

Young & Golden

I was not always Zelda Fitzgerald, lunatic wife of the famed scribe, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Once, I was young and golden and boys wrote my name in the sky, fresh-faced flyboys buzzing our house in their prop planes until my father, The Judge, came out to shake his fist at the heavens. I existed in my own right. I was separate and I was whole. I remind myself of this when the nonsense words go clanging in the next room, when the medicine cart's wheels rattle in the hall, when that damned static hisses in my head, making me feel as though there is no escape from the torments of this world.

I have been at Highland Hospital here in Asheville, North Carolina, for nearly four years. Before that I lived with my mother in Montgomery. Before that I was at the Phipps Clinic at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. And before that I was a different person, a bright star on the black canvas of life. I'm sure I don't have to explain to you—but I will—how sometimes the brightest of stars flare up and burn too hot, and that is what happened to me. That is how I lost myself and ended up here.

I have ways of coping with the pain that accompanies my illness, exercises meant to keep me "grounded." Honestly, I don't know who *wants* to be grounded, but I know I've got to play along, because otherwise all that unfulfilled desire might just burst right through my skin. Calisthenics, horseback riding, and hiking the rocky hills around the clinic are the doctors' ideas of soothing and appropriate activities. Painting, dancing, writing, and remembering are mine.

Scott has never liked my creative pursuits, and Scott, man of words, has a way of putting things that makes people agree. On his orders, writing was forbidden for a time, dancing strictly off limits, painting to be done only after all other options were exhausted. I suppose that's to be expected when one paints pictures of people aflame. It's the remembering the doctors have never been able to stand, though, and it's the remembering they can't stop, though they do try.

"Dwelling on the past will only cause a regression, Mrs. Fitzgerald. You can't change the past. No one can. So, there is no point to reliving it. We like for our patients to move forward. Why don't you go for another walk instead?"

Still, it's my favorite refuge and my last rebellion, the memories of who I was and who I might've been. When the glare is at its unbearable brightest, I think of Montgomery, summer coming on, full and fragrant like hothouse flowers, and I go, quick as I can, to the big white house on Pleasant Avenue. I don't stop until I smell the pear trees, their perfumed air on my skin like a sigh. Then I listen until Grandmother Sayre calls: "Zelda! Come now! Your mama's ready for you."

My heart races my feet down the stairs, and it's a miracle. My bones do not ache; my skin does not burn. I am fifteen years old, and no one outside of Alabama knows my name yet. I have not been to New York City or danced in public fountains; I have not lodged in luxurious hotel rooms or given birth to a fat, pink child. I have not considered extramarital affairs or contemplated suicide. It's wonderful—so wonderful—to be perched on the edge of everything again. It feels like when you lie awake all of Christmas Eve, your body sizzling in anticipation of the next morning, your mind bubbling with the thought of all the riches about to come your way.

On the first floor, I twist my skirt around to face front, smooth my hair, and hurry after my grandmother, so close I nearly step on her hem. For all her supposed ailments, Grandmother Sayre is moving fast today. She always moves fast on Mama's good days. No one knows how long the spells of lucidity will last, and it's best to keep moving, cramming days, weeks, months of meaning into a tiny pocket of time.

At the bedroom door, Grandmother Sayre raps once and pushes on in. The room is stuffy, the windows shut. The pungent smell of wilted lilacs spills from a blue porcelain vase on the dresser, but underneath, there is still, always, the odor of disinfectant and disease. Mama's bent over the black Singer like a cat curled around a heater, spinning the wheel as she feeds a luminous pink satin to the hungry needle. She's not in her dirty old dressing gown but in a starched blouse and skirt, her hair pinned up off her neck. She's humming.

"Mama!" My voice is too big for this space, and Grandmother Sayre's head swivels, quick as a spool on its spindle. I smile at her, pretending not to understand her reproach.

Mama rises up. "The dress is almost done. You ready for the recital, Baby?" Her cheeks flush like fruit, pinpricks of perspiration on her brow. I have the urge to demonstrate a pirouette, a skill I've perfected in the days since we last talked. I so want Mama to come to the Follies and see me dance my first lead, but I know better than to bring that up again. Though I manage to hold my words inside, the rebellious things attempt to escape through my feet. They make me hop once and land in a deep pli , my knees bent at perfect angles. Grandmother Sayre, a Confederate War widow to her core, frowns at this display of frivolity, but Mama, my one true ally in

all the world, responds with a mock solemn bow.

My eldest sister Marjorie once told me our mother wanted to be an actress when she was a girl. "She had a part in a play directed by Georgiana Barrymore but turned it down to marry The Judge." Hearing this had made me love Mama all the more, and I'd felt a savage disappointment that she would abandon herself for our dour-faced father. I can tell you this: I lived with The Judge for twenty years, and Anthony D. Sayre, Esq., though a fortress of a man, was no reason to turn your back on your dreams. It was like trading caviar for a very dependable ham sandwich and pretending to enjoy it all the same.

