

# The Great GATSBY



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the great gatsby by f. scott fitzgerald

*ai rewrote every page of the great gatsby in the style of dostoevsky, kafka or any of the other great authors.*

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# I

In the tender years of my youth, when my soul was yet unguarded against the cruelties of the world, my father, in his infinite wisdom, imparted to me a piece of counsel that has since nestled in the recesses of my mind, tormenting me with its profound simplicity. "My dear boy," he uttered, his voice heavy with the weight of experience, "when the urge to condemn another soul arises within you, pause and consider that not all in this vast, indifferent universe have been blessed with the same fortunes as you." His words, though few, carried the gravity of a thousand unspoken truths, for such was the nature of our peculiar bond – a connection of unspoken understanding.

This paternal guidance has instilled in me a reluctance to pass judgment, a trait that has both revealed to me the curious intricacies of human nature and subjected me to the tedious ramblings of many a tiresome individual. It is a quality that seems to beckon the abnormal mind, drawing it inexorably towards those who possess it. Thus, in my university days, I found myself unjustly branded a politician, for I had become the unwitting confidant of many a troubled soul.

These confessions, more often than not, were thrust upon me unbidden. I confess to having feigned slumber, affected distraction, or donned a mask of levity when I sensed the approach of an unwelcome revelation. For the outpourings of youthful hearts, though earnest, are often plagued by unoriginality and conspicuous omissions.

To withhold judgment is to nurture an infinite hope. Yet I remain ever vigilant, lest I overlook some crucial truth in forgetting my father's somewhat snobbish assertion – one which I, in my own snobbery, now echo – that the fundamental decencies of life are distributed unequally at birth. But even as I extol my own tolerance, I must confess its limits. For while the foundations of conduct may vary, beyond a certain point, I find myself indifferent to their nature.

Upon my return from the Orient in the autumnal season past, I found myself possessed of a most peculiar desire—that the world should don a uniform and stand at moral attention for all eternity. No longer did I wish to embark upon boisterous adventures offering fleeting glimpses into the depths of human nature. Yet there was one exception to this sentiment: Mr. Gatsby, the very gentleman whose name graces this volume, and who embodied all that I held in genuine contempt.

If one were to consider personality as an uninterrupted sequence of graceful gestures, then Mr. Gatsby possessed a certain magnificence—a heightened awareness of life's possibilities, not unlike those ingenious devices capable of detecting tremors from across vast distances. This quality was far removed from the insipid sensitivity often lauded as artistic temperament. Rather, it was an extraordinary capacity for hope, a romantic disposition I had never before encountered and doubt I shall ever witness again.

Indeed, Mr. Gatsby proved himself worthy in the end. It was the pernicious influences that preyed upon him, the unsavoury elements that trailed in the wake of his aspirations, which momentarily dulled my interest in the fleeting joys and sorrows of mankind.

My own lineage boasts three generations of prominence and prosperity in our Middle Western town. The Carraways are something of a clan, with a family legend claiming descent from the Dukes of Buccleuch. However, the true progenitor of our line was my grandfather's brother, who arrived here in the year fifty-one. He dispatched a substitute to the Civil War and established the wholesale hardware enterprise my father manages to this day. Though I never made the acquaintance of this great-uncle, I am said to bear a striking resemblance to him—particularly in reference to the rather severe portrait adorning my father's office wall.

In the labyrinthine corridors of memory, I find myself emerging from the hallowed halls of New Haven in 1915, a quarter-century after my father's passage through the same. Soon after, I was swept into the grotesque carnival of the Great War, that belated Teutonic exodus. The intoxicating chaos of the counter-raid left me restless, a clockwork wound too tight. The Middle West, once the pulsating heart of existence, now seemed a frayed edge of reality, prompting my eastward migration to immerse myself in the arcane rituals of the bond business.

This vocation, it seemed, was a universal constant among my acquaintances, surely capable of sustaining one more solitary soul. My relatives deliberated with the gravity of choosing a preparatory institution, their faces etched with hesitation as they uttered a drawn-out affirmation. My father, in his infinite wisdom, agreed to finance this metamorphosis for a year.

After an eternity of delays, I found myself transplanted to the East in the spring of twenty-two, believing it to be a permanent transformation. The logical course was urban dwelling, but the season's warmth and memories of expansive lawns compelled me to accept a colleague's proposition of cohabitation in a commuter's hamlet. He procured a weather-beaten cardboard construct at an exorbitant rate, only to be whisked away to Washington by unseen forces.

Alone, I ventured into this alien landscape, accompanied briefly by a canine companion who soon vanished into the ether. My possessions consisted of an aged Dodge and a Finnish woman, whose mutterings over the electric stove seemed to hold the secrets of the universe. In this solitude, I wandered until, one morning, a fellow newcomer materialized on the road, breaking the spell of isolation.

In the sweltering heat of summer, a lost soul approached me, his eyes pleading for direction to West Egg village. As I guided him, I felt a surge of belonging, as if I had become a pioneer in this strange land. The stranger's simple question had unwittingly bestowed upon me the keys to the neighborhood.

The world around me burst into life, leaves unfurling like time-lapse footage in an old newsreel. I was filled with a familiar conviction that life was renewing itself, as it always does when summer arrives. The air was thick with possibility, and I breathed it in greedily, determined to extract every ounce of vitality from it.

I acquired a collection of books on finance and economics, their gleaming covers promising to reveal the secrets of wealth that only the greatest magnates of history had known. They stood proudly on my shelf, a testament to my ambition. I harbored grand plans to expand my literary horizons, to become that most paradoxical of creatures: the well-rounded man.

In my college days, I had fancied myself something of a writer, penning earnest editorials for the Yale News. Now, I sought to rekindle that spark, to view life through the lens of literature once more. But as I would come to learn, life is best observed through a single, focused window.

By some quirk of fate, I found myself residing in one of the most peculiar corners of North America. On a slender, chaotic island stretching eastward from New York, nature had sculpted two remarkable land formations. Twenty miles from the bustling metropolis, a pair of colossal eggs emerged from the landscape, separated by a narrow bay. These twin promontories jutted into the placid waters of Long Island Sound, that great, domesticated expanse of brine that lapped at the shores of our continent.

The twin promontories, though not perfectly ovoid, bore a striking resemblance that must have intrigued the seabirds soaring above. Yet to those of us earthbound, their disparities were far more captivating. I resided on West Egg, the less prestigious of the pair - a superficial distinction that belied the peculiar and somewhat disquieting contrast between them.

My modest abode perched at the very edge, mere steps from the Sound, wedged between two grand estates that commanded exorbitant seasonal rents. To my right loomed an immense property - a faithful recreation of some Norman town hall, complete with a newly constructed tower barely concealed by tendrils of ivy, a marble-lined pool, and sprawling grounds. This was Gatsby's domain, though I knew nothing of the man himself at the time.

My own dwelling, while unremarkable, afforded me a glimpse of the water, a partial view of my neighbor's manicured lawn, and the dubious comfort of proximity to wealth - all for a modest sum. Across the bay, the gleaming mansions of East Egg dotted the shoreline, their opulence a stark reminder of the social divide.

It was on an evening when I ventured to dine with the Buchanans that the summer's events truly began to unfold. Daisy, a distant relation, and Tom, an old college acquaintance, resided in that realm of privilege and excess. As I drove towards their estate, I couldn't help but reflect on the curious twist of fate that had placed me on the fringes of such extravagance, an observer to a world both alluring and unsettling.

It was but a short while after the great conflict that I had the pleasure of spending two days in the company of my acquaintances in Chicago. Her husband, a man of considerable physical prowess, had distinguished himself as one of the most formidable players of the American football at New Haven—a figure of national renown, one might say, who had achieved such a zenith of excellence at one-and-twenty that all subsequent endeavours seemed to pale in comparison.

His family possessed a fortune of immense proportions—indeed, even during his university days, his profligate spending had been a source of mild scandal—but now he had quit Chicago and journeyed eastward in a manner that quite took one's breath away. He had, for instance, transported a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was rather difficult to comprehend that a gentleman of my own generation could command such wealth.

The reason for their relocation to the East remained a mystery to me. They had sojourned in France for a twelvemonth without any particular purpose, and then wandered hither and thither restlessly, frequenting places where the wealthy gathered to play polo. Daisy had declared over the telephone that this was to be a permanent residence, but I confess

I harboured doubts—while I could not claim to know the depths of Daisy's heart, I sensed that Tom would forever drift, seeking with a touch of wistfulness the dramatic turbulence of some long-past football match.

And so it came to pass that on a balmy, breezy evening, I found myself driving to East Egg to call upon two old friends whom I scarcely knew at all. Their abode was even more grand than I had anticipated—a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, commanding a splendid view of the bay.

The facade fractured, French windows gaping, gold-drenched and wind-licked. Tom Buchanan, equestrian-clad, legs splayed on the porch like a conqueror. Metamorphosed from his New Haven days, now a straw-haired brute of thirty, mouth hardened, manner dripping with disdain. Eyes gleaming, arrogant, domineering his face, perpetually thrusting forward in aggressive posture. Even the effete swagger of his riding attire couldn't mask the monstrous power coiled within—flesh straining against glistening boots, muscles rippling beneath the thin veneer of his coat. A body built for leverage, for cruelty.

