

TRIMALCHIO

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WARNING:
Contains spoilers for
The Great Gatsby

FOR FRANCIS AND ZELDA FITZGERALD

TRIMALCHIO

BY NATHAN HARDISTY

Wear the gold chain if that'll hype her,
If you can bounce then bounce straight up,
Till she's like; "Lover, gold-chained, high-bouncing
lover, I must have you!"

TREVOR GREENE, JR
A.K.A 'TALL GRASS'
ADORN THE GOLDEN CHAIN (1999)

Chapter One

Everyone always tells you that writing the first sentence is always the hardest part.

Huh. *That was easy.*

Writing is really just cobbling shoestring synapses together in the hope you'll find some common thread. It's akin to using a metal detector on the beach except with, you know, less dead bodies and more *dead bodies*.

My father gave me some great writing advice that I've been turning over in my head ever since; 'Mark. You're a lot like a doughnut. Goey on the inside. Goey on the outside.'

I'm still not quite sure what he meant by that.

I suppose we should just stop the family history and philosophizing and get straight to what you came here for. A story. Whenever you begin a story, any story, you have to choose when exactly it begins. I've read a lot of autobiographies and not one of them starts with 'Out of the womb I went' or even 'And so I, but a lone seed, hit upon the golden egg'. So much cruel dishonesty in the world.

Beginning this story with my conception would probably take us a few months or so, just for convenience let's start where everything mildly interesting took place. For the next few hours of you reading this you can pretty much call me an 'unreliable narrator' or whatever but, you know what, I don't care. I'm telling a story. It's my curse to make it interesting for you. It's my curse to constantly try and remember words and special phrases at five o'clock in the morning. You know what word I wanted to put in today? Aneurysm. *Aneurysm. Aneurysm. Aneurysm. Aneurysm.* I'm suddenly scared if I remember it too much that it'll become what it means.

Words mean a lot but so do the details, which I'll withhold for your sake. If Nick Carraway told you at the start of *The Great Gatsby* that "Gatsby died! It's all about the American Dream and superficiality!" then would you really stick around to hear the rest of it? Of course you wouldn't. If someone told you the minute you were born "Hiya! You're going to die one day and fade into non-existence!" you wouldn't be too happy about that either.

Blimey.

I'm English, by the way. Usually that would come about from some other person saying 'Mark! You're British!' just like how you found out my name but, instead, I'll just tell you. I'm not completely secretive you see. Only 50% asshole.

Can a man even be half anus? Is such a thing even possible?

Shall we get on with it? Because let's get serious for a second, some of this is still painful. A lot of it is lonely philosophizing and me sucking my thumb in the corner. I'll try and make it the least bit entertaining. *I'll try.* It's a story of my emotional epiphany and how I ultimately turned out alright in the end.

Or did I?

So let's just wind back two years to where all of this truly began. I was sat in

an office somewhere talking to someone I sort of knew with my suitcase clutched on my knees. I had some wet tired rolls curling around my eyes with New York rain sponging up my hair.

Yeah we're in New York.

'I'm telling you this is more than up your alley,' I watched his hands shift across his chair's armrests with nervous unrest, 'I need you for this. You're the perfect candidate, the only one who can squeeze a Tony or two out of this.'

There were suddenly two co-existing thoughts in my head. The first thought was *how can anything be up my alley? I'm not a walking urban sprawl* and the second thought was *why me?* I was (and still am) a hack writer with a head of spoon-fed academia, a trunk of worthless manuscripts and an injured heart to boot. I had been sick for a while and I had displayed no talent in my writing whatsoever. One critic had even called me "The exact opposite of what a writer should be." I read later over a bagel and coffee at Christmas that the critic suffered a heart attack the afternoon he reviewed my latest work.

A sadistic part of my mind gave a chuckle when I read that paragraph. Sorry my *dear* reader.

'I'm not ah sure if I'm qualified to perform any writing right now.' I replied. He just looked at me with a sigh.

The man I was talking to was Frank or Frankie if you wanted him to take a dislike to you. Frankie had rubbed elbows with the rich elite from the day he could waddle as a toddler. His papa sat him on the knees of babysitter billionaires while he went off to neglect his son for million-dollar deals. I met Franks during my first week of university. We punched each other in the face over some opinions concerning Ayn Rand.

Fuck Ayn Rand.

Two years later and a series of unfortunate events bit straight into Frankie's life. His entire family were en route to Barbados to snort cocaine and make bad socialism jokes for a few weeks. Their plane crashed just outside of Boston.

Frankie, then nineteen, called me up with a tearful jerk in his voice. A crusty, hoarse sound. It was what rusty steel would talk like if it was personified I guess.

'I just can't believe how they've gone.' I could hear Frankie's swollen throat hissing down the phone. 'Just so. Quickly.'

'I know what you mean.' I replied.

I didn't know what he meant. As far as my relationship with the Grim Reaper was headed it was only a brimming acquaintance. I'd lost some twice removed uncle to a kidney illness some years ago. I was a kid so I didn't know what was going on. As I got older I got into films and Plato and literature and only then did I realize that everyone seems to talk about this death guy like he's a damp rag at a dinner party. The awkward kid who always leans against the kitchen counters at terrible parties. Basically me but with benevolent omnipresence and a scythe.

'Can you-can you come up?' Frankie said.

'I'm sort of in the middle of something.' I wasn't doing anything.

'In the middle of what?'

'I'm sort of in the middle of being many hundred miles away from you right now.'

'I'll pay for you to fly up.' I cursed the emotional blackmail and the bottomless chequebook of Frankie. Under my breath of course. Jesus wouldn't be proud, if he ever existed.

I passed the mobile to my other ear as I started to try and type my long-form essay on the entire literary history of pantaloons. I'd chosen a fun dissertation topic. By 'fun' I mean it was one I thought would raise eyebrows and invite comic superstition that would later to be blown away by sheer quality of my research and footnotes and Harvard referencing. Except I hadn't researched. I had gorged myself on chocolate and looked at a blank screen for two months before realizing I had just thrown my entire education against a wall, watched it burn and couldn't even tell whether to laugh, cry or disembowel myself.

'Please, buddy.'

I ended up abandoning my chocolatistic nightmares and wrestles with the evolution of the presentation of lower clothing in favour of finding myself in a dark-lit pub at quarter to midnight and a sickly cider to calm my jet-lagged nerves. I'd only been on a plane for an hour but being in a steel cage in the air does things to you. You can sort of sympathise with baked beans once you fly enough.

'Do you remember being a kid?' Frankie said whilst turning his half-drunken neck towards me.

'If by 'remember' you mean 'suppress' then absolutely.' I was on witty form tonight. Unfortunately. Inappropriately. 'But, yes, I do remember.'

'See where I was born there was a lot of difficulty. My whole upbringing was difficult.'

'It can't be that difficult, where you came from. My hometown is famous for being the birthplace of Jimmy Savile and cholera.'

Frankie's face was turning into this greenish blue.

'I remember my father telling me he loved me. Only once. It was Christmas Day and my mother was rushing about the house. Doing something.' He said.

'Being a woman?' I gave a wry smile.

Little bit of misogyny never hurt anyone. Women *maybe*.

'I was unwrapping my presents,' the liquor in Frank's breath started to make my eyes water like a raw onion shedding its skin or some other fitting simile, 'and I just turned to him and looked at him. He didn't know what to say, he was looking right at me. Suddenly he just blurts it out almost mechanically. The three words.'

'I've heard of those.'

'Yes.' Frankie raised the glass to his lips, 'and it was a good day.'

I knew those three words. Like the back of my hand and, actually, I'd managed to say them to so many women at this point that I wasn't sure if the meaning had either faded or flamed. I meant it to someone; a long time ago, except the words never escaped my mouth. Like a silent nod at a dinner party as you stumble over cocktails and both of you are too polite to laugh.

Now there I was sat in Frankie's office a few years onwards. I was sat there just watching him start to compliment me into oblivion.

'I really think ah this is your thing Mark, honestly! You've read the book and that's more than enough.' He was talking to me in his sweet-talking voice. The kind that didn't work on the women or men in his life. Except once.

I remember going to his wedding, I made a joke or something about there been more than one groom and who would really wear the pants in his family. No-one at the reception even gave me a glance after that.

'Yes. Yes.' I replied, adjusting my glasses. Did I mention I wear glasses? I wear glasses.

'Then I need you to do this for me. I own the theatre, I have the grant and I want to do this. We should collaborate!'

I should've mentioned the thing about Belgium. *No, Mark, it's not funny or a cute little fact. We all know that Belgium is pretty much a non-country.*

'Why do you want to do this?' I asked.

Frankie paced his arms a little and raised his head to his Dad's portrait.

'It was my father's favourite book. My mother's favourite book. Somehow it's nearly everyone's favourite book,' It's not *my* favourite book, 'and since everyone has heard of it or read it or loved it then that means people are going to remember every stamp on it in history.'

'I think people would uh remember crayon scratchings on the Mona Li-'

His voice became rapidly excited and overtook mine, he even started walking out of his chair, 'I want to be remembered, Mark. I want you to be remembered. You're the best writer I know!'

'I'm the only writer you know.'

'Then you know that I know that you know that you know that I have no other options, and you're entirely right! You are literally the only writer I can find!' He started to bound around the room, touching little relics of his history. Photos of family, birth certificates and even books on *How To Survive Being A Pompous Parasite Living Off Inheritance And Heredity Hedge Funds*. That book wasn't actually there, nor does it actually exist best to my knowledge. I was just being mean to Frankie for humour's sake *dear* reader.

I respected Frankie. He was one of the few friends to believe in my ability, taking the time to read my writings. I trusted that he could count the amount of books he had read, in his entire life, on his left hand and I'd at least take up his thumb and forefinger.

'Frankie, it's not that I um don't want to. It's that I can't.'

'Why not?'

He came over placing his hands on his desk and shining his irises into the bowels of my soul. *Wait that makes him sound demonic.*

'I've never written a play!' That was a complete lie; I had attempted to write a musical for one of my girlfriends. She laughed at my pathetic attempt to create a musical out of the Potsdam Conference, much as she laughed at my two minute capacity to 'deliver'. Yes that's a euphemism. *Go away.* That relationship only lasted

a few weeks. I ended up pushing her into a pond when she yelled out an insult involving my genitalia and a hammer and sickle. Do with that what you will.

'Please man.'

'Then make it with somebody else? I'm terrible. In fact, don't even adapt the book. Do something wild. You want to make something that'll last?'

'Mark.'

'Make a film about molars.'

'Mark.'

'I could give you some friends' numbers. They're much better writers than I am, in fact, some of them can write about anything. David's writing for DC but by night he writes erotica!' I had entered the 'cynical self-loathing' zone, 'There's Kerry who's on the top list for Poet Laureate, but her first novel was about a mutant post-it note who just can't get enough. You might actually like Roy, his first book was about a...'

'Mark.'

'... spoon.'

The plosive bite of the *sp* had sunk into the air and now we were left to our silent, thoughtful devices. I had chuckled in-between my sentences, growing slightly wearily angry. I was jet-lagged and was talking to a (possibly) half-drunken Frankie on the (possible) edge of maturity... for the second time in my life.

'Mark. I'm doing this for three reasons.'

'Showbizness. Fulfil your father's hidden dream. Unite the kingdoms and bring order to England.'

'James the First? That's the best you can reference?' Frankie snapped back.

'What?' I gave him a scowling, questioning face. I had made a funny and he hadn't noticed.

'As the history hornblower, Marko, I expect you to say something a lot more obscure than James I. Everybody knows fucking James, even fucking Shakespeare knows James and he's been in the ground for three-billion years.' I didn't want to point out the fact that *fucking Shakespeare* literally knew James I.

We weren't actually in the year three-billion. Honest. Frankie just likes to exaggerate things to appear funny when he couldn't make the effort to *be* funny. Perhaps why I took a liking to him; he reminded me of myself.

By now he turned serious, letting his tie flap in the air like a cape as he turned around his office. Actually it wasn't that cinematic; in fact I think he sneezed instead. Some on me.

'The third reason, Mark, is that I want you to get lost.'

'Such a good friend.'

'No. I mean.' He paced about rolling his eyes in thought, 'Get lost in a work. This work. I'm sure you'll be able to do it quite quickly. You were always one for getting lost in books.'

'What do you-'

'While we were out drunk to our toes, our elbows in the nearest orifice and our glazed eyes able to tip the Titanic; you were in your room. Covered in words and biro ink.' Frankie turned on the offensive now, answering the half-finished questions I had raised, 'And you lost out. Until after *that* event. Then you went fucking mental. Like a chimpanzee on speed.'

I did go mental. I'd only been drunk twice in my life up until I strolled into campus but by the end of university I was ready to relinquish my liver and gain a doctorate in Astronomy just so I could see the full extent of the damage.

Because you'd be able to see it from space.

Woo!

'Mark my chap. My friend. This is your time to get out of this this pile of mental. This roaring depression. Get some human texture back into your dish of life.'

'I'm not depressed,' I said automatically, 'it's part of being a writer. Always looking sad when, inside, you're as well as everyone else in the world.'

Frankie suddenly swayed his heavy body around in disbelief. He knew I was joking or lying or some fusion of the two. We both knew the unfortunate philosophy of life. That everyone, literally everyone, was miserable inside. Everybody had troubles of their own, problems to deal with and mornings to rush. Frankie was saying that he was holding out his golden hand into my drowning just so I could come into his boat of despair and head towards the lighthouse of hope or something. Maybe he'd have a metaphors textbook in there too. I was kinda running out, probably on account of drowning and all.

'I think this could ah be a good distraction for you, Mark. You might even solve the problem.'

'Problem?' I looked at him quizzically. By 'quizzically' I mean I tilted my glasses a little.

'You know the one.'

The stale silence now rested again. I knew Frankie was getting bored of it. The office life was droning in the distance. I could feel the life of the number-crunchers being slowly drip-fed into the parasite that was Frankie. And he hated himself for it. He hated the legacy of his father, he hated his inheritance. Sometimes I heard him swear every time he shook someone's hand.

'I take it from your silence that you'll do it then.'

'I don't know.'

'It's a chance to meet new people. To go places!'

'I don't know.'

'Some of them will be women. That sort of thing you like.'

'I don't know.'

'You don't have to do anything! No editors! No need to revise or learn!'

Who knew that all I had to do to improve my craft was not to improve at all.

'I don't know.'

'It pays well.'

And those were the magic three words. The real three words that every writer, artist or poet wanted to hear even if they don't want to admit it. Those three words

stop stupid o'clock rolling around with an empty stomach and piling bills. The nervous biting of fingernails, the need to pay someone or some faceless company so they wouldn't take away your *stuff*. No writer or artist or poet worth his damn wouldn't starve at least once.

'I'll do it.'

'Good. Then you know what I'm asking of you.'

'Absolutely.'

'Work with some young folk. A director, casting peoples. Work alongside them, build the greatest adaptation,' Frankie suddenly blinked and unblinked rapidly whilst turning his head in excitement. Like an owl suffering a seizure, *wow that's quite dark*, 'make me the best damn *Gatsby* that's ever been gatsbied!'

There were again two sudden thoughts in my head. The second one I spoke aloud, but the first thought was that Frankie had suddenly invented a word; a blend of disjointed syllables so convincing that it had in a split-moment been suddenly absorbed into my vocabulary without any barriers of logic to stop it flooding in. And the second thought was a little lapse in my jet-lagged straitjacketed attention.

'*Gatsby*? What *Gatsby*?'

'Surely you know of *Gatsby*? You told me you read it anyway.'

'Oh right that one.'

'Just the one.'

'A heartfelt journey into the nature of dreams, memory, the upper-class lifestyles and the philosophies of life...'

'Yup yup!' Frankie nodded his head. Generously.

'... and a cynical, crooked critique of the nineteen-twenties superficiality that floated to all rims of society and helped to create such massive disparity between poverty and wealth.'

'Absolutely!' Frankie suddenly beamed with joy.

I could have told him the novel was about rainbow gypsies and he would've nodded anyway. Frankie always stopped listening past when you agreed to something even if you didn't actually agree. Even if you didn't sign the contract Frankie would pat you on the back for a job already well done.

And so began the chapter of my life that turns into this chapter of my life. Well not literally, because this chapter was about its beginning so I assume the chapter of my life that's about to begin is the next section or so.

A few months later I would be sat looking at my pixelated screen with scripts of the play strewn before my eyes. It was the night before première and I was redrafting. *Redrafting*. Just redrafting and trying to remember just how I had got myself into such a nonsensical bother.

I sit here right now remembering that moment in which I tried to piece together my beginning.

Scripts are pretty easy to begin. A few days later and I was putting together a little apartment by the New York Bay all sponged by Frankie's bank account. I felt the crisp wind prickle against my neck hairs as I unpacked everything. I called my mother and told her about the job and she muttered some empty encouragement

while trying to hide the years of resentment and disappointment under her voice. I heard her talk of the family, of money woes and how I should be there to help and how there were accountancy jobs available nearby. I was never able to give her a comfortable life that promise was the one I swore I would never break.

As I poured myself some ice-water and let the flash of the laptop come to life I began to think of the wealth of life now before my fingertips. Frankie had shipped Fitzgerald biographies, calendars, olden editions of *Gatsby* and even reviews of the aged book. I had boxes of books on playwriting from *A Dummies Guide* to the much revered *Seriously, You Can't Be This Dumb – Guide*. I was an employed writer, a ravenous rat about the sewers of Paris who had just found a bastion of foodstuffs. Here whole chunky scraps of bread were shoved down the muddied waters and into a little alcove for my brethren and I to devour yeasty goodness.

And given that I was a rat with a primarily gluten-based diet I wouldn't last that long given I was a protein-based lifeform.

I began to type while feeling a new world come to life under my fingertips. I constructed the title screen under careful formatting. Choosing the right sizing. The right lettering. Once you study typography then everything changes. Or so people who actually study typography say. I'd always use lucky old Arial 12pt. Always italicize your titles and thoughts. Always bold your chapters. Classic.

Trimalchio.

Chapter Two

I ask myself sometimes if what I ended up doing was the right decision. That if I made a different choice at some point I could have ended up somewhere else. A teacher, an astronaut, a physicist or maybe even a *successful* writer. I tried something different at some point. I attempted stand-up comedy once but didn't get very far; told a rape joke and was almost arrested. That's the last time I ever get hired for a children's birthday party.

I could have become myriad of things yet instead I became a 'writer'.

Those days beginning *Trimalchio* largely involved me walking around my new little studio apartment for the first time, hands in my jeans, just trying to quantify my luck. Sterile white walls and Avant garde paintings were dotted throughout. This was a rented little piece of plastic paradise pitched up by the New York Bay. Out into the horizon there laid currents and tankers destined to crack into the cultural jewel of the collective American consciousness and fill it with sugars and spices. *Where the poor get poorer and the rich get-*

I saw a wealth of homeless people near the apartment block. They were trying to sleep on the blue grass grounds of the tennis courts. Here with my little glasses I watched a legion of them gawp at me while being carried by Frankie's chariot. Well, Rolls Royce. I'd seen this homelessness. *The Guardian*, a newspaper back home, called it an "economic epidemic". In less than eight years America had gone from two million homeless folks to over eight and climbing. That's eight million, not just eight people, just want to make that clear.

The new American honcho's attempts to plug the plughole of the 'Great Recession' weren't working. Nothing had worked. We tried stabbing the Euro, we tried taxing the rich, we tried taxing the poor and we even tried going to war. There was nothing left to do. I heard whispers inside the circles of Frankie's friends that the world economy was entering its "moribund stage", and these were the people in charge of it in the first place.

I'm no liberal nor die-hard lefty either. I remember arguing with my friends that I don't think most right-wing folk support the excessive capitalism that destroyed the global economy and left it in utter ruins. Today, anyway, it's irrelevant. Nowadays people watch plays, they watch films, they read books and suddenly culture is back in town. Because we want to escape. Or something. Throughout the Great Depression there was an almost rebirth of communal culture. People saw films together, scrapped the money together to sit in the darkly lit theatres and immerse in the holographic beats playing on the curtain in front of them. The projection would sputter and sparkle with dots of black resin stretched across the film print. Families would huddle for warmth as the sprinkling Depression-era American frost set its toes inside. The film industry, freshly baked with the advent of new technologies, was now able to supply such classics as *King Kong* and pave the way for the great commercialization of the American dream. Hollywood was now in the same cultural leagues of Broadway, there was an appreciation; an artistic appreciation.

And now it's happening again. When mankind retreats from its nuclear ruins into its pristine vaults it'll take books and torches with it. No matter where we go, even when we're starving, we seem to always want to be distracted. Whether from the apocalypse, financial woes or heartbreak, we like *stories*.

That is why I chose *Trimalchio*. It was Fitzgerald's first choice for the title of *The Great Gatsby*, a neoclassicism kick with 'Trimalchio' being a character in Petronius' *The Satyricon*. "Trimalchio is a freedman who through hard work and perseverance has attained power and wealth" that's what Wikipedia says anyway. Except the title meant something more. I could get lost in hard work, that's what Frankie wanted right?

Over those few days I started to chip together some vague outline of what was to come. I called my mother twice to talk plot points, character bits. She eats books just like me.

'I haven't read *Gatsby* yet.' She said.

'Do.'

I read *Gatsby* myself a long, long time ago. But I kept reading it. For those few days when I unpackaged my thoughts I read the book over and over. I tore out pages of the cheap paperbacks and pinned them to the walls of the writer room. I used to go to bed with the laptop on my knees just rushing to whisk out the characters. Except they were already wrapped in pre-cooked batter, the type you get tucked into clingfilm, they just needed warming up in the microwave of my mind.

People tend to like to babysit me and, inevitably, Frankie came around. He brought around his husband, Gerry, so we shook hands and made small talk while Frankie fetched whiskey from the supermarket down the street. Gerry wandered into the writer's domain and saw the stripped pages. There was a stern look on his face when I looked at him. I watched him read the words.

'Why these pages?' He said. 'There's nothing really significant about the 'butler's thumb'?'

'There is.' I went to go sit on the reclining chair in the corner, taking the box of *Gatsby* copies on to my thighs. I folded about the copies and threw a cheap paperback towards Gerry's hands.

'The butler's thumb, the butler's nose. *Gatsby* and Daisy both hold on to parts of a human being, someone who cleans up after them. Thematically it speaks of wealth and of decadence – resonating with some elements of slave trade literature - almost a consumerist philosophy to valuing life. Just by its bits of flesh. No names. No heart.' I pointed to the page. 'Read the whole paragraph.'

A few minutes passed.

'In fact read the whole chapter.'

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy Gerry's company. He was a kindly man and a good partner for Frankie. They were jovial together, happily intellectual in some spots. He was a pathfinder, alike an original settler, for Frankie. I watched his little blue eyes trace among the inkage. I wondered how other people saw the book's characters and populace. I pictured *Gatsby*, upon first reading, as a curly haired, British looking

gentleman. A con-man too. I pictured Nick as a buffoon and Daisy as something something cotton candy.

I have a weird affection for chapters and titles. I'm a bit OCD like that. It's weird though that one chapter in my life might be just one sentence in yours.

Gerry's large beak started to fall between the pages as if melting into it. We still hadn't spoken since my literature insights.

'I see what you mean Mark but it's not that much of a critique of Gatsby or Daisy.'

'Then you're saying it's a support?'

'No. Not at all, it's objective. It kind of has to be.'

'Why so?'

'Honesty is-' He put the paperback down clasping his hands together in thought. 'Honesty is the glue of friendship. It's what keeps us together. Nick's all about that.'

'You don't have to be honest about everything.'

'It's better to be.'

I paused before speaking, letting a little bit of silence punctuate the air. Like he had just told a bad joke.

'Life isn't about being honest; if that were the case then we'd all be happy.' I froze for a second.

'So you're saying everyone's miserable?' Gerry moved about the room.

'Yes.' I replied bluntly.

An awkward air hung over the conversation like rotten road kill on the hood of a Rolls Royce.

See what I did there? Bit cruel, I know.

Gerry was about to speak but he tripped over his words as Frankie opened the front door. We all gathered in the hallway as Frankie muttered something about the weather. He threw me a bottle of whiskey so I went into the kitchen. I poured four glasses and asked Gerry to carry them into the lounge.

'Why four?' I heard Frankie call, seeing our hands enter the room.

'I'm a recovering alcoholic.' I took my seat, passing a glass to Frankie.

'Someone else has to drink twice for me.'

They both gave me a weird half-smile. That fact wasn't entirely true. In fact I had only been drunk thrice in my life. Up until nineteen years of age. The first time it was alone. The second time? Well. It's interesting what happens when a drunk and paper aeroplanes meet.

'The play then, how goes it?' Frankie sipped the liquor.

'Like the current economic climate.' I sat back with a cackle, just looking for the funny. 'A bureaucratic nightmare, a bean counters wet dream and the biggest class gap of all time,' my cynical mode came out a bit too early, 'but, in fairness, at least everyone's still alive.'

'You make it sound like people don't want to live.' Gerry gulped down his drink.

'I'm not sure there's a sweeping suicide sensation, Gerry.' Quipped Frankie, with no trace of humour on his face. None of them had noticed my brave attempt at satire. 'Everyone seems to be getting on.'

'And whilst everyone else is getting on we're getting on happily.' There wasn't a smile on Gerry's face as Frankie raised his glass. 'We might as well toast to the homeless. It'll be the only whisper of nourishment they'll ever encounter next to their name.'

'Let's not mock. It's bad enough that you think they're all named 'homeless'. Gerry took a bite into the conversation.

'I agree. But it's a problem, a problem that has to be solved.' Frankie said, nodding to himself.

'Maybe it can't be solved.' I said alone.

'Sorry what?'

'I said maybe.' I was suddenly not confident in what I had done. 'Maybe it can't be solved?'

'Go on.' And suddenly there was an invitation for sociological discourse.

I leaned forward watching the men sip their drinks to the bone. I clenched my teeth in thought.

'Maybe someone has to be unhappy for the rest to be un-unhappy.' I realized what I had just said. 'I mean that un-unhappy means they are not unhappy. The opposite of which is obviously 'happy' but, in reality, no-one can be happy in a world like this. Maybe, at best, the pinnacle of the elite can experience it or maybe some teenage lovers caught up in some stupid crusade.'

I paused and then carried on.

Is there such a thing as a 'smart crusade' though? Pope Urban III would be all over this.

'But there has to be suffering in order for there to be prosperity. In order for there to be wealth there has to be something to measure it against. It all comes down to history. Legacy. There are those who live and there are those who prosper but there's no true happiness. That's left to devices of the past.'

