

## The Sea Outside

We set sail for Paris in April 1924, and by June we'd made our way down the coast to St. Raphael. The rental house sat alone on a hill. She was wide and pink, her layers stacked like a cake, and she looked out on the Mediterranean, all twinkling blue promises. The lawn was a blanket of green, and there were trees scattered around the property. There were all different kinds, but they all had the same look about them, long, bare trunks with the leaves piled on top like they were running away from something down below. The air was light and tasted sweet, and it made me feel a tingling in my spine.

Here was my adventure at last, the chance we'd been looking for to start anew. But old habits are hard to break. Before our trunks were even unpacked, Scott shut himself up on the second floor. He dragged a desk over to face the window so he could watch the current, ceaseless as his mind, while he worked on the new novel.

There were five in our party. There was Scott, of course, and our daughter, Frances, who everyone called Scotty. We'd brought along a nanny, a middle-aged Austrian named Gerda, who wore her starched blouses buttoned clear to her fleshy neck. There was a French cook, too, *la femme ancienne*, with gray hair and a love for cream-based sauces. And then there was me. I could do anything I wanted as long as I didn't bother anyone. Isn't that the most awfully funny thing? All that time as a girl back in Alabama I was surrounded by people but on fire to get away and see the

wide world, and now here I was way on the other side of the ocean, eating *fromage blanc* on sliced bread, smoking French cigarettes, the bejeweled sea at my door and not a soul by my side. Until I met Edouard.

He was French, a regular at La Garoupe, the beach a quarter mile from our villa. I walked there in the mornings, already in my bathing suit, a tote slung over one bare shoulder, a linen sarong around my waist. I wondered if Scott watched as I waded through the grasses at the side of the dirt road, if he suspected the way I touched Edouard's arm when we laughed or how the Frenchman saved a spot for me, clearing away the small mottled rocks to create a place where our towels would touch.

When I returned home in the evening, my hair warm from the sun, my toes gritty with sand and the bitter taste of tobacco on my tongue, Scott was never at the window pining as I'd imagined. He was instead hunched at that monstrous desk, papers spread like a fan across the scarred wood. Sometimes he would grunt a greeting or if the mood took him, rattle off plot lines, character backgrounds, thematic ideas. I would like to say he valued my opinion. Between you and me, he would've said the same things were he talking to the sea outside.

"*Trimalchio?*" I said, leaning over his shoulder one evening. I'd just come from the bath and was wearing my robe, white satin clinging to my back where my hair had soaked it through. "Are you still on that? You, my Gofo, are terrible at titles."

Scott was wearing his own robe, a faded cobalt blue terrycloth he called his "Thinking Man's Cloak." It belonged in a wastebasket, but after two novels, one does

not question a writer's processes. Under the piled material, Scott's back stiffened. He turned to squint up at me, his teeth set. "What exactly do you find offensive about that reference? Petronius' work changed ancient literature. Mine has changed modern." He held his hands up like a scale, measuring his work against the other man's.

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. My husband did go on sometimes.

Scott swung back around, his wooden chair nearly tipping over. His ink-stained fingers resumed their movement, pen whipping across page. His breathing was labored. Even with the windows open, even with the wind and the waves, Scotty screeching with Gerda on the lawn below, it was only Scott's wheezing I heard. The ashtray on the desk was full, and a half empty crystal decanter sat next to it. I laid a hand on his back, chastened. "Your book isn't about that Trimalchio character. That's all I meant. It isn't about power. Gatsby doesn't want power. He wants love. He wants to feel like he belongs. Right?"

Once, Scott had made me feel like I belonged with him. He had made me believe he was the antidote to my restlessness and I the cure for his longing. He had worked so hard to win my heart, to convince me that together, with his pen and my charm, we would fell our foes. It was Zelda and Scott against the world. Now, though we were standing in the same room, it felt as though I was on the other side of a glass pane, unable to touch him. Sometimes I feared I would never be close to him again. I ran my hand up to the nape of his neck and squeezed.

When he didn't respond I was gripped by a desperate need to put us back upright. I sometimes got that feeling, the feeling that things were coming undone.

“Do you want to go to the beach? I’ll cancel my dinner with Sara. We can have Cook pack a picnic and eat under the stars. Maybe bring a bottle of the Chateauneuf. I’ll go and change.” I tried to leave the room quickly, before he could protest, but his words were faster than my feet.