"Zelda," snaps Grandmother Sayre.

"It's alright, Mother Sayre. Baby's got her head in the clouds. It's my fault for spoiling her." Mama crosses the room, skirt rustling, and digs her long fingers into my curls as though I am still a little girl. She cannot see my hidden strength.

I imagine I can hold my mama down. Keep her from wandering off to that place with the dark caverns where the sloshing of lonely waters whispers her name. I've seen that place in my nightmares, the place where my brother Daniel died so many years before, and Lord knows I don't want Mama to go back there. How awful to keep searching for something—someone—you will just never find.

Grandmother Sayre clears her throat, and Mama pulls away. How I wish that old woman would go back to Tuskegee and leave us alone!

Mama's hands flash like white birds as she helps me into the skirt and slips the bodice over my shoulders. The measuring tape flicks in and out, shoulder to waistline, waistline to ankle, around the ribs. The process ends too quickly. The

pieces of my new dress are stripped from my skin, and I'm pushed toward the door. I break away, though, and bolt back to Mama, already returned to the sewing machine, two pins between her teeth. I take hold of my mama from behind and squeeze. She gasps, the pins dropping onto the metal of the sewing machine stand with soft clicks that create fissures in my heart.

"I'm gonna dance," I say, "and dance and dance. No one in this town has ever seen such dancin'. I feel the music now, in my bones. It makes my skin itch likes it's on fire! Isn't that wonderful?"

There's a tap on my shoulder, and I turn to see a hard smile affixed to Grandmother's face, probably the same smile she gave "those blood-thirsty Yankees" when they marched through Alabama. I give Mama one quick kiss on her head and scurry from the room. That familiar glow is kindling inside. Someday I will be away from my family's restraint and my town's expectations. I will go to a place where big things happen. I can be someone else. I can be myself. The thought of freedom terrifies and thrills me in equal measure.

My brother, Daniel, died before I was born. My family never did like to talk about loss, not unless it was in lecture form, but I know he fell from a rock into Blackbird Creek, his small, bare feet slipping on the slick moss. He struck his head on the way down. The exact methodology of his death—of any death come to that—is a mystery to me. He drowned. He broke his neck. He punctured a lung. I've imagined him, my own personal ghost, dying a dozen different ways. It doesn't matter how it happened. What matters is that when he came out of the water, when they dragged

him out of the water, he was dead.

When the constable came to tell Mama, she went into her room and closed the door. She didn't come out for three weeks. The Judge tried consoling her. Grandmother Sayre tried rebuking her. The doctor tried reasoning with her. There was still my eldest sister, Marjorie, now an only child.

"Minnie," he said, "You are still a mother." She needed to "buck up, be strong, and soldier forth," all those phrases with which people attempt to patch one together when they are not in possession of actual, helpful advice. Still, Mama remained in her room.

What did she do in there? I've often wondered, particularly during the periods of my own isolation. Did she stare at the wall? Read books? Sob uncontrollably? Did she lose herself in a waking sleep, chasing after another dissipated dream?

A month after my brother died, Mama emerged. She was someone different, bright as a soap bubble, doting to a fault. Seven years, three more children, and everyone believed she'd moved on. She fooled them. I think it's because they wanted to be fools. **Recovery from the loss of a part of oneself cannot be is not measured in time, and even if it were, a month wouldn't be any longer than an inch.**

Then one afternoon, my very pregnant mother slipped beneath her blankets, refusing once more to bathe or eat or get out of bed. There was no mania to this madness, no screaming or ranting, no railing against God and man. There was only Mama, alone, and so sad she could not bare to exist in a world that had let her boy die. Like a swelling Southern summer, her grief had to rise to an unbearable

crescendo before it could recede again, and it was when her internal sorrow was at its loudest, during the summer of 1900, that I, Zelda Sayre, sixth and final child, was born, my mama's longing wrapped in a gilded package.

We run the streets of Montgomery the way other children run in their backyards. Every rock has been skipped, every tree climbed, every flower smelled. We know everything there is to know about one another. We know sweet Sara Mayfield prefers gardenias to roses and peanuts make little Charley Stockton swell up like a balloon. We know handsome Lee Callaway writes poetry and wild Zelda Sayre never has a serious word to say. Montgomery, where everything is as it should be and nothing ever changes. We love our drowsy town, every day long and lingering as a summer sun, but some of us wonder what it would be like to shake off that haze and come alive.