The tiny rant was over and I gestured the floor to retort. In seconds Gerry was on the tip of his speech.

'But you argued earlier that truth is the key to happiness. That being honest to one another is the key to happiness? Literally, *to each other*.' He sat forward furrowing his brow. 'What exactly do you mean by that, Mark?'

Frankie's face suddenly snapped into action.

'Sorry uh Gerry but I don't think we need this.'

'It's just a bit of banter. I love political, philosophical talk! It helps me sleep at night.' He was being funny. *I don't like funny.*

'Gerry.'

'It's like a midnight snack. Like a warm glass of milk. Routine.' *He was being funny again.*

He wasn't bellowing but he was exaggerating. Frankie was visibly annoyed as he made one final remark.

'Without it I couldn't sleep and wake up tomorrow to see the full beauty of a wonderful, decaying, homeless world!'

'Stop it.'

The glasses sat on the table and the conversation suddenly drifted to an uncomfortable topic.

'The play, Mark. How far are we?'

'Outline.'

'You've read the books, the research, the essays, *Gatsby* again?'

'Uh yes.'

'Then you're writing it right now.'

'It begins tonight.'

A smile came across Frankie's face; a sense of accomplishment was wrestling under his lips.

And then I said something that changed everything.

'But there's been a title change,'

'What?'

'*Trimalchio*.'

There was a visible *what* on Frankie's face.

'Trimalchio?'

'Trimalchio.'

'Tri-mal-chio.'

'*Trimalchio*.'

'Why.' He almost said the title again. 'Why that?'

'You know the tale. It was Fitzgerald's first choice. I read up on it in one of the biographies.'

'You mean you skimmed Wikipedia?' Challenged Gerry.

'Absolutely.'

Frankie was visibly disturbed. I sought to rest his case.

'What's wrong Franks?' He got up from his chair turning towards the study.

'It's a 'why'. Not a 'wrong'.' '*What's why Franks?*' *Nope. Doesn't make any sense.* 'Why do you do this Mark?'

'Do what?'

'I know who Trimalchio is. I know the literature. I do read...'

'...Wikipedia.' Gerry finished his sentence for him in the wrong way.

I adjusted my glasses and folded my arms as he began to make an emotional blow to my chest.

'But why do you have to distract yourself so blatantly? Why can't you get lost?! Why can't you just stop being so miserable. The homeless talk, the political wit and now the title change! Don't tell yourself that you're distracting yourself, *he* might notice.' He finally moved towards me with his shins shaking the table. 'And you need to get away from *him*.'

I gulped a little. There was an unsettling memory coming to fruition. I shook it off.

'I thought that's what you wanted me to do.'

'But not admit it outright! You can't get lost while still holding a map.'

'You wanted me to get lost, to get distra-'

'I wanted you to get better.' He came over and sat by me. He put his arm around my back while noticing the confused look on Gerry's face. 'I don't want you wallowing again. We've been through this before when you wrote your poetry and your-'

'I know.' I stopped my shaking. 'I know.'

'But I like the title.'

And just like the snap of his fingers, Frankie had turned back into the astute, casual castled businessman that he carried about in his suit. He started waving his finger in approval, adjusting his tie and humming some elevator music while heading into the study. Gerry and I followed to watch this man read the pages on my wall.

'Why uh these pages? Why these bits? 'Butler's thumb'? What's um-significant about that?' He looked at me weirdly. 'You aren't casting this without me already are you!' He gave a biz laugh. The kind of half-hearted chuckle you hear at bad dinner parties and sell-out restaurants.

I caught the prodding joke like a kiss in the air from a pretty brunette across the room... *foreshadowing foreshadowing!*

'No. It's just thematic stuff, stuff to translate.'

'You know I want a modern setting.'

Frankie broke my play.

He skimmed over my printed outline and looked at my notes. He showed me the copies of *Gatsby* he had already sent me. There we went through the auctions he had to go through, counting them on his fingers, including recounts of the reports of his lackeys as they were unable to find an original print. They procured the 1965 reprint edition. It was just the same but it was somehow important.

'All these editions.' Frankie laid them out in a line across the laminate flooring. 'Are from different times. Age. History. It's what life's about right?'

He gestured towards my earlier rant.

'They all lead up to the cheap paperbacks; the rotten ink bits. But then it's the same novel uh right? Just produced differently. Different machines pumping out the same bounded and chained words. Not one of these designers or artists will be remembered with Fitzgerald's masterpiece.'

I caught the motive again under his breath like a shark fin erected out of water. *Heh erected.*

'That's why we make it modern. Relevant. Glitzy. Wall Street. Afghanistan. The global recession. Ugg boots if you want!'

He took a stride out of the room.

'I suggested it.' Gerry had a stupid grin on his face. Stupider than usual.

All throughout the bumbling conversations I had darted my eyes to my now defunct outline. To these words and phrases that now had no impact upon the play that I was now writing. *Now writing.*

The process of writing takes a lot of willpower. It's less of a job and more of a pilgrimage. I would be caught up in another cloth of existence, living some other life,

and wondering what exactly I was doing. Now Frankie was just ripping up my duvet of *Gatsby* that I desperately needed to hide under. How would I make a new one?

Then I remembered who was paying for my food, paying for this place and paying for me to wallow in my underwear and copy Fitzgerald's timeless words. That's what we were doing at the end of the day, living off his legacy. That's all human beings seem to do nowadays - remake, rework, interpret - we're all just patchworks. We're all products of our environment and stuff like that. *Blah blah philosophy!*

That's not entirely a bad thing, it's just too honest.

Frankie started to adjust his clothing to clean himself up. He asked Gerry if he looked okay and then started towards the front door.

'You're leaving?'

'Yes. Yes. I think everything's in order, just a check-up. A nice evening.' He shook my hand like we weren't friends. This wasn't the first time that Frankie had acted this way.

Gerry patted me on the back.

'Then what do I do?'

'Write.'

'Anything else?'

'Read.' He opened the front door. 'You need to be inside Fitzgerald's head. Read his biographies, his Wikipedia pages, email a literature scholar or maybe uh just order a takeaway and ask the pizza boy about chapter three.'

I was confused as to what Frankie had just asked me to do. For now I was robbing someone's mind, someone's thoughts, I was but a jewel thief in the Museum of Timeless Authors' Pickled Brains just shoving my gloved fingers into the jars of brine and Fitzgerald cerebral goop. *Wait what.*

Writing is a surreal, private pleasure. Similar to stones skimming across the waters of the sub-conscious, and no-one should be able to steal that.

Although people can pick up stones quite easily.

Shut up.

It was blasphemy. But outside there was the crooked and homeless world. There was no safety net, no welfare fireman to catch me if I fell - I didn't want to be like them - I certainly didn't want to *remember* being like them either. Being without a home and a heart.

'Ta ta!' They both left.

I turned already heading towards my study. I grabbed the whiskey on the way, something to soothe my evening woes. Just this once.

The front door opened again.

'Oh, by the way, casting!' He gave a beaming smile. A Beverly Hills breed. 'I'll pick you up in a week. Drive us down to the Newark Theatre.'

'Newark?'

'That's what it's called,' Gerry was whispering for them to leave quicker, it would be a crime if they were belated. 'It's my pride and ah joy. We'll watch some

folks audition for roles. Are there any changes to the characters I should know about, are you cutting anyone?'

'Um, Gatsby.' I said automatically and 'hilariously'.

He gave a little look of annoyance.

'Seriously?'

'I'm not sure yet.' I said sincerely.

'Any at all.' Gerry was tapping him on the back.

'I'll em-'

'Email me! Goodbye Mark! Ta ta!'

And then he darted off. I realized that Frankie was now somewhere between friendship and business. The young, playful lad who had aided me through my earlier years. Who had literally carried my drunken corpse home? The glowy-eyed aspiring pudgy, tragic fellow who longed to become something. Who hated himself for his legacy, but still slipped so well into his daddy's shoes. He was a lot like his father. He had inherited something. *The businessman, the empty handshake and the beautiful shirts.*

It's at that point I realized *Gatsby* was beginning to bleed into my emotional rhetoric. I wondered aloud just to myself with a head full of intrepid loneliness if the further I became Fitzgerald then the more he became *me*.

Chapter Three

I rubbed the rings of the sleepless nights from under my eyes like sandpapering of rings within trees as I wandered down the theatre aisle. Two young goatee clad individuals yelled at me. I gave them a scowl back. I hadn't slept for a little while. By 'little while' I mean a few days. Frankie's ask of a modern interpretation had wobbled my outline and my vision. It took a bit of time to reassess the bits to bring to the front. I kept all the characters intact and kept the absurdist setting. It would be a warped version of New York but New York nonetheless.

'Mark!'

My first impression of the men who would direct my play was mixed. I would learn that they dropped out of college, picked up a few theatre productions and trashed them in a bare-knuckled fashion. They were the best that Frankie knew, and by best that usually meant the only folks that Frankie knew.

I had frat boys playing with my words. Nothing had changed.

Nodding a hello I took a seat. We were sat on plastic chairs under a plastic desk that was positioned just under the wooden stage. The two men introduced themselves. The taller one was the director and the smaller one was the casting director. I forgot their names on purpose as soon as I heard them and so they will be referred to respectively as 'Brent' and 'Rex'.

I threw some manuscripts at them, still hot off the photocopier, and mumbled a few things. The play was taking shape but it wasn't complete. It was still too obvious a *Gatsby* and not a *Trimalchio* if that makes sense?

Looking at the stage there lay a bare sight. Wood flooring, purple curtains and a black canvas behind it. This is where Frankie wanted to win his Tony. The idea was we'd be so good that they'd cancel *The Lion King* for about a week and give us enough time to win the clapping hands of everyone on Broadway and beyond.

'Dude holy shit!' Brent started skimming through the pages.

'Holy shit dude!' As did Rex.

The doors swing open behind and we looked up to see the great lord himself had graced us with his presence. Frankie took himself and his three-thousand dollar suit down the aisle and patted me on the back. He high-fived Rex and Brent.

'We've got them all crammed in the backstage. They're ready to show us already!'

Things were happening too quickly.

'Things are happening. A bit too quickly.' I said.

Another plastic chair was put into place by a stagehand or something. We all sat down.

I tapped Frankie on the back wanting a word.

'I emailed you the script. They've read the script right?' I looked at Frankie twice. 'You've read the script right?'

'Of course!'

Frankie was always a bad liar.

And so the actors began to pile in. Their names were shouted by Brent, or maybe it was Rex whatever. They took some steps on stage and were judged in roughly three seconds. That's apparently the time it takes for job interviewers to decide on a candidate and the same holds true for theatre. The characters were called out randomly and the folks were asked to read from the script that they had been handed at some point.

At least some people read it.

'Next!'

The name would be read out and they'd be asked a few questions.

'Gus, why do you think you are best for this role?'

'Bill, why do you think you are best suited for this role?'

'Michael, what do you love most about Gatsby?'

The questions would change each time. It was obvious Brent (or Rex) was making them up on the spot. They'd then be asked to audition a piece from their character or sometimes we'd have two of them on stage to act a slice of dialogue out between them. I had to improvise with a potential Gatsby, sitting in the place of Nick for him for a piece of conversation.

'Going away?' I read.

'No, old sport.' He read.

'I hear you fired all your servants.'

'I wanted somebody who wouldn't gossip.' He paused to read. 'Daisy comes over quite often — in the afternoons.'

'They're uh some people Wolfsheim wanted to do something for. They're all brothers and sisters. They used to run a small motel.'

'I see.'

During their performance Rex and Brent would chatter and chuckle with their Diet Coke in hand. They'd talk about frisbees and breasts, the hallmarks of the alpha-male conversation. Once in a while they'd point and obnoxiously nod to each other. At the end of every audition, no matter what, all three of them – Franks, Rex and Brent – they'd all get up and clap. Rex (or Brent) would always say "Brilliant!" and clap. Just clap. The actor would smile through the bullshit while I just sat there.

I was the writer; I didn't even need to be here. One of the actors just came on and broke down on stage - the three musketeers still chose to give her a standing ovation - she ended up just running away.

'Who do you like best so far Marky?' I didn't like Frankie when he called me Marky.

'For which character?'

'Any.'

'Well. Gatsby.' I looked at my scribbles of notes on the back of a manuscript page. 'I liked David Brent.'

'Yeah?'

'He was English, curly haired. Just how I pictured him.'

I heard Brent and Rex stop conversing and join the conversation.

'What about Jordan?' Frankie continued.

'Probably Hilda.' I said scanning my notes.

'She was a little old wasn't she?' Brent chipped in.

'What about the redhead?' Rex said.

'Which one?' Brent asked.

'The one with the uh the- the large mammaries. You know!' Rex gleefully said.

It took them a second to snap and realize. They gave a light chuckle and all nodded noises of agreement.

'What?' That was me.

I noticed they hadn't taken notes. None of them. They'd read off a clipboard and clapped and patronised all of today.

'What's wrong Marko?'

'Is my entire show going to turn out to-.'

The redhead they were talking about gave probably the most wooden performance I've ever seen in my life. And I sat through *Top Gun*. I'd seen better performances from a hair dryer and I'm not even a woman.

Sexism!

'We've got the last few... shall we uh just get this over with?'

I nodded.

It was almost by luck that the next few were all auditioning for different characters. Gatsby, Nick, Jordan, Michaelis, Daisy, Tom, Wilson, Wolfsheim, Myrtle. The cracks would be filled by extras and leftovers that Frankie could pull out of his wallet at the drop of a hat. Not literally a drop of a hat that's just stupid. *Oh my god why would you even think that?*

'Nick, why do you think you're best suited to the part of Gatsby?'

I was half tired, slouching in my chair and nodding into annoyed oblivion. It was by some wonderful chance that I suddenly lit to attention when that young man spoke his first few words as his Texan accent filled the room with classy southern cool.

'I believe that Gatsby is a hero, and I've played many heroes in my theatrical history, even some anti-heroes. I think my history tells you what I know.'

This young Texan, blonde and blue-eyed, adjusted his hair and wiped his nervous lips. He was short but well-spoken and maybe twenty-five at best.

'Which heroes?'

'Macbeth, Hamlet, Lenin uh all of the greats.'

'So what exactly can you bring to this role?'

'A wee bit of Shakespeare never hurt anyone.'

My Gatsby. The curly haired British buffoon who clumsily wandered around, who had a skittish swagger and a voice of pure silver. He was suddenly shot in the head and this well-spoken Southern dweller had taken his place.

As soon as he turned on his mid-western accent and read Gatsby's words outloud my worlds changed. My Gatsby changed. This Nick was Gatsby and Gatsby was this Nick.

The three gave their typical standing ovation as Nick stood there and gave a little smile. I joined in with them. I had my Gatsby. I'd never cast a play before, I'd

barely ever written a play before but I knew that this young Nick was the man I had been writing about all along.

'Brilliant!' Brent (or Rex) yelled out.

I got out one of the contents pages of the play. It was a list of characters, I scribbled Nick's name on to the right of it in my scruffy handwriting. I noticed the triumvirate sitting next to me just look at me. One of them shook their head.

The next few people came on for their respective characters. They all seemed to transform them into their own. It was as if they had leaped from the page to the stage. Nick Carraway's role went to some thirty-something with this wicked grin, Daisy was picked up by this delightfully nervous young blonde and Wilson's actor didn't have the script on him but had a soliloquy from *King Lear* in his mind. He gave the speech while I scribbled names next to the characters. I was becoming involved, distracted and inside this little piece.

Myrtle, Michaelis and all manner of folks walked on and instantly looked like they could peer into the novel and it'd look back in wonder. Wolfsheim even hobbled onto the stage with a cane, he was a fifty something with a bad back and a rotten acting career. He'd lost some parts of him to cancer but he still seemed to feverishly yearn for the role of Wolfsheim. He wanted to be in *Gatsby* in one form or another.

I remember reading a story about a man who pursued being in a play in one form or another. The ultimate form. Death. In some newspaper, over my coffee and biscuits, I remember reading about 'Andre'. This man died of cancer aged 42 in 1982. He knew the prop curator of some fancy Shakespearean company and decided to donate his skull so that it could be used in the 'Alas, poor Yorick' scene of *Hamlet* where Hamlet goes apeshit. This macabre prop was only ever used in rehearsals though. *I guess it must've been a headache to try and get him into an actual performance. Heh.*

The roles were filling up with this final hurrah of folks. The final role, the final person to show off, was Jordan Baker. She swaggered on stage in her jeans and leather jacket, took one look at me and grinned from ear to ear. I settled into my seat as she began recounting Jordan's lines one by one. All of them seemed to slip straight from the book and into her beautiful pucker of her lips. I was quite taken back by how attractive she was, about how even a lick of her lips was a simple movement of confidence. She moved throughout the stage, bending and leaning and talking to invisible creations. That's when I got the tickle of curiosity. Even Frankie seemed to take notice; he even kept looking right at my gawping attention.

I was a little taken back I have to admit.

Dusk turned to dusk as we finished up soon after, and so we all began to talk it all over. Rex and whatever left early without even discussing the cast. I imagined they had very important sarcasm meetings to attend to. Gerry and Frankie were talking in the foyer and I was left alone in the theatre room. I paced about the aisles to get a feel for the history. This was important to me.

The dust on the retractable seats, the thin layer of red wool to comfort the audience and the potent smell of rotten past in the air. The lights lit up the sunbeams on the stage. It was just a plain little wooden thing. Purple curtains either side ready

to be drawn to end a show or a life or two. There were little plastic stairs to the side and I began to pace up and down the wood. This was where actors had hypnotized people with their performance, where directors had their careers broken over knees and where many undergarments were probably thrown. I took more steps onto the planks and looked throughout the stage. I imagined it stretching out forever with the light-lipped darkness sweeping into sunsets and valleys of churned and chewed infinite bark. I wandered, with my hands in my jeans, and adjusted my glasses and looked down at my shifting feet. I looked into the audience and imagined them enraptured. Thousands and thousands of performances collided at once with actors and characters and plots developing, ending and folding into one another. They were all on stage at once. I thought of every single reaction; all of the cries in the audience, all of the boos and all of the silent sombre moments of full immersion. There I saw, like an x-ray, thousands of skeletal nerve outlines all with electrical pulses all conversing to create emotions.

Then would come the curtain call in which the audience clapped their hearts out or were left silent either by stunned emotion or numbed reaction to utter horse dungus. The fear of mediocrity crammed into my skull again like some familiar lick of liquorice liqueur, as I paced the wood again trying to get a rhythm for the place. Trying to imagine the set that would be constructed – I'd given no word to what I wanted yet – and I thought of Frankie tossing me his own dream. And now my dream was the one that remained. My little piece of creative endeavour spun off the webbing of Fitzgerald's masterpiece. I wondered what the theatre would look like in the 1920s, if it was that old or what would be here in its place instead. A little corner shop maybe? Flappers and gangsters wandering, putting on their stereotypical voices and giving their chatter to the world like gifts at Christmas. I imagined them all wandering in their droves. Thousands of them. All with the same chitter and swagger. All the fancy folks with their furnished souls. Men and women, wives, husbands, kids and gangsters and police and everything then sudden-

I saw her looking right at me. Just looking at me. That grin of hers started to twitch, straight from my muscle memory, and she peered into my soul again. I saw her lips move but no elastic bit of sound was fired into the air. I saw her move like she used to. I saw her melt into the satin purple dress straight from my memory. She moved and danced around the theatre as the great white spotlight twinkled overhead like she was auditioning or something, and then she pierced a harpoon glance into my heart.

'Did I get the part?'

It wasn't her voice. I awoke from my daydream with foggy eyelids and heavy breathing. These moments happen every now and then, I think it's some kind of punishment for avoiding sleep. It's what happens when your eyes are made out of the sandman's nail clippings. I scraped my forehead with the back of my hand and tried to wipe the memory of the daydream away. There are times when my brain isn't on my side. I looked around the empty stage and saw Jordan Baker looking right back at me.

I nodded. I was caught off guard by how wonderful she appeared up close. And how taller she was than me. Her blue eyes were like some coloured amber glittering in the darkness, some cloud above just taunting me with slow movements and silver linings. Or some romantic bullshit like that. She more than looked the part too. I hadn't noticed I'd just hired a supermodel to play my vapid, vague little character that cheated men and golf.

'I know who you are.' Jordan said tilting her head a little.

Her wavy, curly locks rested just below her shoulder. She started walking towards the edge of the stage. Either to give me a look at her other *wide range* of *talents* or just to peer down at the notes still left on the desk.

'I'm Mark. I'm the writer of the thing that you're in,' You should know I'm an incredibly charming man. 'I do the writing thing. You know. With the writing.'

She looked behind her shoulder with a good smile on her face.

'I know who you are silly. You write poetry and novels that no-one reads!'

'I didn't know that someone I didn't know could know me so well.'

My feet moved towards her as I looked out at the ghost audience. She sat down on the edge of the stage and peered out to the tens of cubic metres of empty air. She tapped the ground under my feet gesturing me to sit with her.

I looked at her and the awkward silences settle in. I joined her.

'You don't know my real name do you?' She said, dangling her long legs off the edge.

'Is it Jordan Baker by any chance?' This gave her a little smile.

'Melanie.' I almost guffawed.

'Well that's certainly a name.'

'It is a name. Definitely a name.'

Do I hear a slight hint of wit?

'Not like my name.' I said bemusedly.

'What's wrong with your name? It's not real?'

'It's a plain name.'

'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'

She quoted Shakespeare and complimented me in the same sentence. It was a simple reference but something quite nice about it.

I was given a look of nerves.

'Not to say you smell sweet, I mean that uh-' She gave a confused look and shrugged. I took a confused look at her again. 'I mean that you smell nice I guess.'

'And you. I guess. Although I. It's. How do you smell?' I said innocently.

'What?'

I forget whether I knew what I was about to say would be the stupidest thing in the history of the human race. Stupider than Hitler's parents making the decision to avoid contraception throughout July 1888.

'As in, like, um do you sniff people or do you secretly sniff or do you just hope to catch a whiff or something?'

'I'm not sure. Usually you just catch a smell from being close enough to people.'

She hadn't run away nor had she given some scary deconstruction of my 'odd mode' quirk. She hadn't even giggled or been suddenly magnetized away by the invisible hand of social justice. This Jordan, *sorry*, Melanie gave a rational response.

'Do you want to know something Mark?' She said innocently.

'Go on.'

'Usually to get these parts I have to sleep with the manager of the place.'

'I'm pretty sure the manager is gay.'

'Is he?'

'Well I have known him for a good while. I also went to his wedding.'

'Did you count the grooms?'

'Not entirely sure I double-checked but there was more than one.'

'Oh darn! Now who am I going to sleep with!' She slapped her knees in failure and gave me a mischievous smile.

I had no idea what the fuck was going on. Honestly. I must have just been incredibly attractive all my life and no-one had noticed until now. All it took was a supermodel!

'So what-what?' I asked.

'What what?'

'Yeah. What what.'

People who know me know exactly what 'what what' meant in Mark-lingo. It meant I was asking them what they did for a living, how they earn their butter, how they shoot their bacon and whatever.

'Ah. I was an underwear model, I was a finalist for a Playboy photoshoot opp, I've done shoots abroad in London, Paris, Oxford-' I finally caught her husky little West Coast accent, 'On stage I've played Anna Karina, Queen Victoria, Winnie The Pooh, Catwoman and Marilyn Monroe.'

'Ah. I never thought Tolstoy and Milne would ever be seen together.'

'You'd be surprised.'

I'd made some fairly obscure references to authors and it hadn't gone over her head. She was completely on the same wavelength. Like Churchill and Stalin on their last days of meeting each other in Moscow. Drunk as punch friends. Without the twenty-seven million dead Soviets to come I guess.

I wonder why I'm using World War Two as a framing device for my social drama.

'I've read you work Mark. All your stuff is fascinating. You're fascinating.'

'They are? I um am?'

'You really should've won the Booker Prize for *Sawdust and Tin*. It was a travesty what they did to you.'

'I never asked to be even suggested. I even got sent an insulting letter from them for some reason. It seems not everyone can appreciate people who don't want to be appreciated.'

'But it was a beautiful piece of literature...'

I almost laughed at her. *Sawdust and Tin* was an endeavour which took me years to even think of attempting to write. I was fresh out of university with a suitcase

full of World War One literature, leftover lager and a bedroom ripe for my return. I set about wondering about what to write first. What to begin my lifelong career with. What to just nudge my dreams with. Trains? No. A time travel extravaganza set in the Cuban wilderness? No. An existentialist exploration of World War O- yes.

'It was a pretentious attempt at a war novel. If there ever was such a thing. To release that thing first was also really silly of me. The least personal thing I've ever-'
'And?'

After gorging myself with procrastination I began to set five hours of writing a day. I started sending off my poetry and pieces of work to various agents. The rejection letters started to get their own folder. For some stupid reason someone decided to throw me a bone. Chris something or other, a self-employed agent, had taken a liking to my online work and thought he could throw me at some small publishers. I started writing outlines of the novel and faxing him some. His family was military so he took *Sawdust* like bread and butter. We had a publisher deal within a week, pretty small scale. It took me another three months of reading and outlining to even think of writing it. Then it just happened. January, the next year, the book launched and I cried and my family was happy and then Chris died and then I went to his funeral and then-

'Critics hated it. *The Telegraph* called it a "blasphemy", *The Guardian* had their users vote it the worst novel of the decade and even *The Sun* picked on me. Something about tits and bigoted immigrants probably.' I knew some of this would go over her head.

'It's interesting how you can remember the worst bits of what critics say.'

'But they're right.'

'They're not though.'

They were right. The book did okay for the first week or so. It was a war novel releasing alongside some anniversary stuff. It worsened as I began getting messages telling me to 'kil miself' and that my novels were 'sh1t'. Thankfully I figured out how to block people by that point. It didn't stop me being too curious to have a peek at what people were saying though.

'But people liked it.'

'What people?'

'Don't you remember?'

There sprang a group on the internet. This little group numbered into the little thousands. A nice bunch. They sent me messages of encouragement, photos of them holding the book and even notes from their grandfathers and folks. Positive stuff. There was some mild critique here in there but the people who really liked it, well they kept making my day. I was goaded on to try and get into the Booker awards thing. I refused because the mainstream didn't want me. I was the indie kid who, at all publishing dinner parties, just leaned on the kitchen counters and watched all the smooth talking just gnaw across the air.

Someone forwarded them a copy anyway and I got sent an insulting letter myself.

'I do remember. You were one of them?' I said to her.

'I was. I remember sobbing at the ending to *Sawdust*. I have to uh agree with just one of the criticisms I've found though.' She paused a little. 'You shouldn't have.'

'I had to.'