“I’m working, Zelda.”

“But wouldn’t it be lovely? To...”

“Yes, yes,” he spat. “Lovely. Go on your own if you want.”

He would not show me his face again. Not even when I slammed the door, rattling the wood in its frame. That glass between us was too thick. He couldn’t hear me, I knew, but still I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to try. I’m not sure if he felt the same way, and I don’t think I ever asked.

That was The Summer of Zelda, Alone. I was alone on the terrace and I went alone to the beach. I went to parties alone and the casino, too. Of course, the season was upon us now, and the Murphys were there and Dorothy Parker and Dos Passos and the MacLeishes and so many other people. People I loved and people I could not stand. Every space was absolutely filled with people, with their soft centers and hard shells, their noises and their needs and their words and their wants. But don’t let them fool you. I was still alone.

At the casino, I drank my dinner. Food was unappealing. Sara Murphy tried to cheer me up by telling me stories about her children. Gerald Murphy kept on with his card tricks. Charm radiated off our table like a bright light. The band was all Negroes and the horns were blaring. Under the table my feet twitched, and I kept

hoping Scott would come. He'd said we could dance tonight, and we hadn't danced in so long. I imagined him in his study, bent like a question mark over his writing, the single bulb in his desk lamp a contrast to the blaze of the casino's lights. I stared at the door, willing something to happen, and it did.

Edouard came in with his friends, two other soldiers named Jean and Jacques or some such. He came right to me, the multitudes parting for him just the way the Red Sea parted for Moses. The brass section was muted, the glare dimmed. He stood over me, just as dark as Scott was light. His edges were blurred like a watercolor painting. I reached out my hand to touch the hem of his jacket, to see if he was real.

"*Danse avec moi*," he said. Not will you or can you, just dance. He was in his aviator's uniform and moved with a feline's assurance of footing. I leaned my head against the stiff twill of his jacket.

The first time I met Scott he was in uniform. He'd been stationed near my home in Montgomery. The night had been balmy, cicadas buzzing in the trees, and I'd been asked to perform at the club, *The Dance of the Hours*. How had he asked me to dance that night? Had his words bubbled in my stomach this way? I couldn't remember, and I wanted to say something to make it all funny, a big joke—the way Scott made me feel, the way Edouard made me feel, the way I actually wanted to feel—but my tongue was numbed by the cloying sweetness of too much pink champagne. I felt Edouard's breath on my bare neck as he leaned in and thanked me for the dance.

I'll admit. It didn't stop there. We danced through July and August, my Frenchman and I. On the beach Edouard wore coconut-scented pomade in his hair,

and I dabbed lavender water behind my ears and pretended that was just the way I smelled. Some mornings, we shared a thermos of cold gin. It wasn't much but it was something. The music played on, and I waited for the tune to change. I waited for Scott to cut in as he must, but he missed all his cues. He was distracted. More than that. He was obsessed. And not with me.

In the evenings, I sipped martinis with Scott and our friends. I'd never felt so far from my husband in all the time I'd known him, not even that first night at the club. I studied him as he told the same stories over and over, boring old things about editors and paychecks and this new book changing everything. Where was I in these tales? I'd always been a part of his writing before, but now I didn't know what role he wanted me to play. As he blathered on, Scott began to look different. His smooth veneer became sallow and harsh, his cheeks sunken in. His words became garbled. He was changing right before my eyes.

"For God's sake, Zelda, why are you making that ghastly face?" He laughed at me. He ignored me. But I could see right into his heart. Once, this man had published a novel simply to win my hand, and now he wouldn't engage me unless I threatened to kill myself with a paring knife from the kitchen drawer. You might say we'd grown apart, but I began to wonder if we'd ever been close at all.

It was the first week of September when Scott met me at the door. Where had the summer gone? The buttery heat of the sun was still on me, my cheeks flushed from the warmth and from Edouard's attentions. Scott's cheeks were rosy, too. He smelled like ink and alcohol.

"It's nearly done," he said, grasping my shoulders the second I got close enough.

"Where's Scotty?" I tried to look around his body, but he was a rock, a boulder, unyielding. I wanted so badly for him to get out of the way. I tried to shrug him off, but he held on tighter, his fingertips pressing into my skin.

