

# Lights and Shadows

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## Method

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## Method

### Daniel Hobbs

Lear stared at himself in the mirror, make-up lights ringing his form, providing beautiful, yellow lighting, as he slowly remembered his name was Howard Stills. Rehearsals had been going very well, and the entire cast was still abuzz in the hallways outside his dressing room, whispering and shouting their excitement. All of it, of course, was focused at some level on Howard and his performance in the play. Advanced reviews were already glowing, and the rumors surrounding the production were that this was the seminal work of Howard Stills' career. Sitting alone, Howard wondered again if he was losing his sanity.

Acting had always been natural to Howard Stills, even as a child. He performed to great acclaim in his grade school classes, giving his encore in the principal's office. Everyone secretly appreciated his abilities, even the teachers that yelled for quiet and resented the loss of attention to the child. His personality was magnetic, and led naturally to a very popular social life as he progressed through school. The drama department sought him out early as he entered high school, as did the young actresses. They all seemed in awe of how easily he embodied any role, and happily sought to claim whatever piece of that talent they could.

His charm also brought intimate knowledge of

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those girls thought unattainable by the student body, either head cheerleaders or quarterback's girlfriends. The first was Tammy Abernathy. She was blonde, a cheerleader, and utterly out of his league by all accounts. Howard saw her at her locker one day and recalled her linebacker boyfriend grabbing his head and shoving it in the used towel bin in gym earlier that week, calling him a drama fag as his friends egged him on.

Howard came up quietly, watching Tammy for a moment, before clearing his throat slightly and saying hello. Her curls bounced as her head whipped around, and he saw surprise and an automatic disgust on her face. Being from a lower social run, it was obviously unheard of for someone like Howard to engage someone like Tammy in conversation. He pressed on, unimpressed, "How are you?"

"What do you want?" She asked, already turning back to her locker. Howard watched her shuffling some papers together, looking for something, and noticed something new. When her boyfriend Jerry had given her his State Champion ring, Tammy had been so proud she'd crowed to the other cheerleaders, loud enough for the entire cafeteria to hear, for nearly a week. Her finger was bare now, and looking back to her face, her eyes seemed slightly red and swollen.

"Just saying hi. Where's your ring?" he asked. Tammy's head whipped around, and she looked ready to say something nasty, probably that it wasn't his business. It seemed to catch in her throat, though, and after a moment she turned back to her

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locker, silent. Howard leaned closer, catching the scent of strawberry shampoo and prescription acne medication. In a voice full of quiet concern, said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

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By college, Howard had all the certainty in the world that the course of his life was set. He was an actor, bound for Hollywood or Broadway, whichever he might fancy, and nothing could stand in his way. Here, though, he was tested for the first time. The concept of an acting technique had never occurred to him. Roles came as easily as breath, and he never needed to try, or go through the exercises his teachers now forced. History and criticism also seemed beyond him, and he quite vocally resented having to learn what he considered so unnecessary to being on stage.

Parts were not offered so readily to Howard here, either. Seniors held tight sway over the department, and many were offended by Howard’s certainty of being cast, and even more so that this was backed with a natural talent so few ever received. Rumors cropped up and insults were traded behind his back, but the high school social scene had prepared him well for the drama of a theater department. Soon, Howard had his own small followers of hangers-on and devotees. He himself had become a follower of Marlon Brando and his pioneering technique of method acting. By his third year, he was playing Mercutio and Hamlet, and had the world of college drama all to himself.

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Some time during a fall semester production of “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead”, a talent agent quickly signed Howard on, and Stills quite happily left without a degree for the world of professional acting. This time became more of a blur of background parts and alcohol as he was thrown full force into a hectic New York City nightlife. New York was far more exciting in its sense of freedom and lack of control. Where college had been an insular community, this was an open world of theatrical possibilities and drug infused debaucheries.