'Why?'

'Because it was me. I had to.'

The final hours of that book resulted in me changing the ending so that the main character ends up abandoned in No Man's Land with his legs blown off. He yells for help, breaks his voice and the rats start to slowly eat him alive. People say it was in poor taste and historians commented that, while it might have happened, it was an unrealistic and exaggerated affair that was clutching at thinly-emotion clothed straws. A minor group actually celebrated the ending as unconventional and there was actually a Cambridge Debate about the final chapter, in the context of a discussion on the end of the First World War. I even attended it as a silent audience member thanks to some old friends. It instead resulted in a back-and-forth deconstruction of why my novel was the worst novel ever with both sides nodding all the way.

'It's why I came here, Mark. It's why I came for Jordan. The group heard through a grapevine or two that you'd be writing a play, so I came.'

'Because I'm an awful writer?' I said into the blue.

'Don't say that for god's sake.' She gave a sigh. 'You're an excellent writer. You shouldn't belittle yourself like that.'

'I'm an awful writer compared to everyone else though.'

'I wouldn't even compare you to anyone. Writers aren't one big group you can put on a grid or categorize, they're rare and unique. They can't be um put on a big spreadsheet. Everyone's got different writing styles.'

Not strictly true.

'But some of us can't actually write. I mean look at my grammar for example. I've had university professors forward me emails from students reporting on how my writing style was 'untechnical' and how I'd managed to usher in works about 'How Not To Write' built entirely around *me*. People have done doctorates about how terrible of an author I am. Probably.'

'Then they're being pretentious. Writing isn't about reading.'

'Oh yes it is.'

'It isn't. It's not about literary history or making history or writing to please. It's about the self. Nothing more.'

'I guess you write as well?'

'No. I simply ran away from home when I was young and some famous high-roller called me 'pretty' at one point. I worked a little bit and then everything seemed to fall in place like some yellow brick road of a career.'

'What a lovely world we live in.'

'I got time to read though. A lot.'

We looked out into the ghost audience and I felt the stir of connection beginning to breathe between us like a lantern appearing in dark Victorian woods. There was something weird. An incredible attraction. She was practically the most

stunning woman I had ever encountered and she had suggested a want for my gonads. Probably.

I decided to press on.

'What about friends and romantics and stuff?' I asked.

'They never really panned out.' She said.

I thought beautiful people had everything.

'So you've never been involved romantically?' I probed. *No that's not a euph-*

'There were a few I've conquered. Right now I've got someone.'

I guess I should try some kind of humour?

'I guess your boyfriend must have a massive amount of genitalia or have access to witchcraft?'

'Actually he's not a he.'

'Oh right.'

I sometimes wonder if I have my own sexuality-defusing orbit or something.

'But that's not going to end well. Her friends told me she's ending it tomorrow so that's fun.'

'So you came here to distract yourself?'

'No.'

She turned her head towards me. I returned to gesture.

'I came for the play.'

'So that's what attracted you to the *play*?'

'I wasn't attracted to the play, silly, I was attracted to you.'

Chapter Four

'So why Gatsby?' She asked.

I handed her the drink and settled into the couch opposite. I pondered for a moment, or at least I pretended to ponder.

'I haven't asked myself that question yet.' I said.

'Really?' She said, 'It's a big undertaking.'

'I know. That might be why I'm doing it.'

'Is it though?'

I looked at the bottom of my glass.

'Nope.'

We sipped our whiskey as we waited for the awkward silence to pass over. I was being difficult. Or at least more difficult than usual.

'I chose Gatsby,' I started to finally answer her question, 'because I was told to.'

'What?' She said, sipping some more.

'I'm doing this more as a favour to a friend than anything else.'

'And the pay-cheque?'

'The pay-cheque helps.'

Again we sipped away the silence. I watched her eyes sway while scanning my entire little body. I cupped the glass with both my hands and blinked a little too much.

'*Gatsby's* my favourite book.' She said.

'Good for you.' I said.

'Why are you being so difficult right now?'

She took a scowl on to her face. She finished the glass and put it on the table with a dead harpoon look in her eyes like she was fucking Captain Ahab and she'd just spotted Moby Dick. Except I wasn't a whale. Nor was I dick. *At least as far as I knew.*

'I'm sorry.' I said.

'Go on.'

'It's just when I get near that thing.' I pointed to my writer's hovel, 'Things go weird in my head. Like a whole other Mark.'

'You have a personality disorder but only when you're near your typewriter?'

'I don't use a typewriter. Filthy and mechanical. I prefer longhand, laptop usually. Size of the screen affects my ability to zone out.' I began speaking quickly.

I finished my drink with a painful gulp. It stymied my throat muscle a little.

'And I thought you were a traditional writer.'

'I am in some respects. I just like to *you know* after every other chapter.'

The humility gave her a little giggle. The self-pleasuring stuff? That's not the actual truth by the way, seriously. It would totally ruin my concentration. I'm writing this now on a laptop anyway and the thought that terabytes of pornographic imagery is just a Google search away doesn't entice me at all.

Hold on, I'm going to break the fourth wall and tell you I need to take a break.

...

That was for comedic effect.

'Your writing is honest though. It's painful in some places.' She said crossing her legs. Painfully.

'Is it?' I looked a little bewildered. People don't talk about my writing, ever. They usually just scowl and hide their frustration.

'Either that or you've got one nasty sub-conscious mister.'

'That's somewhat true. I do put a lot of myself in my works. Try and dump the nasty stuff and-'

'See if it sells?'

'See if it sells.' I raised my finger in approval.

I poured us both more drink. She was now putting on a little charming smile.

'You know I'm just inches away from your bedroom.' She changed her voice to a deeper tone. Sensual. Like slowly swallowing an asparagus. Actually that's not sexy at all. Unless you're a very eccentric vegetarian with too heavy a libido or something hilarious.

I simply sipped my drink and looked at the writer's retreat. *The room where you write is probably the most important place in your life. It's a sacred, bound and-*

'Mark?'

'Sorry.'

'You were looking at your study. Like you'd just seen a ghost.'

She put her drink on the table without even sipping a sliver. I watched her get up and adjust her jeans; she caught me noticing her adjustment and shot me a suggestive smile. Her legs paced towards my hovel and she even peered inside a little.

'This is where the action happens?'

'People usually say that about different rooms altogether.'

'For you it's not the case though is it?'

'Always with the questions.'

Maybe they weren't questions. I'm just giving her question marks here for variety. Or whatever. If you're studying this out of some wacky coincidence that I ended up in a classroom then don't talk about the effect that the writer wanted to portray or the purpose of my writing. I just wanted to add some variety! See there's even an exclamation mark! Look another!

'I'm just curious is all.'

She took a few steps inside the room. I brought my drink in with me for some added comfort as she ran her fingers across the stuff inside. Books, stickynotes, pages of *Gatsby* and then the closed laptop. I watched her take a few seconds just feeling it.

'I wonder what's inside other than *Trimalchio*.' She said into thin air.

'You know the new title?' I shot her a look.

'Gerry wrote about it on his blog.'

'Gerry can write?'

I was being funny again. She sat on my office chair with her legs under one of the armrests while she swayed around a little making it move from side to side.

I started to get the jitters. It was now approaching dawn again, I hadn't realized I'd past all night through this woman's company. As the wafer of the sun's rays draped across my apartment I began to get the shaking tiredness; the electric all-nighter feeling in which anything is possible. When the dawn finally enveloped the Earth I looked at this young woman again and questioned exactly how I'd manage to get such an attractive young specimen into my domain of pain. *No we're not about to suddenly go all BDSM and stuff.*

'Trimalchio was that guy. I read it on Wikipedia.' She said with her head in her hands.

'Good girl.' I said,

'Why did you choose it?' She said.

'Something about it being Fitzgerald's original choice. Something about the figure of Trimalchio too. Resonated a lot with me personally. The other titles were *Gatsby* or *Greatness and Bullshit*.'

'Huzzah for the bullshit.'

She was charming, funny, quirky, attractive and fearless. I had met her type before but not on this level. She reminded me of my first week of university; involving me being coaxed into drinking and clubbing away from the textbooks I so desperately craved, and was introduced to the wonderful mess of student life.

I forgot about my high-school friends. That's a pain I wouldn't feel until three years had passed. Like a syringe in numb flesh slowly being fished out. *No I've never taken drugs. Cocaine is one hell of a blah blah.*

I had lamented late one night in the summer before gallivanting away to university, to one of my friends over some online messaging whatever, that I wondered how many of us would still be friends afterwards. The truth was that none of us were. I'd get the odd message seeing how I was doing and that usually triggered a nostalgia bomb of entangled memory bits. Funny moments, sad moments and all the warts that make up the human existence. I forgot about it in those three years of half-drunk academic chaos. I got a 2-1, I was pretty chuffed with myself. What I was more chuffed with was my flourishing ability to talk to women or lack thereof. They seemed ethereal, mysterious creatures to me through high school and then in this new lifestyle I was isolated. I felt removed from the world and so I acted and talked and just caught interest in women. I never fell in love; they were always more simple relationships. Physical and emotional shoulders to lean on and dance with. Like an atomic bomb that you didn't exactly want to drop on a few hundred thousand Japanese children *wow this goes dark really quickly.*

It was at the crux of that thought that I realized I didn't want to sleep with her anymore. My friends, what little I had, would have belittled me for not doing so upon seeing her. I didn't sleep with her for a multitude of reasons that I don't want to pry open right now. The best way I can express it is like having a golden page of fiction and still being told to 'kill your darlings'. If any writer can stab his own little bits of his

own greatness with such ferociousness then, quite frankly, they deserve to be bestsellers.

'Where's the bedroom again?' She said.

I pointed towards it as I felt the bags under my eyes drag into my face.

'Aren't you going to join me?'

I almost slapped myself.

'Um not really.'

'Not really?'

'I'm tired and not feeling it.'

Excuses tend to come quickly to me.

'Really?'

She gave me a confuzzled look as she gathered herself. I watched her strut towards the bedroom.

'I'll wait for you then.'

'I'll sleep on the couch.'

'Are you sure you don't want to?'

'Pretty sure.'

'Okay.'

She gave a warm smile and went into the bedroom. I heard the ruffle of pillows and quilt from the room and took myself into the living room to perch myself on the edge of the couch. I put the drinks away before coming back to a heap of thinking.

There was the time still trapped in my brain. Just after university. I hugged everyone, exchanged contact details, shook my tutors' hands and came home to a big warm homely hug. I did get homesick at some points while at university but it was a journey of independence, a necessary journey, and now I had nothing to do.

I was invited to a little pub meetup in London a year after we had left our academic trials. I met with all my friends and folks from then. I had *Sawdust* in my brain and it was going okay. It made up most of the smalltalk. Everyone else had become accountants, government cretins, psychologists, journalists, writers, artists, models, photographers and everything inbetween. I had failed them all. Now they all had girlfriends and boyfriends, now they were all settling into their happy endings while I continued to wander some social wilderness of my own devising. *Maybe that's how it should always be.* I became the sad story that everyone talks about at reunions or random chats or behind my back. I pictured my long-lost friends sat at Parisian bars and cafés milling about the chatter over coffee while the sun soaks the cobble. *Where did Mark end up?* One of them will ask. They simply don't know *and neither do I.*

A while ago I bumped into a young, pretty girl from my school at some literary convention. She was talking about where she had ended up. It turned out this young little sprite, sweet as a pepper, had ended up as a world revered hotshot writer. She'd used a pen name so I didn't notice as she was leapfrogging me and jumping into a happy ending of literary Eden. She branched out into other media and in a year's time won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay.

I read her poetry a while ago.

It made me cry.

Still stuck in thought I started casting my eyes around the room. I ended up walking aimlessly around the place. I picked up a *Gatsby* and started flicking through pages, flicking through memories of reading it. I encountered it first at school in a literature class. I read it at a very weird time in my life. I felt myself entangled in the story, I still somewhat do. Whenever friends and teachers talked about specific passages I had to hold back the emotion. It must have just been the right book at my weird time.

I opened up the laptop and begin the most crushing and ethereal of experiences. Did I mention earlier that writing was like that? How it's about skirting the sub-conscious or something pretentious like that? Try doing it when you're tired. I don't know what drove me to start writing and rewriting and just spinning off new outlines and character bits. There's a sudden jolt as you become this pretty pristine sense of self after you've been typing in an all-nighter. You end up writing random paragraphs, skipping scenes and forgetting your plotting. It's pretty okay.

Perhaps I wanted to torture myself to sleep. I decided to look online for some music. I usually write to ambience or silence. I write best to the raindrops though, I feel like I'm in tune with a natural rhythm. The heartbeat of geology.

I stopped typing and listening, just switching off to the sounds of nothing. I rested my arms on my knees and started tapping away just trying to concentrate on something. I was filling in some of the scenes in *Trimalchio* trying to make sure that the protagonist's motivations were clear. There was some experimentation to be had with presenting it visually, now that I had a stage all to myself.

It's weird the things you remember at the tireddest of times. I can still recount quite a lot of my thoughts that occur just before I nod off to sleep. They're usually about the futility of my existence or death or whether or not I have a bauble shaped tumour in my skull. This time, however, my thoughts reversed into something from my childhood. I don't know what the memory entailed but it made me smile. It made me happy. That was probably the only flicker of happiness I'd had for a good while.

At this point I should tell you how I'm writing this. I'm simply writing it while sat on a Cuban beach. This sentence, literally this one, was written on the back of a prostitute in the streets of Havana. Do I plan everything I write? Do I truly wish to put myself in my story? I'm not sure. This is why I see literature, and any 'arts' based subjects, more of a study of the sub-conscious than the conscious. As a writer myself currently writing these very sentences I do admit to liking play with storytelling. It helps to mask the terrible grammar and the fact I'm breaking the fourth wall. I shan't even mention how on Earth any of these events logically took place nor even hint towards what's real and what is not. That's up to you to decide. If we should meet *dear* reader I would happily engage in debate about whether you think I did indeed almost fall asleep in some New York studio apartment faded noises fading from memory and a supermodel falling asleep in my bedroom without me for company. Then we can move on to more important matters such as your breasts. If you're a woman obviously. Manboobs don't do it for me sadly.

Unfortunately I did not fall asleep. I was half-awoken by a buzz of my smartphone. I ended up having a half-panic attack and coughing my sleepiness away.

'Who is this?'

'Sup man! Thought we could talk the casting!' It was Franks. I heard Gerry shout at him in the distance of the conversation.

'Now?' I checked the clock. It was eight in the morning. I'd been sat for a few hours on the cusp of consciousness.

'Yeah man! I got (Brent and Rex) on the line! Let's shoot the shit! Speakerphone motherfucker!'

'Are you high or something?'

'High on life man! We're gonna get this shit rolling!!'

'Fine.'

'So let's talk casting right now!'

'Okay.'

'Did you just wake up or something?'

'Not exactly.'

'What do you um mean not exactly?'

'I haven't been to bed. I can't actually go to bed.'

'Why so?'

'There's a woman in the.'

That was the moment I realized I should've kept my mouth shut.

Chapter Five

If I were to tell you about the wonders that sleep deprivation has on the body then we'd be here all night. Literally.

One of the wonders of being half asleep, that I do have time to tell, is that you're not entirely responsible for your actions. Your subconscious takes the wheel while your body gives way to sleeping. The movements you make become fuzzy while you force your mind awake and that tends to be the place where things get ugly. Or grumpy in my case. Sometimes grugly.

'Gerry. No.' I said.

'Come on man! We all agree it has to be Kerry!' Franks said for him.

'That's my point. You all agree.'

I shifted the laptop about my knees while knocking my elbows about the bath's ceramic rim. There wasn't any water, don't worry, but I just needed an isolated place to be yelled at and my writer's hovel wasn't being nice to me today. Or tonight. Depending on your interpretation.

'Gerry, for the last time I am not having my Daisy Buchanan be some big buxom blonde without an inch of talent.'

'Without an inch of talent? Isn't that uh the entire point of Daisy?'

I ignored him. 'Head to toe she has nothing. Nadda. No gut about acting or flair or style, she's wooden as Beech' *More oak, surely?*

'So who would you suggest then?'

'The other blonde, what's her um name-'

Twas tough recounting her audition, *dear* reader. She was nervous, shaking and shivering. Then the words spilled out and this little angelic voice with this quirk of accent suddenly washed the floor.

'Sylvia?'

'No. no the-th ah other other blonde.'

'Oh dude!' Brent suddenly lurched into full-shout mode, 'Fucking dude! Motherfucker!'

'I think Brent agrees with you.' Gerry said, and then after a slight cough, 'Motherfucker.'

'So he thinks the other other blonde should be Daisy?'

'Yeah right up top!' Brent was now yelling at the top of his lungs.

Before Brent could yodel his tune, I sighed and fiddled around with the shampoo bottles around me. Someone told me once that there are more carcinogens in soap than there is in cola. I find that ironic. Oh look at me going off topic.

I started typing a little on the laptop; I was still tampering with the script. I needed to make sure it wasn't just Fitzgerald's masterpiece with some contemporary commentary glazed over it and an unfunny side-plot involving Gatsby trying to find the perfect hat.

Funny hat. An orange one.

Foreshadowing!

'The draft of the script Mark.' Gerry said.

'What about it?'

'I've read through it.'

'I'm editing it right now.'

'Oh right. Good. Because I've noticed something quite glaring.'

'Go on.'

'There's a short section in act four where Gatsby and Nick are chatting.'

'Yes?'

'And they're chatting and shit and it doesn't stop.'

'What do you mean? That's the point of a long conversation.'

'How so?'

'Well if you were to space it with action in between, as is the usual case, then you'd distract the audience from them speaking to one another. It's uh a very heartfelt moment.'

'It's where Gatsby tells Nick about his trip back to where he met Daisy.'

'Yeah or ah something like that.'

'But there's nothing in between. Just words. Bit um dull don'tcha think?'

'Not dull at all. It's meant to show something.'

'Like what?'

'That Gatsby is a sentimental and maybe even self-obsessed soul.'

'I don't think it is. I'd like to think it's not about himself. I think the scene's more about the pain of being in love.'

'And how do you know that?'

'Well I've experienced this pain Mark. As have so many people. It's too obvious to ignore.'

'That's just what you're see-'

'Hold on my portrait just fell. Let me adjust it.' Frankie suddenly interjected.

'...'

'Just one sec!'

'...'

'There I'm back. Sorry. It just fell behind the filing cabinet. We were talking about the long conversation in act four?'

'Yes.'

'What does it reveal about Nick then?'

'That in some senses he has to suffer Gatsby's company.'

'Just maybe put something in there. Like small stuff. Nods, leaning on tables, drinking.'

'Fine.'

I almost drank the shampoo bottle when I remembered my glass of poor alcohol was in the other room. I had been many hours awake. Spelling mistakes and grammar issues would probably start to sweep in. Short sentences too. They help me.

Wonders at this point began to emerge, like when exactly did my life take a turn for the weird? I was sat in a bathtub glaring in and out of consciousness, talking

to some steroid junkies and my homosexual best friends while writing an adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. The phone started beeping, Frankie and company said their goodbyes.

Just before the phone turned off Frankie decided to pry me open.

'The woman Mark.'

'What about her?'

'Did you fornicate?'

'No I did not.'

'Is it a romantic pursuit? Are you just not into it? She not the prettiest pig in the pig yard?'

'I'm not sure I'd um allow any pig to sleep in my bedroom, let alone an ugly pig.' I thought for a moment, 'That somewhat suggests I have standards when it comes to pigs.'

'Just think about it man. Ta-ta!'

The obnoxious send-off from Frankie was what sent me spiralling into sleep. I lounged out and let the laptop's fan whistle with its whistling whirs. I was drifting. or at least I think I was. and then suddenly my brain decided to be an asshole. It's the weird part of going to sleep in which your stream of conscious decides to fire into lightspeed, that everything comes at once. It's a writer's curse that your best scraps of dialogue come at a quarter to midnight when you're nodding off and you have to get up and turn on a light to scribble it down on a post-it note. There are some nights where you start writing and don't stop, some nights where you can't write, some where you think about thinking or just wonder. Just wonder.

I started to remember again.

Frankie had called me to come up to New York for a meeting. He booked the airline tickets wrong and I ended up in Washington over two weeks before. I asked him if he wanted to just hang out but he and Gerry were sorting something out. He gave me his credit card at the airport. I remember seeing him all pale and on the cusp of crying after every syllable. I ended up deciding to just wander. Away from comforting my friend who, no doubt, was having difficulties in a relationship. My lack of emotional connection with Frankie will become more relevant later in this story.

Throughout those weeks I toured the memorials, the museums and the libraries. I flirted with the college students and watched them giggle at my British accent. I started to wonder about what the Dutch sailors would have thought upon coming across this land, this fresh breast of new earth. Actually that's not true, that's straight from *Gatsby*. Even now I have the last page stuck to the wall of my Havana hotel. I still do wonder what they would have thought. What they would have wondered about their beginnings. This land. This poor land. Gettysburg, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Manhattan, The Cuban Missile Crisis, Silicon Valley, the rise and tide of Hollywood filmmaking, the gorrarn Kennedy assassination and the moment at which man landed on the moon. Another fresh breast of new earth.

Wealths of history can't be found just in the blood soaked in the soil; it's not just wars and battles, it's just *mankind*. Its bones, arguments and speeches and conversations are all now rusted leftovers in the ground. Someone somewhere

fancied someone somewhere. I pictured people in those old wooden nineteenth century houses just looking at each other down the hallway. Maybe one's a humble servant, not much to look at, and she's ogling some ginger-haired master who swaggers down the hall. He's being good to her. He's the only one who smiles at her. I thought about this while sat in some library. About how universal those specific human experiences are. Not many people from the nineteenth century would ever know what fast food tastes like or what a laptop is or what it's like to try and untangle your earphone wires yet they know what love is. They know what hate is. They know what it's like to let go even if I don't.

I wandered around the East Coast for the last week or so trying to find some fruit for my creative endeavours. I'd been working on some short stories, pushing some journalism out too, but my planned novels and novellas and big works of fiction hadn't happened. Without an agent I really had nothing to work with. I remember pacing around the Lincoln memorial. It was a foggy noon and the dark was still out. I scribbled halves of conversations I overheard. The usual stuff.

That notebook is still lying around here somewhere.

I had bought a sandwich but didn't feel hungry; I ended up giving it to a homeless chap. I was in the unfortunate situation of then turning around to find another homeless looking at me with a lump in their throat. I mumbled something about 'sharing is caring' and went on my way up to New York to Frankie's office complex.

At this point if you want to ask exactly what Frankie did to make him so stinking rich. Um. Well. I'd tell you if I knew.

It took me awhile to find a place to just sit down in Manhattan. I ended up writing something about my observations of the people there - they went about their day and did their things – and just sipping some cold coffee along the way.

You may understand this to be a simple work of regurgitating memories, a simple biography. It's not how I see things. To me this is a story. It's a shame that you'd probably never understand my mother or Frankie or any person to whom I have a relationship with. To you they probably read like characters and my relationship with them pre-determined by my authorship. I've been told this is a terrible way to establish character sympathy given the protagonist and the reader should develop relationships at the exact same pace. I think that's a horrible way to go about things. Everyone you meet has a family, everyone you know has a friend you don't know about and everyone has relationships and secrets before and after you. I'm no character, I'm a human being- heck I'm even a *writer*.

Scribblings were written on some pages on my notebook while I was seated in Manhattan hearing the buzz of everyday existence. I recalled conversations from other book, scribbles of sentences and even notes and characters. I wondered where they began and ended. Did a book end when you put it down? Does this sentence strictly end when it's finished with a question mark? It can be read again and again. Maybe that says something about writing or reading or life in general. I don't know what it is. It'd probably be something pretentious or some over-cooked

didactic bullshit or some heavy crapcake leftist allegory like any Stephen King work post-2000.

Sorry, Stephen King.

When Frankie told me he wanted *Gatsby* converted to the modern day then I was on it like a hash brown on a Sunday morning. After hearing of payment of course. As I began writing the best *Gatsby* that's ever been gatsbied I came across some words in Fitzgerald's masterpiece. They stuck out to me like sore thumbs. I can't tell you what they are because it would give away the rest of this story. Stories, often too often, tell us too much about ourselves. You'll find out soon enough.

When I found these words then everything seemed to shift. The actors we hired with their faces and bodies started to become my projections of the novel. Whenever I read *Gatsby* I was now imagining them. Or was I imagining *Trimalchio*? The line between the two was melding and what is 'reading' anyway? Reading an historical source and reading a novel are completely different. One is about facts and analyses whereas the other is imagining a set of characters go about something. Whenever I read a speech by Nixon then I do recall his voice in my head, I don't project some curly haired British guy into an environment and then feed words into his mouth.

When Frankie called me on that cold Manhattan day we discussed where to meet and what to eat and how things had been. There was something missing from his chitter chatter though. Something that just didn't feel right. He still had a misty quality to his voice; I learned later that Gerry had left him due to an argument about bread. They made up later, obviously, but there was something else missing. There was just something missing out of all of this. It wasn't Frankie's fault, it was mine.

There was a longing for the taste of English rain, I missed the feeling of lying in on a Saturday morning, I missed waking up and feeling time is drip-fed instead of coming at me like a tide and, most of all, I missed my dreams. This wasn't homesickness but a special type of sickness. It was remembering what it was like before I remembered things. The dreams about being an author and a writer-guy in a big glass mansion with a wife with ample features and a mouth like Plato. Not literally like Plato - that would be weird - but you know what I mean. I missed wondering about tomorrow before it became today.

'Mark?'

Sleep hadn't claimed me. I was in my half-wide-awake state of recalling memories and being pretentious. Melanie was there just looking at me half-closed-asleep.

'Hello.' I said back.

'I can't really sleep.' She said.

'What time is it?'

'About twelve I think. Why didn't you sleep on the couch?'

'That would be just too normal.'

'True.'

'Do you want me to call you a cab or bake you a cake or something?'

'I can't imagine you baking anything.'

'I was baking before you were ever conceived.'

I wasn't sure if I was appearing as a badass or a flamboyant asshole that second. I'm not sure what a flamboyant asshole even looks like. It'd probably have a bowtie and tassles and *oh god*.

'I can call my own cab. Thanks for the night.' She said.

There was an awkward pause like there was business still left to be done.

'I'm a little bit disappointed you didn't um dip your biscuit.' She continued
Initiate funny mode.

'Tea was cold.'

'Are you saying you don't find me attractive?'

'I'm attracted to people who are attractive.'

'Well done.' She even did a little bit of a fake clap. She was so obviously trying to hide a smile. Damn actresses and their closeted emotions.

