mid-hump, she was on the final stretch of down grade. Walking fast. But as he reached that section, a car turned at the corner below, throwing its blatant light up on her, on him. Again anger plucked at his face; his steps slowed. The car speeded up the Incline, passed him, but the damage was done, the darkness had broken. As if it were a parade, the stream of cars followed the first car, scratching their light over the path and the road and the high earthen Palisades across. The girl was safe; he could feel the relaxation in her footsteps. Anger beat him like a drum.

When he reached the corner, she was already crossing the street, a brown figure under the yellow fog light marking the intersection. He watched her cross, reach the opposite pavement and disappear behind the dark gate of one of the three houses huddled together there. He could have followed but the houses were lighted, someone was waiting for her in the home light. He would have no excuse to follow to her door.

As he stood there, a pale blue bus slid up to the corner; a middle-aged woman got out. He boarded it. He didn't care where it was going; it would carry him away from the fog light. There were only a few passengers, all women, drab women. The driver was an angular, farm-looking man, he spun his change

box with a ratcheting noise and looked into the night. The fare was a nickel.

Within the lighted box they slid past the dark cliffs. Across the width of the road were the massive beach houses and clubs, shutting away the sea. Fog stalked silently past the windows. The bus made no stops until it reached the end of that particular section of road where it turned an abrupt corner. He got out when it stopped. Obviously it was leaving the sea now, turning up into the dark canyon. He stepped out and he walked the short block to a little business section. He didn't know why until he reached that corner, looked up the street. There were several eating places, hamburger stands; there was a small drugstore and there was a bar. He wanted a drink.

It was a nice bar, from the ship's prow that jutted upon the sidewalk to the dim ship's interior. It was a man's bar, although there was a dark-haired, squawk-voiced woman in it. She was with two men and they were noisy. He didn't like them. But he liked the old man with the white chin whiskers behind the bar. The man had the quiet competent air of a sea captain.

He ordered straight rye but when the old man set it in front of him, he didn't want it. He drank it neat but he didn't want it. He hadn't needed a drink; he'd relaxed on the bus. He wasn't angry with anyone any more. Not even with the three noisy sons of bitches up front at the bar.

The ship's bells behind the bar rang out the hour, eight bells. Eight o'clock. There was no place he wanted to go, nothing he wanted to do. He didn't care about the little brown girl any more. He ordered another straight rye. He didn't drink it when it came, he left it there in front of him, not even wanting to drink it.

He could go across to the beach, sit in the sand, and smell the fog and sea. It would be quiet and dark there. The sea had appeared again just before the bus turned; there was open beach across. But he didn't move. He was comfortable where he was.

He lit a cigarette and idly turned the jigger of rye upon the polished wood of the bar. Turned it without spilling a drop.

It was his ear caught the word spoken by the harsh-voiced woman. He wasn't listening to her but the word spun and he thought the word was 'Brub.' He remembered then that Brub lived out this way. He hadn't seen Brub for almost two years; he'd spoken to him only once, months ago when he arrived on the coast. He'd promised to let Brub know when he was settled but he hadn't.

Brub lived in Santa Monica Canyon. He left his drink on the bar and went quickly to the phone booth in the corner. The book was tattered but it was a Santa Monica book and there was the name, Brub Nicolai. He found a nickel and clanged it in the slot, asked the number.

A woman answered; he held on while she called Brub. Then Brub's voice, a little curious, 'Hello.'

He was excited just hearing the voice. There wasn't anyone like Brub, those years in England wouldn't have been real without Brub. He was gay as a boy, calling, 'Hello there, Brub,' wanting Brub to guess or to sense who it was. But Brub didn't know. He was puzzled; he asked, 'Who's calling?'

Excitement titivated him. 'Who do you think's calling?' he demanded. And he cried, 'It's Dix. Dix Steele.'

It was a good moment. It was the way he'd known it would be, Brub taking a gulp, then shouting, 'Dix! Where you been hiding out? Thought you'd gone back East.'

'No,' he said. He was warm and comfortable in Brub's pleasure. 'I've been sort of busy. You know how it is. Always something here. Something there.'

'Yeah, I know.' Brub asked, 'Where are you now? What are you doing?'