His voice, a rough, husky tenor, amplified the aura of fractiousness. Paternal contempt laced his words, even for those he favored—and at New Haven, men had loathed him viscerally. "Don't mistake my opinions for gospel," he seemed to taunt, "merely because I'm more man than you'll ever be." We shared a senior society, never close, yet I sensed his approval, his desire for my affection, tinged with a harsh, defiant longing.

We exchanged words on the sun-drenched porch. "I've carved out a fine domain here," he boasted, eyes darting restlessly. His grip, a vise on my arm, as he swept his hand across the vista—a sunken Italian garden, roses deep and pungent, a motorboat bobbing insolently offshore. The landscape, like Buchanan himself, a carefully curated display of power and wealth, each element precisely placed to underscore his dominance.

In this gilded cage, Tom Buchanan reigned supreme, a monument to masculinity gone awry, to privilege unchecked. His every gesture, every word, a reminder of the chasm between his world and that of ordinary mortals. The air itself seemed to bend to his will, heavy with the scent of roses and the promise of violence barely contained.

The house belonged to an oil tycoon named Demaine. My companion gently turned me around and led me inside. We entered through a tall hallway into a sun-drenched pink room, delicately connected to the outdoors by French windows on both ends. The windows were slightly open, their white frames contrasting with the lush grass outside that seemed to creep into the room.

A soft breeze flowed through, making the curtains dance like ethereal flags. They twisted upwards towards the ornate ceiling, then rippled across the deep red carpet, creating shifting shadows like wind on water. The only still thing was an enormous couch where two young women floated as if on a tethered balloon.

Both wore white dresses that fluttered as though they had just landed from a brief flight around the house. I stood there for a moment, listening to the snap of curtains and the creaking of a picture frame. Suddenly, Tom closed the far windows with a thud. The trapped wind dissipated, and everything - curtains, rugs, and the two women - slowly settled back to earth.

I didn't know the younger woman. She lay stretched out on her end of the couch, completely still, with her chin slightly raised as if balancing an invisible object. If she noticed me, she didn't show it. I almost felt compelled to apologize for interrupting her reverie.

The scene felt dreamlike, suspended between reality and fantasy. The fleeting breeze, the ethereal women, and the play of light and shadow created an atmosphere of both tranquility and underlying tension. It was as if time had momentarily paused, allowing us to glimpse a hidden world of beauty and mystery.

In the sweltering heat of that endless summer afternoon, the two women reclined like tropical flowers, their petals unfurling in languid splendor. Daisy, the more effervescent of the pair, stirred from her repose with a half-hearted attempt at propriety, only to dissolve into laughter that bubbled up like champagne in crystal flutes. Her mirth was contagious, and I found myself drawn into the room, enveloped by the intoxicating aroma of her presence.

"I'm positively drowning in ecstasy," she proclaimed, her words floating on the humid air like butterflies. Her eyes, luminous pools of light, fixed upon me with an intensity that suggested I was the only person in her universe at that moment. It was a talent she possessed, to make one feel singularly important.

In hushed tones, she introduced her companion as Miss Baker, her whisper a siren song that compelled one to lean closer, as if to capture some vital secret. Miss Baker acknowledged me with the barest of nods, her attention consumed by some precarious balancing act that threatened to topple at any moment.

Daisy's voice was a melody that defied the laws of nature, rising and falling in cadences that would never be replicated. Her face, a canvas of contrasts, held both sorrow and joy, with eyes that sparkled like stars and lips that curved with passionate promise. But it was her voice that truly captivated, carrying within it the echoes of past revelries and the tantalizing hint of adventures yet to come. It was a siren call that men found impossible to resist, a whispered invitation to a world of perpetual excitement and endless possibility.

In the somber twilight of my journey's respite, I imparted to her tales of my brief sojourn in Chicago, and of the myriad souls who had entrusted me with their fond regards. "Do they pine for my presence?" she inquired, her voice a tremulous whisper of ecstasy. "The metropolis lies in utter desolation," I replied, my words dripping with melancholy. "Each carriage bears a wheel of ebony, a funereal wreath, and the northern shore echoes with an unceasing lament."

"How exquisitely mournful!" she exclaimed. "Let us return forthwith, Tom. On the morrow!" Then, with sudden caprice, she added, "You must gaze upon the child."

"I should be most pleased," I responded.

"She slumbers now, this three-year-old babe. Have you never beheld her?"

"Not once," I confessed.

"Then you must, for she is—"

At that moment, Tom Buchanan, who had been pacing the chamber like a restless specter, halted his wanderings and placed his spectral hand upon my shoulder. "What occupation claims you, Nick?"

"I am a purveyor of bonds," I answered.

"With whom?" he inquired. Upon hearing my reply, he declared with finality, "That name is unknown to me."



His dismissive tone kindled my ire. "You shall come to know it," I retorted, "should you remain in these Eastern climes."

"Oh, I shall remain," he assured me, his gaze darting between Daisy and myself with a predatory gleam. "Only a damned fool would dwell elsewhere."

At this juncture, Miss Baker, hitherto as silent as a tomb, startled us all with a sudden exclamation of "Absolutely!" The word seemed to surprise even her, for she rose from her repose with a series of swift, graceful movements.

"I am stiff as death," she lamented, "having lain upon that divan for what feels an eternity."

"Cast not your accusatory glances upon me," Daisy retorted. "I have endeavored to lure you to New York throughout the afternoon."

"I must decline," Miss Baker responded to the proffered libations that had materialized from the pantry's depths.

Yo, check it. This chica's all "I'm training, for real." The dude hosting looks at her like she just said she could fly. "You are?" He downs his drink like it's nothing. "How you get shit done, I'll never know."

I'm eyeing this Baker girl, wondering what kind of "done" she's talking about. Can't lie, I'm digging the view. She's this flaca thing, small tetas, standing all soldier-like, shoulders back like she's challenging the world. Her eyes, all grey and sun-bleached, give me the once-over. That face, though - wan, pretty, but mad unsatisfied. I swear I've seen her before, or maybe just a picture.

She throws some shade, "You're from West Egg. I know someone there."

I start to say I don't know nobody, but she cuts in, "You gotta know Gatsby."

Daisy's all, "Gatsby? What Gatsby?"

Before I can explain he's my neighbor, dinner's called. Tom grabs my arm like he's moving a damn chess piece, dragging me out.

The ladies float out ahead of us, hands on hips, to this pink porch facing the sunset. Four candles are fighting the wind on the table.

Daisy's not feeling it. "Why candles?" She kills them with her fingers. "Longest day of the year's coming up." She beams at us. "You ever wait for the longest day and then miss it? 'Cause I always do."

Baker yawns, sitting down like she's hitting the sack. "We should plan something."

Daisy's voice, a ribbon of sound: "What shall we conjure?" Her eyes, lost satellites, seeking mine. "What do humans devise?" Before my lips could part, her gaze fixed, awestruck, on her smallest digit. "Behold," she murmured, "it's bruised." Our collective attention drawn to the purpled knuckle, a tiny galaxy of pain.

"Your doing, Tom," she accused, voice a thin blade. "Unintended, yet done. The price of wedding a brute, a vast, lumbering specimen of—"

"Lumbering," Tom interjected, his words a growl. "I detest that word, even in jest."

"Lumbering," Daisy insisted, her repetition a defiant flag.

She and Miss Baker, their voices a duet of nonchalance, words overlapping like cool silk. Their dialogue, never quite frivolous, as detached as their ivory dresses and dispassionate gazes. They inhabited this space, acknowledging Tom and me with polite,

effortless attempts at engagement. Aware that dinner would soon conclude, the evening folding itself away like a discarded garment.

The contrast with the West was stark—there, evenings hurtled towards their demise, propelled by anticipation or dread of the impending moment.

"Daisy, you render me uncultured," I confessed, cradling my second glass of mediocre yet imposing claret. "Might we discourse on agriculture?"

My casual remark ignited an unexpected blaze.

"Civilization crumbles," Tom erupted, his words volcanic. "I've become a prophet of doom. Have you encountered Goddard's 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires'?"

"No," I replied, my surprise a palpable thing in the air between us.

Listen, child, and I'll tell you about the white man's fear, his trembling at the thought of being washed away by the dark tide of other races. Tom, he speaks of this book, this scientific book with its long words and deep thoughts, as if it were gospel truth. He says, "We must be vigilant, we Nordics, we who have built civilization with our bare hands and brilliant minds."

And Daisy, poor foolish Daisy, she nods and winks and whispers fiercely about beating them down, these others who threaten their dominance. Oh, how they cling to their whiteness like a life raft in a storm-tossed sea!

Miss Baker tries to speak of California, but Tom won't hear it. He's too busy naming who belongs and who doesn't, hesitating only a breath before including Daisy in his chosen people. As if her paleness might not be quite pure enough.

There's a desperation in Tom's voice, a need to believe in his own superiority that goes beyond mere arrogance. It's as if he fears that without this belief, he might crumble into dust and blow away on the wind.

But then the telephone rings, and Daisy seizes her chance to change the subject. She leans close, her eyes bright with gossip, and says, "Let me tell you a secret about the butler's nose." As if this trivial tidbit could erase the ugliness of what came before.

And I, I listen and nod, for this is why I came, is it not? To hear their secrets and their fears, to see the cracks in their perfect white world. To witness how they polish their silver and their souls, trying to outshine the rising sun of change.