The laptop closed as I took a step out. The battery had died a little while ago. She offered her hand to help me out of the bath. I shook my head and tripped straight out of the rim and hit my head on the sink.

It wasn't that hard of a hit so I just laughed it off while she asked if I was okay while my body began to wobble.

This was the tiredness drowning in.

'I'll ring you a cab.' I said.

I threw the laptop on the couch and tried to walk over to the phone. I ended up collapsing on the floor again. She was laughing this time. I couldn't help but just look back and see that gorgeous face bellowing the laughter.

'I'm not sure the floor is a phone Mark.'

'Floors can be phones. Trust me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Trust me.'

I waited for a while with my legs crossed just waiting for the joke to outstay its welcome. I got a smile out of her. Enough.

'I'm not sure why I didn't sleep with you last night. I was tired enough.' I said, knowing full well why I didn't commit myself to coitus.

'I kind of just assumed if you ended up between the sheets that I'd be doing most of the legwork.'

'I wouldn't mind you humping my snoring corpse by the way.'

'Oh that takes the fun out of it.'

'I had no idea I had let a rapist into my house.'

'*You have no idea.*' She gave a grin with her teeth and skipped off to the phone. She dialled a number and asked for the address. I said I didn't know it. She found a letter with my name on it though and just read from that name and all. I finally gathered myself from the floor and fell into the couch face first.

'Mark. I'm going now.' I heard her say.

There I composed myself and found my glasses fall off my head. I looked around my blurry world and saw her looking down at my sprawl. I wiped my eyes.

'I had a time, Melanie.'

'Time is good.'

'I'm sorry that things didn't occur.'

'Don't worry. Most folk are intimidated by the fact I fall for them in the first place,' She moved her eyes a little bit in thought, 'girls instead tend to just dance with my shoulders, hail a cab to take me home and then forget about me after a few-'

Somehow I had brought up a bad relationship. Her voice went from witty banter to pained nostalgia in a matter of minute syllables

'Sorry.' I said.

'It's okay.'

'I know how it is.'

I think she hugged me. Or pecked me on the cheek. I couldn't quite see let alone feel for all the tired in my body at that moment.

'For the record I'm still available for another night like this.'

'I'm not uh sure what that means but okay.'

'It means that I do want to see you again to eat cake and stuff.' *Sleep with me?*

When I was younger I thought 'to sleep with' was just to snooze off with someone. Even hearing it in the early days of high school I just assumed the same. I didn't think it was particularly cool or noteworthy to claim you slept with that girl or that boy. Even if they were pretty, all you did was fall asleep next to someone. Then I un-idioted myself in the later years. It's a weird euphemism really. I much prefer dipping biscuits or landing your eagle or having a penis like China, you know, *mass produc'in'*.

Or hoarding precious Earth metals if you want to get very technical.

'I might one day take you up on your offer. I might not.' I fumbled my head and remembered a thought. 'Don't mention this night to the others.'

'I thought you already told your boyfriend that you were fake-hooking up with me?' I assumed she meant Frankie.

'I did accidentally tell him. I expect to get pats on the back soon.'

She patted me on the back just then. I almost fell into her chest. *Almost?*

'I shall see you at the rehearsals.'

'How do you know you've got the part?'

She smiled.

'I not-slept with you.'

She swaggered off out of the hall. It was a shame I didn't watch her curves sway on account of me not having glasses and all. I guess there's some things we're not meant to remember.

With her passing I went forth to venture back into my Manhattan daydreams as I fell back into the couch. I even started to drift off to sleep. I feared I would fall asleep just mid-thought or someth

A mere paragraph later my phone shocked me awake. I grabbed my glasses and went into the bathroom scooping it up and bracing myself for Frankie's voice.

'Mark!' Came the voice.

'Person!' Came my own.

'Rehearsals! Three days from now! Manuscripts!'

'It still needs uh work, Franks.'

'Really? I've read all it again and it is awesome.'

'You thought *Sawdust* was a good book.'

'It is!'

'Whatever.' I was too tired to let Frankie try and be my friend at that particular moment.

We mumbled goodbyes and I fell again to the floor in a fit of sleep. I ended up crawling to the couch to try and at least find something comfortable. I saw the letter that Melanie had read off to tell the cab to come here. I hadn't even read it myself.

I grabbed it and something else fell from underneath it.

I took one look and slapped myself into slumber.

Chapter Six

It was at some point during the nine hour rehearsal that I realized that I would be doing all the work. It wasn't that the directors hadn't shown up, and Frankie later told me they disappeared off into Las Vegas, but it was the very fact that I had to hold so much on my own. I came bearing my laptop and a whole pile of bags under my eyes. Narcoleptic tendencies and sleep deprivation don't mix well. *At least Napoleon got a good night's rest.*

I sat down on the front row and typed as the actors played their parts and spun their lines. I nodded along and helped them if they forgot. They were otherwise making a play independent of a playwright.

At some points I walked up to the stage to display the action I wanted or the emotion that was needed or to hilariously scold the incompetent stagehands as the props for Gatsby's mansion were laid upside down. *The same thing happened with Blade Runner in Tyrell's office. The columns were laid upside down and Ridley reportedly made them spend another five hours trying t-*

Melanie gave me a smile when she walked on stage for her scenes. It sort of broke the illusion. I went back into the script and wrote 'JORDAN BAKER NOW HAS A SMILING DISABILITY' just to make the point clearer. She still kept doing it. We were in the midst of rehearsal trying to weave some kind of play together, some kind of respectful modernization of an aged novel written by an old man. I was a youngling gleaming up at God.

That's if God wrote *The Great Gatsby*, which he didn't because he doesn't exist.

The stage was playing the scene in which Nick meets Gatsby for the first time and the actors decided to take a break halfway through. A few of them pulled up chairs and took off their jackets. Gatsby (played by Nick) even went off to grab a soda. I was too busy typing to pay any attention to what Nick or Jordan or Daisy were saying. At some point Wolfsheim wandered on stage, even though the rehearsals for his scenes weren't until tomorrow.

'Mark!'

I didn't look up from the screen. Probably trapped in my writing.

'Mark!'

I still tried not to look up.

'Mark!'

Stay working.

'Mark!'

From the screen I shot my eyes up to the stage. *Jord*-Melanie waved at me. I nodded back and continued typing.

'Mark come join us and stop ogling pornography.' She said.

'I wouldn't be doing that anyway, the wife in here is terrible.' I said.

I decided to bite my productivity and vaulted onto stage. Or should I say that I painstakingly jumped and was half on it. I teetered my torso towards the stage centre, dropping my glasses, and then heaved myself up in a crawl.

'What are you doing anyhow?' She said.

Everyone's eyes were now on me. I noticed all their costumes up close now. Golden dresses and airbrushed tuxes.

'I'm um rewriting a few scenes.'

'While we perform them?'

'Yeah. It's the only way really.'

'That's not how you write a play.'

'It is.'

I finally picked up my glasses.

'Not exactly.' Said a new voice.

I turned to face Daisy Buchanan peering up at me. She had a husky tone to her voice.

'Sorry, I've got a bit of a cold.'

I could see the whispers of illness under her eyes. She was sat on a little deck chair just watching me with her pretty little face.

'It's how I work. I change scenes while they happening.' I said. 'I'm a writer, that's what I do.'

'That's not a way to go about it,' she flicked her hair, 'given that things that happened stay the same.'

'That's true, but this is a play. It's not static. It's uh like an unsolved Rubik's cube.'

Movements came from me as I tried to give her a sense of what I meant. She just gave a light little smile back. Melanie got up from her chair as if I was inviting her to dance or something.

'It's not exactly kind on us though. Our performances have already happened.'

'Rehearsals. Not performance. Opening night is still eons away.'

'It's still unfair. It's like they were pointless if you're just changing our lines.'

I gave some thought as I stopped moving. I shot Jordan a glance.

'How about I start yelling out the new lines?' I said.

'What if we disagree with them.' Daisy said.

'Then we can argue about them.' Jordan barged in.

My feet jumped off the state as the cast of the scene finally flushed onto the set. Gatsby (played by Nick) and Nick finished their soft drinks and threw them with eagle eyed accuracy straight into a recycling bin near me.

I gave a clap in hope for their attention. The familiar bite of anxiety started to rise.

'Some of you are wondering why I'm the only non-cast member here. I'm not a homeless man who just found out there's a warm little theatre and wandered in. I'm the writer of those words in your mouth. Most of you probably already know that. I just didn't introduce myself earlier because you all looked a bit too busy not being yourselves.'

'I've been changing your lines while you've been performing in front of me. Nothing too drastic but little tweaks to make the narrative make sense in a modern

context,' some of the actors started whisper-talking to each other, 'and some of you will be learning more changes than others.'

I grabbed my laptop and balanced it on the edge of my fingers.

'I'll yell out your lines after you say them if they need changing. Okay?'

Some of them nodded, some of them didn't care and walked off. It wasn't their scene anyway.

'Okay. On with the show. The same scene. Repeat!' *I am the greatest director who ever lived!*

Theatre has always appeared weird to me. Normal faced people swagger on stage with lines and riddles and make-up, they say things and do things and then leave. It's like walking into a story. *Trimalchio* embodied this. The characters were based off whatever scraps of things I could remember about the actors. I still like to preserve some tracing paper of humanity. It's why I write really.

Gatsby and Nick wandered onto the wood. Chairs and tables were fumbled off-stage and the floodgates of extras were pulled and then covered up. The room was packed with people mouthing lines. I toyed earlier with having them whisper and glare at Gatsby while he trundled about with his dollar-bill cornershop swagger but it interfered with the lines the main cast were saying. Practicality had never mattered until now.

'Your face is familiar.' Said Nick.

I grabbed the laptop and looked up at them performing. One of them shot me a glance seeing the cogs in my head turn.

'Weren't you in the Third Division during th-'

'Wait.' I shot straight into the conversation between them. 'How about *oddly* familiar?'

'Okay we'll try that.' They said together.

I walked around the edge of the stage as the scene replayed again.

'Your face is *oddly* familiar.' Said Nick.

'Weren't you in Third Divisi-' started Gatsby, 'Try Thirty-Third Battalion, sounds more modern.' I interjected; he sighed and continued, 'Weren't you in the Thirty-Third Battalion?'

'Why, yes. I was Ninth Mach- wait the line doesn't make any se-'

'Already changing it.'

Typing comes clearer to me than any other skill in my life, but I also type very loudly. They kept shaking their heads, even whispered something awful into each other's faces. *They* didn't think I was listening.

'Try Ninth Regular Regiment.' I said slowly.

'That doesn't make any sense. There's no ninths of regular regiments.' Nick said standing up.

'Okay then uhh try-.' I fumbled around with the keys. 'Try-'

'How about.' Gatsby coughed and went back to his voice, 'Something about just being an infantryman?'

I paused typing and looked up.

'Could um work. Try it.'

They both made a look and went back to their poses with a shift in their eyebrows.

'Your face is oddly familiar.' Gatsby said.

'Weren't you in the Thirty-Third Battalion during the war?'

'Why, yes, I was a regular infantryman.'

Glances of approval were shot at me. I nodded.

'I was in the Seventh Inf-' I typed and they looked at me to correct them. I shook my head while pressing backspace – 'I was in the Seventh Infantry until June oh-six. I knew I'd seen you somewhere before.'

They played around with the drinks.

'Did you ever visit a place outside Paris called Montague?' Nick said.

'The city?' Nick replied.

'No, little village just off've the-the umm.' Gatsby said.

They looked at me.

'Little village just off've the motorway.' I said.

They nodded.

'Hold on that sounds like bullshit.' I said.

The wifi came in hand as I searched around for a town outside of Paris. Then I remembered that the war I was writing about was set in the Middle-East. *Why in the name of all that is fuck would they be in Paris? Shooting Frenchmen doesn't help. Unfortunately.*

'Hey, Mark why would they um b-' they'd caught on.

'I know. Just say something else like,' I began yarning, 'did you ever visit a little lake outside of Kabul called-' *Some quick Googling* 'Qargha.'

'Alright.'

The scene was reset.

'Your face is oddly familiar.' Gatsby said. Again.

'Weren't you in the Thirty-Third Battalion during the war?'

'Why, I was, I was a regular infantryman.'

'I was in the Seventh Infantry until June oh-six. I knew I'd seen you somewhere before.'

They gulped down their drinks a little. It looked like malt whiskey but it was actually apple juice. Appearances can be deceiving.

'Did you ever visit a lake just outside of Kabul called Qargha?'

'I don't think I did.'

Gatsby swayed his drink around in his glass and then shot Nick a fresh glance. A smile of confident favour the likes of which that Nick had never seen before, never performed before.

'I have a new old-fashioned hydroplane just down at the docks, old sport.'

I almost yelled. They shot me weird glances and sighs before I started furiously typing.

'Why would Gatsby start calling him old sport this early?'

'You wrote it that way Mark.' Nick said.

'Did I? You know that for fact?'

'It's in the old script. Trust me.'

The gent slowly gravitated towards a chair on the side and picked up one of the manuscripts. His was covered in felt tip scribbles and coffee stains. He flicked to one of the pages and read from it. He was wrong. I hadn't written "old sport", I'd written "old friend". Gatsby didn't name Nick "old sport" for a few scenes still.

'Sorry. I didn't know.'

'It's okay.' Hiding my triumph.

'So I still say old sport?'

'No! No!' I put the laptop down, 'Why on Earth would you do that?'

'I don't know, that's what the online sum-'

He hadn't read the book. *He hasn't read the fucking book.*

'I'm half-tempted to fire you.'

'I'm sorry, I'll try harder. I know I'll try harder. I know the whole damn thing backwards, Mark, you don't have to read the source materials to know the story.'

'Really? I think it's mandatory. Nay, it is mandatory. You, all of you really,' I opened up the conversation, 'All of you need to read the novel otherwise you don't *know* this play. You wouldn't know Jack about Jill.' What relevance does that have to *The Great Gatsby*?

Sat down I waved my hand for them to continue. This went on for an hour or so, spent on the same scene, as I slowly refined it to what I exactly want. By the end of it all, and into the next scene, everyone hates my guts. The whole goddamn cast keeps shooting glances of pure angst right at me. I don't entirely blame them. It's just human nature, and human beings are just growths of fleshbits and cognitive fuckery. Nothing special.

Melanie walks onto the stage and steps into Jordan Baker.

'Having a gay time now are we?' She said.

A stifled giggle emerges underneath me but everyone just looks at me with vicious eyes. Melanie gives Gatsby a look of twinkle while everyone casually scolds me with their visions.

At some point they start talking straight to me and the play falls apart. We're just talking in a circle or, rather, they're all talking to me all at once. They keep asking and asking and prodding. Frankie calls at one point to invite me to a terrible evening at his penthouse which I *gladly* accept. He asks me a few things but I just ignore most of his questions. He tells me that Melanie has been texting him throughout the rehearsals. A slight raw tone in his voice indicates he's not too happy with me.

They're asking questions. *Why why why!* I blame the money. They just haven't sussed it out yet. That there's something else, some other reasoning.

Sat in a chair on the actual stage I started to field more questions. The whole cast keeps whispering to each other and looking at me. Some are sat down on the floor, others are leaning against the wall and others realize their work is over and are about to head off home. Some of them are even trying to play down a snigger. There's a joke and I just might be the punchline.

'Doesn't exactly answer the question.' Gatsby said, downing a soft drink.

'You were asking me about why I'm here-'

'No, we asked you *why Gatsby*.'

I could've told them that it was forced upon me. That's the truth. I could, however, have bent it to whatever I wanted. *Gatsby* could become *Marksby* and be all about my life.

Melanie and Nick (the one who plays *Gatsby*) kept giving each other these funny looks. They kept laughing at each other's jokes. Obviously everyone laughs at a good joke but she's laughing at his especially. I can tell. I saw 'it' in her eyes, and at some point she starts playing with her hair while talking to hi- *are you fucking kidding me?*

It doesn't matter. I'm not attracted to her, just curious. Curious! I'm more concerned with the play! The show must go on! That old cliché will save me and my- I realized at this point that something has changed. Is it the date? It is coming closer to 'the day'. I should've probably just ran, called in sick until then and a little while after stopped going outside again. It's all I can do. I didn't want them to notice but it seems I also *do* kind of want someone to notice that I'm not a heartless schmuck. That's all my writing has ever been about.

'I'm doing *Gatsby* because Frankie told me to do *Gatsby*.'

'Is that the real reason?' Melanie suddenly dived into the chitter-chatter.

I glanced at her. *Did I say something during our drunken escapade? Did I tell her the hard-boiled sweet truth?*

'Yes.'

'So we're essentially performing for someone who doesn't have his heart in the play.' One of them said under their slurps of cola

The temptation to say something almost overcame me. I could feel the opportunity for conversation slowly dripping away. That sensation? It's terrible. It's awful. The feeling in your gut hangs on like fingernails on a chalkboard roughly converted to emotive response. Every single little inch of me was craving to say something. The people. They were gathering themselves up. They were leaving. *They'll never know.*

Smaller talk between them would now revolve around how much of an asshole I am. How much they noticed I'm swearing. How I kept moving in between tenses in the middle of conversation and, more importantly, how that makes me a bad writer.

I decided to say something. Really fast.

'Oh I fucking do have my heart in this story. Almost literally. Yes I just so happen to display myself as an angry, bitter man who keeps throwing lines at you but it's increasingly pathetic how none of you notice *how I look*. How I literally *look* everytime *Gatsby* or someone mentions love or the past or memories or forgetting or just fucking looking on with jealousy. Because that's what I do. That's why I stood in the foyer and watched you all walk in, bid your girlfriends and boyfriends and husbands and other halves goodbye with a happy kiss because I can't have that. I keep trying and trying and it doesn't work. Don't you dare ever question whether I have my heart in this play ever again because it's all I have left.'

Chapter Seven

I descended upwards into the minds of madness. Or at least of the flamboyant. My new haircut was playing itchy; it'd been some trouble waiting an hour in line at the nearest barber while all the homeless crammed around the pennies on the floor. This was Manhattan after all.

I'd spent years and years wishing to journey here.

The elevator was a tin can waiting to burst open with me inside. I held onto the railings while trying to not hurl like a soggy egg tumbling around some child's guts. I've had a long standing fear of elevators since watching some early 90s action flick involving them and terrorism. Since then I tend to take the stairs, even escalators give me the jimmies, but to walk up that many flights to a Manhattan penthouse is out of the question. Out of the mind. Like a knife in a toaster, you just-you just don't.

Walking down these streets, looking out into the omnipresent bay, that looks like a pincer from above, that it doesn't feel like the Manhattan you see in the screens. There's truckloads of lost floating folks, the rats are everywhere and there's people with headphones and screens glued to themselves. Nobody seems to notice the sulfur soaked air or the constant flooding or the leaves melting into the concrete. When I was growing up I imagined Manhattan full of fancy restaurants with men down on their knees proposing to beautiful women in beautiful purple dresses. I didn't think that wandering these streets would fill me with a strange sense of familiarity, sense of a decadent place eating itself bone by bone. Like Germany into the last days of the Second World War with legions of soldiers receding back into black sleep with families and lives and futures crumbling away. Bridges blown in desperation to stop the Soviet infections come crashing into the arteries and infect the blood of the nation. Little girls, who could've had husbands and children, slaughtered with tears and bayonets.

I can see why you failed at stand-up.

It wasn't until a few hours ago before that wandering that I came to terms with a phrase I'd once used to describe one of my memories, in a story I once told, that 'Even buildings can die'.

The tight-fit tuxedo wasn't helping my nausea. Nor was the fact I was holding some fifty-dollar champagne and heading for a million-dollar penthouse gathering full of billion-dollar smiles. I'm not sure why Frankie kept inviting me to them, why he constantly setting me up with disgusting women with pretty faces. Why he always made Gerry pat me on the back to try and buddy up to me. I'm sick of it, but I was sicker of the elevator by the time the doors chimed open.

Sweat was clogging up my new haircut by the time I busted out of the cage. My glasses almost fell off and I wobbled a little. I breathed a lot slower and thought that I'd no longer be in a steel tube. I will no longer be like the packaged peanuts in aluminium containers floating their way from coast to coast thousands of miles above ground.

'Mark! Man! I didn't think you'd make it!' Frankie shouted from across the room, shimmying towards me with a champagne glass between his fingers.

He hugged me like friends don't and then patted me on the back like biz folks do. He signalled twice for Gerry and a drink for me. He shoved it in my hand and took the champagne bottle.

'I thought you forget what happens when I become unreasonably intoxicated?' I said.

'Tonight! Tonight! Tonight there are no limits!' His breath stank.

He wandered back and gestured for me to follow. The walls were completely glass save for girders in between the panels. The floor was marble, sheened to reflective perfection as if we could discern our own acne by a simple glance at our feet tucked into our expensive shoes, hidden from expensive decay. The ceiling fans were painted gold, the jewellery hanging in places were all glowing with gold ribbons. The bar in the centre of the room was made out of mosaic gold. Gold gold gold. You could've sworn the Aztecs had been plundered again. There were a few people wandering about. There was a group of three; a man in a tuxedo who nodded at me with his glasses, two women with blue dresses cut from the same cloth and brown eyes from the same genetic broth. There were people with monocles, biologists I think, discussing the 'mantis shrimp' which is capable of cracking open clams with a kick of its claws. I think they were probably joking but I'm still not sure.

Gerry came to pat me on the back and lead me through the lion's den as slow jazz crawled over the conversation saturated air. There were swathes of folks littered throughout the room with chairs, tables and sofas seemingly gravitating towards around them like asteroid belts. Some of them were drinking, no wait, scratch that, they were *all* drinking. All of them.

I knew none of their faces.

'Frankie.' I said, without a hint of irony.

'Mark! I really didn't think you'd make it. I assumed you were too busy writing yourself into isolation or madness. Heh.'

Three, maybe four, women surrounded Frankie. Alcohol tends to have this fungal like effect on your memory. Their dresses. Their dresses? *What did they look like?* Simple yellows, standard greens, plain blues and basic oranges. I think. Two redheads, one blonde and some kind of mixed brunette bob. They all looked like photocopies of Victoria Secret models and they were just there with their hands around Franks.

The perks of being homosexual.

I almost muttered that under my breath.

'This is Tiffany!' Frankie gestured.

'Hello!' Came the mouth.

'This is Kelly!'

'Hello!' Came the face.

'This is Tilney!'

'Hello!' Came the eyes.

'This is Jane!'

'...' Came the shaking hands.

Handshakes were exchanged as I tried to remember who said what. I either couldn't make out their names under the jazz and conversation throughout the room or I was still recovering from my elevator trauma.

You don't know man. You weren't there.

'Mark's a writer! He writes things!' Frankie went to sit down behind a table as I was left standing awkwardly besides Gerry.

'Really! What have you written?' Spoke the mouth.

My throat cleared a little under the probing question. *Heh probing,*

'Nothing special really.' I said.

'Oh come on! Mark! You've always been something special!' Gerry tried to feign a smile.

'Are you trying to insult him?' One of the women said.

'What do you mean?'

'Like special. Yeah?' She said, 'Like uh I thought he was kinda slow when I first saw him, are you- are you trying to insult him?'

Some of us looked at each other in blind awkward panic.

'Mark's not special like special needs, he's special as in he's a 'unique' writer.'

'Oh right, gotcha.' She said sipping her drink under her flushed face. Or twice as flushed under the heavy make-up.

Some of them smiled at me like dollar bill notes.

'So what kind of um things do you write?' One of the yellow dresses asked.

'Novels, poems, novellas, stories, obituaries...' I said

'Oh cool. Are you working on one right now?'

'Well there's one in the making.'

'Really! What is it! When is it coming out?'

'I'm not sure. There's some difficulties with it coming out like the fact that half of the characters don't turn up to rehearsals.' I said. *Yes, characters. Char-actors, characters. Wordplay. No, they didn't notice.*

The comment flew straight in the face of Frankie. He knew full well how 'well' things were going with *Trimalchio*.

'Mark's one hell of a funny guy too, he's a great uh great man. Sin-single too!' Frankie said with drunken courage.

Some looks from me tried to discern some kind of honesty from Frankie.

'Really?' One of the blues said, 'Tell us a joke.'

For all the jokes to appear in my mind at that specific moment in my history it had to be the worst one imaginable.

'What do you call um a vegetarian prostitute?'

Here we go.

'Answer? A herbivwhore!'

The hilarity punctured the air like the breeze of Chernobyl had just wandered in.

I sipped my awful drink while the awkward washed over us all as Frankie feigned a dishonest laugh.

'Well! I'm gonna get the nibblonians to start passing out the nibbles!' He moved throughout us, shoulders crashed into each of us like a boat against the rocks. *Blimey that's enough similes for today.*

'Hello stranger.'

I knew the voice by the time I had turned my head. Melanie. My Jordan Baker.

She wore a black satin dress, the kind only film stars with heavy make-up wear at their premieres. It had pokadot bits of white down the sides and her face looked like a scoop of the ocean air. By that I mean she had a pretty look about her. Even her voice was full of money. *Pounds sterling.*

Her eye shadow was a bit too heavy, mind you; it looked like she had just caked herself in soot. Though I'm not one to critique fashion sense.

But she looked beautiful. She stood out. It was as if the strange, awkward party had suddenly become a pop-up book.

She was the pop-up obviously.

I don't mean her boobs. Pervert.

'Hello acquaintance.' I said sipping more liquor.

'Hello.'

'So did you uh break in? Did you get invited to show off your Jordan Baker? Are you wishing to copulate with me so angrily?'

I burped.

'Pardon you.'

'Myn hooly pardoun young waferere!'

Chaucer-esque flirtations were usually my thing but she wasn't grinning from the literary referencing for once.

'I was invited. Frankie wanted another-' She looked out at the crowds and then into the bay beyond the glass, '- pretty face to look lost in the swathes of pretty faces.'

'Fair enough. It's why he invited me too.'

We lightly chuckled and went off. I even gathered her a cocktail. I wasn't sure what the attraction was. Or perhaps I was just being incredibly stupid. I had other things to concentrate on, least of all the opportunity to get a *Great* in my *Gatsby* if you know what I mean?

'Do you ever wonder if this will be the moment that you remember last?' She looked at me with her words like a character from a book.

'What do you mean?'

She clutched her straw and stirred it with frustration. The ice churned around the black ocean of drink as she carried on.

'When life's restless rigor finally hits you, when the arrow of time is in your heart.'

'You're speaking in metaphors. I don't do metaphors.'

'What?'

'I'm a writer Heh. Heh.' I do apologize. This is what happened.

I chugged my drink and gobbled another one out of a passing tray.