It's The Great War that shifts Montgomery from sleepy burg to patriotic hub, reigniting a pulse that hasn't been felt since the Confederacy. There are training camps outside of town, would-be soldiers pouring from the rails to fill them, boys teeming with bravado and hope and the stirrings of patriotism. There are new ice cream parlors and soda fountains dotting Sycamore Drive, and dances held once a week or more, handsome young men in smart, high-collared uniforms, looking for a girl who knows how to move. These are the boys who take to hanging around my tin-roofed porch in the firefly-lit evenings, who offer glowing brass insignia as a sign of their adoration, who skim the clouds over Pleasant Avenue in their planes, raising

the stakes in a game none of them will win. None save one.

The night I meet Scott, I'm asked to perform a solo from *The Dance of the Hours* at the country club. Initially I demur. It's been three years since I became the belle of the Montgomery ball and I've grown tired of dancing on the same stage for the same people, but at the last minute, my feet get to tingling and I change my mind, consenting to perform.

At the club, I am nervous, though I don't know why. My friend Sara asks that I save her a soldier or two tonight. Backstage, the younger girls wish me luck, their eyes wet with admiration. The thick green curtain is raised. At the first swell of strings, the first trill of bells, my anxiety melts into the floor and I am carried away, transported by the way my body responds to the music.

This is Francis Scott Fitzgerald's first image of me: a radiant blur of gold and plum, long, cream-colored arms and legs, grace and heat. This is my introduction to him: a striking, confident Northerner in uniform, his rigid jaw and mouth at odds with his limpid green eyes. He meets me at the edge of the stage, pushing another suitor aside to inquire if all Southern girls can dance that way.

"If so, I think I've spent my life in the wrong part of the country," he says.

"You don't know the half of it," I respond.

He brings me a drink, something cold and sweet, and leads me outside where we sit on a concrete bench and listen to the cicadas sing. He's from Minnesota, a land I imagine to be made wholly of ice. He hopes to be sent overseas soon so he won't miss all the excitement, but he's been keeping himself busy writing a novel in the officers' training camp. He works on it every Saturday afternoon and all day on

Sundays. He wants to be a writer.

“I want to be a dancer,” I tell him. Then I tell him about Sara and Genie and Roberta and Charley and Lee and Bill, just everyone I can think of, and I tell him about the house on Pleasant Avenue, how I adore peach pie and can’t stand to wait for anything at all, and how wonderful Montgomery is, especially in the summer when the warm air is just perfect for napping on a porch swing.

“I’ve never met a girl with so damned much to say,” he says amiably, and I see it in his eyes, a world beyond the South. I can tell from the way he goes on about himself that he is just as spoiled as me, just as sure he knows exactly where he is going. He will spend the rest of our life together assuring me he can get there with no one other. I rarely believe him, but that’s another story.

“*The Romantic Egotist?*” I don’t like the title of Scott’s novel, but I haven’t read it yet, so I’m hesitant to tell him. It’s new to me, this concern that I’ve missed something, some revelatory outpouring of this man’s soul. Scott has been to Princeton. Just a few months before, I couldn’t wait to be done with school, but now I feel the need to prove myself, to show I’m more than a pretty, small town belle.

Scott grasps my hand, his delicate fingers sliding between mine. “It’s the perfect title. The main character—his name is Amory—his ambitions ruin love for him, and...oh, you’ll have to read it. I’ll send a chapter when I get back to barracks. This book is going to change literature. I’m speaking for our whole generation. Just wait. You’ll see.”

“So I’ve heard.” I lean into him. He smells of linen and pencil lead. He smells

of promise, something cleaner than even the pear trees just the other side of the yard. He strokes my hair, his fingers trailing along my spine in a way that makes me think of desserts covered in whipped cream.

Though Scott has met my parents on several occasions, tonight is the first time he's been invited to stay for supper. Upon hearing of our guest, The Judge began to act even more put upon than usual, and this rankled me so that I was forced to mention more than twice how my family had better eat faster so I could get on to my next date. In response, The Judge's square face expanded to the approximate shape and shade of a rutabaga. Pushed to his limits, he grasped the wooden handle of his steak knife and rose, the backs of his knees knocking his chair into the wall. He advanced upon me, and I, delighted to have extracted even the slightest emotion from one of Alabama's esteemed judiciary, hurried around the opposite side of the table, laughing like mad. My siblings continued on with the meal, as they are apt to do when things get out of hand. Mama inquired of Scott if he'd like another glass of iced sweet tea. After a couple laps around the table, both The Judge and I resumed our seats and finished the roast on our plates.

"Not that I want to turn talk away from my literary prowess, but is your family always like that?" says Scott.

I sit up. The porch swing rocks with agitation, its rusty old chains croaking like the bullfrog camped in the farthest, dampest corner of the yard. "Like what?"

Scott raises an eyebrow and glances at the lighted windows. He needn't worry. The Judge is snoring upstairs, our squabble long forgotten. It's only Mama behind those lace curtains, pretending to cross-stitch while she keeps an eye on the

mantle clock. She's having a good spell, worried about nothing more than whether I've remembered to put on my stockings.