In the waning light of day, as shadows lengthened and the soul grew heavy with the weight of existence, he found himself condemned to an endless cycle of polishing, his very being consumed by this Sisyphean task. His nose, that most prominent of features, bore the brunt of this futile endeavor, until at last—

"The situation deteriorated, did it not?" interjected Miss Baker, her voice tinged with a mixture of pity and morbid curiosity.

"Indeed," came the reply, "it spiraled into an abyss of despair, culminating in the relinquishment of his position."

For a fleeting moment, the dying sun cast its warm embrace upon her luminous countenance; her words, like a siren's call, drew me inexorably forward. But then, as if God Himself had withdrawn His favor, the light faded, each ray reluctantly abandoning her visage, reminiscent of children torn from the bosom of their beloved street at twilight.

The butler, that silent specter of propriety, materialized to whisper some secret intelligence into Tom's ear. Tom's brow furrowed, and without uttering a syllable, he retreated

into the depths of the house. His departure seemed to ignite a spark within Daisy, who leaned forward, her voice resonating with an almost ethereal quality.

"Nick, your presence at my table fills me with such joy. You remind me of... of a rose, yes, the very essence of a rose. Don't you agree?" She turned to Miss Baker, seeking validation of this fanciful notion.

This comparison, however, was far from the truth. I bore no resemblance, however faint, to a rose. Yet, despite the falsity of her words, a palpable warmth emanated from her being, as if her very soul yearned to reach out and touch those around her through the vehicle of her breathless, entrancing utterances.

The neighbor I mentioned, this Gatsby fellow, lives just—" I began, but was swiftly silenced.

"Hush now. Let the tale unfold," she commanded.

"Is there a tale to tell?" I asked, feigning innocence.

Miss Baker's eyes widened, genuine surprise etched on her face. "You mean to say you're unaware? I thought the whole world knew."

"I do not," I confessed.

She hesitated, her words hanging in the air like ripe fruit. "Tom... he's entangled with a woman in the city."

"Entangled?" The word echoed hollowly in my mouth.

Miss Baker nodded, her face a mask of disapproval. "One would think she'd have the decency to refrain from calling during the evening meal. Don't you agree?"

Before I could fully grasp the weight of her words, the air was filled with the rustle of fine fabric and the creak of expensive leather. Tom and Daisy had returned, their presence filling the room like smoke.

"It was unavoidable!" Daisy exclaimed, her voice a brittle laugh. She took her seat, her eyes darting between Miss Baker and myself, searching for something unseen. "I stepped outside for but a moment, and oh, how romantic it is out there. There's a bird on the lawn, surely a nightingale that's crossed the ocean on some grand ship. Its song fills the air—"

Her voice took on a melodic quality as she turned to Tom. "Isn't it romantic, my dear?"

"Exceedingly so," he replied, his tone flat. Then, to me, with a hint of desperation, "If there's light enough after we dine, I'd like to show you the stables."

The shrill cry of the telephone cut through the air like a knife, and Daisy's firm headshake to Tom banished all talk of stables and everything else into oblivion. In the fractured moments that followed, I recall the pointless relighting of candles and a desperate desire to both meet and avoid every gaze in the room. I couldn't fathom Tom and Daisy's thoughts, and I doubt even Miss Baker, with her hardened skepticism, could entirely dismiss the urgent, metallic voice of that unseen fifth guest.

In the twilight's embrace, a tension hung thick as smoke. Some might have found intrigue in the unfolding drama, but my instinct screamed for intervention, for the cold clarity of law enforcement. The equine matter dissolved into silence, unspoken yet heavy in the air.

Tom and Jordan drifted back to the library, twilight shadows stretching between them. They moved as if drawn to a vigil, a presence unseen yet palpable. I followed Daisy, feigning interest and slight deafness, as we wound through verandas to the front porch.

In the deep shadows, we settled onto a wicker settee. Daisy cradled her face, as if mapping its contours with her fingertips. Her gaze drifted into the velvet darkness, emotions roiling beneath her surface. Seeking to calm the waters, I inquired about her child.

"We're strangers, Nick," she said abruptly. "Cousins, yes, but you missed my wedding."

"The war kept me away," I offered.

"Yes," she paused. "I've been through hell, Nick. I'm jaded now."

Her words hinted at untold stories. I waited, but she remained silent. Awkwardly, I returned to the topic of her daughter.

"She must be talking, eating... living?"

"Oh, yes," Daisy replied, distracted. "Nick, let me tell you what I said when she was born. It'll show you how I've come to see the world."

"Please, do," I encouraged.

"She was barely an hour old. Tom was... absent. I woke from anesthesia, feeling utterly abandoned. The first thing I asked the nurse was whether it was a boy or a girl."

In the fading light of that autumn evening, I found myself drawn into a peculiar scene, one that would linger in my memory for years to come. The woman beside me, her voice tinged with a curious mixture of despair and defiance, spoke of her newborn daughter. Her words, at once tender and callous, echoed in the stillness of the room. "A beautiful little fool," she mused, "that's the best a girl can hope to be in this world."

As she continued, her tone shifted, taking on a worldly air that seemed incongruous with her delicate features. She spoke of her experiences, her sophistication, her eyes flashing with a fierce pride reminiscent of her husband's. Yet, as her voice trailed off, I was struck by a sudden unease, a sense that her words were but a carefully constructed facade.

The crimson room, bathed in a warm glow, beckoned us inward. Tom and Miss Baker occupied opposite ends of a long couch, their figures casting elongated shadows across the floor. Miss Baker's voice, soft and melodious, filled the air as she read aloud from a magazine, the words blending into a soothing rhythm. The lamplight played across the scene, illuminating Tom's polished boots and casting a dull sheen on Miss Baker's autumnal hair.

As we entered, Miss Baker paused, her hand raised in a gesture of silence. "To be continued," she announced, her voice carrying a hint of theatrical flair. The magazine found its resting place on the table with a soft thud, and Miss Baker rose, her body seeming to assert its presence in the room with a restless energy.

In that moment, I felt as though I had stumbled upon a secret gathering, one to which I was not entirely welcome. The evening stretched before us, laden with unspoken tensions and half-concealed truths.

The hour struck ten, its resonance etching itself upon the ceiling's blank canvas, and she, with a languid gesture, remarked, "The time has come for this virtuous creature to seek repose." Then Daisy, her voice a meandering stream of explanation, "Jordan, you see, is to engage in that tournament, tomorrow, at Westchester." And suddenly, like a revelation, "Ah, you're Jordan Baker," I uttered, comprehension dawning as to why her countenance bore such familiarity, that pleasingly disdainful expression having gazed out at me from countless rotogravure images of the sporting milieu at Asheville, Hot Springs, Palm Beach, and some tale, too, a critical, disagreeable one, had once reached my ears, though its substance had long



since dissolved into the mists of forgetfulness. "Good night," she murmured, her words a soft exhalation, "Rouse me at eight, won't you?" "If you'll but rise," came the reply. "I shall. Good night, Mr. Carraway. Until we meet again." Daisy, with an air of certainty, "Of course you will. In fact, I believe I shall orchestrate a union. Visit often, Nick, and I'll contrive to—oh—thrust you together. You understand—confine you accidentally in linen closets, cast you adrift at sea, and such machinations—" From the staircase, Miss Baker's voice floated down, "Good night. Not a word has reached my ears." Tom, after a moment's contemplation, "A pleasant girl. They oughtn't permit her such unfettered wanderings across the country." Daisy, her tone glacial, "Who oughtn't?" "Her family," Tom replied. "Her family consists of a single aunt, ancient as time itself. Besides, Nick will assume the role of guardian, won't you, Nick? She'll frequent this place on weekends throughout the summer. I suspect the domestic influence will prove most beneficial." Daisy and Tom exchanged a silent glance. I, seizing the moment, inquired, "Is she a New Yorker?" "From Louisville. Our fair girlhood unfolded together there. Our beautiful, unblemished—" Tom, his interruption abrupt, demanded, "Did you engage Nick in an intimate tête-à-tête on the veranda?"

The words hung between us, heavy with unspoken meaning. She gazed at me, her eyes searching, as if trying to recall a half-forgotten dream. "The Nordic race," she murmured, more to herself than to me. "Yes, that's what we discussed. It crept up on us, silent as a shadow."

He interjected, his voice a mix of warning and amusement. "Nick, don't swallow everything you hear."

I laughed, a brittle sound in the thick air. "I've heard nothing at all," I said, rising to leave.

They followed me to the door, framed in the warm light spilling from inside. As I started the car, her voice cut through the night, sharp and insistent. "Wait!"

She paused, her face a mask of feigned casualness. "We heard a rumor. About you and a girl out West. An engagement?"

He nodded, his kindness feeling oddly misplaced. "Yes, we heard that."

"It's not true," I said, the words tasting bitter. "I'm far too poor for such things."

But she pressed on, her voice opening like a night-blooming flower. "We heard it from three people. It must be true."

I knew what they meant, of course. But there was no engagement, not even a vague one. Gossip had spun its web, and I'd fled East to escape its sticky threads.

Their interest touched me, making them seem less like gilded statues and more like flesh and blood. Yet as I drove away, confusion and disgust churned in my gut.

I half-expected Daisy to come running after me, child in arms, ready to flee. But no such drama unfolded. And Tom? His depression over a book was more surprising than his New York affair. In this world of glitter and facades, even the simplest truths seemed to warp and bend.