'I'm serious Mark.' She looked into me, 'What if this is the moment wh-when an old love is holding my hand and the blood is fading and my deathbed creaks.'

'Bit morbid.'

'It's going to happen though. We're all floating our way towards non-existence.'

'Existentialism and cocktails. An evening of the highest pleasantry!'

I skipped over the conversation as her eyes rolled over. Or she sighed. One of those things happened, I'm sure of it.

She was simply speaking into the concrete air. Like we all do really.

'What's got you thinking this way?' I asked.

'I'm seeing Nick.'

I blinked.

'Which one?'

'Gatsby, not Carraway.'

'Jordan and Jay don't get together though? They don't glue. They don't share the same sentences.' I said, 'You know he's even made up his name. If I ever met someone who changed their name once I'd be the I-.'

'Well it happened. I've thought about telling you for a while. He's nice, you know. Very polite' She said.

'Unlike me?' I burped again.

'He's sweet and caring.' She stirred her drink with her finger now.

'I'm not much of a scholar around that subject.'

'They're pretty substantial qualities.' She said, tipping the drink into her mouth.

'Do they have their own footnotes or something?'

She winked at me under the drink and started to wander off.

'I'm going to go float around the small talk. Catch me later- maybe when you're not so *sober*.' She said.

'Make sure no-one gropes you.'

'Why would anyone do that?' She shot a quizzical bullet of a look into my pool of attraction *Gatsby reference Gatsby reference!*

It was because she looked beautiful. I wanted to tell her that because she was beyond the vaguely attractive females currently orbiting the homosexuals in the corner probably discussing where next for their colour-blind dictatorship. I wanted to tell her because she mattered. I wanted to tell her because she was an enchanted object and that she reminded me of Someone.

But I shrugged those thoughts off and went back to my liquor laden daydreams. Like the true shrewd shrew I am.

A few weeks had passed since my outburst at the theatre. She tried comforting me for a little while, even coming over and making me a meal. I ended up just going to my bed for the first time in weeks.

Later on I would tell her about 'my first time'. We'd be on the street outside the Newark Theatre and I must've been full of drink. I told her about it maybe out of a bid to see if she found me cute or if she maybe found something... uh... how did I tell that story anyway...

Freshers week. I think. Obviously. I was throwing away the history textbooks for a seven-day binge. I hadn't expected to 'get' any but my corrosive charm must've worn down someone.

No, I don't remember her name.

But she studied Theology.

We ended up in some dressing closet with dubstep drowning out the half-asleep partygoers all with lectures in the morning. Theology had herself a headband around her golden hair, some denim miniskirt and a pop culture reference t-shirt. Literally, it said 'pop culture reference'. I fell head over heels in testicles with her the moment I saw it.

Remember, I wasn't that old yet.

'You do theology then?' I leaned up against the door to shut it.

'I do. Yes. That's all you've been talking about for the past hour, and how you would do a pornographic adaptation of *Back to the Future*.'

'I was?' I was curious to see how brilliant I had been, 'How would I do it?'

'You'd call it *Butt to the Future*.'

'And?'

'All female cast.'

'And?'

'Something something intercourse?'

I remembered then I didn't have my glasses on and couldn't see her face clear enough. I blinked a few times, maybe out of nerves. I burped too. Out of nerves, again, or high levels of stomach acidity. *Not sure*.

'Well then. We're all alone in here.' I said.

'Yep.'

'And we're both incredibly attractive people.'

I take no pleasure in remembering this, I must add.

'Both?' She said.

'Really?'

'Nothing special, really. Sorry. Cute though.'

She had quite the smile.

'Fine then... where... and I'm an incredibly attractive person.'

'I meant you as in 'cute', dummy.'

'Dummy? I'm not the one doing theology, Theology.' I said, pointing.

'You can't even remember my name?'

I'd seen her and we had shared a word around three days before in some street outside some club somewhere. Teenage romances.

'Honey when you've got a face like mine.' I felt vomit lurch into the back of my tongue. 'You don't need no smarts.'

There passed an awkward silence.

'Should we just get this over with?' She said.

'Huh?'

'Obvious residual sexual tension. Nothing to scavenge a relationship out of, not too keen on the way you talk to me, no sense of real attraction either. Just

something we have to do to get out of this room. Should be okay I guess. Like squeezing an orange.’ She looked at me. ‘Can’t really do anything with an orange pulp.’

‘I can think of a few things... compost...’ I burped again. ‘Funny hat.’

‘Funny hat? Really?’

She gave a little cute smirk.

‘It would make a pretty funny hat. People could call you Mr Orange like that film or something. Oh I don’t even remember its name,’ I said, burping again. ‘I had no idea I could handle this level of intoxication.’

‘Should I make the first move?’

‘Hold on I’m being funny.’ I said.

She grabbed me and somehow we were making out. Somehow her tongue was inside mine and I’m backing the vomit down my throat to make sure she doesn’t catch a lick. I couldn’t see her eyes. She was doing things to me though. Good things, not ‘your old creepy uncle’ type things.

The funny thing about creationism is that it explains the biggest dick move behind evolution. Literally. Somehow God gifted mankind both the greatest computer on the planet (the brain) and one of the greatest avenues for pleasure (the reproductive organ). God, however, was a dick and thus decided to only give those of male origin just enough blood to power one at a time.

Guess which module was in control just then.

‘This...’ ‘Is..’ ‘My...’ ‘First...’ ‘Time...’ I said between the kisses.

‘Stop talking in ellipses and get on with it.’

I went for her skirt and then for my trousers and then I felt the vomit again and again and then the door started being banged upon and time’s slowing and shaping and tenses becoming forwards and then don’t isn’t wasn’t and she’s whispering shit into my ear and then I realize I didn’t have protection and and... but then I remember full stops exist. All goes slower and I didn’t feel in control anymore. I gave it up.

I took a breather from giving her mouth surgery with my tongue.

‘Theology? Right.’

‘Yes?’ She said frustrated.

Don’t do this.

‘I’d pluck your forbidden fruit anyway.’

There’s a few seconds.

‘Are you seriously doing this? Look, there’s protection in my purse. Let’s just get this over with. We have to get the business done so everyone outside can pat us on our backs and butts. I kinda want to *at least* make out with the other cutie in the corner. He looks like he actually has forearms for on-’

‘Honey your thighs are like St. Peter’s gate... something something I’ve died and gone to heaven, so open ‘em up.’ She gave me a horrible look. *One more to sweeten the deal.* ‘I wanna crucify you so hard.’

‘Jesus Christ! Do you even know what you’re saying!’

I unbuckled my trousers while she sighed into my face.

‘That’s my name baby and I rise on the third day.’

That was the night I realized that all of the 'funny' was a coping mechanism, a charming little snake to make sure I had my logic in place at all times. That I could giggle at my own misfortune.

Just like I'm doing now.

Chapter Eight

You know what's funny? The word 'consonants' has more vowels than the word 'vowels'.

I don't know why I said that.

The penthouse party droned on as I drank more heavily, becoming a blur in the blur. I kept looking at Melanie making her way around the groups of people, talking to them slowly and laughing at their half-jokes. I thought of what she had said of Nick, about how nice and manly he was. I couldn't compete with that. I'm no *nice* guy.

'Mark! There's someone I want you to meet!'

Some voice grabbed me and herded me off into a group consisting of an ill woman in a generic blue dress, a man with a clerical collar, the only black man at the party and a six foot seven colossus made out of handsome marble.

'Mark! This is Nelson! He's a writer!' The voice patted this six foot bloke on the back.

I shook hands with the behemoth. I've always had small hands but, with this chap, it was like he could sink all my battleships, the board game obviously, with just one finger.

'Marko! Glad to meet you.' He had this Southern drawl to his voice.

'Pleasant. Most pleasant.' *My British can't compete with that.*

'Gerry and Frankie have told me all about your stuff. About *Trimalchio*?'

'Yes.'

'So you're adapting Fitzgerald's magnum opus?'

'Yes.'

'I think it's horseshit personally.'

His face turned to a smug little curl.

He took a sip of his water. *Wait, water? Wow.*

'Horseshit?' I was somehow intrigued by this.

'Horseshit. Some skinny Western twerp has sexual frustrations and laments about a dead past. He can't keep up with the future.' Nelson looked into me, 'He can't keep up with anything. How can anyone want or even respect that?'

I put on my metaphorical literary critic hat. *Metaphorically.* The clerical collared creep kept glaring at me alongside the only black man.

'We all want to return to the past.'

'Really. You can't repeat the past.'

'Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can.' I almost laughed, 'Gatsby does it-'

'So you think um having a vague romantic relationship with a destructive bitch you went out with for a month over five years is what will cure you of your illness.'

'No but.'

'Relax, Marky.' He pats me on the back looking down at me with his great big linen eyes. 'It's okay to be wrong.'

'I'm not wrong. It's just my opinion. I have a fond attachment to it.'

'Where did you study?'

'Oxford.' I lied.

'Harvard man, myself. English boy are we?'

'Yes.'

'Figures.'

He sipped his water again and said something to the woman.

'Marko. You know who I am right.' The handsome ogre said.

'Nelson.' *Wait did I get his name right?*

'I wrote *Tempest*... yes I'm that Nelson' I blink. 'The Nelson.'

Nelson. *The Nelson*. The first great author, with a capital G and an A... scratch that, the first Great Author of the 21st Century besides the rest. A true literary mastermind. He crawled his way up through the dregs of film criticism and became a new wave journalist. People called him the handsomest critic there ever was; he was on the cover of *Vallure* a while ago. Folks on messaging boards chalked him up as a post-modern hero and praised how he spent the last ten years writing some of the greatest literature of all time. Novels, plays, poems; you never leave a Nelson work without a tear or two. He won the Pulitzer aged twenty-two and swigged the Nobel Prize for Literature aged twenty-six for 'valour extraordinary'.

He was everything I could've been.

'Frankie, why didn't you let me write *Trimalchio* with Marko over here?'

Frankie looked panicky as he turned around from somewhere.

'It was more of a favour to a friend really.'

'How so?'

'He needed work... he needed uh you know.'

'I've read his other stuff, Frankie,' I didn't expect him to be so blunt, 'could use another hand, though he's not *bad*.'

That was English for 'horseshit'.

'You know I haven't written a play in a while.' Nelson mouthed.

'I know, Nels, I just-' Frankie said.

'Frankie?' Nelson put his hand around his shoulder.

'I just... it's...'

'You like *Gatsby* and you didn't trust me with it?'

'I don't like *Gatsby* either, you know that-.' Frankie was either being dishonest with

me or Nelson.

The conversation droned on as I wandered away to become blind of it. I sipped a drink or two and watched Frankie and Nelson as they started arguing in one of the corners.

Some thin finger tapped me on the back.

'Melanie?' I turned around.

It's a plain-faced girl.

'You talked with Nelsy?'

'I did, yes.'

She gestured for her friends to come over. I grab something in a cup and swig it down. I had no idea how much alcohol was in me by the t-

'How was he? Did he say anything about the girls here?' One of them said.

'What do you mean?'

'Did he check us out? Please tell me he at least noticed my cleavage.'

Another said, 'I spent all night trying to get the-t.'

'I haven't even noticed your cleavage and I'm a bottom-feeder like the rest.'

My head is pounding with the taste of tomorrow.

'Say, your face. It's sort of like him.' The first one said.

'I'll have to take that as a compliment.'

'Like half of him in a way.'

'So you're uh saying he's twice the man I am?'

'I said half, dummy! Hah! A half isn't a twice.' She snorted in laughter.

Vomit spasmed up to the roof of my mouth and I swallowed it down like the insults. They started to giggle as I almost barfed myself (again) out of the conversation. I looked at Nelson for a second with his biceps and chiselled chin and perfect hair. That's when I caught another glimpse of Melanie walking towards the elevator.

'Melanie!' I shouted out.

'Yes, Mark?'

'Why are you leaving?'

'I have to do some thinking Mark. I can't stop thinking.'

She vanished and I turned my head to face the music. Nelson was standing over me.

'Who was she?' He seemed almost entranced.

'Melanie. She's in my play.'

I almost didn't tell him.

'Did you see the figure on that? I haven't seen a rear like that since Tuesday.'

'I could've uh...' *Am I seriously going to do this?* 'Had it you know.'

He laughed and put his giant hand on my shoulder.

'Really? Did you screw it up?'

'Sort of.'

The clerical collared man and the black chap suddenly surrounded us.

'Nelson, you were talking about the symbol of the green light in *Gatsby*, perhaps Mr. Mark here can uh build upon your argument?' One of the newcomers said.

'Of course.' Nelson began, 'The green light in *Gatsby* signposts Nick's journey to discover his sexuality. He first sees it through *Gatsby* and, by the end of the novel, sees it through his memories of *Gatsby*. He realizes his love.'

Is he trying to debate me or serenade me?

'I'm not sure I entirely agree.'

'Go on.'

'Well, Fitzgerald mostly uses Nick as a device and, by the end, seems to discard him and mirror the changes. Just as Daisy and Tom escape back into their money, so too does Nick escape into his philosophy just as he started with.'

'That's not strictly true. The novel begins with philosophizing and ends with him on the beach caught in thoughts. But it's all written at the same point.'

'We're taken inside Nick's head though, for all of it.' I pushed down a laugh of victory, 'You can't be thinking that the novel is all in the present. The green light means nothing because it's all of Nick's stream of consciousness. We can't separate the truth from the re-'

Nelson raised his goliath hand for me to stop.

'The final chapter begins with 'Two years after' and shows exactly *when* Nick is writing *Gatsby*. Nick is explicitly inserting thoughts into his past self where they didn't exist, just as he structures the green light to appear at moments of romantic discovery. Clearly it is an extension of Fitzgerald's past.' Nelson raised his head and sipped his water. 'Very clearly.'

'That's simply not true though.'

'How so? I just proved it is.'

'I'm pretty sure the final chapter takes place... no... ah wait. Wait.'

Nelson's smug grin just suddenly flowered across all over his face. He ruffled my hair and just went off without a word, with the black man nodding along. I'd forgotten my *Gatsby* in the face of someone who thought nothing of it.

I wanted to tell Nelson to go back to jerking off into baseball caps and his faux-intellectual bullshit but I was beyond that. I was beyond trying to do anything about this literary humiliation. I took another shot of some spirit and just let it wash over me. Frankie had been looking at me throughout the night with a heavy eye. For weeks now he'd just been either ignoring me or asking these stupid questions, or trying to shove women into me. Like I wouldn't trip over their heels and embarrass myself, much alike I did with Nelson, but without heels thankfully.

Packages of my thoughts were pushed out of my mind. My own horrible, envious and rotting thoughts. Nelson seemed to swim around the groups of people around the room and some of them turned around to face me while he talked about our conversation. He even called Frankie over once more, and I knew exactly what they were talking about.

I downed another drink and realized I couldn't walk anymore.

The clerical collared fellow came over to me.

'You should take a mark out of Nelson's book you know?' He said, without a trace of irony.

'Who's this?' The booze is suddenly hitting my like a punch from the morning after.

'I'm serious! All this drinking! Look at what's done to you! You can't even walk son.'

'Calm down Captain Catholic, I'm fine. I'm fine.'

'No! Jesus.' He grabbed me as I almost fall down. 'Gerry get me some water!'

'I don't want none of your holy water, I ju-ju-just wanna-.'

Why is there a Minister at a penthouse full of whores and billionaire bastards?

Someone threw water in my face. It wasn't Gerry.

'That's what they said about Jesus too, right, that he was *apparently* the messiah and stuff.' *I felt a little better, honest!*- 'Hey, let me go talk to the women. The ones with the boobs. Not that you know what one of those is. I'm sure one of th-' I vomited straight onto the floor.

'Marko! Marko! Jesus Christ!' Frankie's voice darted around the room.

'That's my name.'

'Marko! What's gotten into you.'

'How do you know these people Frankie?' I grab onto his face with my breakfast running down my chin. 'How do you know Admiral fucking Nelson and Reverend Cockblock?'

Frankie looked at me like he hadn't done in a while.

'This has to about to always be about Her doesn't it Mark. You orbit that month.'

'What?'

He slapped me. I froze in an instant.

'It's always about Her isn't it. That fucking parasite of a memory in your head. Fucking hell. These past few times and all my phonecalls and how you just don't *talk* to me anymore. Why did I let you get- I gave you a poisoned chalice didn't I.'

Frank moved me away from everyone, practically dragging me.

'Mark. Why do you do this.'

I didn't say anything.

'Why are you so dense. Why haven't you listened to me? Don't you get it! Was your mother a rock you stone age fuck?' Frankie said words he had never said before.

'You don't. Why those words. Frankie.'

'Why are you still obsessed over Her? I gave you a play, I gave you a girl.'

A metaphorical light bulb cracks above my head.

'Melanie. That's why you invited her. That's why you wanted uh to cast her.'

'I thought some busty literary thief could cure you. It seems I'm just ignorant to how fucking terminal it is.'

'She's seeing Nick. She saw through my vapid attempt at humanity. I'm not supposed to have anyone just yet. You told me to get lost and I only know one direction; myself.' My cheeks started flexing, 'Are you surprised about that? I'm-I'm-vomiting again.'

And so I did. Right on to the floor. Now I couldn't even see my expensive shoes through the expensive food turning over on the floor's surface.

He dragged me to the elevator door with everyone looking on, I even heard Nelson fashion a joke about me now literally talking *the smug bast-*

'Mark.' Frankie looked at me with sad eyes. 'I can't do this anymore. It's official. I've tried everything now.'

'What? Can't do wh-'

I spat out yesterday's lunch on his five-hundred dollar shoes and fell against the elevator doors.

'I keep picking you up out of your own tears. I can't do this anymore man, I can't keep. I'm sick and tired of your sickness.'

'Frankie I-' I coughed a little. 'I invited Her.'

His face changed completely then with his blinking now like curtains being drawn open.

'The fuck?'

'She sent me a wedding invitation. Yeah a wedding invitation. You can imagine *my* face.'

He sat silent for a good while.

'Mark.' He said softly.

'I told Her that it clashed with a few things, but if a month before it Sh-She could make it to the play. The premiere. I told Her that She could get a seat for her husband to be too. She wants to see it, Frankie.'

'Mark. Why why why do I...'

'I wrote to her twice Frankie. No long-ass letters. Short stuff, smiley faces. She's got kids and a Caribbean hubby. He sounds good for her. More good.'

Frankie adjusted his suit. His business suit.

'It still hurts doesn't it?'

'It stings.'

'Mark. She can come. You can see Her, for the last time.' His voice turns misty just like before, 'and me.'

I am no longer looking at Frankie.

'What?'

'I can't be friends with someone who's into self-torture on your level. I've tried so very hard to help you but it seems you still can't even help yourself.'

I was the embarrassment hanging around him, the mustard stain on his lapel. This was all a trick to wipe me off his name. *Or so I thought.*

'Why don't we talk Frankie. Why don't we try just scooping it out of my head. A fucking lobotomy?' *I'm on the edge.*

'We already tried talking Mark. We've tried all kinds of Plan Bs to the point where we've run out of alphabet,' He sighed. 'I'll call you my limousine, I'll send you some money, I'll get you home and rested and you have my play to deliver. Then that's it. I can't go on like this, Mark. I can't keep talking to you about a ghost. I give in, you fucking win. Are you happy now?'

Forcefully he shook my hand.

'Frankie, don't do this.'

'Mark. I *can't* do this.'

'You. You...' *What the fuck is going on.* 'Remember when. When your folks died and I came up to that pub and I... I... sat with you and how you cried in the car park afterwards. How I held you like a baby and I cried too and I didn't know why... how I wanted to... t-t-t-to...'

'I remember. It doesn't matter.' He blinked. 'That's all in the past, Mark.'

'What isn't.' I'm crying by the time what happens in the next paragraph happens.

The elevator doors chimed open and he helped me in. There were cleaners and waiters now all along the floor cleaning my mess up with clean cloth. All the guests just watched one like I was some circus freak. They all glared at me with not a twitch of emotion as I ascended downwards into the depths of my own despair, blacking out into a pool of my regurgitated dinner and puddled self-loathing.

Chapter Nine

By this point *The Great Gatsby* was in its finale. By this point Gatsby's corpse was simmering in the baking sun and Nick Carraway was picking up the leftovers. By this point he was shaking Tom Buchanan's hand. Shaking it. I picture that moment so clearly more than any other moment in the book because it's where I see the story end. It's where Nick seems to change forever and Gatsby fades away into nothing. When the green light disappears forever.

Shivering took over my tired, half-sobering self at five o'clock in the morning as I began turning over the events of the petty penthouse party in my head. Trying to find my own 'handshake' moment. Was it when Melanie walked out? When Nelson mouthed a joke?

My tuxedo was practically ruined with the slop of vomit and drink. It was only then I mustered some kind of emotion in realization. I saw myself in Gatsby's ocean, that twenty-something who stretched out for an ever eroding future that resided in the past. Of being obsessed with a green light that had burned for over five years, a bright light that he had only once actually held in his hand. Gatsby, like many other people, had much more than I had ever experienced

Fitzgerald though? He ended up having a happy ending despite all the alcoholic problems. I wondered if this too was an episode in my life, that while digging through someone else's waxings I could hope to see my own future buried deep in the memories of the ink stains. I pictured that moment of Nick Carraway shaking Tom Buchanan's hand again and I saw not just the story ending of *Gatsby* but of Fitzgerald too. This was merely a blip in his long history of existence upon his Earth. For as much as I see truth in the story I see it not in the storyteller. How can it be that such a man, a man who is dead and wrote so painfully about pain, that such a man may not be a reflection of his reflections; a storyteller who told a dishonest story.

That was what I realized after reading a few passages of *Gatsby* without my glasses on. The dawn was cracking upon my cheeks as I hurried through those pages. That was when I decided to let the secret out, when I knew that I was completely alone in my loneliness. The only way to escape was to share my misery. Forgive the narcissism, forgive the pretension and all of the self-indulgence for a moment and let me tell you something, let me tell you a story that you've already heard. That you've been asking yourself all this time. You've noticed it haven't you? I keep capitalizing a mysterious 'Her', and Frankie keeps mentioning 'someone' and I seem to be fragile around womankind. There's a reason for that and I think you're ready to hear it.

For the next few weeks after the penthouse ordeal I was silent. You could hear a pin drop in my mind. Metaphorically, obviously, brain damage isn't on my 'to-do' list. The rehearsals went off fleeting by without even a breath of my criticism, though I had an ocean of critique to drown them in yet I just sat there. I came in to watch them splash Fitzgerald's words across the seats, I came in to watch their

voices crack and fake tears spill across the stage. There I was. A ghost in a painting of a photograph. I simply wasn't there.

Gerry was now the middleman who chauffeured Frankie's pay-outs to the theatre. Each week a bundle of cheques in a rubber band was dished out to cast, crew and then me without a word or a handshake. I maybe said a half-hello at best and returned to my seat to just watch on as everyone continued to avoid eye contact.

Churned thoughts of the night of the penthouse episode, and the moment in which Melanie stormed out, they kept me awake. Since then she usually arrived with Nick in arm while giggling over their nights of passions before. I simply sat there with my glasses and piles of thoughts to sort through and ignore.

Happenings that happened, I let happen. As the rehearsals closed to their finale, as the opening night was double digit hours away, as the thundering fake clapping of the audience could be heard, as the disappointment seemed to fan around already and as I used 'as' for the nineteenth time in my thoughts that day I finally came to it. I finally felt wet from the water coming in and I hadn't bothered to procure a life-jacket.

They noticed but just looked at each other. Some of the whispers I caught seemed to hang their ideas around my crying to the scene at hand; Gatsby's death. It was a low-key scene funnily enough. I intended to try and stop Aristotle rolling in his grave at lightyear speed and have his death occur off-stage like all tragedies should. Nick, playing Gatsby, was indeed a step off-stage when my sobs were thundering throughout. Echoing and rebounding and re-echoing off of each other. I was tumbling like washing in a machine and they all just looked on.

Like a car crash.

Have you noticed how hilariously gut-wrenching this part is already?

'Mark?' I ignored her voice. 'Mark!'

I hid my face and tried to muffle the sounds. Covering myself and hoping for a gas mask to fall from the sky. Something to stop them peering into my pages of my face in trying to find the truth. Something to stop you, the reader, right now wondering about the fact that I'd tell you all the facts from now on. Honestly, just how honest do you think I am?

'I'm fine.' I said.

The lie. That lie. Always always always just thrown out like a hello without meaning. It's why people ask 'Are you alright?' and to save yourself the trouble of conversation you just say 'Yes', because really no day is 'alright'. There are holes to pick in everyone's swiss cheese of existence.

'I'm fine. Honestly.' I said again while swimming under my sniffles.

It's exactly like when someone takes a photo and you're asked to smile like somehow we've got used to the idea that not painting an honest portrait of emotion is entirely okay. That saying 'Cheese' will cheer you up and getting that snap is all that counts.

Sometimes it hurts to smile.

'Really. I am.'

I didn't notice them all get down from the stage and start talking about me. Some of them wanted to call Frankie, another mentioned he wasn't seeing me anymore; oh how I loved the gossiping fruits of the social grapevines. I simply stood up then and looked at them all. I rubbed my eyes a little too.

'You're not okay.' Melanie said.

Ignorance took over as I fought back whatever words there were and gathered my things. My mind at this point was crying out to do something, to finally say something after so many years of suppression. Only so many people knew but not all of the people. I didn't want to share my misery. Because I didn't want to ruin their happiness? Because they all had misery of their own? *Everyone has baggage; I thought alone, there's no use getting my own confused with theirs.*

My feet took me to walking out whilst muttering something. I mumbled about how I needed fresh air, then realized I hated fresh air, and then mumbled something about the toilet, then realized the toilets were backstage, and then mumbled and then stopped mumbling.

I turned to them all looking on at my tears with some thin triumph. I turned to them and this is what I said. This is where it begins dear reader.

'Do you really want to know what's wrong with me? Do you really want to know what's biting at my heart? Why these bits of chemicals are crawling down my cheeks? Should I just stop with the rhetorical questions because clearly you do not want an answer, clearly you want a story. I'll give you a story. I'll tell you it. Every bit if it'll help you, and me, feel better.' I began walking back down the aisle brushing past them all and then facing them again with my words, 'I gave up on it a long time. Yes. It. There's no use dodging 'it' is there? A memory stuck to your head like a sticky note that just won't fall off. No matter how hard you look at it.'

'It was five years ago. It's hard to express that really. It's hard to put a number next to your happiness but we do it anyways. Five years ago, not to the day might I add but still around five years. That's where... that's where.... For a good while in my life I hadn't had the kindest of times. Bullying, depression and that sweet vice called self-loathing. I was a writer, it's kind of our sweet spot. It's an odd profession really, like uh Hello! I talk to myself all day for a living!'

