

PART. I -Buttered Side Down

"BUTTERED SIDE DOWN" opens with a bold statement about the allure of New York as the quintessential setting for magazine stories, then promptly shifts gear, revealing the narrative will not bow to this cliché. Instead, it transports us to Chicago, specifically to the Nottingham curtain district, an area characterized by its ubiquitous "Rooms With or Without Board" signs, smoke-stained curtains, and a strong favor for dishes like creamed cabbage over finer delicacies. Here, we meet Gertie, a diligent department store clerk who resides in a boarding house, highlighting her nightly beauty regime, a task performed more out of routine and necessity than desire.

Gertie's life is a blend of mundanity and aspiration, underscored by her dedication to maintaining her appearance despite the exhaustion from standing all day. The narrative reveals her inner monologue, filled with a weary recognition of her own solitude in the bustling city, contrasting sharply with her nostalgic memories of Beloit, Wisconsin, where personal connections seemed more tangible. The chapter delves into Gertie's late-night emotional breakdown, interrupted by the Kid Next Door, introducing a moment of unexpected human connection through the thin boarding house walls. Their exchange, initially centered around an offer of brandy as a cure for Gertie's sobs, evolves into a shared confession of loneliness and displacement.

The conversation between Gertie and Gus (the Kid Next Door) transitions from their rooms to a quiet nocturnal meeting on the front stoop, where they exchange stories of their small-town origins, the disillusionment with city life, and the harsh reality of their unglamorous jobs. Gus's empathy towards Gertie's situation and his candid disclosure of his own struggles foster a bond formed not only from shared experiences but also from a mutual understanding of each other's vulnerabilities. This encounter, humble yet profound, offers a glimpse into the human need for connection, understanding, and a sense of belonging.

Their dialogue, sprinkled with humor and candid reflections, covers the complexities of adjusting to city life, the invisibility amidst the urban sprawl, and the poignant yearning for the familiarity and identity they left behind in their respective small towns. The chapter closes with these two characters finding solace in each other's company, hinting at the potential for companionship and perhaps a shared resilience against the backdrop of the impersonal city.