In the style of Oscar Wilde:

A peculiar malaise seemed to gnaw at the edges of his consciousness, as if his once-robust self-assurance no longer sufficed to nourish his imperious spirit. The summer had reached its zenith, casting its sultry spell over roadhouse rooftops and wayside garages, where gleaming scarlet petrol-pumps stood sentinel in pools of artificial luminescence. Upon

reaching my West Egg estate, I secreted my automobile beneath its shelter and reclined momentarily upon a discarded lawn roller in the yard.

The zephyrs had ceased their whispers, leaving in their wake a night of startling clarity and brilliance. The trees quivered with the fluttering of unseen wings, while the earth's grand bellows filled the amphibians with the very essence of vitality, their croaks a ceaseless organ melody. A feline silhouette undulated across the argent moonbeams, and as I turned to observe this nocturnal prowler, I discovered I was not alone in my contemplation.

Some fifty feet distant, a figure had materialized from the penumbra of my neighbor's opulent abode. He stood, hands pocketed, gazing skyward at the celestial peppering of stars. There was something in his languid posture and the assured placement of his feet upon the verdant lawn that bespoke none other than Mr. Gatsby himself, come to appraise his share of our local firmament.

I contemplated hailing him, recalling Miss Baker's dinner-time mention as sufficient pretext for an introduction. Yet I hesitated, for he suddenly conveyed an air of contentment in his solitude. He extended his arms toward the inky waters in a most peculiar fashion, and despite the distance between us, I could have sworn I perceived a tremor in his frame.

Involuntarily, my gaze followed his, seeking out the object of his fascination. There, amidst the vast darkness, I discerned naught but a solitary green light, minute and distant, perhaps marking the extremity of a dock.

I searched again for Gatsby, but he had disappeared. The restless night enveloped me in solitude, its shadows alive with unseen motion.

DR. T. ECCKLEBURG.



GEORGE WILSON

GARAGE



## II

In the labyrinth of geography that separates West Egg from the metropolis, there exists a curious confluence where the motorway, as if by some arcane design, merges with the railway. This convergence persists for a quarter-mile, as though fleeing from a desolate expanse that defies comprehension. Here lies the Valley of Ashes, a phantasmagorical realm where cinders proliferate like some infernal crop, forming ridges, hillocks, and grotesque parodies of gardens. In this realm, ash assumes the guise of dwellings, chimneys, and ascending smoke, culminating in a supreme act of metamorphosis: men of ash-grey countenance, their forms already disintegrating as they navigate the powdery ether.

Periodically, a procession of grey carriages inches along an imperceptible track, emitting an otherworldly groan before halting. At once, these ashen figures swarm forth with leaden implements, stirring up an impenetrable veil that obscures their enigmatic labors from mortal eyes.

Yet, hovering above this ashen landscape and its perpetual dust storms, one discerns, after a moment's contemplation, the gaze of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. These eyes, cerulean and colossal, with retinas spanning a yard, emanate not from a visage but from a pair of immense ochre spectacles perched upon a nonexistent nose. One imagines some whimsical oculist erected them to augment his practice in Queens, before succumbing to eternal darkness or simply departing, his creation forgotten.

These eyes, dimmed by the ravages of time and elements, maintain their vigil over this solemn necropolis. The Valley of Ashes is bordered by a fetid rivulet, and when the drawbridge rises to permit passage of barges, rail passengers find themselves unwilling spectators to this dismal panorama, sometimes for the span of half an hour.

The train always paused there, for at least a minute, and it was during one such halt that I first encountered Tom Buchanan's paramour. His infidelity was an open secret, whispered in every circle he frequented. His acquaintances bristled at his brazen displays, bringing her to fashionable establishments, abandoning her at a table while he mingled with familiar faces.

Though curiosity tugged at me, I harbored no desire for an introduction. Fate, however, had other plans. One afternoon, as Tom and I journeyed to New York, our train ground to a halt by the ash-heaps. Tom, clearly intoxicated from a hearty luncheon, seized my elbow with startling force. "We're alighting," he declared. "I want you to meet my girl."

His insistence bordered on belligerence, presuming I had nothing better to occupy my Sunday. Reluctantly, I followed him over a weathered railroad fence, our steps traced by the unwavering gaze of Doctor Eckleburg's billboard.

In the desolate landscape, a solitary yellow brick building stood sentinel, a compact simulacrum of Main Street serving an invisible community. Of its three shops, one lay vacant, another an all-night eatery approached by an ashen path. The third, a garage, bore a sign: "Repairs. George B. Wilson. Cars bought and sold."

Tom strode inside, and I trailed behind. The interior was a study in austerity, its sole occupant a dust-shrouded Ford, crouching in shadowy neglect. The atmosphere hung heavy



with unspoken stories and faded aspirations, a stark contrast to the opulence Tom habitually navigated.

As we stood in that bare space, I felt the weight of impending revelations, sensing that this encounter would irrevocably alter the tapestry of our intertwined lives.

In the sultry heat of a summer's day, I found myself drawn to the shadow of a garage, its facade a veil concealing secrets untold. As if summoned by our presence, the proprietor emerged, his pale hands wiping grease on a rag. He was a man of faded colors, his blond hair and light eyes seeming to blend into the background, yet a flicker of hope danced in his gaze as he beheld us.

Tom's voice boomed with false cheer, "Wilson, my good man! How fares your trade?" His response came weak, unconvincing, "Can't complain." The air hung heavy with unspoken words as they bantered about a car sale, their exchange a dance of power and submission.

Then, like a storm rolling in, she appeared. A woman in her prime, carrying the weight of her years with a sensual grace that spoke of hidden fires. Her face, though unremarkable, held a vitality that electrified the very air. She moved with purpose, her spotted dress of dark blue crêpe-de-chine swaying with each step.

Her eyes, deep pools of intention, locked onto Tom's. She greeted him with a slow, deliberate smile that spoke volumes. Then, without so much as a glance at her husband, she addressed him in a voice both soft and coarse, "Fetch some chairs, won't you? Our guests need a place to rest."

Wilson, ever eager to please, scurried away, his form blending into the cement-colored walls of the office. In his absence, the woman's presence seemed to grow, filling the space with an energy both alluring and dangerous.

In that moment, I sensed the undercurrents of desire and desperation that flowed beneath the surface of this seemingly ordinary garage. The air crackled with unspoken tensions, promising a storm of emotions yet to break.

The pallor of industrial decay settled on his suit, a fine mist of modernity's residue. She approached Tom, untouched by the ambient grime, a beacon of purity in the wasteland. Tom's words cut through the haze, urgent and precise. "I need to see you. Next train." Her assent was a whisper, a secret pact. "Newsstand. Lower level." She drifted away as Wilson materialized, bearing the weight of ignorance and two chairs.

We retreated, spectators to the unfolding drama. Pre-Fourth stillness hung in the air, punctuated by an emaciated immigrant child's methodical placement of miniature explosives along steel rails. Tom's disdain for the locale found kinship in Eckleburg's vacant stare. "Dreadful place." A mutual acknowledgment of decay. "It's an escape for her." "The husband?" "Wilson? Blissfully unaware of his own existence, let alone her fabricated sisterly visits."

Our ascension to the metropolis was a choreographed separation, Mrs. Wilson discreetly occupying another car, a concession to East Egg's delicate sensibilities. Her transformation was complete in brown muslin, stretched taut across expansive hips as Tom ushered her onto New York's unforgiving concrete stage. At the newsstand, she armed herself with glossy distractions and, in the pharmacy, acquired shallow defenses against time's relentless march.

In the station's cavernous upper reaches, she dismissed four taxis with imperial disdain before selecting our chariot: lavender exterior, grey interior, a moving cocoon of affected taste. We glided from the terminal's embrace into the city's incandescent embrace, leaving behind the ashen world of secrets and lies.

In the hazy light of a summer's day, we found ourselves caught in a moment of whimsy, the kind that reveals the hidden rhythms of human desire and the absurd theater of life. The woman, her eyes suddenly ablaze with a newfound passion, jerked away from the window and rapped on the glass with an urgency that belied the triviality of her wish.

"One of them dogs," she declared, her voice thick with longing. "That's what I need for the apartment. A dog to keep me company."

We reversed, coming face to face with an aged figure, his visage a comical echo of old John D. Rockefeller himself. Suspended from his neck, a basket writhed with the squirming forms of freshly born pups, their lineage a mystery.

"What breed are they?" the woman inquired, her eagerness palpable.

"Any breed you fancy, ma'am. What's your pleasure?"

"I'm partial to them police dogs. Got any of those?"

The old man's gnarled hand disappeared into the basket, emerging with a wriggling ball of fur.

"That ain't no police dog," Tom interjected.

"Not quite," the man admitted, his voice tinged with regret. "More Airedale than anything. But look at that coat – sturdy as they come. This dog won't catch its death of cold."

"It's darling," the woman cooed. "The price?"

"Ten dollars for that fine specimen."

The transaction complete, the Airedale – or whatever blend of breeds it truly was – found itself nestled in the woman's lap, its startlingly white paws a stark contrast to its washrag-brown coat.

"Boy or girl?" she asked, her voice dripping with false delicacy.

"Boy dog, that one."

"It's a bitch," Tom declared, his tone brooking no argument. "Take your money and get yourself ten more mutts."