'I'm sitting in a bar,' he said and heard Brub's answering crow. They'd spent most of their free time sitting in bars; they'd needed

it in those days. Brub didn't know Dix no longer depended on liquor; he had a lot of things to tell Brub. Big brother Brub. 'It's down by the ocean, has a ship's prow by the door -'

Brub had cut in. 'You're practically here! We only live on Mesa Road, couple of blocks from there. Can you come up?'

'I'm practically there.' He hung up, checked the street number in the phone book, returned to the bar and swallowed the rye. This time it tasted good.

He was out on the street before he realized that he didn't have his car. He'd been walking up the street this afternoon and he'd climbed on a Wilshire-Santa Monica bus and he was in Santa Monica. He hadn't thought of Brub for months and a scarecrow dame in a bar said what sounded like 'Brub.' She hadn't said it at all; she'd been calling the scarecrow guy with her 'Bud,' but he'd thought of Brub. Now he was going to see him.

Because it was meant to be, a taxi was held just then by the red light. At first he didn't recognize it as a cab; it was a dark, battered car with a young guy, hatless, driving it. It was empty. He read the lettering on it, 'Santa Monica Cab Co.,' even as the lights turned, and he ran out into the lonely street calling, 'Hey, Taxi.'

Because it was meant to be, the driver stopped, waited for him. 'Do you know where Mesa Road is?' His hand was on the door.

'You want to go there?'

'I sure do.' He climbed in, still in his happiness. 'Five-twenty.'

The driver turned and drove back the way he'd come, a few blocks up the hill, a left turn and a steeper hill. The fog lay a deep and dirty white in the canyon, the windshield wiper pushed away the moisture. 'This is Nicolai's,' the driver said.

He was pleasantly surprised that the driver knew where he was going. It was a good omen; it meant Brub wouldn't have changed. Brub still knew everyone, everyone knew him. He watched the driver's fog lights circle, turn, and head down the hill. It was

unconscious, the waiting and watching; in his thoughts was only the look of the amber swinging across the pillow of fog.

There was a gate to open; and the mailbox was white beside it. Lettered in black was B. Nicolai, 520 Mesa Road. He embraced the name. The house was high above the flowered terrace, but there was a light of welcome, amber as a fog light, in the front window. He climbed the winding flagstone steps to the door. He waited a second before he touched the brass knocker, again without consciousness, only a savoring of the moment before the event. He had no sooner touched it than the door was flung wide and Brub was there.

Brub hadn't changed. The same short-cut, dark, curly hair, the same square face with the grin on the mouth and in the shining black eyes. The same square shoulders and the look of the sea on him; he rolled like a sailor when he walked. Or like a fighter. A good fighter. That was Brub.

He was looking up at Dix and his hand was a warm grip on Dix's hand. 'Hello, you old son of a sea cook,' he said. 'What do you mean by not calling us before now? Let me see you.'

He knew exactly what Brub saw, as if Brub were a mirror he was standing before. A young fellow, just an average young fellow. Tanned, medium light hair with a little curl, medium tall and enough weight for height. Eyes, hazel; nose and mouth right for the face, a good-looking face but nothing to remember, nothing to set it apart from the usual. Good gabardine suit, he'd paid plenty to have it made, open-necked tan sports shirt. Maybe the face was sharpened at the moment by excitement and happiness, the excitement and happiness of seeing an old and favored friend. Ordinarily it wasn't one to remember.

'Let me look at you,' he echoed. Brub was half a head shorter and he looked down at Brub as Brub looked up at him. They made the survey silently, both satisfied with what they saw, both breaking silence together. 'You haven't changed a bit.'

'Come on in.' Brub took his arm and ushered him out of the dim, pleasant hallway into the lighted living room. He broke step as they crossed the comfortable lamp-lighted room. Things weren't the same. There was a girl there, a girl who had a right to be there.

He saw her as he would always see her, a slender girl in a simple beige dress, curled in a large wing chair by the white fireplace. The chair was a gaudy piece patterned in greens and purples, like tropical flowers, with a scrawl of cerise breaking the pattern. Her hair was the color of palest gold, a silvery gold, and she wore it pulled away from her face into a curl at the back of her neck. She had a fine face, nothing pretty-pretty about it, a strong face with high cheek bones and a straight nose. Her eyes were beautiful, sea blue, slanted like wings; and her mouth was a beautiful curve. Yet she wasn't beautiful; you wouldn't look at her in a room of pretty women, in a bar or night spot. You wouldn't notice her; she'd be too quiet; she was a lady and she wouldn't want to be noticed.