'I had read *Gatsby* just as all of you have or have not, and to be truthfully honest I didn't get it. All things considered it was a powerful, beautiful piece of literature but it hadn't reached out and grabbed me yet. Emotion had stirred but not cooled. To me *The Great Gatsby* was just a bunch of pretty words that didn't mean anything to me. I didn't get Fitzgerald's story until I had my own.' I gestured to the seats for some reason and headed up to the stage for some other reason, 'Five years ago I met someone and it was fantastic - scratch that - let's take a step back. A few steps back.' I took one foot backwards.

'Five years ago I was in my second year of university just trying to get by. I had Medieval linguistics on the brain with a pile of reading to sift through. The lakes were frostbitten and the buildings seemed to be groaning under the winter wind. I remember that because I do. Not because I choose to. I remember putting on layers of clothing and heading out to lectures, seminars and just floating throughout life.'

I wasn't sure why they were listening. Maybe they found it funny?

'I'd had fleeting encounters with the opposite sex throughout my life. The first seemed alright. The second okay. Nothing to rip my heart out over. Intercourse happened quickly while at university, after escaping the social dungeons of Northern England. I didn't really care though. I didn't 'use' or 'number' any women either, I'm not that kind of gentleman. My story, for a good while, seemed to be the boring type. If I were a novel I'd be in the discount bin within a few fortnights. Funny how we seem to do that with anyone's story. But my own story? Find someone I half-liked, settle down with them and then write something. That was my plan. I'd written some other stuff in whatever time I could find between reading, studying, jogging, lecture attending and partying with half-attractive people while hitting on vaguely attractive women. I was punching already well above my weight in all of the above. I'd be out of breath by the end of each day and just give in to the narcolepsy. I had a comfortable life if anything.'

'Something seemed to change that winter though. My mother's incredible pride over me had ballooned, my tutors had said that my essays were some of the finest they had ever come across, my friends all seemed to be warm and the nights seemed sweet as candy. I was at my magnum opus moment if there is such a thing in life. If this was the end. My happy ending with the final full stop perhaps coming into reach. I am of course talking about...' I swallowed some spit and gulped down the next word, 'love.'

Gestures seemed to flow like wax from a candle as I wandered around the stage for a bit. I was canoeing down the canals of my mind, the memory lane vein in my brain.

'One night under the midnight moon I wandered around the complex. Just took in my happiness, lapped it all up like a cat at Christmas. I had some Russian literature lectures in the morning but the night was too pleasant to resist. You could say that all the tsars had come out tonight.' Laughter, 'I folded my tutors' notes in my pocket and read them aloud in my memory. I read texts from friends and family, all of their kind words. I remembered all the delicious meals, the new prospects and opened doors that had just been opened in a matter of weeks. For years I had considered life to be 'stop-go', that happiness to be a fluctuating moment that is given to us as easily as it is taken away. How wrong I thought myself to be. And how wrong I was then to suppose myself not right.'

'I remember wandering about the halls basically doing nothing. I remember even venturing outside into the cold air and watching the swans cuddle together on the lake surfaces. I might've even cried a little in that moment. I was complete.'

'That's when I saw her.'

Blinking.

'She was doing the same. Just watching the lake with the water reflecting her green eyes. I could see them from across the surface. I could peer right into them and as I reached out to gesture a hello she did the same thing. She was like an uninvited guest you wished you had invited. I caught only a glimpse of her hair and face but I felt a strange sense of attraction I never had done before. I don't believe in

love at first sight. Scratch that. I *didn't* believe in love at first sight. Yet she, just from a glance, seemed beyond me. If this was chemistry then I was non-metal and she was well... metal.'

'And this was to be an ionic bond if there ever was one. Which is somewhat stupid given, well, there's been quite a few in the history of the universe. I look back on that moment now with a sense of half-sadness, half-happiness. Funny how we seem to label and define and word and categorize things yet can't express our most intimate moments.'

'I remember us circling the lake in opposite directions, then the same ways in order to say hellos. We noticed each other laughing under the fact that we couldn't even meet properly. I pointed in the direction of something and we both wandered towards it, and as she drew nearer, even under the dark, I noticed the glow under her eyes. I noticed her black hair flowing in the breeze like the windmills on hills on summer days. I noticed her steps themselves seem to make gorgeous sounds as she came towards me. Every detail of her face and body, and we're talking *body*, was suddenly absorbed in a second. In one calculated little instance I took on every feature of her being and began a simple sub-conscious chemical process called 'love', in which impulse after impulse layered on desire after desire. I felt at one with human history, that most of mankind had experienced this moment. This biological mechanism that sprang into action at random.'

'I caught her first little phoneme, her first letter to me, and hanged on to it like a souvenir. It was a 'H'. I worshipped that consonant. Perhaps I still do.'

I coughed a little.

'We exchanged the awkward greetings and then folded straight into the basics. I began my small talk routine as I did to all those vaguely attractive. *What are you studying? What's your favourite dinosaur? Book? Film? Leyendecker or Van Gogh? You don't know who Van Gogh is? Oh well. I can't make my 'Baby you wanna get starry, starry night with me or not?' joke? Okay?* The usual fodder. Except she knew who Van Gogh was. She even pronounced his name properly. Under the casual surprise and little giggles I became completely entranced by her. I spilled everything. I told her I wanted to see her again. She said yes. She said what about now. I said what. I said *what?* She reached out her hand as if we'd just skipped a few days hard work into a relationship, and suddenly we were shivering together. Her hand wasn't warm or life-giving or any of that romantic twaddle you hear in those terrible films. It was cold just as mine.'

'Under the glow of her eyes she led me down the cobbled paths and into the groves and little woods... and Littlewoods.' They didn't seem to understand that joke, 'We talked as we did before as the tired slowly took hold of us both but seemed not to claim us to bed. Night just looked on as us two bits of carbon began the repetitive human experience of embarrassment, silence and tripping over bits in pavement. Except this time it wasn't my sentences that were hung out to the awkward dry but her's too. Suddenly I realized our venn diagram of separate existences wasn't even that. It was a circle. At least partially, maybe some growths either side.'

'Upon reflection I realize I was indeed playing with fire. We talked about authors, ghosts, archeology (her subject), paleontology, anthropology, books, people, women, gender, identity, theft, carpentry, history, history,, history, alcohol, anecdotes, family, home, memories, first kisses, wine, video-games, books,, romance, our fleeting encounters, aliens, monsters, lycanthropes, books, love, romance and archeology. All of it. As the sun began to rise I realized I hadn't caught her name, I'd caught *her* instead.'

'But obviously all the prose aside, I needed her name. I needed something to etch on to my stone of a heart. She told me it and it was as if the moon had vanished. The sun was there, beaming on us two still standing in the dark. In an instant, like an atomic explosion, my entire biology seemed rewritten. My painful smile was whipped away to this beaming grin. My brain seemed to do a flip and in the Olympics of my mind I was running the hurdles, one-hundred metres and maybe giving some thought to the shot-put, though the long jump was out of question. No fucking way was I getting my socks full of sand.'

I looked at the ground bearing a smile with tears.

'I look on again at that moment. Even telling you it now gives me a strange sense of self-torture but the kind I want. I looked at her under the shade and I held her hand again as we fell into the light. As the students began to prance about us with their bikes and books we decided to meet again that night. To the same place. We traded phone numbers and a thin handshake and she vanished with grace.'

Lights began blinding my vision. I squinted to see them all sat there looking up. Gatsby and Jordan just holding hands unblinkingly, Tom and Nick just leaning forward and Michaelis biting his fingernails just looking right into me. They were all still in their costumes and it just looked odd. Like a miscarriage of realities.

My Adam's apple almost popped as I swallowed the silence once more.

'We met again that night and traded the same cargo of conversation. I was led by her lantern lit lagoons of eyes once more and we began to fall for the same details. I brushed off having any explicit romantic relationship with her no matter how hard it was to tell myself it was unrealistic. She told me she was seeing someone or something but she'd love to see me another time. I didn't really care but, yes, I was captivated. Hypnotized is the word maybe.'

'The next few weeks carried on with the swing of the mundane. I ate; I slept and laughed with my friends. I didn't mention to anyone my pursuit of this ethereal, ever-escaping siren who I now found haunting the mansions of my mind. I went with my best friend to a house gathering she happened to be at and watched her and the man she was with just talk about stuff. I tried not to notice, just making the odd snarky interjection when I could and looking at him with slightly jealous eyes. The truth was I was burying something and it was starting to bite. All secrets have teeth.'

'That night I was wandering home as I always *do* and just wondering and wandering like I always *do*. I kept thinking about whether or not I'll ever write something that outlives the universe. Whether everything turns to ash and crumble. My nihilism was interrupted by, you guessed it, her face.' I did a wry smile, 'She told me she'd given up on her man and that was that. No indication of interest. Just this

unsettlingly nice connection. We were synapses in the dark. I didn't see the signs and, upon reflection, I was stupid not to. They were practically crop circles. She'd talk intimately, shine her eyes and watch as I watched her laugh. We carried on our dusk to dawn walks even as the trees' leaves began to blossom into vision, even as the sun began returning earlier under the peer pressure of spring. Though I'm not entirely sure seasons have cliques and whether or not they bully the stars. If they do, I bet spring would be the bitch of the bunch.'

'I remember us walking about the town centre, around those old buildings and new modern complexes where the glass reflects the Victorian geometry. We settled into this routine of avoiding our sleep and instead walking into dreams. We walked lonely but together. We became *we*. Although we avoided all romantic thought we still hugged and she still pecked me on the cheek.'

'I was deep inside an ignorant time. I'd spend my days listening to old lecturers talk about dictators and the social emancipation of homosexuals while taking my eyes out to feast on the delightful sights of the nightly life. We'd watch people fall out of nightclubs in coats, count the leaves on benches and awkwardly walk into one another now and then. I made her laugh. I made her laugh. I'd never made anyone laugh like I made her laugh. Some people just guffaw; others snort but most just ignore me. Most just walk on and vanish.'

'I didn't tell Frankie, I didn't tell anyone, I just carried on walking with this Houdini of my heart. We'd meet at the same spot; we'd wave and then we'd go about our adventures. Our nights became a whole other world. Even when the streets were paved with glittered snow, even when the ice was barely thawing and even when there was deep rich fog, we still ventured. I still saw her eyes through the blankets of grey air like the snow in sandstorms; green eyes bellowing their light out into the universe.'

I coughed and paused for a little. I took a step towards the stage.

'Just like *Gatsby*?' Said *Gatsby*.

'Not like *Gatsby*. This was nothing like *Gatsby*. There was no First World War, there was no need to leave, and there were no horses and bayonets nor any drifting description of her family's abode as if I was falling for her home and not her heart. There was no *Gatsby* in my story, nor any *Gatsby*.' I put my hands behind my back, 'For as long as I had watched my friends slowly fall into love's arms I had watched on with little agony. Being a person slowly forging my way out of teenagerhood and with zero romantic experience, I had become comfortable with the very idea of dying alone. I had made a deal with the universe that everyone should find someone and to leave me last. I figured myself uninterested, indifferent and perhaps dashingy unique in my approach to life. Love? Ha. Such a thing wasn't reserved for dear Mark!'

'Clearly, however, things were. The cogs of the Earth seemed to turn in a way to meld us two together, to bind us. We began seeing each other accidently during the day and it felt wrong. Like superheroes without their masks, like trains without tracks. We nodded hellos and said to ourselves that we wouldn't risk going public just yet. But going 'public' with what? We hadn't committed vehicular manslaughter,

we had no need to purchase an injunction and -in reality- there was no desire on either part to keep our blossoming something a secret. We began talking with new words. Adverbs.'

'I had a difficult decision to make around my studies and she stayed in my room one night, all night, unflinching in her desire to help me through it. When my mother fell ill, She did my laundry and made me food and cuddled me in the dark. For a while I thought that something was amiss, that no matter how much my suspicions flamed, as little that fire was, it wasn't true. That such happiness really was never for me, no matter how naturally I would've fallen upon it like a sword into sleep.'

'One night, just one night, was enough to change that. She said she had something to tell me. She wanted to create a memory that could burn through time. That could burn forever. I'd seen her for barely a month and suddenly she was inviting hand-holding again. I came to her and she was clad in this satin purple dress, and I could've sworn the universe's clockwork machinery was stopping at her toes. We were walking, side by side, through the same streets. The people fanning out from their day of work to go home to their children to hug them upon entry, the folks in their black cars and tinted windows all trying to just find a place to park for late night shopping and capitalist dance into the rain. The rain was spitting gushes across the city, across the lovely stone buildings and the shop owners who stood in doorways and smiled onwards as my life seemed to tumble into some strange place. To some foreign place. She took me past the cities, past the cobble and into some green path. We followed it and walked under trees, blossoms and the leaves that seemed to fly like darkling moths drawn to our light. We watched the endless wheels of life drone out in the distance as we came to the top of this beautiful meadow, looking out into the universe as the stars above lit up the dying night sky.'

Soaked with sweat I paused and looked up feeling the welling drought in my tears and imagined the stage as a planetarium. I took in this fictional universe and blended it with my memory. Closing my eyes and just letting it sweep over like a loving tide in gasping pandemonium.

'We watched the sun creep its head over the horizon and she finally told me that this was the beginning of the memory. I remember the look in her eyes as she said this with brutal truth. I looked into them again and again like dipping my brain in wonderful honey. We touched hands and looked out again into the sky as dawn began to creep and the sun shone on our faces with our shadows seemingly melting into together.'

I froze.

'She told me a few words and that was that.'

Now everyone in the room was perched on the edge of their seat.

'We leaned in to one another with the sparkle of our lives intertwining. I suddenly felt myself inside some fairytale. Stood on some hill out of town holding hands with this princess of the galaxies. Suddenly my heart blossomed into a heartbeat. Suddenly all my yesterdays seemed to melt away with all their pain and suddenly I was someone else. Suddenly the word 'suddenly' meant exactly what it

had always meant. I was happy. I had reached the apex of my existence, the greatest moment in my entire life. Our lips began to quiver as they finally sank into one another.'

'All of space and time was squashed in that moment. All of the yesterdays, all of them, all of the tomorrows too, all of the years, all of the days, all of the dinosaurs, all of the diseases and cockroaches, all of the smiles and happinesses, all of the births, deaths, laughs, grins, cries and triumphs, all of the bloodied baths and all of the rock and all of the stars. Contained in that one lick into the endless ocean of time was the summation of every sea in the entire universe. All of the black holes, every single organism, every single whisper, every single bad joke, every single screen, single parent, every single tear, every single magazine, every single planet, sky, solar system, organs and all the rocks impacting with each other lightyears above our heads. All of time, all of its sands, all of its endless spinning wheels, all of its molten steel, all of its calendars, all of its seconds, every single last drop; that lick of that ocean spilled and gushed and filled that one second in a flash of an instant. That moment in which I felt I had touched the many minds of many gods, that moment when I felt the birth of the universe on the edge of my fingertips.'

'In that moment she truly became She.'

I stumbled from the quaking emotion under my skin and shook my head. I shook again and came out of my mental self-trickery. I looked at them all gazing into me like the stars in the sky. I simply just looked on for a few seconds but then I observed. They started mumbling about themselves and noticing the tear, which I didn't even feel then, slowly row its way down my cheek. They talked about my fading smile and my sudden return to a thin, awkward figure. I watched them watching me, just as I watched Her watch me all those years ago.

'The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy of an isolated system never decreases. Our system, the universe, is not isolated. Neither was that moment. I could feel all of forever fill that moment, and I do return to it in my hours of need and hours of anguish. Nothing, nothing lasts forever; especially *forever*. We emerged out of our bombastic joining of flesh to find ourselves again in this weird limbo of a limbless wilderness, this strange existence with which we were all somehow born into. None of us asked to be who we are. I can honestly say that, if given the choice, I'd choose *my* life again. For all that pain, misery, irritable bowels and complex conflict maybe it was worth it for that moment of perfect existence.'

'We had started something but we were ignorant to its already imminent ending. Like a budding daisy about to be crushed by a footprint. That's what life's about, right, distracting us from the inevitability? No matter how infinite we find ourselves we always return to finiteness. We always go back into the ground. I had no thought of this with Her. Even as we parted our ways and skipped into our perfect happinesses, I imagine we had no inkling of even tomorrow which now happened to be today. I greeted the same shopkeepers with this incredible smile, this thing which now had my entire face as its own stronghold. I walked around the buildings and the history and just took it all in, smiling and waving and feeling a joy in my step. I even got lost and it took hours for me to return home. This was it. My story, my book, it

was finished!' I began jumping with mimicked excitement like a puppet on a string, 'My tale! My happy ending! Remember this is a fairytale... and they all lived happily ever after.'

I took a step towards them.

'I'd be okay if She did it by text, even if it meant turning this piece of dust into a wisp of embers with a few clicks and a tap. She told me to my face though - clearly and succinctly - that uh.' ... 'it was over. Simple as that. Three words. "It was over." Full stop and all. I ask Her back a why and She simply said that someone had happened. I realized then stood in the doorway of my room what had happened. I had missed something. Like a cartographer missing an entire continent.'

'I began turning over the memories as I watched some of Her friends' darting glances like videotape recordings. Something hadn't felt right. It's the wounds that you can't see that'll bleed the most. We had decided, eventually mutually, that our darting paths and interests wouldn't be healthy. Keep in mind that other parties had taken a keen interest in her. Parties that lingered in her friend groups. They'd be crushed by the news that I'd infiltrated the castle and swiped the Queen. We couldn't break a few hearts to make an omelette out of our own.'

'And so I, at least, went overboard. I went into the waters and the rocks. I tried turning the jigsaw pieces and putting them in different places. As I began drowning in the oceans of apathy I turned towards my friends and they weren't there.' I didn't say that with spite, 'They were too busy in the tongues of their other halves. All of them. Every break, lunch, dinner and night time they spent cuddling up to th... yes. Yes it hurt. It hurt like a sledgehammer on my chest, stopping me from... no, scratch that, I was drowning already. I was kicking and screaming in my mind with entrenched loneliness and just sat there watching Her, in Her chair, just slowly slide across the metaphorical dining room with Her green lights shining in the candle-lit shade.'

I paused for a good while with angry sensation crawling up my wrist.

'Hence *Gatsby*.' Jordan Baker called out, 'That's what it's all been about hasn't it Mark? It's been all about Her.'

I nodded.

'I returned to that book with a new take on it, that it was a book of horrors. As I became shipwrecked and cast into some deep, dark mechanical underworld of emotion I seemed to take on a different walk. I used to look longingly into the distance as if looking for Her to return. I started seeing Her face on people's faces, trying to look under their black hair to see those green eyes bellow back. Nothing came to fruition and so I became flotsam drifting in the wind. I even grew a beard. I tore my innards up and just let it eat me. Forgive the teenager melodramatic emotion but this was like being harpooned. I couldn't. I'm sorry but I'm being honest. I kept silent. I kept my fucking mouth shut... you don't.... a writer isn't meant to write about themselves because that's narcissistic and self-indulgence and it's wrong! If your story is about writers then it's bound to be boring. You're creating an escape for someone so why would you want them to escape into your misery?'

'Eventually the frothing discomfort seemed to turn my heartbeat into heartache. Eventually it grew too large a problem. I let out my guts on to Frankie,

who had just flown in to his dead parents' company. He was still unpacking the boxes on his desk, including his ring for Gerry, when I just collapsed into this breakdown. I told him everything. I told him this story and I let him hold me like he does. Or *did*, rather.'

I took a moment to sip my sadness.

'I stopped jogging. I stopped writing. I stopped reading. I avoided the outside and my friends knowing they all came with new attachments and venomous ancillary accessories, not to themselves but to the memories of me. I didn't hate anyone. I just let myself get deep into the memory of Her to make sure I didn't forget it. What happened is I ended up screen tearing that image of that face. I had to throw myself into my work; which I did and found myself doing incredibly well. I found that if I removed the layers of my life and let my work remain, then there left perfection. But those green eyes, however, were still like a stain on my lapel.'

I sat down cross-legged and just looked into all of their happy eyes.

'Frankie suggested a few things. Grow another beard, take a long run around Toronto. I did. Write a screenplay and sell it. I did. Go on holiday and try and find someplace you like. I did. Write a novel. I did. Finish your degree in the best possible way you can. I did. Wait a year. I did. Wait just a little bit more. I did. Take a break. I did.'

'I was a castaway now and slowly becoming this self-tortured figure who seemed to exclusively talk with himself. When Frankie could coax me out of my shell he found me to be this slimy and disgusting individual. He watched as my writing career went up in flames and, no, I never blamed Her. I blamed myself for getting obsessed with Her. People are never as perfect as you remember them to be. As a castaway I was sifting about the grottos of a new island built out of my own misfortune, trying to find materials for a raft, to try and find some way back to land. That plain. That happiness. I was invited on holiday with my friends before they all vanished out to Japan and Mexico and Africa in their new working lives. They carried their engagement rings too and there in Honolulu they all got down on their knees and proposed, leaving me to just watch. To just watch their perfect spherical happiness unfold like a rose orb. I watched as they all held hands to hurry back to their hotel rooms as they all almost cried sorry at me. I told them to go, to go and let me enjoy my drink. My cocktail with a little umbrella. I kicked about the fake pebbles, sat on some sun-loungers and watched the sun die over the Hawaiian horizon. I was left alone to the sunset shimmering off the face of the chlorine pool and it was at that moment I stopped all of that. I stopped going outside for good. I stopped myself letting my eyes dart to the happy couples and trigger that ingrained system of sadness just like muscle memory that sent me spiralling down and down. I was now a castaway on a wooden raft drifting about the ocean choosing not to even look at the water any longer.'

'I still flirted with half-interest. I still dipped my biscuit, or at the very least attempted.' I looked at Melanie, 'I still tried to involve myself in my self-image of this happy little writer but it became too much. I began to look with more care to my mother's disappointed eyes, and buried any piece of myself. I told the story to a few

people and left it as it was; buried. That was that. I began to find some device, some grand mask, to place over my face. I found humour. I began using it as a coping mechanism for whenever I felt uncomfortable, sad or the least bit melancholy. I had done it before in order to help myself deal with my crushing anxiety and depression but now it seemed to be triggered just on the fleeting glance at the memory of Her.'

'Her life seemed to erode from mine. She ran off into America, I don't know where. I had appearance to keep up so I tried to stop memories with the funny, but the funny hurt more. Smiles seemed to hurt more when they're being faked. I wonder sometimes why they have laughing gas as an anaesthetic, as they attempt to numb you away from the fact that they're going to peer and press into your guts with little knives. It just seems dishonest and, upon reflection, just that much sadder.'

'Frankie finally suggested that I turn Her into something. I turned Her into literature. I tried pouring Her into something. A story about a protagonist who finds himself lost within some memory, perhaps of his own devising, and the more I wrote about Her the less I found I was writing about me. The more I wrote about Her, the more I thought about Her; a circle of hurt within a spiral of a wound. Entrapment.'

'There wasn't a bit of emotion in me because I just couldn't fathom myself to use Her name. I couldn't bring myself to do it, it would be blasphemy. Even now only a select few of people know that exact fact and I'd like to keep it that way.'

'But the more details I chipped away the less of an effect I found. I didn't want Her to read what I had written of Her, it would be a clumsy step to take, and so instead I covered Her up. I gave Her different hair, a different story and a completely different tale. I even supposed in some of my literature that we had gone beyond a kiss, which was painful to write. It was so much further away from the truth. A writer should be separate from his writing otherwise he simply isn't there in the eyes of our reality.' I dragged myself closer to the stage and dropped my legs over it like curtains, 'Soon after leaving that place and past my self-imposed self-rehab I returned to the town. I returned to the shops to find them deserted. It wasn't until then that I realized that even buildings can die.'

'The bistros were boarded up, the great Victorian stone left to rubble construction sites and even the rain didn't show its face. The trees were bare now and the parks we had wandered throughout were now left with nothing. I made the miserable but irresistible journey back to the lake. I went throughout the dilapidated halls and the homeless folks. I walked towards its rim and peered through the sharp bright lights piercing through the reflection in the now swampish lake, seeing shopping trolleys and old footballs gathering watery dust. I looked across it and peered through the lampposts and pollution to try and meld my memory and reality together. To try and trace over my own footsteps. I tried to see Her but all I could create was a spectre. A shadow of Her true form. I held out my hand once more and watched the ghost of Her simply crumble away like the wind beneath me.'

'I began to dream of Her and see Her talk to me. Neither with any romantic indulgence nor *other* imagery, my mind had embargoed itself against such pictures, but She was still a fleeting space. The dream-me, this self-made spectre, seemed to have Her. My avatar seemed happier than I, he had gone beyond me. Somehow I

always thought it impossible to be jealous of yourself. But She was still there. She existed throughout all of this. All of this. A faded photograph floating like a butterfly in the haunted halls of my imagination.'

'And I've had these dreams of rubbish heaps and trainwrecks in which I find myself exploring within. In the junkyards of my splintered dreams I run across the black bags with rouge rust from copper tops kicking up like dust into the air. I hear the jingle of bottle caps in in the wind as my tired eyes fall upon dead silk dresses littered with bruises of drizzle. I run past the choking frost on the old television screens where fog projections of black and white faces once kept young couples warm in the glow of happier, fictional existences.'

'I tread amongst the winter caked rubbish and come to the final turning to go about the business; dipping my hand once again into the pool of battery acid to fish about the poison for that soft drug, that sore spot of a moment which punctuates my miseries and smiles. My own piece of corrosive paradise. The dream became a nightmare and, in this dream, my hand and arm start to be eaten away by the blood of dead battery, but I'm still fishing around. I'm still pressing against this thing that fills me with a half-smile. The corrosion is eating away at my arm now and I feel the flesh float away. I feel my whole body slowly falling into it as I still press my bones towards the moment. There's a numb sense of agonizing pain as I finally spill my remains into it, into that moment, and drown in the acid of my own creation. I just float downwards and downwards. A castaway giving in. A castaway letting the ocean rocks which so infamously he dodged finally claim his bruised being.'

I laughed a little and looked blankly into nothing.

'It's funny how we become the words we say.'

Chapter Ten

I turned over their responses in my head for hours. I turned over my own story in my head too. *Did I say too much?* The details escape me now and then. Even today, this very morning, I find myself going over those memories like walking in the footprints of snow. I remember fumbling down from the stage as they all mumbled and asked me a few questions. *Where? What? When?* I told them the truth; that She was coming to see the premiere. She was. Gerry had passed on a letter underneath my weekly cheque from Her. She said She'd be in town with Her husband and that Gerry had sorted two tickets out. She'd be in the middle row and would watch it all. She was looking forward to it.