As we merged into the flow of Fifth Avenue traffic, the warmth of the day enveloped us, transforming the urban landscape into a pastoral dream, a fleeting illusion of simplicity in our complex world.

In the fading light, one might have mistaken a flock of pale sheep rounding the bend. I made to exit, but Tom interjected swiftly, "Myrtle will take offense if you don't join us upstairs." Myrtle concurred, "Do come. I'll ring my sister Catherine. They say she's quite the beauty."

Reluctantly, I acquiesced. We traversed the Park once more, heading west. The taxi halted before a sliver of white among identical edifices. Myrtle, arms laden with parcels and her dog, swept imperiously inside.

In the ascending elevator, she declared her intention to summon the McKees and, naturally, her sister. The flat, perched atop the building, was a claustrophobic affair of compact rooms. The living area, suffocating under the weight of oversized tapestried furnishings, presented a constant hazard of collision with Versailles garden scenes.

A solitary image adorned the wall: an enlarged photograph of what appeared, at first glance, to be a hen atop a hazy boulder. From afar, this optical illusion resolved into a bonneted, plump-faced elderly woman gazing benevolently upon the room.

Scattered about were dated issues of *Town Tattle*, a copy of *Simon Called Peter*, and various tawdry Broadway gossip rags. Myrtle's immediate concern, however, was for her canine companion.

The air hung heavy with pretension and unfulfilled aspirations, a microcosm of societal climbing encapsulated within these cramped quarters. Each object seemed to cry out its importance, yet whispered of a deeper, unacknowledged emptiness.

In the hazy light of a summer afternoon, the reluctant elevator attendant brought straw and milk, adding unbidden a tin of dog biscuits. One floated forlornly in the milk, dissolving with patient indifference. Tom produced whisky from a locked drawer, and I found myself drunk for only the second time in my life. The events that followed swam in a golden, blurred haze, though sunlight filled the apartment until evening.

Myrtle, perched on Tom's lap, made a flurry of phone calls. When cigarettes ran out, I ventured to the corner drugstore. Upon my return, the couple had vanished, so I settled in the living room with a book that, whether due to its quality or the whisky's influence, proved incomprehensible.

As Tom and Myrtle reappeared—we had progressed to first names by then—guests began to arrive. Catherine, Myrtle's sister, entered with an air of ownership. She was a slender woman of thirty, worldly and artificial. Her red hair was cut in a sticky bob, her skin powdered to a milky pallor. Her eyebrows, plucked and redrawn at a rakish angle, fought against nature's stubborn attempts to restore their original line, lending her face a blurred, uncertain quality.

As she moved, innumerable pottery bracelets clinked and chattered on her arms, a constant commentary on her restless energy. Her proprietary haste and possessive gaze at the furnishings made me wonder if she, too, claimed this space as her own.

The afternoon unfolded like a dream, each moment distinct yet flowing into the next, the boundaries of reality softened by whisky and the warm, golden light that filled the apartment.

In the depths of my tormented soul, I found myself compelled to inquire of her, and she, in response, erupted into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, echoing my question with a mocking tone that pierced the very air around us. With a dismissive wave, she declared her residence to be with a female companion at some hotel establishment.

Mr. McKee, a pallid, effeminate creature from the lower floor, had just completed his daily ritual of shaving, evidenced by a lingering spot of lather upon his cheekbone. He greeted each person in the room with an air of exaggerated respect, as if bowing before the altar of social propriety. This McKee, he informed me with an air of self-importance, was engaged in the "artistic game," which I later discerned to mean he was a photographer by trade. His handiwork, a ghostly enlargement of Mrs. Wilson's maternal figure, loomed on the wall like some spectral vision from beyond the veil.

His wife, a shrill and languid creature, possessed a terrible beauty that seemed to mock the very concept of matrimony. With an unsettling pride, she boasted of her husband's

obsessive documentation of her visage, having captured her likeness no less than one hundred and twenty-seven times since their unholy union.

Mrs. Wilson, that enigmatic figure, had undergone a transformation of both attire and essence. She now adorned herself in an elaborate afternoon gown of cream-colored chiffon, which rustled incessantly as she glided about the room like some restless spirit. The intense vitality that had once burned within her at the garage had morphed into a haughty demeanor, her laughter and gestures growing increasingly affected with each passing moment.

Yo, check it, this lady McKee, she's all up in Mrs. Eberhardt's business, peeping at people's patas in their own cribs. Then she's like, "Mami, that dress is fire," to Mrs. Wilson, but Wilson ain't having it. She's all, "This old rag? Pfft, I throw this on when I don't give a fuck."

But McKee keeps pushing, talking 'bout how her man Chester could make something outta that pose. We all just staring at Wilson, who's doing that hair flip thing, smiling like she just won la lotería.

Mr. McKee's getting all artsy-fartsy, moving his hand like he's painting the air. Talking 'bout changing lights and shit, trying to capture her "features" and "back hair." His wife's all excited, but he shuts her down quick.

Then Tom Buchanan, that cabrón, he yawns like he's bored as fuck and stands up. "Yo, McKees, have a drink. Myrtle, get some more ice and agua before everyone passes out."

Myrtle's all dramatic, rolling her eyes like, "Coño, I told that pendejo about the ice." She's bitching about how you gotta stay on top of "these people" all the time. Then she laughs at nothing, like some loca, before going all lovey-dovey on the dog.

Next thing you know, she's swaggering into the kitchen like she's got a whole crew of Gordon Ramsays waiting on her orders. The whole scene's so ridiculous, like some telenovela shit, but that's how it goes down in this crowd.

Hark, good sir McKee doth boast with pride,  
"On Long Island's shores, my art doth reside."  
Tom's visage blank, as if struck by Fate's hand,  
"Two works, below, in gilded frames do stand."  
"Pray tell, what manner of works be these?"  
Tom's query echoes like a summer breeze.  
"Two studies fair, of Montauk's domain,  
One of gulls, one of sea's vast terrain."  
Fair Catherine, with grace, beside me sat,  
"Dost thou on Long Island dwell?" she spake.  
"At West Egg, my abode doth reside,"  
I did reply, with nary a pride.  
"Forsooth! A month past, at Gatsby's estate,  
I reveled there. Know'st thou this man of late?"  
"Indeed, for he's my neighbor," quoth I.  
"They whisper he's of royal German tie,  
A cousin or nephew to Kaiser Wilhelm,  
His coffers filled from that noble realm."  
"In truth?" I asked, as she nodded her head,



"I fear him, lest secrets be widespread."  
This tale of intrigue was cut short anon,  
As Madam McKee, with eyes that shone,  
Proclaimed, "Chester, this maid could be thy muse!"  
But he, bored, to Tom did turn and choose  
To speak of his art with fervent zeal,  
"On Long Island, more work I'd fain reveal,  
If only a chance were granted to me."  
Tom laughed as Myrtle entered with glee,  
"Ask Myrtle for aid, she'll pen a note,  
To grant thee access," Tom did gloat.  
Confused, she asked, "What dost thou mean?"  
"A letter to thy husband, unseen,  
That McKee might capture his likeness true,  
'George B. Wilson at the Pump,' or some such view."  
Catherine, leaning close, did whisper low,  
"These couples, their unions bring naught but woe,  
Neither can bear the one they've wed."  
"Can this be so?" I asked, filled with dread.  
"'Tis true," she sighed, her gaze did roam,  
From Myrtle to Tom, a tale untold.

The words spill like shards of glass, cutting through the stale air of confinement.  
"Why cling to those who despise them?" I mutter, my tongue heavy with unspoken truths. "If I were them, I'd sever the ties, bind themselves anew in matrimony." The question hangs, a noose of curiosity: "And Wilson? Does she loathe him too?" The answer erupts, a violent storm of obscenities from Myrtle's lips.

Catherine's triumph blazes, a sickly flame. Her voice drops, a conspiratorial whisper. "It's the wife, you see. Catholic. Divorce is forbidden fruit." The lie unfurls, elaborate and grotesque. Daisy, no Catholic, stands falsely accused. I taste bile.

"When they unite," Catherine persists, "they'll flee westward, wait for the dust to settle." I interject, "Europe would be more discreet." Her eyes light up, unexpected. "Europe! I've just returned from Monte Carlo." The words tumble out, a cascade of fabricated memories. "Last year. Another girl. Marseilles. Twelve hundred dollars, gone in two days. Private rooms. The journey back, a nightmare. That cursed town!"

For a moment, the window frames a slice of sky, Mediterranean blue, honey-thick. Mrs. McKee's shrill voice shatters the illusion. "I nearly erred too," she proclaims. "Almost wed a little kike who pursued me relentlessly. I knew he was beneath me. Everyone warned me. But if Chester hadn't appeared..."

Myrtle Wilson nods, her head a bobbing buoy in a sea of lies. "At least you escaped." Mrs. McKee agrees, "Indeed I did." Myrtle's voice drops, heavy with ambiguity. "Well, I married him."

The room swims with half-truths and delusions. We are all complicit in this charade, each word a thread in the tapestry of deceit we weave around ourselves. The air thickens with

unspoken regrets and misplaced desires. We are trapped, each in our own cage of choices, the keys long since swallowed by time and circumstance.

In the stifling confines of that room, the air thick with cigarette smoke and whisky fumes, Myrtle's words hung heavy. Her voice, tinged with bitterness, cut through the haze.