She was at home here; she was mistress of the house and she was beautiful in her content. Before either spoke, he knew she was Brub's wife. The way she was smiling as the two of them entered, the way her smile strengthened as Brub spoke. 'This is Dix, Sylvia. Dickson Steele.'

She put out her hand and finished the sentence, '- of whom I've heard you speak constantly. Hello, Dix.'

Dix stepped forward to match her smile, to take her hand. Except for that first moment, he hadn't shown anything. Even that wouldn't have been noticed. 'Hello, Sylvia,' he said. She was tall standing, as tall as Brub. He held her hand while he turned to Brub, a prideful, smiling Brub. 'Why didn't you tell me you were married?' he demanded. 'Why hide this beautiful creature under the blanket of your indifference?'

Sylvia withdrew her hand and Brub laughed. 'You sound just

like the Dix I've heard about,' she retorted. She had a nice voice, shining as her pale hair. 'Beer with us or whiskey as a stubborn individualist?'

He said, 'Much to Brub's surprise, I'll take beer.'

It was so comfortable. The room was a good one, only the chair was gaudy, the couch was like green grass and another couch the yellow of sunlight. There was pale matting on the polished floor; there was a big green chair and heavy white drapes across the Venetian blinds. Good prints, O'Keeffe and Rivera. The bar was of light wood – convenient and unobtrusive in the corner. There must have been an ice chest, the beer was damp with cold.

Sylvia uncapped his bottle, poured half into a tall frosted glass and put it on an end table beside him. She brought Brub a bottle, poured a glass for herself. Her hands were lovely, slim and quiet and accurate; she moved quietly and with the same accuracy. She was probably a wonderful woman to bed with; no waste motion, quietness.

When he knew what he was thinking, he repeated, 'Why didn't you tell me you were married?'

'Tell you!' Brub roared. 'You called me up seven months ago, last February, the eighth to be exact, told me you'd just got in and would let me know soon as you were located. That's the last I've heard of you. You checked out of the Ambassador three days later and you didn't leave a forwarding address. How could I tell you anything?'

He smiled, his eyes lowered to his beer. 'Keeping tabs on me, Brub?'

'Trying to locate you, you crazy lug,' Brub said happily.

'Like the old days,' Dix said. 'Brub took care of me like a big brother, Sylvia.'

'You needed a caretaker.'

He switched back. 'How long have you been married?'

‘Two years this spring,’ Sylvia told him.

‘One week and three days after I got home,’ Brub said. ‘It took her that long to get a beauty-shop appointment.’

‘Which she didn’t need,’ Dix smiled.

Sylvia smiled to him. ‘It took him that long to raise the money for a license. Talk of drunken sailors! He spent every cent on flowers and presents and forgot all about the price of a wedding.’

Comfortable room and talk and beer. Two men. And a lovely woman.

Brub said, ‘Why do you think I fought the war? To get back to Sylvia.’

‘And why did you fight the war, Mr. Steele?’ Sylvia’s smile wasn’t demure; she made it that way.

‘For weekend passes to London,’ Brub suggested.

He stepped on Brub’s words, answering her thoughtfully. He wanted to make an impression on her. ‘I’ve wondered about it frequently, Sylvia. Why did I or anyone else fight the war? Because we had to isn’t good enough. I didn’t have to when I enlisted. I think it was because it was the thing to do. And the Air Corps was the thing to do. All of us in college were nuts about flying. I was a sophomore at Princeton when things were starting. I didn’t want to be left out of any excitement.’

‘Brub was at Berkeley,’ she remembered. ‘You’re right, it was the thing to do.’

They were steered to safe channels, to serious discussion. Brub opened another beer for the men.

Brub said, ‘It was the thing to do or that was the rationalization. We’re a casual generation, Dix, we don’t want anyone to know we bleed if we’re pricked. But self defense is one of the few prime instincts left. Despite the cover-up, it was self defense. And we knew it.’

Dix agreed, lazily. You could agree or disagree in this house.

No one got his back up whatever was said. There was no anger here, no cause for anger. Even with a woman. Perhaps because of the woman. She was gentle.

He heard Sylvia's amused voice as from afar, as through a film of gray mist. 'Brub's always looking for the hidden motive power. That's because he's a policeman.'