"Oh, that." I snuggle back against Scott. "No, they're not always like that. Only when they dislike someone do they try so very hard to be themselves."

Scott sighs. "I would think they liked me very much. It takes such a great effort to be oneself, don't you think?"

"Scott Fitzgerald," I say, "I think I might love you."

Scott never promises riches or fame, though it's clear that is what he craves. My tastes are different from his. I'm already a star, remember? What I yearn for is a place where my heart won't feel so restless, where I won't fall like Sleeping Beauty into a lull from which I might never wake. I want a bigger stage, one without all those familiar faces before me, and Scott is that stage. He sees something he needs in me, too, that spark a pile of kindling needs to burn. We are engaged to be married that fall.

Within a year, everything has been turned on its head. The war is over; Scott's book is soundly rejected, his confidence shattered. In spite of my misgivings, I break our engagement. It isn't the money, though I know that's what people whisper when I pass. It's the loss of something inexplicable, the loss of something I never had but can't bear to live without. Scott has changed.

He writes to me from New York where he's taken a copywriting job he hates, but his letters are terse, the life bled out of them. Still I hold them close, a sheaf of papers tucked into a flowered hatbox under my bed. Though I've got beaux from

Auburn to Georgia Tech, I cannot bear to toss those bits of Scott in the trash. I try my best to recover myself, but it's too late. I have changed, too.

"He's unstable," says Mama. "A writer? Baby, you would've lived hand to mouth if you'd married him. You'll find a nice Southern boy soon enough. You can't let an imaginary future rub out a real one."

Can she see the irony of this condemnation? I can never bring myself to comment on it for fear my mama honestly doesn't know how we are the same, how there are two sides to us, two broken sides, and we cannot rest until we've put them back together and are whole.

In its third incarnation, *The Romantic Egotist* becomes *This Side of Paradise*, all the pieces falling into place. Four days after receiving his acceptance letter from Scribner's, Scott appears on our porch. His fair hair is parted down the middle and slicked back. His light eyes are luminous once again. He is a beacon, calling me. I take his warm hand and step out of the white house, into the world.

"Morning, Mrs. Fitzgerald." In an instant, Montgomery is gone, a syrupy alto drawing me back to the world where the floors smell not of pears but of bleach. It's Joyce, my favorite nurse, if you can have a favorite in a place like this. When I was younger, people said they were going to "take a cure" or "convalesce." Now I'm just considered insane. *The World's First Flapper in a Nut House*. Now there's a title.

Sometimes I ask the nurse on duty to put in a call to Scott in California. She always squints when I ask about Hollywood, and I am plagued by the old terror that

I'm being blamed for something beyond my control. Can't they see everything is beyond my control? People have tried to say I held Scott back, postulating on how great he might've been without me. Isn't that just the way? Always it's been, since Eve gave Adam that apple. As if Adam had no choice in the matter. As if there never was anything special and pure and true between us. Ha. Now I'm sounding like another writer we know, and Lord, I wouldn't want that.

Without me, Scott might've been more. Without me, Scott might've been less. Don't you think, has it ever occurred to you, that without me, Scott might've been nothing at all? He has his faults, you know. I don't like to dwell on such things because he is my stage, so big and full of promise, but without a star, the stage remains dark. Just remember that. Just remember: I am Rosalind. I am Gloria. I am Nicole Diver. I am Daisy Buchanan, damn it. I am every girl he ever wrote, and if he's going to portray me in so uncharitable a light, the least he can do is acknowledge my place in this, his art. This is what I tell myself.

To Joyce, the nurse, I say, "Can you just get him on the phone already?"

She's fiddling with the medicine cart, locking and unlocking its little metal doors. "Mmmm?" she says without looking up.

Then I remember: I can't call Scott because he's dead. A heart attack in his mistress's apartment. On my good nights, I dream of gouging that woman's eyes out with a tiny fork like the ones Scott and I used to eat shrimp cocktail in Paris. He's been gone seven years, hasn't he? Time is slippery, mercurial, hot, silver liquid staining my hands. There is never enough time but then all these years have passed so quickly. How is that possible? How does life go on at such a pace?

“Mrs. Fitzgerald?” Joyce, always interrupting. “Your pills, ma’am. Meds before breakfast, remember?”

My fingers itch to knock those wretched pills from their metal tray. I don’t want them now because I am thinking. My reflection, aged and white-washed, blinks out from the nurse’s horn-rimmed glasses. My mouth is pinched, and my glowing golden hair is replaced by a mop of drab brown. It is all wrong—all wrong!—and I want to rip it out, every strand. I would do it, too, but for the thought of the pain in the tender scalp beneath. And it’s the pain that pulls me back, reins me in. So, I take their pills. I swallow them and trace their path, down and down and down, inside myself I go.