"She's with Gerda on another one of their expeditions. Zel, listen. The novel's almost finished. I should be able to send it to Max soon. We have to celebrate!" He released me and strode to the sideboard where a bucket of half-melted ice stood next to that old decanter. I stepped forward, leaving the door ajar. I had all my things in my arms, my bag and my towel and my floppy hat. I couldn't possibly be asked to carry more.

"I'm not in the mood for celebrating," I said. I'd made arrangements to meet Edouard that night. He'd touched my arm and smiled shyly at the ground, his dark lashes skimming his cheekbones as he spoke.

Scott came toward me, two glasses in hand. He offered me a martini, four olives drifting through clouds. He was a different person from the one who'd been chained to his desk all summer but still not the man who'd shown up on my parents' porch to whisk me away from everything that was boring and same in the world. I didn't want to drink, but I didn't want to watch him offering it to me all night like a fool. I dropped my things and took the glass.

"Nonsense," he said. "You're always ready to celebrate. It's what I love about you."

"Is that so?" I wanted to laugh at him, but this wasn't one bit funny.

He touched me again, and my skin, so warm moments before, stood in bumps where his fingers brushed my arm. It was the same place where Edouard had touched me as we parted.

“I’m not in love with you anymore,” I said, not entirely sure if that were true. I just wanted him to stop all this nonsense, to realize he couldn’t pretend everything in our lives was just the same as when we’d arrived in France.

Scott’s hand dropped and his face crinkled as though he’d heard a noise far off. “I’m sorry?” he said. He didn’t sound shocked or sad or angry, only confused, like he’d missed part of a conversation and was struggling to catch up.

I felt sick to my stomach. I hadn’t eaten all day except for a thick, flaky strawberry pastry around noon. I threw the drink into my mouth anyway, grinding an olive between my teeth, and set the glass down. My head spun.

“This is not right,” I said. “We are not right. You don’t love me like you should.” I had to stop from stamping my foot. This wasn’t how I wanted to broach the subject. I sounded petulant, like Scotty begging for another *gallet*. I didn’t sound like the lonely woman I was.

Scott chuckled. “I’m sorry. I haven’t the least idea what you’re saying.”

“This book...” I began in frustration.

“Yes, the book! The book is done! Well, almost. And when I finish, we can go to Rome. We’ve always wanted to see Rome. *J’adore les Italiens.*” He twirled around, and the sight of it made that pastry churn in my stomach.

“No!” Words failing me, I turned to the door. I had to get out of there. I was thinking again of Edouard who would be waiting for me in a few hours, looking of



molasses, his coat hugging his shoulders, his mustache curling when he saw me enter the room. But I realized, though it was a pretty picture, I didn't really want all that. I just wanted Scott, my Scott, to pay me the attention he'd promised, but he couldn't. It wasn't in him anymore. I stumbled over my useless hat on the floor, stubbing my toe hard on the doorjamb.

I cried out in pain, tears welling.

"Zelda! Come back and change. We'll be late for dinner. Everyone's waiting."

I turned, trying not to cry and ruin it all. "There's not going to be a dinner, Francis. I'm leaving you."

He laughed as he had before, but this time the sound kept on rolling around the room, like a marble in a glass jar, getting louder as it went. Abruptly he stopped, the sound dying in his mouth.

"Who is it?" he said with an upward flick of his chin. If I wasn't sure before, I knew it then: he was drunk. It's in the eyes, you know. Before I met Scott, I never knew the true color at the center of a flame is not orange or red or blue or white. It's green like his eyes. "Edouard Jozan," he said, his voice no louder than a whisper.

"This is not about anyone else. It's about us," I said, indignation roiling in my ribcage. "All summer you've neglected me. You left me alone."

"Apparently not."

"I haven't done a thing wrong." And I hadn't. Unless you counted thoughts. But if people counted thoughts, I'd done much worse things than imagining myself tucked neatly into another man's arms. My body tightened, my muscles pulling taut under my skin.

“I cannot stand disloyalty, Zelda. Honor. It’s the most important thing in the world. You know how I feel.”

“You want to talk of loyalty? What about your book? That book is *your* mistress. I hate that book!”

“That mistress paid for this house. That mistress got your drinks. Jozan’s, too, most likely. And that mistress is going to make us. This was the plan. It’s always been the plan. It’s why we came here, so I could write in peace. You can’t change that now. Everyone in the world will know our names.”