He came sharply into focus. The word had been a cold spear deliberately thrust into his brain. He heard his voice speak the cold, hard word. 'Policeman?' But they didn't notice anything. They thought him surprised, as he was, more than surprised, startled and shocked. They were accustomed to that reaction. For they weren't jesting; they were speaking the truth. Brub with an apologetic grin; his wife with pride under her laughter.

'He really is,' she was saying.

And Brub was saying, 'Not a policeman now, darling, a detective.'

They'd played the scene often; it was in their ease. He was the one who needed prompting, needed cue for the next speech. He repeated, 'Policeman,' with disbelief, but the first numbing shock had passed. He was prepared to be correctly amused.

Brub said, 'Detective. I don't know why. Everyone wants to know why and I don't know.'

'He hasn't found the underlying motive yet,' Sylvia said.

Brub shrugged. 'I know that one well enough. Anything to keep from working. That's the motto of the Nicolais. Graven on their crest.'

'A big healthy man reclining,' Sylvia added.

They were like a radio team, exchanging patter with seemingly effortless ease.

'My old man was a land baron, never did a lick of work. But land baroneering is outmoded, so I couldn't do that. The girls all married money.' He fixed Sylvia with his eye. 'I don't know why I didn't think of that. Raoul, my oldest brother, is an

investment broker. That's what it says on his gold-lettered office door. Investment broker.'

'Brub,' Sylvia warned but she smiled.

'Up and to the office by ten,' Brub proclaimed. 'Maybe a bit after. Open the mail. To the club for two quick games of squash. Shower, shave, trim, and lunch. Leisurely, of course. A quiet nap after, a bit of bridge – and the day's over. Very wearing.'

Brub took a swallow of beer. 'Then there's Tom – he plays golf. A lawyer on the side. He only takes cases dealing with the ravages of pterodactyls to the tidelands. The pterodactyls having little time for ravaging the tidelands, he has plenty of time for golf.' He drank again. 'I'm a detective.'

Dix had listened with his face, a half smile, but he kept his eyes on his beer glass. His mouth was sharp with questions, they were like tacks pricking his tongue. Brub had finished and was waiting for him to speak. He said easily, 'So you took the easy job. No investments or law for you. Sherlock Nicolai. And were you right?'

'No, damn it,' Brub wailed. 'I work.'

'You know Brub,' Sylvia sighed. 'Whatever he does, he does with both heads. He's full fathoms deep in detecting.'

Dix laughed, setting down his beer glass. It was time to go. Time to put space between himself and the Nicolais. 'Brub should have taken up my racket.' To their questioning eyebrows, he elucidated, 'Like ninety-three and one-half per cent of the ex-armed forces, I'm writing a book.'

'Another author,' Sylvia mused.

'Unlike ninety-two and one-half per cent I'm not writing a book on the war. Or even my autobiography. Just trying to do a novel.' A wonderful racket; neither of them knew what a smart choice he'd made. Not haphazardly, no. Coldly, with sane reasoning. He stretched like a dog, preliminary to rising. 'That's why you haven't seen me before. When you're trying to write,

there isn't time to run around. I stick pretty close to the old machine.' He smiled frankly at Brub. 'My uncle is giving me a year to see what I can do. So I work.' He was on his feet. He had meant to ask the use of the phone, to call a cab. But Brub wouldn't allow it; he'd insist on taking him to the busline; he'd want to know where Dix was living. Dix didn't mind a walk. He'd find his own way to town.

He said, 'And I'd better be getting back on the job.'

They demurred but they didn't mind. They were young and they were one, and Brub had to get up in the morning. He slipped the question in sideways. 'After all Brub has to have his rest to detect for the glory of Santa Monica, doesn't he?'

'Santa Monica! I'm on the L.A. force,' Brub boasted mildly.

He'd wanted to know; he knew. The L.A. force.

'Then you do need sleep. Plenty of work in L.A., no?'

Brub's face lost its humor, became a little tired. 'Plenty,' he agreed.

Dix smiled, a small smile. Brub wouldn't know why; Brub had been his big brother but he hadn't known everything there was to know. Some things a man kept secret. It was amusing to keep some things secret.

'I'll be seeing you,' he said easily. His hand opened the door. But he didn't get away.

'Wait,' Brub said. 'We don't have your number.'

He had to give it. He did without seeming reluctance. Brub would have noticed reluctance. Brub or the clear-eyed woman behind him, watching him quietly. He gave his telephone number and he repeated his goodnight. Then he was alone, feeling his way off the porch and down the path into the darkness and the moist opaque fog.