In 1973, Andrew Tobias (writing under the pseudonym John Reid) published *The Best Little Boy in the World*, a personal memoir of his childhood and self-discovery as a gay man. In it, he explains, “Of course, through all these shining performances I was feeling less than entirely adequate . . . But it was more than that: it was the basic understanding—that sick, guilty feeling in the deepest recesses of my psyche—that I was a phony. I was not the best little boy in the world as my parents thought.”

Written in a series of present-tense vignettes, Tobias reanimates his childhood experiences in both a child’s voice and adult self-reflection: “I am five years old. I am the best little boy in the world, told so day after day,” explains the author. As if replaying home movies from his childhood, Tobias provides brief glimpses into his formative experiences—the creation of both an inward identity and an outward mask that he presented to the world. In many ways, the memoir is less a story of a gay man emerging from the closet and more a meditation on how the closet is constructed—how queers, as children, learn to play pretend. “I am in the hall closet, behind the winter coats, stiflingly hot,” remembers Tobias, “but this is the price you pay to win at hide-and-seek.”

Indeed, as Tobias notes, in this hide-and-no-seek game, “masking” is an essential feature of queer submergence, of being-but-not-seeming. Tobias is not alone here. In *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing up Gay in a Straight Man’s World*, psychologist Alan Downs has this to say in his first chapter, “Little Man with a Big Secret”: “This is you and me—a little boy with a terrible secret who hides his curse behind a curtain made of crimson velvet. It may surprise many to learn that his secret is not his sexual appetite for men. No, it is something darker, stinging, and filled with rage.”

A. Scahill, *The Revolting Child in Horror Cinema*  
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A queer becoming is a narrative of loss—not the loss of innocence, which is the narrative most often told about childhood. Rather, Tobias and Downs narrate the loss of self behind a façade of innocence and perfection: the construction of a false exterior self that recapitulates societal expectations of normative childhood. Inside, however, Tobias’s remembered or reimagined child-self harbors inappropriate knowledge seemingly incompatible with the body of a child.

I start here with Tobias’s memoir because the focus of this chapter, the 1956 domestic horror film *The Bad Seed*, is equally obsessed with performance, masking, and the covertness of cuteness. Its eponymous infantile monster, Rhoda Penmark, hides a wealth of perverse desires beneath her Pollyannaish veneer. Through her “shining performances,” as Tobias might put it, she plays the Best Little Girl in the World with cunning accuracy.

*The Bad Seed* was based on a 1954 novel of the same name by author William March. A critical and financial success, the novel was quickly translated into a theatrical version and, a few years later, a film version. In the film, eight-year-old Rhoda (Patty McCormack) has surreptitiously convinced almost all those around her that she is the perfect little angel. But underneath the surface is a cold and calculated killer who murders a classmate, Claude Daigle, for a penmanship medal she deemed as rightfully hers. Before the close of the film, the audience discovers that she has additionally killed an old lady who promised her a snow globe and a hired hand who threatened to expose her and that she is actively plotting the murder of her upstairs neighbor Monica Breedlove (Evelyn Varden). Her mother, Christine Penmark (Nancy Kelly), learns of Rhoda’s proclivities while her husband, Kenneth (William Hopper), is away on military business and finds herself torn between her maternal instincts to protect her child from the authorities and her own terror at her child’s monstrous nature. As if prompted by Rhoda’s unnatural nature, Christine delves into her own past, discovering that she is the daughter of a female serial killer and has seemingly passed on the “bad seed” to her daughter. Out of guilt, Christine gives Rhoda an overdose of sleeping pills and shoots herself in the head, only to have both she and her daughter survive. The film ends with two didactic attempts at closure: first, at the behest of the Production Code Administration (PCA), Rhoda is struck dead by lightning at the pier, the site where she murdered her classmate. Second, the cast of the film is brought out for a bizarre curtain call in which Christine spanks her monstrous daughter for the audience’s satisfaction.