“Your name. Your plan. Not mine.”

His eyes widened and his cheek—just one of them—flushed brighter red so it looked like I’d slapped him. It made me feel as though I should apologize. My heart and my brain were all jumbled and the blood was roaring in my ears like the waves on a day when a storm blows in and I didn’t even want to yell. I just wanted to crawl into a corner and cry. The condescension, the injustice made me feel like a girl again. It was impossible to explain what I wanted.

“You never would’ve treated me like this before,” I said.

“You’re being selfish. I was working. I’ve got to take care of this family. Someone does anyway, with you just flitting around like a drunk. And you’re pouting because I didn’t spend the summer worshipping at your feet like that poof, Jozan?”

“He’s not the queer one here, Scott.” It was ugly to speak that way. It was a low blow, Scott’s weak spot. To question his masculinity was to question his very self. I knew I shouldn’t have said it, shouldn’t have but I was angry. I only regretted that now he wouldn’t listen to anything that came after.

“What did you say?”

I crossed the room and poured another round, one for me and a double for him. Straight vodka, the decanter trembling in my hands. I set the glass container on the sideboard with a clunk and picked up a half lime, squeezing it over our drinks. The juice dripped over my fingers and down my wrist, seeping into a cut I had from biting my nails. I put the finger in my mouth. There was sand in my teeth now.

I was still facing the sideboard, trying to steady my heart, when he said, “If you leave me, you will never see Scotty again. I can goddamn guarantee that.”

He grabbed one of the drinks I had just poured and threw the glass against the wall behind him. A thousand shards exploded into the air, and I jumped back, hands up. Scott nodded at me, grabbed the second glass, sloshing liquid onto the wood, and went out the door. I watched his back disappear between the trees as he moved down the slope, toward the water, further away from me.

In the tiny downstairs bathroom, I braced myself against the sink, focusing on the smooth, white tiles beneath the medicine cabinet. I was trying to take slow, deep breaths, but my air came in and out in jagged gasps.

I'd done as Scott had asked when he'd come back. I had bathed and dressed. I had sat with him in our formal dining room. I had sipped gin and tonics. I had laughed and joked. I had changed into my white cotton nightgown. I had let him kiss my neck and my shoulders. I had felt him on top of me and in me. I had listened to his heavy breathing until it slowed. I had lamented the loss of love. I had accepted

responsibility for the part I played in that loss. Then I had risen and made my way to the bathroom, groping down the staircase in the dark.

My head was pounding after dinner, which wasn't much of a dinner but more of me pushing cold green beans around my plate. Scott had tried to apologize, he had, but his words sounded hollow when he told me he still needed me. In sleep, his face looked so peaceful. Was it wrong of me to be jealous? I knew I would not be able to find that sort of peace on my own, not tonight, but a pill would help get me through to the morning.

We kept the medicines in this downstairs bathroom, all the amber bottles, the tiny, pearl inlaid pillboxes. I found the ones I wanted, chalky white, and took two, then one more. I guzzled water from the tap. I stared at the box in my hand. Peace. I swallowed another two, then another. The water and the pills, the feel of them coursing together down my throat. Peace. The satisfaction of having done something affirmative to help myself was fleeting, merengue on a tart, dissolving before it could be appreciated. Peace. It was never quite right, that taste. It never solidified upon my swollen tongue. So I kept trying. Searching for peace. It was close, so close, but I lost consciousness before I could grasp hold.

They said it was a suicide attempt, and of course Scott didn't do anything to dispel the rumors. He'd driven in a panic, headlights veering across the road as he careened toward Villa America, where our steady, stalwart friends, Sara and Gerald Murphy lived. It became another one of his stories: *The Day Our Marriage Almost Ended*. At least this time, I told myself, I was the protagonist.

“And then I said, ‘Come quick! Zelda’s taken pills.’

“Now that you mention it, there was someone else, an aviator. French, if you can imagine.

“Told him she wouldn’t have him. He crashed a plane on a beach in Marseilles. Lovesick. Heartbroken.

“Isn’t that right, Zelda?” Slapping his hand on my leg. His green eyes afire. He was there with me, right by my side. He’d come back to me in his way, and he expected me to come back to him. But there was still that glass between us, a clear, unbroken pane.

“That’s right,” I’d say, “Absolutely heartbroken. Who wouldn’t be?”