His agent approached him after a particularly interesting “Love’s Labour’s Lost”. He had gotten to know Rosaline and Katherine quite well in a single night, and the two girls were delighted to introduce him to the world of cocaine. The last show he missed his entrance, as he had been doing lines in the girls’ dressing room as they cheered him on. Only a few days later Howard had gotten a call to come into the offices of Green Talent Agency to speak to Saul Green personally.

“Kid,” Saul began, one hand indicating a large leather chair for Howard to sit in as the other gently tapped ash from an expensive cigar. “I like you, kid. The director’s like you, the audience likes you, but you got to cut this shit out now.”

Howard looked confused for a moment and started to speak before Saul’s hand came up to indicate he was far from finished. He liked the man, but Howard was well aware that when his agent got on a tear, it would sometimes take hours and a very expensive

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scotch to shut him up. After a long drag on his cigar, Saul started in again, "I know you're going to say 'what shit?' and sit there looking oblivious to the entire dame world. But you know what I'm talking about. You almost blew that last show."

For the first time, Howard became indignant. He felt heat crawling up his neck, and wondered how much was from anger or from shame. Howard might not have been the best person in the world, but he had always prided himself on being a consummate professional. No matter how much he had to drink the night before or how badly an enraged boyfriend had taken it out on his face, Howard Stills was always on that stage and saying his lines when he was supposed to be.

"The producer was on the phone bitching me out before the curtain even went down," Saul said leaning back in his chair, hands resting on his large stomach as he regarded Howard through the haze of smoke. "I told him he was lucky he got half the addicts in that show on stage at all. It was a closing matinee, one last chance for all the blue-haired ladies and punk high school kids looking for extra credit. But that's not the problem here, Howard."

Howard slumped slightly in his seat, knowing full well what the problem was. He had to admit, the last couple months had been a storm of exciting experiences and almost frightening new pleasures. The director had yelled at him and the two actresses for an hour after closing, but none of them had been sober enough to care. They were still coming down a long time later, and Howard's first sharp memory had

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been waking up in his apartment in a cold sweat, with two people who were almost strangers in his bed. To someone with a greater level of insight, it might have been a wakeup call, but Howard had just felt sick.

“I ain’t going to tell you to stop with the stuff,” Saul was saying. “Would be hypocritical. Hell, I do it myself. But you aren’t fucking up another gig, hear me? You’re young, and people may like you, but I can’t get work for an actor that isn’t on stage.”

Howard left Saul’s office that day feeling more confused than ever. He had expected some sort of moral boundaries to be set up, for an older, wiser person to show him the right way of doing things. Now, though, it seemed like no one cared and those boundaries just didn’t exist. After that, though, Howard never missed a cue and kept extracurricular activities till after show time. It first registered that more than a decade had passed when he was no longer being cast as Claudio or Romeo. He saw younger actors getting the parts, despite their obvious inferiority, and Howard felt mortality for the first time.

This first piece of introspection gave birth to what many hailed as the Hamlet of that generation, and a new crop of awards and young girls buried the depression and self-awareness the actor had been so close to falling into. His love of casual drug use had been left behind with a younger, healthier heart and a nose that didn’t have a tendency to bleed when anything stronger than air passed through it. It was around this time Howard discovered a new love of alcohol, though. Drinking seemed second nature to

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any seasoned actor, and the great Howard Stills never had a shortage of company to celebrate with.

“Come on, do it again for us,” the girl asked. He hadn’t bothered learning her name, but Howard knew she must be about half his age. Probably an NYU student, trolling the bars and gathering around any name on Broadway with the slightest fame attached to it. This girl, with her gaggle of friends had been bothering him to do lines from his Hamlet over and over the entire night. He didn’t mind too much, as she kept repaying him with views of her cleavage, young, smooth skin held tight in a designer blouse.

“All right, but this is the last time,” Howard smiled, and the girl felt it down her spine. They were both using the other, he thought. Both were just cheap thrills, one an attractive thing a middle aged man had no business with, and the other a connection to that fabled idea of fame and praise on the stage. Another round of drinks came that he would never paid for, and Howard gave the worst Hamlet he had ever done.