"I took him for a gentleman," she said, her eyes unfocused, lost in recollection. "But he was nothing of the sort. Unfit even to polish my shoes."

Catherine, ever the provocateur, prodded. "You were besotted once, weren't you?"

Myrtle's laugh was hollow, mirthless. "Besotted? Who fed you that lie? I never cared more for him than for..." Her finger jabbed accusingly in my direction. I felt the weight of their gazes, tried to school my features into neutrality.

"The only madness was in marrying him," Myrtle continued, her words tumbling out now. "He couldn't even afford a suit. Borrowed one, he did. The owner came round looking for it. I wept that day, great heaving sobs that shook the walls."

Catherine leaned in, conspiratorial. "She needs to leave him, you know. Eleven years above that garage. Tom's her first taste of something better."

The whisky flowed freely, glasses refilled with mechanical precision. Only Catherine abstained, claiming sobriety suited her fine. Tom, ever the host, ordered sandwiches - a meal in themselves.

I longed to escape, to walk the twilight streets towards the park. But each attempt was thwarted, drawn back into the maelstrom of their arguments, tethered to my chair by invisible bonds of social obligation and morbid fascination.

In that moment, I felt the weight of their lives, their choices, their regrets. It pressed down on me, suffocating, inescapable. And still, the night wore on.

The city's skyline glimmered with a constellation of yellow windows, each one a tiny vessel of human secrets. I stood there, both observer and participant, captivated and repulsed by life's endless intricacies. Myrtle leaned in close, her words tumbling out in warm, excited breaths as she recounted her first encounter with Tom.

"It was on those two facing seats, you know, the ones always left empty on the train. I was headed to the city, planning to stay with my sister. And there he was, all dapper in his suit and shiny shoes. I couldn't look away, but I had to pretend I was reading the ads above his head every time he glanced my way. At the station, he was suddenly right there, his crisp shirt against my arm. I threatened to call for help, but we both knew it was a bluff. The excitement was dizzying – I could barely tell if I was stepping into a taxi or onto another train. All I could think was, 'This moment, this feeling, it can't last forever.'"

She turned to Mrs. McKee, her laughter ringing out, artificial and sharp. "Darling, this dress is yours once I'm done with it. I need a new one tomorrow anyway. I should start listing everything I need to buy."

As I listened, I felt myself slipping between worlds – the one I inhabited and the one I observed. The city's pulse quickened around us, a living, breathing entity of its own, indifferent to our small dramas yet somehow magnifying them in its vastness.

In the hazy twilight of a New York soirée, amidst the cacophony of clinking glasses and vapid chatter, a peculiar list unfurled in someone's mind: a canine accoutrement, a spring-loaded receptacle for ashes, a funereal wreath destined for maternal repose. Time, that fickle mistress, leapt from nine to ten with nary a warning.

McKee, that paragon of inaction, slumbered in his chair, fists clenched as if ready to pummel the very air. I, ever the fastidious observer, removed a speck of dried lather from his cheek, a task that had vexed me throughout the afternoon's tedium. A diminutive canine, perched upon the table, peered sightlessly through the miasma of smoke, occasionally emitting plaintive whimpers.

The party ebbed and flowed, a human tide of comings and goings, of plans made and instantly forgotten. Revelers vanished only to materialize mere feet away, engaged in the eternal dance of seek and find.

As the witching hour approached, Tom Buchanan and Mrs. Wilson found themselves locked in a heated tête-à-tête, debating her right to invoke Daisy's name. "Daisy!" she cried, each repetition a challenge. "I'll speak it as I please! Daisy! Dai—"

In a fluid motion, both brutal and graceful, Tom's open hand connected with her nose, silencing her impudence. The aftermath was a tableau of crimson-stained towels and shrill recriminations, punctuated by the keening wail of the injured party.

McKee, roused from his stupor, stumbled towards the exit, pausing midway to survey the chaos. His wife and Catherine fluttered about, dispensing aid and admonishments in equal measure. On the divan, the victim sprawled, a fountain of red, futilely attempting to obscure the pastoral scenes of Versailles with a gossip rag.

Mr. McKee exited, and I followed, retrieving my hat from the chandelier. In the descending elevator, he invited me to lunch, leaving the location open-ended. The operator barked at McKee to keep his hands off the controls, prompting a dignified apology. I accepted the lunch invitation.

Later, I found myself by McKee's bedside. He sat among the sheets in his undergarments, clutching a large portfolio. He muttered fragments: "Beauty and Beast... Solitude... Aged Cart Horse... Brooklyn's Span..."

Time blurred. I drifted into a half-conscious state on the frigid floor of Pennsylvania Station's lower level. The morning Tribune lay before my unfocused eyes as I awaited the 4 AM train, my mind adrift in the liminal space between waking and dreaming, where reality and imagination intertwined like DNA strands in the fabric of existence.







### III

Through the sultry nights of summer, a spectral melody wafted from my enigmatic neighbor's abode. In his cerulean gardens, phantasmal figures flitted to and fro, like moths drawn to the intoxicating elixir of champagne and the celestial glow above. As Apollo's chariot reached its zenith, I observed his revelers plunging from the tower of his aquatic raft, or basking upon the scorching sands of his private shore. His twin vessels, like obsidian blades, cleaved the Sound's surface, drawing airborne chariots through cascades of froth.

On the eve of each week's end, his Rolls-Royce transmuted into a carriage of revelry, ferrying merrymakers betwixt metropolis and manse from dawn's first light until the witching hour. His station wagon, a golden scarab, scurried forth to greet every locomotive's arrival. As the new week dawned, eight servants, including an auxiliary horticulturist, labored tirelessly to erase the night's debauchery.

With clockwork precision, each Friday heralded the arrival of citrus bounty from a New York purveyor, only to depart come Monday as desiccated husks. A mechanical behemoth in the kitchen, at the press of a button, could exsanguinate two hundred oranges within a mere half-hour.

Fortnightly, an army of caterers descended, bearing canvas and chromatic illumination to transform Gatsby's expansive grounds into a phantasmagorical dreamscape. Buffet tables groaned under the weight of glistening delicacies: spiced hams vied for space with kaleidoscopic salads and pastries of porcine and avian form, all bewitched to a auriferous hue.

The grand hall boasted a bar of gleaming brass, stocked with an array of potent elixirs and cordials so arcane that many a youthful guest stood bewildered before their mysterious allure.

In the waning light of day, as the seventh hour struck, a grand orchestra assembled, not a meager ensemble, but a veritable army of musicians. They arrived with their instruments: oboes and trombones, saxophones and viols, cornets and piccolos, and drums both high and low. The final bathers emerged from the sea, ascending to their chambers to don their evening attire. Automobiles from the great metropolis lined the drive, five deep, their occupants spilling forth into the grand house.

The halls, salons, and verandas burst with a cacophony of hues, hair coiffed in the latest fashions, and shawls that would make the most opulent Castilian dream. The bar, a hive of activity, sent forth waves of cocktails that permeated the gardens. The air itself seemed to vibrate with the din of conversation and mirth, whispered innuendos and fleeting introductions, passionate reunions between ladies whose names remained a mystery to one another.

As the earth retreated from the sun's embrace, the illumination intensified, and the orchestra struck up a melody as golden as the libations they celebrated. Voices rose in pitch, a crescendo of humanity. Laughter flowed more freely with each passing moment, spilled with wild abandon at the slightest provocation.

The throng ebbed and flowed, groups forming and dissolving in the blink of an eye. Wanderers appeared among them, confident young women who wove through the crowd, briefly becoming the cynosure of all eyes before gliding away, exultant in their triumph. They navigated the ever-changing sea of faces, voices, and colors beneath the fluctuating light.

Suddenly, one of these Bohemian spirits, adorned in shimmering opal, plucked a cocktail from the ether. She downed it for courage and, with hands moving like a San Francisco dancer, took to the canvas platform alone. A hush fell over the gathering; the orchestra leader obligingly altered his rhythm to accommodate her. Chatter erupted anew as an erroneous rumor circulated that she was an understudy for the famed Gilda Gray of the Follies.

The revelry had commenced. On that inaugural evening at Gatsby's estate, I found myself among the rare few genuinely summoned. Most simply appeared, drawn by an invisible thread, their automobiles gliding through the night towards Long Island, inevitably alighting at Gatsby's threshold. Introductions were made by those who claimed acquaintance, and then the newcomers surrendered to the carnival atmosphere, as if the grounds were a fantastical amusement park.

Some flitted in and out, never encountering their host, their presence justified by a naive eagerness that served as its own admission. But I—I had received a formal invitation. A chauffeur, resplendent in robin's-egg blue, had traversed my lawn that Saturday morn, bearing an unexpectedly ceremonious note. Gatsby, it proclaimed, would be honored by my attendance at his "modest gathering." He had observed me on several occasions, it explained, and had long intended to make my acquaintance, but circumstances had conspired against it. The signature—Jay Gatsby—sprawled majestically across the page.

Clad in white flannels, I crossed to his property shortly after seven, adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces, though occasionally I glimpsed a visage from my daily train commute. What struck me immediately was the abundance of young Englishmen, impeccably attired yet with a hungry gleam in their eyes, engaged in hushed, earnest dialogue with robust, prosperous Americans. They exuded an air of salesmanship—bonds, perhaps, or insurance, or motorcars. Their awareness of the wealth surrounding them was palpable, as was their conviction that it could be theirs with just the right words, pitched in just the right key.