I chose not to read that letter again and again like I read Her other words, texts and scraps of writing over and over. The cast seemed to have enjoyed the story. When I came in to the theatre the next day they all looked at me with full attention. By the end of it Melanie was going home to a sickly Nick so I walked her out. I even told her the story of my 'first time'. I didn't know what was in me. She was always smiling at me but I couldn't make her happy like Nick could. I wasn't crushing on her or anything, it was just this strange attraction. This something you just can't explain like a lost full stop

I began interfering in scenes again after telling the story and had to fill in for Nick's role. I remember having to perform all of Gatsby's scenes on that particular day and feeling a strange familiarity in my back by the end of it. I called a chiropractor about it and, rather than give me an appointment, she suggested a good night's rest. *American healthcare!*

I don't like writing about dreams because they're too honest. But I dreamt that night of Gatsby and some of it needs writing down. Some of it needs to be made public. I dreamt of his house party and the fireworks in the sky. I dreamt of the rushing crowds throughout his mansion and I dreamt of myself looking onwards into Nick Carraway's gaze that seemed to fill up the room. I saw Her a few times, as I always do, but I still felt myself removed from the dream. I tried moving a few people either side with a flick of my wrist but nothing happened. And then nothing happened.

With two days to go until premiere I asked the cast to leave behind their manuscripts. I wanted them to naturally step into the words that evening and be away from my ink. For a few hours I skimmed through all of the paper and the notes they had made in the margins. "PLAY THIS PART WITH NERVOUS SHAKES", "LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE AUDIENCE" and some other directions. There were phone numbers too and some stains on the actual thing along with masses of lines scribbled out to be replaced by the new stuff. Entire scenes seemed left out or out of order in some of them and it seemed okay to me. It seemed okay that this story should play out of order otherwise it wouldn't be as honest. All of our lives are functioned through memory, to be ourselves we have to constantly remember who we are.

Soon we were hours away from the last rehearsal when everything changed.

Wolfsheim's actor was talking with Melanie over something. Some stagehands were finally putting together the set together behind our backs. Everything was coming together. We were on a break.

'If life were a film then what song would play over your end credits?' Melanie said into thin air.

Wolfsheim looked at her for a bit and then shrugged. Some other cast members mumbled a response and then went back to their sandwiches and theatrical chatter. I was however going through a catalogue of every song that meant something to me. Every melody that had some resonance. I couldn't boil it down to one singular note, I couldn't just squash my whole life into a few minutes

And then it hit me.

Actually, it didn't, it took me a few glances into thin air to realize this.

I just couldn't squash my whole life into a few minutes.

'I wasn't honest with any of you, the other day.' I said to them all.

'What do you mean Mark?' Someone said.

'I told you I'd skipped over some details, and I did, but I didn't tell you everything.'

'We all know what you meant with your story don't worry.'

'No. I do worry. I do worry that I'm not being honest with you because you're telling me it's a story.'

'Isn't everything we do simply that? A story?'

'Then who's the author? The author and the protagonist can't be the same person surely?' Mark said.

Everyone seemed to get up from what they were doing and start whispering to each other about some words I had just mouthed. This time, however, I saw no humour or bitterness or cynicism between the lines.

'The real truth is what's behind the words Mark.' Wolfsheim walked up to me with his manuscript open, 'It seems that some of this stuff means a lot more to you than it did Fitzgerald.'

'The author is dead.' Melanie said, 'At least that's what post-modernism is.'

'I get a bit frightened every time someone says that.'

Wolfsheim tapped me on the arm and showed me the words.

'This scene, for example, has always felt weird to me. When Gatsby goes back to the places where he and Daisy walked together.'

'But you're not in that scene.'

'Yeah but I can look at it.'

Wolfsheim took a few steps forward.

'He came back to those places when She and Tom were on their honeymoon trip. He seemed to forget himself as he began to talk the miserable yet irresistible journey back to the streets and places where their feet had clicked together...'

Wolfsheim flipped the page and skipped a few lines, 'He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air.'

Everyone looked at me for a few moments before mouthing something.

'If there's something you're not telling us, Mark, it's not for us to know.' He looked at me.

It took a few moments for me to say something.

'Yes. Yes, you're right. These things mean something different to me, but they should for all of you uh right?' I looked at them all.

'Who's in charge though, Marko? You or the words? Who's the author here?'

'Me. My name's on the manuscript.' I half-laughed.

'What about Fitzgerald? This is an adaptation old sport.' Nick said in-between his sickly glances.

'It's his words through my frame. *My* frame, not the other way around.'

'What about Gatsby?' Melanie said.

We all took a minute to slowly look at her.

'It's called *The Great Gatsby* for a reason. It's his story.'

I nodded. Sort of.

'But I'm still writing it. I'm in control not the other way around.'

'Are you sure about that. Are you sure you're in charge of the story or is *it* the other way around?' Melanie challenged.

My entire life defined by a few minutes. All my sadness, strife and constant isolation were all rooted in the painful smiling that occurred when I ran over those memories of Her in my head. Melanie was right. As much as I tried to change the story, the story always stayed the same. As much as I tried to write and tell people about how I felt, something was always missing. I was cursed. I was cursed to always find Her at every corner and admitting that fact was hard enough. People are never as perfect as you remember them to be and neither was I. This story, this obsession with a figment of my own imagination all turned out to be some self-obsession. I had been drowning in my own narcissism. I had been both within and without for too long.

'I'm changing the play.'

They all looked at me.

'What?'

'All of it. Every single word.'

Their faces all seemed to shake.

'What are you talking about? We've spent months sinking in these words.'

'But they're not my words.'

'They'll never be your words, Mark, you're trying to adapt a story to your own rules. You can't.'

'I can try.'

Spinning looks began spinning about the room.

'We have one last day of rehearsal and you're telling us that everything we've learnt means nothing to you? All of this change and transformation, all of your footnotes and notes and fucking interference.' Nick dropped his manuscript and took a step towards me, 'No. I vote no. This is our play now. These are our words.'

'You're characters,' I scanned all of them, 'All of you. You're all my creations. You do as I say. I've been sinking into the mind of Fitzgerald too and I've had enough.'

They all dropped their pages now and some of them just looked confused.

'We're not characters, Mark, we're real people. We're *actors*, not your property.'

'I'm in charge here. I'm the author. I'm going to be the author for once.'

Some of them talked about walking out. Some of them were already doing so.

'If you walk out of here then there's no coming back.'

'No Mark. I'm not sure if this is my thing anyway. I never said this but why anyone would want to write about how shirts were 'beautiful' is beyond me! Such obvious and downright pret-' Nick said.

'That's Fitzgerald's vocabulary not mine.'

Nick took a step toward me and everyone seemed to freeze and looked right at me.

'Are you going to give us a speech or not?' Melanie said with a half-smile.

I took a stride forward.

'*Trimalchio* is no longer an adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, it's going to be about what Gatsby means. It's going to be my words, not Fitzgerald's, coming out of your mouths. The story is mine, no-one else's, and it won't tell me what to do anymore. Tonight I will not sleep as I type up an entirely new play. Longer, better, faster and full of...' I looked at each of them, 'Honesty. It'll be full of me. The truth. The full bitter truth. You all liked the story so much and if *Trimalchio* became your own then so too should this new version.'

They all seemed to move back towards the stage.

'What you're saying is that you're writing this for yourself?'

'Yes.'

'And no-one else?'

'Yes.'

'Then why perform it? Why uh why use us? Why not just leave, Mark. The play's done.'

'No story is ever done.'

I began picking up the pages of the dead manuscript on the stage as they all began talking amongst themselves. I would change the story and I'd stop dodging Her. She'd be the star of the show.

'So what's the story about now?'

'It will all remain the same. The same plot, structure and names. That's it though. All of the characterisation, language and everything else will be of my design.'

'So we just need to learn new lines?'

'Yes. It won't be too much work.'

'And why are you doing this?'

I took a step backwards with my hands full of my dying words.

'I forgot today is my birthday.' I said into the distance.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Today’s my birthday.’

The strange silence returned as I began to feel a wave of kingdoms seem to slowly burst into being within my mind. It was something of a grand change. Some kind of magic. I thought of the writings I’d done thus far and the failure they had all attracted. I thought of Frankie watching me deteriorate into this self-loathing, lonely being. The truth was that I desired pain because it allowed me to be painful. It allowed me to pull the strings off of my puppets and watch them crawl. Watch them beg just as I have begged. Pain demands to be felt but it also demands us to do something about it. To change.

I take a step out of the palace of my mind and into the dark. A thin wafer of moon across the roof cascades a rhythm of light across my face. I see tired faces and drunken stumbles as the night air seems to tumble into a drone. I see Nick Carraway drifting off and Gatsby retreating back into his mansion, back in to his photos and medals and souvenirs of his past. I wonder if, just once more, I should follow him. If I should go back again into the miserableness that tempts me so much.

I’m reminded of something Frankie said to me. Just a few words. I threw them away right after but, weirdly, at this instant I’m reminded of them.

‘Your first will always feel like your first, Mark, but so too will your last.’

I think sometimes back to those words and him patting me on the back and my ignorant teary self on the riverbank of Liverpool. I had stained the city with my blue little self. I remember Frankie just sitting there with Gerry on his mind and the many millions of drops of water just sitting beneath us. The wobbled reflection showed off the night sky in all her starry glory. It reflected so many billions of worlds and possible life forms. Did they all do this? Did they all have problems and look to the night sky and think about the droplets under their feet. I began thinking of each of those drops and, in my head, traced them backwards through their entire life. Perhaps they floated amongst the River Nile as Tutankhamen carved out his empire out of stone brick while his workers carried blocks up ramps in order to build one giant epitaph. Perhaps these drops were once drunk by slaves being carted out from Africa to the Caribbean and then sweated out while being viciously whipped to death. Perhaps these drops were once the spit of kings. Perhaps these drops beneath our feet, I thought, could be once found in the glaciers that were slowly melting us all to our watery death. Perhaps I, like these drops of water, should drift on to a new history. Drift on.

‘Mark?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you feeling alright?’

‘Never better.’

‘Never better? Happy?’

‘Clarity is the word.’ A good shiver ran down my wrists. ‘We have a play to make.’

I organized everyone to slowly talk over their characters and what really drove them. They weren’t allowed to use Fitzgerald’s words. I wanted to peer into their

heads to see exactly what made them tick. I was the one putting things in their minds after all.

‘How old am I?’ Wolfsheim asked.

‘Old enough.’

‘Does Jordan actually fancy Nick?’ Melanie asked.

‘Maybe. I hope not.’

‘Is Gatsby really heroic? Does he have that fire in his eyes?’ Nick asked.

‘Define fire.’

‘How much of the books he talks about has Tom Buchanan actually read? Should I read about them?’ Tom’s actor asked.

‘I don’t know.’

I don’t know. I’d never felt so in control. My inner voice started to hum away into absence and it seemed, for a good while, my life was beginning to turn into some kind of ethereal existence. I was able to dip into my imagination and then move straight out. I could move straight on. I was no longer a castaway but a fully-fledged galley with Viking brutes heaving me forward toward the American planes. I could feel the drops now against my wooden sides with the sun’s prickle lighting against my cheeks. I felt as if I was a chess piece of history as these men heaved forward with breathless ambition into the unknown glowing dark of unmatched exploration.

Stagehands, craftsmen and carpenters all worked with my words to craft the set differently. I had Gatsby’s mansion now being wheeled onto stage with the fireworks and confetti coming straight from the ceiling’s sky. I had an entire wheel behind the set, built in to the stage itself, with half of it displaying the night and the other half of the circle displaying day. It took about three hours to make and, all the while, the cast were reading *Gatsby* feverishly. I told them to ignore the words and to focus on the meaning, to focus on the synonymous feeling behind every beat. I told them to imagine Fitzgerald did not exist and this was simply a story. Simply a story without an author, just as life is.

Gerry seemed to appear from out of nowhere brandishing the final payments before the premiere, most of which was to pay us for our overtime. He was playing with the rubberband between his fingers as he descended down the aisle. The seats were being cleaned and dusted but the pages of the old manuscript were still left. I looked at his confused countenance as I drifted past all the actors lounging around reading paperbacks.

I took the wad of paper out of Gerry’s hands without a word and for the first time in weeks he spoke to me.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’

I looked back at him.

‘Making a play.’

‘Why... why are all the manuscripts...’

‘That’s not the manuscript,’ I picked up some pieces of wood underneath a stagehand’s feet, ‘The play hasn’t been written yet.’

‘Of course it has.’

I placed them back in his hands and muttered some direction.

'Not my play.'

Gerry seemed shocked and he even took out his mobile phone while exiting the place. I heard some faint buzzes of Frankie's voice from the mobile as he left the building.

The lights went out on the lonely stage. I'd given my promise to everyone. I'd come with a box of printed manuscripts by the morning and then they'd learn their new lines. The actions were the same and some of the props stayed still. I'd changed Wilson's revolver a little though. Some minor details. Nothing more.

The stage's edge looked warm and welcoming, so I took it upon myself to lay down on it for some reason and peered into this sky. Tomorrow Gatsby would step out for the last time in his life and look into the dusty ceiling to search for the stars. To blur layers of actor, character and humanity. I wondered if some transformation would begin. This is the stuff you think of when you're an author, *it's all you think of when you're an author*.

My head turned towards the empty canvas that would, throughout two hours, be painted with my words. I traced my eyes across the room and looked at specific seats with imagined faces. I saw clapping, I saw tears and then felt that same apprehension of not being good enough. All writers fear failure but all of us know inadequacy. I imagined what would happen if the 'Okays' and the two and a half star reviews started to bleed into the production. I imagined that Frankie would simply never even look at me again. This was my last chance to do something about it. I looked across the seats one last time and right into the middle-row I pictured Her sitting there with her husband. I felt the entire night perform under my imagination's strings. I pictured a full house all looking onwards with blank faces into this glowing play as Gatsby and Nick began conversing. I pictured everyone in the room peering into this world and I was simply lying on the edge with Her glowing face slowly turning me to candied tears.

Chapter Eleven

Nine o'clock in the evening. The laptop's light was leaning over me like some impending disaster. There I was adding thoughts to my story. There I was tripping over the same stepping stones in trying to retrace everything. We can never tell the truth, no matter how hard we try, about anything. Sometimes we do it to protect others, sometimes we do it to tell a good story and sometimes it's a psychological disorder and that's one of the few good excuses. I happen to float in some other realm of 'sometimes'. I remember sitting there remembering sitting there so long ago with my mind full of worries, anxiety and a strange nostalgia tipping me over to emotion.

If memories were like footprints in snow then my mind was made of sand. That place, that other place, in which you stand on tip-toes in the dark recounting words to yourself. Letting them spill from your fingertips through a pen and onto paper or on to keyboard plastic on to a radiated screen with digital ink. Writing is the weirdest of all human experiences. I've said before it's like skipping stones across the lake of the sub-conscious. You find yourself putting in words you've never even said and you find different pieces seem to collide and mesh. You'll often surprise yourself with *yourself*. I remember finishing the ending to a novel and finding myself seemingly trapped in a halfway space between reality and this fiction of my own creation. I wonder if Einstein or Newton had the same problem in finding themselves unable to unsee the world they had envisioned; of gears, theory and gravity. Historians see the world differently to doctors, as do physicians and psychiatrics and trombonists and teachers of oncology.

Perspective is what makes our world so exciting, frightening, compulsive and repulsive all at the same time. It is the engineer behind Fitzgerald's immortal 'both within and without', a phrase that will continue to haunt authors and artists for amptjer millennia. Past my time as a walking wad of dust so too will others be enchanted by the dead words of a dead man. A lot of writers write to be remembered. I think that is stupid. Everything we ever say will turn to rubble at one point or another. All of Shakespeare's sonnets will soak in fire at some point in history and at some point his name will be muttered for the last time in the great time continuum to which we exist. It doesn't matter to be remembered given you will be gone anyway. You will cease. Gone.

Sitting there with the clock turning to ten o'clock and *Trimalchio* gushing out of my fingertips I was invited in to a strange daydream. A daydream of Her and some other objects all spinning and falling. I imagined myself placed well above them, falling just as the rest, and reaching out to grab them. Reaching out. If only I could just stretch further, if only I could run faster and then I could dodge the laws of physics in order to meet our hands. The lake that once holding shimmering glory simultaneously tearing into the lake now holding dead shopping carts and fish corpses now annexed unto the bay beyond Gatsby's mansion. My life suddenly lurched out as a monster of mirrors with horrors of reflections tattooed across its face. I saw it. Like zooming in on the green light and seeing the white hot radiation

bubble beneath. A cataclysm of my thoughts emerged and soon I stopped typing like an oarsman who had just spotted the rocks beneath.

Trees started to yell, the birds started to whisper and the ground beneath me seemed to groan and whimper with the years of history. I pictured layers and layers beneath us full of oil, cracks of bone and dead dinosaur eyes all looking upwards, all waiting to be added to. Time does wait for all man.

I tried picturing the scenes and this time I saw them with clarity. I saw the faces darting around the mansion during the parties of Gatsby while, at the same time, imagining his death taking place outside in the pool. I saw Gatsby falling from his ivory tower of tragedy and right into bloodied water. I scribbled these thoughts down. *Time is relative*. Simultaneous history. History is not progress to this linear line that marches on without you, no, it marches *beside* you. Gatsby realized that. He realized that pursuing the past, however noble, was fruitful in its fruitlessness.

The universe is cruel and kind in its utter indifference to even the strongest of human impulses.

This was all pouring in to *Trimalchio*. All of it, all of the pain and hurt of my imagination. Our Achilles heel can sometimes be the muscle that stretches us to victory. Here I was with a great portfolio shaking through my wrists and on to this collection of scenes called *Trimalchio*. I saw her face and Daisy's face, my face and Gatsby's and soon enough I saw the tides colliding once more. Churning forth together in an endless marriage of realities.

Fitzgerald's novel will survive my bloody dissection. It will survive my surgical removal of his characters. All characters we create seem, in some way, to be a product of ourselves. They contain our thoughts, philosophies, impulses and desires. Even our villains can say something about who we are. Just as I rip out the synapses of Fitzgerald so too will someone soon make my memories dance. At some point after our death, either by someone we know or do not, someone will speak of us. Someone will put strings in our bones and make us dance. Literature students practically make a degree out of telling each other how us writers feel and live and experience. 'Context' they call it. They don't know what writing is.

Writing is a pilgrimage, if anything.

The final handshake. It darts throughout my mind eclipsing the final pages of this tragedy. I've witnessed Gatsby's death now thousands of times. I made sure to make Nick, when he falls, to try and picture Gatsby's picturing of the tortures of Afghanistan. This is a modernisation, and so too must the handshake be modern. If it were real, and I only finished thinking of this at one o'clock in the next morning, then it would be floating somewhere in the 1920s.

Today there is much more attached to that handshake. Imagine shaking the hand of Bill Clinton. Maybe you have. He has shook the hand of George Bush Sr, for sure, which was also shook by Ronald Reagan. All Presidents seem to mingle at some point so it's easy to say that Reagan shook Carter's which shook Ford's which shook Nixon's which shook Johnson's which shook Kennedy's which shook Eisenhower's which shook Truman's which shook Franklin D. Roosevelt's which shook... and so on and so forth. Each of those likely shook more Presidents' hands,

given most of them were Presidents, and so if we go back far enough we could trace some of George Washington's fingerprints in the grease of Clinton's palm. So too could we see the germs of the first human in there. You can weave human history through the lens of heirlooms and handshakes.

The green light then. Like a drumming beat echoing into itself. Peering into that network of words you see something. A symbol of Gatsby's past, a symbol of history, a symbol of ourselves etc. These layers and layers of attached meaning. Gatsby's naive dream mirrors that of our own. Just like the handshakes it's passed on. It's passed on long past even after the author's first stroke of that immortal phrase. I can imagine it inside of a closed book attached to the skeleton of a spaceship suddenly exploding off into some uncharted territory. The fresh green breasts of new worlds.

This is how I wrote the handshake. As more than a handshake. Just like the green light, which I revised well past the coffee shivers and sugar rushes of that evening, I wrote it just as one would write a piece of tapestry lurching onwards from pyramid to tomb hunter's hands to museum to crumble to dust to earth to wood to paper to paper to pyramid. I wrote it just as it truly exists; an spec being passed onwards.

Trimalchio finished in a different way to *Gatsby*. It was probably the proudest moment of my life thus far. To be sat in my underwear gazing at that flicking screen with the ending in sight. I had blended visions of the stage into it. I saw the audience looking onwards to the final steps of the final man on stage and, just like an old picture book, I saw their faces freeze with burning emotion. I framed that moment. I had triumphed. I had finished *Trimalchio* exactly how I had always needed it to be.

Some words enveloped out from inside of me towards my misty-soaked self, some words I can't remember but I knew that they mattered. I know that they mattered because I had managed to change something. The green light was no longer *the green light*, it was merely a painted bulb on stage lighting up the set. The handshake was just two characters shaking their hands. Meaning was subtracted.

I moved onwards from the lake within my headbox.

My toys and drawings, my laughter and good poetry and the warm cuddling soothing of bacon on a winter morning. I imagined these with a struggle against the white hot soak of that green light trying to claw me back. Trying to stop me from rising. I became comfortable with that soundbite of my laughter played like an mp3 in the back of my head. It's funny how you can download faster than you can upload with the internet, it says a lot about consumer culture, but it also says a lot about how the mind works. How we gorge ourselves on fabrications that we know are fabricated. How we constantly see realities and expectations, thousands of universes and possibilities, all opposite each other. The truth is there are no opposites. This is what I realized under the curtain of light. This is what made me go wide eyed. As much as I had imagined a future with Her. As much as I saw myself waking up to her warm skin and peering in to some happy eyes, as much as I wished to make her breakfast in bed and see her walk with me on Summer days and Winter evenings... as much as I had wished, it was merely a wish. I tore down this Berlin wall. I

chiselled at it. One piece at a time. I watched the cube of concrete slowly fill up the streets and yet I went on. I saw my own head turning towards *Trimalchio* that was beaming full of truth.

Like an arrowhead splitting open my leopard fur or the skin of a bullet ricocheting throughout my skull with deafening death I finally happened upon my final thoughts under the wake of the final sentence. I watched all my anguish, all my anxiety and crushing loneliness become just that; crushed.

I let go.

For all those moments I had watched Her relationship status change, from standing in a garden in Toronto to falling asleep in some abandoned warehouse and for all those painful pleasures of gazing upon a wanted future; I tore them down. I tore it all down. My enclosure came down with a deafening thud and just like the handshakes, just like the green light, those memories remained like the new wisps in the air. Like the eternal stain of history. This time, however, I was able to venture freely. I took my glasses off at quarter to eight in the morning. This time I could see my own world more clearly.

Some final beats of yesterday still burrowed into the back of my brain but they soon trailed off like the dying embers of a happy barbeque. Suddenly I realized that all my painful similes were all just that. They couldn't touch me just as my memories shouldn't.

I was no longer trapped and caged in the first syllable of Her name. I was no longer bound to capitalize her pronouns.

Trimalchio beckoned and called for attention. I saw the grammar mistakes and some misspellings already as I began scrolling up and down. I had three hours until I had to appear at that theatre for the final rehearsal before the premiere tonight. I would leave the feelings of tiredness until tomorrow as I had a job to do.

It was tough. I have to admit. To wave goodbye to the smiles of my sadness. You get attached even to the most painful of things, hence why I don't believe in Hell. How can a place, no matter how inventive or endless in its instruments, be designed to make you feel pain for an eternity. You get used to it like the chunks of Styrofoam blocks that float throughout the maze-like lake of your mind. So too do I choose not to believe in a Heaven or any idea of eternal consciousness; such a thing sounds like the most incredible punishment of existence.

While seeing those flavours of memories depart I still saw the stains of myself just sitting there. Like a blush of colouring in a black and white photograph. I stopped myself from reaching out and changing it back. Even while re-typing 'Gadbsty' to 'Gatsby' I thought of keeping that mistake. I thought of how there's no actual sense of 'mistake' or 'wrong' if we considered language to be a flowing and ever-escaping being, incapable of standardization. Such as how I can put mp3 into a goddamn novel if I wished. Still, I changed it, because it is *wrong*.

The cup of coffee was now frosty cold but I still carried on, wiping my face and spinning in my chair for inspiration. I searched for some spellings, watched a video about baby owls and then stopped my seconds of procrastination to finally crack open the truth once more.

With an hour to go I wondered if I was simply tinkering with fate. Whether or not that I was doomed to fail. Throughout my life I was tempted by these moments. The temptation to fail often goes so strong, often it overwhelms us. I didn't even notice myself slowly falling asleep and the burning sensation running under that fold of flesh under your eyelids. I was trying not to give in, but it seemed too enticing. It would be too good of a story.

Too good of a story.

Is this why I do what I do? Is it why I continually shoot myself in the hand because I get a kick out of it? Do I keep asking rhetorical questions aimed at myself in order to dodge the truth; that I like this. I wonder why I put the meaning to memories in the first place and then my mind skips onwards to *Gatsby*. More specifically, *Gatsby*. Why. Why. Why. Why would you spend your nights reaching out for an impossible green light.

Maybe I'm one step ahead of *Gatsby*. Maybe this is my Myrtle Wilson moment. Do I grab the wheel and blame or do I vanish into the night. Except it's actually nothing like that. To give up now would not make a good story because there would be no more way to tell this story. With this manuscript I was gazing out into the Egyptian darkness with my lantern and my tired eyes slowly dropping me towards failure. I was Howard Carter begging to Lord Carnarvon to take a swipe at finding King Tut's grave just one last time. Carnarvon eventually gave Carter an ultimatum - one final season of tomb hunting - and soon it was paid back. Was I Carter begging on the office floor of that Lord, or was I Carter looking deep into the wonderful dark after peeling back the sands and stones masking over King Tut's tomb?

Back to reality.

The chauffeur and his car will be here in a few minutes, I can evade that too for a little while so I press on. I press onwards and onwards into this place. I take scenes apart and rush them through separate notepad documents. I almost break my wrist from the erratic movements of the keyboard.

See, that's the truth behind this story. As much as I had yearned and groaned and cried out about everyone else's 'happy endings' and as much as I had chased after their chats over coffee in the cobbled streets and the talks behind my back, I just hadn't 'got it' until that moment. I stopped editing, stopped scrolling and looked up and down at this piece of myself.