Age had taken him more quickly every year, it seemed. Howard was approaching the end of a long, distinguished career and couldn’t hate it more. The critics were almost afraid of his Macbeth, saying it was filled with more rage than they were comfortable with on a stage. The audience loved his Falstaff, but the people behind the scenes were seeing the cracks starting around the edges. He was getting slower, his performances sloppier. The calls came less frequently after that, usually only for supporting roles that Howard refused on principal, despite what bills needed paying that month.

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Finally, a day came when Howard realized he was now seventy years old. It was then the realization came that his life was over, and he contemplated just finishing it off with some bit of dignity. Before these thoughts had gone far beyond looking at the knives in the kitchen speculatively, the phone rang. The phone never rang anymore. Picking it up, he heard the voice of his agent, Frank Green. Saul had died ten years ago, leaving the business to his son. Frank had been trying to unload old war horses like Howard Stills ever since, seeing them as the ballast keeping the agency from making any real money.

“Howard,” Frank said. Howard could hear the fake smile on his face. “How are you, birthday boy? Listen, I’ve got a bit of a present for you. The Shakespeare Festival is casting right now. How would you like to play Lear?”

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The production had been the greatest ordeal of Howard’s life. Many of the actors were young and disrespectful, thinking that theirs were the parts that really mattered in the play and vying for the director’s time. Others paid him far too much attention, acting more the sycophant than the die-hard fan. Howard had no time for either, and relied on the director to keep rehearsals from breaking into complete bedlam on occasion. For his part, Howard found his mind betraying him for the first time. Lines wandered in his head, becoming confused and sometime not coming at all. Everyone, of course, understood completely what kind of pressure he was

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under and assured him it was perfectly all right and grumbling about how the old man needed to get his act together when they snuck out for the occasional cigarette.

Sitting in his dressing room, Howard found one night he couldn't quite remember his name. Surely, he was a man named Lear, who had just been on stage lamenting the deaths of his daughter and beloved Fool. He looked in the mirror a second time and saw Howard there, every inch a decrepit actor. There was no doubt anymore that this was his last show. Shaking several random medications from their bottles into his palm, he just hoped he could keep it all together. Frank Green, despite being an ass of a man and not near the agent his father had been, was right about this being an incredible part. There were good actors here, despite his anger at a few, and the director was one of the most competent he had ever met.

Tilting his head back, Howard swallowed his pills, wondering if they ever really helped. None of it mattered, after all. Mackers had it right; sound and fury, signifying nothing. This was simply the last, futile flailing of a dying creature. The audience, the directors, all of them always expected so much from him. All he ever mattered was on the stage, though. Howard Stills had never meant anything to anyone unless he was pretending to be someone else. He shook his head and knocked over a small makeup mirror in frustration. It cracked on the floor, shards spread and catching the light. No, couldn't think like that. Howard had one last performance to give, and

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he'd be damned if he'd let anything get in the way of that, himself least of all.

The show opened the next night. The seats were crowded with eager season ticket holders feeling blessed to see Howard Stills on a stage, critics mulling over the old man's career and wondering if he'd pull it off, bored husbands and wives dragged there because of the "culture", and students already yawning and wishing they had taken another class. The lights dimmed and the house fell silent, waiting for Kent's immortal words to begin the show. Many would later claim with pride they had seen the last, and best, performance of Howard Stills' life. On some level, all of them realized they were seeing something special.

The audience watched an old man lose the dignity of a king, reduced to nothing but his bare humanity and somehow still clinging to himself. The critics gave praise where they felt it was absolutely necessary, not daring to admit the awe they felt that night. Students went home and wondered if Shakespeare was something more than just words and essays written unwillingly. No one was there, however, when Howard Stills went back to his dressing room that night, slowly and reverently taking off his costume, hanging it up and removing his make up. He sat in his chair, looked over the bouquets and cards of congratulations, then looked at his reflection one more time. Howard Stills remembered his name, closed his eyes, and died in his dressing room that night.

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