Upon my arrival, I found myself adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces, their eyes widening with bewilderment as I inquired about my elusive host. Their vehement denials of any knowledge pierced me like cold steel, driving me towards the sanctuary of the cocktail table - a lone island where solitary men could find refuge without appearing lost and purposeless.

As shame threatened to drown me in alcohol, Jordan Baker emerged from the house, a vision of cool detachment atop the marble steps. Her contemptuous gaze swept over the garden, igniting a desperate need within me to anchor myself to another soul before I succumbed to the madness of addressing strangers.

"Hello!" I called out, my voice unnaturally loud in the still air. She acknowledged me with distant politeness, reminding me of my neighboring residence. Her touch was impersonal, a mere promise of future attention as she turned to two yellow-clad girls at the foot of the steps.

Their synchronized greetings and condolences for her recent golf tournament loss floated up to us. One girl claimed a past acquaintance, to which Jordan coolly remarked on her changed hair color. But the girls had already drifted away, leaving Jordan's words to hang in the air like cherry blossoms, addressed to the premature moon that had appeared as if conjured from a caterer's basket along with the evening's supper.

In that moment, I felt the weight of my isolation pressing down upon me, a suffocating blanket of loneliness in this garden of strangers and fleeting connections.

Arm in arm, Jordan's lithe golden limb entwined with mine, we descended the stone steps and meandered through the lush garden. The twilight air shimmered with the promise of intoxication as a tray of cocktails materialized before us, carried by some unseen hand. We found ourselves seated at a table, joined by two yellow-clad girls and a trio of gentlemen, each introduced with a mumbled moniker that escaped immediate memory.

Jordan, ever the socialite, leaned towards one of the girls. "Are you a frequent guest at these soirées?" The addressed young woman, her voice brimming with self-assurance, replied, "The last one was our introduction, wasn't it?" She turned to her companion, "Lucille, wasn't that the case for you as well?"

Lucille, a carefree spirit, chimed in, "Oh, I adore these gatherings. I'm game for anything, which ensures my perpetual amusement. At the last fête, I snagged my gown on a chair. Our gracious host inquired after my details, and within a week, a package from Croirier's arrived with a replacement."

Jordan's curiosity was piqued. "Did you keep it?"

"Naturally," Lucille boasted. "I had intended to wear it tonight, but it required alterations—too ample in the bust. A gas blue creation adorned with lavender beads, priced at two hundred and sixty-five dollars."

The other girl leaned in, her eyes alight with gossip. "There's something peculiar about a man who'd do such a thing. He clearly avoids confrontation."

"Who does?" I interjected, drawn into their whispered exchange.

"Gatsby," she breathed, as the group huddled closer. "I've heard rumors... they say he once took a life."

A collective shiver of excitement rippled through our circle. The three Mr. Mumbles craned forward, eager for more.

Lucille, ever the skeptic, shook her head. "I doubt that's the case. More likely, he was a German spy during the war."

One of the gentlemen nodded solemnly, as if privy to some unspoken truth.

In the twilight of the garden party, whispers fluttered like moths around the enigmatic figure of Gatsby. Tales of his past swirled, each more intriguing than the last. A German childhood, an American soldier's life, or perhaps a darker secret? One young woman, eyes glinting with excitement, leaned in close. "Watch him when he thinks no one sees. I wager he's taken a life." Her words sent a shiver through the group, a ripple of delicious fear.

We turned as one, seeking Gatsby among the crowd. Such was his allure that even those unaccustomed to gossip found themselves drawn into the web of speculation.

As the first supper commenced, Jordan beckoned me to join her circle. They sat apart, a bastion of East Egg propriety amidst the exuberant chaos of West Egg. Three married couples and Jordan's escort, a brash young man clearly hoping to claim her as his prize, made

up the party. They wore their superiority like armor, warding off the vibrant energy that surrounded them.

After a stifling half-hour, Jordan murmured, "This is unbearably polite. Shall we escape?" We rose, and she explained her intent to seek out our elusive host. I confessed I had never met him, a fact that seemed to unsettle me more than I realized. As we departed, Jordan's escort nodded, his expression a mixture of cynicism and melancholy, as if he understood all too well the allure of the unknown.

The bustling bar yielded no sight of Gatsby, nor did the veranda above. On impulse, we pushed through an imposing door, entering a Gothic library of transported English oak. There, perched unsteadily on a grand table's edge, sat a portly, middle-aged man. His oversized spectacles magnified owlsh eyes that squinted at the bookshelves with drunken intensity.

As we entered, he swiveled abruptly, appraising Jordan with exaggerated scrutiny. "What's your assessment?" he demanded, gesturing wildly at the shelves. "No need to verify. I've done it already. They're authentic."

"The books?" I queried.

He nodded emphatically. "Genuine. Pages and all. I'd assumed cardboard facsimiles. But no—real books!" He lurched towards a bookcase, returning with a volume. "Look!" he exclaimed. "Actual printed text. Quite the illusion. This Gatsby's a master of realism. Even left the pages uncut. Brilliant!"

His enthusiasm washed over us, leaving bewilderment in its wake. He hastily replaced the book, muttering about the precarious balance of the entire collection.

"Who brought you here?" he inquired suddenly. "Or did you come of your own accord? I was brought. Most are." His gaze fixed on Jordan, who met it with polite curiosity. "A woman named Roosevelt brought me," he added, his words slurring slightly as the evening's excesses caught up with him.

In that moment, surrounded by leather-bound tomes and the scent of old paper, the peculiarity of Gatsby's world became palpable. It was a place where even the books held secrets, where guests arrived by mysterious invitation, and where nothing was quite as it seemed.

The sultry Southern night hung heavy, thick as molasses, as we encountered Mrs. Claud Roosevelt, her name dripping from the lips of a man besotted with drink for nigh on a week. He sought sobriety in the library's dusty confines, amidst tomes real as the blistering heat, their pages whispering secrets of ages past. We shook his trembling hand, retreating to the garden where bodies swayed and writhed upon the canvas floor.

Old men, their vigor long spent, pushed young girls in endless circles, while couples clung to one another in fashionable agony. Single girls twirled alone, their youthful energy a stark contrast to the weariness etched on the faces of the musicians they occasionally relieved.

As midnight approached, the revelry swelled like the Mississippi in spring flood. An Italian tenor's voice soared, followed by a contralto's jazzy drawl. Laughter bubbled up like swamp gas, punctuated by the antics of revelers scattered across the lawn. Twin girls in yellow, their faces painted with innocence long lost, pranced about in a mockery of childhood, while champagne flowed freely from glasses large as baptismal fonts.

The moon climbed higher, casting its cold light upon the Sound, where silver scales danced to the tinny twang of banjos. Jordan Baker remained at my side as we shared a table with a man my age and a girl whose laughter erupted like gunfire at the slightest provocation. The champagne worked its magic, transforming the scene before me into something primal and profound, a tableau of humanity's eternal struggle against the inexorable march of time.

In the lull of the revelry, the man's gaze found mine, his lips curving into a smile. "Your visage," he remarked with courteous curiosity, "strikes a chord of familiarity. Perchance you served in the First Division during the great conflict?" "Indeed," I replied, "with the Twenty-eighth Infantry." "Ah, the Sixteenth claimed me until that fateful June of '18. I knew our paths had crossed in some distant realm."

We exchanged fleeting reminiscences of damp, dreary hamlets in France, their names rolling off our tongues like droplets of rain. He, it seemed, was a local denizen, for he spoke of a newly acquired hydroplane, inviting me to join him on its maiden voyage along the Sound's shoreline.

As I teetered on the precipice of inquiring his name, Jordan's voice cut through the air, her smile a crescent moon. "Enjoying the festivities now?" she probed. "Immensely," I affirmed, before returning to my enigmatic companion.

"This soirée," I confessed, "is quite unlike my usual haunts. The host remains a phantom to me. I reside yonder," I gestured towards the invisible boundary, "and this Gatsby fellow dispatched his chauffeur with an invitation."

For a heartbeat, bewilderment clouded his features. Then, with the suddenness of a summer storm, he declared, "I am Gatsby."

Astonishment seized me. "I beg your pardon," I stammered.

"I presumed you knew, old sport. I fear I've been remiss in my duties as host."

His smile then, oh, his smile! It was a rare and precious thing, imbued with the power of eternal reassurance. In that fleeting moment, it seemed to encompass the entirety of existence before focusing solely on me, bestowing an irresistible prejudice in my favor.

In the haze of the evening, I encountered a presence that seemed to mirror one's deepest aspirations. It comprehended you with an uncanny precision, reflecting the version of yourself you yearned to project. And then, just as swiftly, it dissipated—leaving me face to face with a polished young ruffian, barely past thirty, whose meticulously chosen words teetered on the brink of absurdity.

Even before he introduced himself, I sensed a deliberate curation in his speech. As Mr. Gatsby revealed his identity, a servant approached, murmuring about a call from Chicago. He excused himself with a gesture that encompassed us all, urging me, "If you require anything, old sport, don't hesitate to ask. I'll return shortly."

In his absence, I turned to Jordan, compelled to express my astonishment. I had envisioned Gatsby as a ruddy, portly figure in his fifties. "Who is this man?" I pressed. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"He's simply Gatsby," she replied.