I write a lot about endings. Carter died of natural causes, lymphoma I think, at age 65, I think, but I don't think that was his ending. It takes us all a little while to guess at our 'ending' and we're lucky to get a 'happy ending' anyway. Life is not a fairytale and while the world is cruel, hopeless and indifferent in how it murders its own children; it never stops spinning. The best thing you can do is run with it and I didn't realize it until then. I didn't realize that I was lucky to even get this far.

With the manuscript now printing to the side of me, with the sound of the papers churning now digging into my ear drums, with the sounds of the car's horn booming outside, with the tweeting of birds now dying as the sun's dawn settle into

its daily routine and as my mind trembled, perhaps for the final time, I had one last thought.

I am a writer. I have hurt myself in order to give myself this. The pages that I holepunched and treasury tagged might as well each have been mirrors. I looked deep into each of them, even the copies of pages, and I saw the truth behind them. Yet I also saw it like I saw the handshakes and the green light and so many objects that people left behind. This wasn't me moving on, such a thing would be impossible for any being, but this was me. When all twenty manuscripts were finished I scooped up all of them and stood up with the thoughts of my all-nighter running through my head. This was my second act and the light at the end of the tunnel finally looked too inviting.

Chapter Twelve

I'm not a nightclub person. Regardless, my memories of those deafening places served me greatly in the most important hours of my life. I remember running, skipping and banging my head, purposefully, in order to keep up consciousness. Down the aisles I practically skidded and remembered I hadn't even put on any shoes. I'd scrambled on some ironic t-shirt and some scruffy jeans. The booming loops of sounds from my nightclubbing memories of swaying bodies in sauna wastelands served me well in keeping my body afloat. More importantly the lack of concentration made sure I hit my face straight into one of the walls, recoiled and then fell to my bloodied death.

Haha.

Joking of course. I merely tripped up and grazed my knees. The huddle of actors were already streaming on me with hunger in their eyes, hunger like flies look for poop. Except most of the time flies don't actually typically look for poop, they just want a cuddle. That's what a year of reading zoological textbooks does to the human brain.

'MARK!'

Oh. We have full caps lock dialogue now? Okay.

'MARK! WHAT!'

I threw the manuscripts towards the invisible voice and slapped myself, melodramatically, before letting the blurs of faces slowly becoming clear portraits. Melanie. Nick. The rest. All of them looking onwards while grabbing on to whatever they could. Some of my pages fell into the hair like pretentious rain or some other self-deprecating metaphor. Some of them just landed straight on me as I fell to the floor and looked up at the ceiling.

'Mark. What in the name of all that is fuck.' Melanie said. I think.

'I never noticed the ceiling looks like someone painted the Sistine Chapel. If that someone were blind, had access to one colour and something something.' I gibberished.

'You didn't sleep at all did you, Mark?' Someone said?

'Sleep is for mortals,' I could already taste the nosebleed marks on my lips, 'And I intend to live forever my darling Gatsby!'

The tired mind does a lot of terrible, embarrassing things and thankfully it can shut up when given the right stimuli. At that moment the best possible stimuli was Melanie's left palm striking across my face. That is exactly what happened. It hurt for about a second but then I remembered I'm only a mere avatar of my own representation inside of my past-tense distance narrated narrative and thus cannot feel true pain.

So, yes, I did shut up.

I tasted my own blood. Nosebleeds have a tendency of cropping up at my most naked moments. *Heh, this one tim-*

'Mark. This is incredible stuff.' Someone said.

I looked around while holding on to the tip of one of the theatre seats. The noises of the nightclub were flooding into my brain still and trying to keep this ship sailing.

'Iceberg! Dead ahead!' Nick Carraway shouted into nothing.

He was already starting his lines and his entire complexion seemed to shift into a watercolour or an oil painting. Something artsy. Wolfsheim and Michaelis just looked on because they're not important so let's go through the next items on this shopping list of characters. Jay Gatsby was entranced by the piece and sat cross-legged on the floor and darting through the pages. Melanie was still attending to me, wiping my face with a handkerchief while simultaneously hugging me. Daisy Buchanan was doing something or other, I don't care about her. Myrtle Wilson and her husband were silently whispering comments to each other while at the same time asking if I was alright. Slowly walking up the stage and with one hand clenched to her face was some extra. Someone who would be partying in one of the background scenes. Somehow she had turned up on the last day extra early, extras don't usually come in until the last minute and somehow also she had her hands on my script.

She was silent but, through the blood-stained handkerchief and Melanie's enormous bosom, I could trace some familiar emotions creeping over her face. Like how you see yourself in old photograph books you flicker through late at night, I saw my own eyes gazing back into me.

'Mark. There's not much to say.' Gatsby said, or rather Nick said, rising up and walking towards my dishevelled position.

'He's fine, by the way.' Melanie said whilst looking up at him.

'I'm sorry for yesterday. I am glad that you changed this.'

The other voices started to pipe up.

'I'm only skimming but this has to contain some of the finest language construction I've ever seen.'

'It's incredibly entertaining and, at the same time, some of it makes me want to cry.'

'I'm not laughing or smiling but this is *so funny*.'

'Does the green light mean something else now? There's something about it being a fading bulb? Mark?'

'Mark?'

I wasn't looking or answering any of them. My entire attention was directed towards the extra still wandering on the stage and meeting my eyes every few seconds. No, she didn't become my wife or love or stupid whatever. She wasn't ever that interesting to me. Yet she did seem to move her feet into someone's footprints. She seemed to catch characters and dance around their actions, see projections of them on stage and finally see the great tragedy play out before her. This silent, misty eyed extra was, and still is, the sole reason to why this tale exists. This moment made me - and I am sorry to say that if you're expecting me to die at the end of this (I'm not dead as far as I'm aware) - this moment made me happy.

Melanie's eyes were now taken by the pages of the manuscript that Nick was showing her and there was a jolt of life now rushing throughout us all. We all seemed to rise at the same moment. We all seemed to join in to this harmony of a piece of myself now playing out. We all seemed to love it. The praise being showered upon me made me blush below the pain of the tiredness but in reality it served nothing. To the true reader who sits there and wonders exactly what everything means? My meaning cannot be transplanted or observed or even played around with because it's not there. Meaning is merely suggested. If I am really a surgeon playing around with organs, and really I am the least qualified person on the planet to involve this metaphor, and you are watching me use the scalpel then it's probably because the guidebook said so. Not because I'm trying to 'say anything'. But if you think it's 'saying anything', good for you, because maybe deep down inside I do kinda want you to think that.

'Are you okay now Mark?' Melanie was embroiled in the play now and gathering everyone to take centre stage.

'I'm fine. Honestly. I don't think I've ever felt this glad. Or tired. Mostly glad.' I hiccupped.

Nick was helping me up now but still leaning over Melanie's shoulder to either catch glimpses of my hearty words or to look down her top. Probably both.

'Did you forget your glasses Mark? Do you want me to text Frankie to get someone-'

'No. I don't need them anymore.'

Someone laughed.

'Of course you need your glasses. No matter whatever epiphany or great tectonic shift you've undergone you'll still need to see properly.'

'I don't need them.'

Someone put me down on the edge of the stage to watch everyone's conversation boil to small talk. Finally I heard voices barking orders and the cast seemed to align themselves. My play was performed at my very feet. The scenes were played out, the stagehands were shown the new actions, utterly bemused and somewhat furious by the extreme changes, and the sets were now being changed and sawed in half and things were being moved about too.

The circus show of my mind kept the nightclub music on full volume while the actors strutted out to do their business. They seemed to shake into whole new skins when they took those first few steps. Their voices changed and so did their words. No longer did they talk like Fitzgerald or some half-Fitzgerald, but instead they talked *exactly* like me. I soon find myself finding my own personal trinkets. I found my old jokes hanging inside their chitter-chatter, my memories being played out before me and even the eyes of my old love being shone from Daisy Buchanan's blinks.

The play played on. The rehearsals soon barrel rolled into scrambles to cram lines in. I was getting the odd nudge to direct a scene or something but I just stayed and let the music of memory intoxicate me deeper and deeper into some entranced state of half-sleep.

Gerry wandered in and almost caught a glimpse of himself in Nick Carraway's words before walking down the aisle with a message between his fingers. He read it out. It was unimportant. No one paid any attention. They all nodded towards him while he almost jumped onto his mobile phone to converse with Frankie. This time I could hear all of his voice bark and echo into the play. I ignored it and kept on at the listening to myself.

Someone fetched me a tuxedo. I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like I was actually going anywhere else apart from backstage tonight. I put it on just to appease everyone as they finally slotted themselves into their costumes and my play started to take shape. I realized I'd been awake for more than twenty-four hours after ten seconds had passed after something o'clock.

I'd never been backstage properly before and I found it a little sparse. There I was watching my own mind's mechanics suddenly spring forward like the chimneys of the industrial revolution slowly rising up like some kind of erection metaphor or something?

It was happening though. Daisy and Gatsby and Nick were drifting away from me and I was comfortable with this. I was getting a happier ending than Gatsby. I was cleansing myself and tonight would be the final dig into the depths of pain. I'd take a shovel of hurt to the chest but I knew I could fight my way out. I knew seeing her face would kill me and bring me back to life in paradoxical fashion. Like a Midas touch with the springs of the elixir of life attached or some mythologizing bollocks like that.

Scenes were now being marathoned all at once with Nick Carraway seemingly diving in and out of each of them. I tried to find Melanie in the piece but only saw Jordan Baker looking deep and confusingly into Nick's eyes. I saw the final act play out alongside the first and there was some beauty to it. There was some beauty to the idea that the ending mirrored the beginning, perhaps in a way I'd never intended. Gatsby stood out, alone, as all the scenes around him finished. I gave him the last lines because he deserved it and because he was getting a worse ending than I was receiving. I wonder if Gatsby ever wrote any of it down within the story? He probably had a diary and strings of sentences to describe anecdotes that floated around his head but nothing concrete. Perhaps Gatsby may have given his own characters a happier ending than his own, maybe he had an Atlas complex and believe only he could carry on the burdens of misery in this cruel cruel world. That's why he took the fall for Daisy.

Buzz from outside of the theatre was already swelling and I started to get the chills. Cold shivers seemed to take over my hands and voice as people still tried to calm me down. They lay me down on the couch and I watched as my final words are taken from me. I watched as I stop directing and stop looking onwards altogether. I was told that while backstage they had a crew rush through and spruce up the theatre. I leaned to catch one glance as the lights finally flash onwards and feel the cascading nerves down my wrists. The theatre was now a blinding place with blinding seats and I could already hear the humming of conversation outside in the foyer.

Frankie entered. He looked different. Maybe 'happier' is the word. He knew full well what was going to happen and he just glanced at me for more than a second. Then he jumped up the stage and invited me out to shake a hand. We do so without exchanging words while he pats all the cast on the back and seemed to look longingly into the walls that surrounded us. I heard his pockets jangle with confidence and the bank account that sponged this whole dreamscape together.

'Do you have any last words for us Mark?' Jordan Baker said.

My movements were becoming more lethargic, plodding and my arms seemed to drift like the clock hands of some grandfather clock. Sleep tends to bite into you when you least expect it and it is paralysing as it is freeing.

'I don't. Just. Thank you.' I said.

They all leaned around me and adjusted their costumes. The extras flooded in too and there's a sudden leap within me to do something about all of this. Anxiety meshes with the sleeplessness into this weird emotional broth that seems to heat up my bones. I wanted to cancel all of this and tear the theatre down, and these thoughts kept beating on just like the drowning footsteps of the crowds crowding the aisles.

'Nelson is here. Pretty much everyone from the Chicago Th-.' Their voice faded out as they read out names from behind the curtain.

'There's a lot of folks here who rejected me. Quite scary seeing those faces again. Like some kind of copied and pasted nightmare.' I know the voice but not who said it.

'I'm scared and yet I'm happy to be afraid.'

Someone held my hands and invited me to peer but I refused. I pictured Frankie sitting in the front row and almost guiding the now deafening collection of conversations hovering throughout the room. Like an orchestrator directing a great gossiping symphony. *Soon my characters will step out onto a little wooden porch to try and make some people cry.*

I let go of the hands holding me as the conversation started to slowly come to a halt. I tried again to envision her. Her sat there with her husband's hands drifting across her lap *no no more*. No more. *No more*. I hung on to that imagined polaroid like a bad religion. I hoped to see it. I begged to see it. I even *prayed* to see it. I knew I would catch her eyes that night but the burning question was when.

Time trickled away too slowly and I caught myself running out of breath. The fanfare flared up and suddenly the audience outside was quieting to a complete halt. They were taking their seats. I heard the smalltalk start to envelop and the whispers and gossip seem to froth and bubble. I could almost taste it. I could almost see my forward march. Like watching traffic lights through the windows of an ice cream truck.

Frankie and Gerry spoke up as they went towards the stage and started mouthing off an introduction. I knew all of these filled seats would have been sponged from their little black books, I knew that no matter what happened that Frankie would bribe his way to Broadway and beyond if he had to and I knew that

he'll happily get Nelson to make the rewrites. I could already sense the chequebook bouncing from his pocket.

My cast all lined up in unison and the emotion drifted from their faces.

Tiredness overcame me as the audience clapped against Frankie's useless, empty words and I was left plummeting into a panic attack. I tried to focus on something to keep me awake. Some fragment of a memory. Some kind of object. Something to guide me away from the demon of sleep now taking me by my ankles... *slowly...*

I tipped my head from side to side as white noise overtook everything else. *This must be what clouds feel like.* My eyes were beginning to ache as the sleep took over. Everything seemed to blur out, like squinting at a carnival on a pier. I fell slowly into now forgotten dreams. All I remember is the waking up part. In a matter of a few paragraphs I had fallen asleep through the whole of my play.

I awoke at the climax. All was silent at first, you could hear the dust move about the air, and I just rubbed my half-numb eyes awake to just stare at a wall in front of me. I just looked on as I started hearing my words. My words echoing out through that theatre. I looked at the curtain and could sense, like x-ray vision, all of the bones jostle and turn on-stage. I scanned around to see Melanie and the rest of the cast, besides Gatsby, on the verge of some kind of emotion. They all shot their eyes straight on me.

I turned to find myself turning some kind of bloodshot blue from all of this. I even stood up, silently, as I began to hear the thunder behind the fabric. Gatsby's last words. Ripped from my brain, not Fitzgerald's, and Melanie's lover performing them to a full house of people who weren't throwing things at the stage. They weren't demanding my head either. They were listening to this man spout my words...

'And so. Nothing changed. Even during those lonesome midnight toasts to myself I still saw the reflection of the past in my own wine glass. Wheels turned within wheels like the sands turn in the Arabian lands. I woke up in frozen hot sweats in the middle of my nights trying not to feel the crown's metal poking into my skull. All I could do was lay there grasping my hair and night-terrors. All I could do was wait.'

'Nick Carraway believed in my dream even when it had ended. The man that watched those boats dart ceaselessly against the past, he was truly something. I sit now before you all and I realize that this was always my story. That nothing ever really changed from the beginning. This story was always a tragedy and even lying there dying in my own pool changed none of that. Nothing changed. I was still lonely, afraid and tired. Tired, tired, tired. I have closed my eyes at many sunsets to hope that perhaps the light would not dance off my face for the last time to no avail. All I hear is the tide churning and the winds aching and no matter my struggle, no matter how much I try to stop in my own tracks, the tracks keep turning. The tracks keep turning.'

A weight seemed to slide right out of me as Gatsby slowly moved from his hunched over state and walked, like a death march, back towards the curtain. The whole cast was darting looks at each other as the final beats of my play began to unfold. I seemed to scribble every last footstep onto that stage into my head. Like it

mattered. Like anything mattered. These were echoes of a fictional world that I was trying to cage in my mind, trying to immortalize - or rather *mortalize* - with my own memory. Here I was clutching at straws and I was okay with that.

As the curtain came away and Gatsby went through, it was Nick who came back into the backstage. The stage lights suddenly dimmed and the silence seemed to drone to a halt. For a good while there was nothing. No trace of emotion or response from anyone. I stood just waiting for something. Waiting for something. I even adjusted my tuxedo to face the criticism head on. I considered in that moment a realm of possibilities and none of them were pretty. None of them were the truth.

Very rarely do our realities exceed our expectations.

As the curtain fanned out and the lights poured in to the cast stepping out, the audience seemed to jump to their feet. I caught the fabric and started mentally googling their faces through the folds. I saw things that made my mind leap. There were tears on cheeks. There were misty eyed middle-aged men, there were people on their feet stone-faced but clapping harder and harder with reddening hands and there was Nelson sat at the back with his head in his crying palms. I felt an awe of triumph and a wave of joy that I never felt before. There was an excitement rocketeering in the air and the rows were now on their toes. I could see them all now gathering to celebrate me. To celebrate *me*. I heard some cheers and whistles throughout and the success just kept caking on. The cast took their bows, one by one, as the clapping and cheering kept inching towards some rocking crescendo. I was caught off-guard by how special all of tonight had been. I nearly collapsed behind the curtain flaps with my own tears now emerging out of nowhere.

The sounds of happiness were almost deafening. Suddenly some of the cast started coming backstage with their faces full of impossible truth. They all shot me a glance and then they suddenly mobbed me. Some of them started pushing me out and we fought words we couldn't hear. I wasn't going to show my stupid face. The audience would stop. They'd stop. Once they knew the lips that had made them cry then all illusion would shatter.

Jordan Baker, Daisy Buchanan and then Nick Carraway were now clawing at me to go out. The curtains were completely drawn now and the Great Gatsby himself came walking back with his hands behind his back. He just looked right at me and then pushed me straight out on to the wood. I took a slight stumble and then stood, mouth agape, as Gatsby shouted something about me being the writer I stood there just tumbling over the whole audience.

And then the crescendo came.

Hundreds of thousands of claps seemed to take place that night but most of them during that brief moment. When my name was read aloud and suddenly everyone, *everyone*, was on their feet. Suddenly no-one was hiding the tears. I just stood there and smiled to them all as the claps began to push the tears out of my eyes and down my cheeks. I caught Nelson's nod of jealousy, Gerry's smile of disbelief and Frankie's red-face full of bursting restored pride and I just closed my eyes for the briefest moments to hear the sounds of the room swell like the shores just outside.

I opened to a sight. I saw in the middle of the entire theatre, stood there and clapping with her husband... her. Her simply stood there with those laked eyes, still full of that glow I had discovered years ago. Still with that enchanted quality. I nodded at her and she just simply smiled. Smiled like just before.

Chapter Thirteen

The hot porcelain of the coffee cup warmed me as I turned it over between my hands. Melanie, still clad in Jordan attire, stood above me. I took a look around. I was in the studio apartment, I'm not comfortable calling it a home, and my entire vision had changed. I was wearing my glasses again but that's not the point. I could see a lot clearer. Not that much, but it was a start.

Metaphorically speaking obviously.

'What did you say to her?' Melanie asked.

'I said hello and then she said hi.' I said.

'Did her husband say anything?'

'We shook hands,' I took a sip, 'He was a really charming guy.'

'I saw him. We saw him.'

Frankie and Gerry emerged from the kitchen with their ties undone. They hadn't stopped looking at me all night with a smile. With their held hands they just carried on with their ogling.

'I'm not a piece of meat you know. My eyes are up here. Etcetera.' I said.

I finished the coffee and stood up looking at them.

'We saw you talking to her, Mark.' Gerry said.

'I know.'

'She laughed. You laughed. That other chap, whatever his deal, he seemed happy too.'

'I know.'

'Did it hurt.' Frankie said his first words to me since the penthouse ordeal.

I stood blankly faced for a little while. A good while actually. Melanie even began wiping her make-up under the awkward hulk of silence. Soon I decided to churn the cauldron of conversation a little.

'Frankie, it does hurt. I told you it hurt when the wound was fresh and it's still bleeding. Maybe more. I could quote some stupid comic book movie and say that my night is darkest before its dawn or some bullshit but I don't feel any better. What I do feel better about is saying these next few words.'

'I'm sorry.' I said.

Frankie came over to me, extending his hand.

'I understand Mark.'

'I let it get in the way of things. I was stupid to let it get to me.'

I shook it.

'If it still hurts then why do you seem different?'

'Because I understand that this isn't really a wound so much as a scar. And scars don't usually don't go away without the use of surgery. Or gamma radiation. I'm not too keen on accidentally catching a few tumours and cancers myself so I just figured I might as well get used to it.' *Was I hiding under the jokes?*

'I thought you already were comfortable with this?'

'So did I-' I turn halfway to the kitchen, 'life's too short to spend it hooked on a lost memory of a ghost from your past. No matter how sweet they were. No matter

how much it hurts and helps to look at their face in your mind you have to push on.' I walked towards the kitchen and put the cup down.

'Does this mean you're on the market?' Melanie asked.

I smiled at her.

'Sort of.'

She looked at me with an almost solemn look.

'I'm moving in with Nick.'

'Good.' I said honestly.

'That doesn't- I know that today and what I've just said just doesn't make sense but if you're out there chasing new pastures, I don't want you to get confused about any signals, I-'

'It's okay. I wouldn't uh chase your pastures. I've got enough crops to chop. Harvest is coming. Springtime or something.' I shrugged, 'Yeah.'

Frankie leaned up against the doorframe.

'Did you drink while you talked to her?'

'Nope.'

'So you just talked?'

'Yeah. About the play, about the wedding, about jobs and children and Reagan and comic books.'

We all strolled out back into the living room.

'No-one needs to tell you this because you probably already know Mark.' Gerry said. 'You made a lot of people cry tonight with that beautiful play. Myself included.'

'I'm a writer. My job is to hurt people.'

'We mean it though. It was a beautiful play.' Frankie looked at me with honesty, 'I know what you've been thinking so go ahead.'

'What?'

'Go ahead.'

'Okay.' I cleared my throat. 'I mean no offence but I assumed you used the play as a means to shift me out of my mood and that, even if it didn't critically take off, you'd pay some hands to get the play on Broadway and into the Tonys somehow.'

'Not exactly but you-you've got the gist.'

'So it's ah true you never had faith in me?'

'I had faith in you to write a beautiful play. But only to yourself.'

I nodded.

'There's been three potential theatres who want us to move the play there. I'll sort some deals out to see where we should put our residences. Everyone adored the casting choices and direction and everything, they said that you Melanie probably stole the show.'

'That's really nice to hear Frankie.' She said. 'What did you think of it Mark?'

'I thought you were wonderful.'

'I mean the play.'

I paused for a brief second. Again.

'I'm happy with it.'

I'd never said that before. Like, ever. I'd sort of made those words come out of my mouth but the meaning never properly attached.

'You remember asking for us to collaborate, Frankie?'

'Yeah.'

'It's a good job I happened to be not-Belgium.'

Confusion.

'How so?'

'I didn't tell you this, but when you said that word my mind shot to this little tidbit of history. To most Belgians a 'collaborator' was someone who co-operated with the Nazi Germans when they marched into the country during World War Two.'

'Well I wasn't exactly asking you to assist in my genocide plots.'

'Good. It wasn't the impression I got anyway...'

'Maybe further down the line. We'll see how it goes.'

'We are horrible people.'

Everyone gave a half-laugh at that moment. I wasn't necessarily enjoying all of their company but, for the first time, it felt good to call them 'company'. Tonight I had salted my wounds and recovered my... *friends*. The word 'friends' goes down as one of the worst possible descriptions because I've never had 'friends', just people who were close to me, which is why that night was so important and why you are so important dear reader.

'The future looks bright, Mark. Truly. I am proud of you. We are all proud of you.' Frankie said.

'So what do I do now?'

'Nelson wants to see you for lunch next week. Clear the air and clean some things up. He tells me his publisher already wants a word.'

'Wha-'

'He has a lot of leverage in the literary world. Nepotism goes a long way you know?'

'I'm a historian. Of course I know.'

Frankie and I had a half-hug.

'Come on then. Let's all go out for something. Melanie, call up Nick and try and gather as many people as possible. We'll have a meal and then we'll drink for a little. All of us. We'll get shawarma and bubble wrap. I'll fly us to Australia and we'll pound down into this sweet nightclub in Melbourne, some place called Didgeridoom. I'll put on my thunderpants too and then we'll have a *real* shindig.' Frankie said with growing energy.

We all began making our way towards the door as Melanie, with a fresh grin, was already speaking on the phone. Gerry and Frankie patted each other on the back and I knew that Franks and I were still in the aftermath of our recovery. We were friends and collaborators and it would take time for normality to recover. Our chatter would turn to happy memories soon even past all the bittersweet making-up. But no matter.

And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceasele-

No.

'Hold on. I'll just be a sec.' I called out.

They were halfway down the hallway when I came back. They were slowing down to eventually turn around and goad me on. Yet there I was with an instrument in my hand. There I stood with a clearer vision, a clearer head and a brighter future. This was to be an ending. Not a truly 'happy' one. My story would go on and on and yet I remained hopeful. And yet this story still had a few chapters still.

My father's writing advice? I understood it now. Or at least what 'it' meant. I was soft, just like anyone, and that was the only fact I needed to know. Everything else just an accessory.

When I say 'this story had a few chapters still', I'm talking about my life. No matter what I do I can't cleanse the memory of 'Her' out of my system. What I decided, in that moment, was to just get on with it. My 'story' was my life, and I had many more chapters. So many more pieces and things to do.

That instrument. The instrument of my self-realization. It was a paperback book.

I stood with *Gatsby* between my fingers. I needed one last look, just one last scan of those pages. A ritual to cleanse the palette. My friends at the end of the hallway now looked back at me stood there on the threshold of the outside as I froze for the longest moment just caught in the wildest of thoughts...

Gatsby peering out into the darkling ocean, feeling the washing reflection of the star-lit sky wobble before him. I thought of all the thousands of universes and other trillions of life forms contained in that reflection of the heavenly constellations. I thought of *Gatsby's* exhaling breath becoming a frostbite puncture into the night air. Most of all, I saw him standing on the edge of his dock in the exact spot where the enchanted Dutch sailors had first laid their own eyes upon the lush green. Here, *Gatsby* was entranced not by the fresh breast of the new world but by the gleam of the old one held in the green light. I pictured him trembling with the thoughts of his history rushing throughout his system. He thought of the past laid before him, beyond his fingertips. I felt Nick Carraway's darting glances and assumptions, I felt the city's neon jelly blur out the distance and the far away hum of the oceans' currents provide a heartbeat for this moment. As I held these pages of Fitzgerald's mind between my fingers I peered into that eternal green fire of *Gatsby's* past and saw it burn into dark. I too sat alone on that shore, by Carraway, and could feel the same smoked sensation run down my spine like piercing thunder as my own green light faded away. Faded away.