"But where does he come from? What's his occupation?"

She responded with a wan smile, "Now you've opened that door. Well, he once mentioned being an Oxford man."

A vague backdrop began to materialize behind him, but her next words caused it to dissolve.

"Though I doubt the veracity of that claim."

"Why?"

"I can't say for certain," she mused, "I just don't believe he attended Oxford."

Her tone echoed the earlier remark about him possibly being a murderer, igniting my curiosity further.

In the sweltering heat of Long Island, where reality blurred with fantasy, I found myself pondering the enigma of Gatsby. His origins were as mysterious as the mirage-like mansions that sprouted from the fertile soil of new money. In my provincial naïveté, I had believed that young men did not simply materialize from the ether, purchasing palaces on a whim. Yet here was Gatsby, defying logic and expectation.

Jordan, with the practiced nonchalance of the urban elite, steered our conversation away from such vulgar specifics. "He throws magnificent fiestas," she remarked, her voice dripping with ennui. "And I adore them. They possess an intimacy that smaller gatherings lack."

As if summoned by her words, the night air trembled with the thunderous beat of a drum. The orchestra leader's voice cut through the garden's cacophony, announcing with theatrical flourish, "Señoras y señores! At the behest of our gracious host, we shall perform Vladimir Tostoff's latest masterpiece, which caused such a stir at Carnegie Hall. A sensation, I assure you!"

The crowd tittered obediently, as the leader proclaimed with exaggerated gravitas, "I give you 'Vladimir Tostoff's Jazz History of the World!'"

As the first notes drifted across the lawn, my gaze was inexorably drawn to Gatsby. He stood alone, a solitary figure on the marble steps, surveying his domain with benevolent eyes. His tanned skin gleamed in the soft light, stretched taut over chiseled features, his hair impeccably trimmed. There was nothing sinister in his demeanor, yet he seemed set apart from the revelry, growing ever more poised as the bacchanalian atmosphere intensified around him.

In the post-"Jazz History of the World" denouement, a veritable orgy of puppyish, faux-swooning commenced, girls collapsing with calculated abandon into the arms of eager male catchers, a choreographed chaos of bobbed heads nestling on willing shoulders. But not for our enigmatic host, one J. Gatsby, who remained untouched, unquarteted, an island of isolation amid the revelry.

Enter: Gatsby's butler, materializing with that eerie efficiency peculiar to servants of the hyper-wealthy. "Miss Baker?" he inquired, voice dripping with plummy deference. "Mr. Gatsby requests a private audience."

Jordan Baker, eyebrows ascending to her hairline in a pantomime of surprise, rose with the fluid grace of a career golfer, her evening attire somehow evoking fairways at dawn. As she segued house-ward, I found myself abandoned to the relentless march of time, the hour creeping towards two a.m.

The ambient soundscape shifted, a cacophony of intriguing noises emanating from a sprawling, window-riddled chamber overlooking the terrace. Eschewing the siren call of



Jordan's now-gynecologically-preoccupied undergrad (ensconced with a pair of chorines), I ventured indoors.

The room: a seething mass of humanity. At its epicenter, a yellow-clad pianist accompanied a statuesque redhead, late of some renowned chorus line, now deep in her cups and deeper still in melancholy. Her performance: a schizophrenic duet between liquor-fueled lamentation and actual singing, each pause in the melody filled with gasping, histrionic sobs before she lurched back into the lyrics, her soprano wavering like a tightrope walker with an inner ear infection.

The woman's tears streaked her face, mingling with her mascara to form inky rivulets down her cheeks. Someone jested that she might sing the notes painted on her visage. In response, she collapsed into a chair, succumbing to a drunken slumber. A nearby girl whispered, "She quarreled with a man claiming to be her spouse."

I surveyed the scene. Chaos had erupted, with couples locked in heated disputes. Even the East Egg quartet had fractured. One man engaged intensely with a young starlet, while his wife, attempting dignity, eventually crumbled. She materialized at his side repeatedly, hissing "You promised!" like a furious gem.

The reluctance to depart wasn't limited to the men. Two alarmingly sober gentlemen and their irate wives occupied the hall. The women commiserated loudly:

"He always insists on leaving when I'm enjoying myself."

"I've never encountered such selfishness."

"We're invariably the first to go."

"As are we."

One man meekly interjected, "Well, we're nearly the last tonight. The musicians left ages ago."

Despite the wives' unified front against such perceived malice, the altercation escalated. It culminated in a brief scuffle, with both women unceremoniously hoisted, protesting vehemently, into the night air.

The scene unfolded like a grotesque tableau, a microcosm of societal decay masked by the veneer of opulence and excess. The party's remnants clung desperately to the fading echoes of revelry, even as the harsh light of reality began to intrude upon their carefully constructed illusions.

In the twilight of the evening, I lingered, awaiting my hat's return. The library door swung open, and out stepped Jordan Baker alongside Gatsby. His words to her, once eager, now tightened with formality as others approached to bid farewell. Jordan's companions called impatiently from the porch, but she tarried a moment, extending her hand in goodbye.

"Child, I've just heard the most astonishing tale," she whispered, her voice a melody of secrets. "How long were we ensconced in there?"

"Why, about an hour," I replied, curious.

"It was... simply astonishing," she repeated, her mind elsewhere. "But I swore to keep it hidden, and here I am, teasing you with its existence." She yawned with grace, her breath a warm breeze on my face. "Do come and see me... Look for Mrs. Sigourney Howard in the phone book... My aunt, you see..."

Her words trailed as she hurried away, brown hand waving a jaunty farewell as she melded into her party at the door.

Feeling a touch of shame for overstaying on my first visit, I joined the last of Gatsby's guests gathered around him. I yearned to explain my earlier search for him and apologize for my garden oversight.

"Don't trouble yourself," he urged, his voice warm. "It's of no consequence, old sport." The familiar phrase rang hollow, as did the hand that brushed my shoulder in reassurance.

"And remember, we take to the skies in the hydroplane at nine tomorrow morning."

The butler's voice intruded: "Philadelphia calls for you, sir."

"I'll be there momentarily. Tell them I'm coming... Good night."

"Good night," I echoed.

"Good night," he replied, a smile gracing his features.

In that moment, I felt a pleasant significance in being among the last to depart, as if it had been his desire all along.

Night falls, but the evening persists. The old sport bids farewell, yet as I descend, a spectacle unfolds. Illuminated by a dozen mechanical eyes, a scene both bizarre and tumultuous erupts mere steps from sanctuary.

A fresh coupé, not two breaths from Gatsby's embrace, now rests in a roadside ditch. Violently shorn of one wheel, it tells a tale of collision with an unforgiving wall. Curious chauffeurs swarm like moths to flame, their attention fixed on the detached circle of rubber and steel.

But chaos breeds chaos. Cars block the road, a cacophony of impatient horns rising from the rear, adding discordant notes to this symphony of confusion.

A figure emerges from the wreckage, draped in a long duster. He stands, puzzled yet oddly serene, gaze dancing between car, tyre, and onlookers. His words float on the night air: "See? It went in the ditch." As if this fact were a revelation of cosmic proportions.

Recognition dawns. This man, with his unusual quality of wonder, is none other than the late patron of Gatsby's library.

"How?" I ask, curiosity piqued.

He shrugs, a dismissive gesture. "Mechanics are a mystery to me," he declares, washing his hands of responsibility.

"But how? Did you collide with the wall?"

"Don't ask me," Owl Eyes protests. "Driving is an enigma. It simply happened."

A voice from the crowd, tinged with judgment: "Night driving isn't for the inexperienced."

"But I wasn't even trying," he insists, indignation rising. "I wasn't even trying."

Silence descends, heavy with awe and unspoken questions.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the chaos unfolding on the tarmac. The crowd, a sea of curious onlookers, swelled and surged around the wreckage. The air was thick with tension and disbelief.

"Is this a death wish?" someone cried out. "Reckless! Careless! You're fortunate it was only a wheel!"

The accused, his eyes wide with bewilderment, stammered, "You misunderstand. I wasn't at the helm. Another soul occupies the vehicle."

A collective gasp rippled through the gathering as the car door creaked open. The throng instinctively recoiled, leaving a void of anticipation. From the wreckage emerged a spectral figure, pale and unsteady, his feet uncertain on the unyielding ground.

Dazed by the harsh glare of headlights and the cacophony of blaring horns, the apparition swayed precariously before noticing the man in the dust-covered coat.

"What's amiss?" he inquired with eerie calmness. "Has our fuel run dry?"

Fingers pointed accusingly at the detached wheel. The man's gaze followed, then drifted skyward as if seeking celestial answers.

"It's come loose," someone offered.

He nodded absently. "I hadn't noticed our halt."

After a pause, he drew a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and declared with misplaced determination, "Might someone direct me to a petrol station?"

The crowd, some in marginally better states of sobriety, attempted to explain the physical separation of wheel and vehicle.

"We'll reverse," he suggested, undeterred.

"The wheel is gone!" came the exasperated reply.

He pondered this. "No harm in attempting," he insisted.

As the cacophony of horns reached a fever pitch, I turned away, cutting across the verdant lawn towards the sanctuary of home, leaving behind the surreal scene of man and machine at odds with reality.

The nights in New York that summer shimmered with promise, yet beneath the glitter lay an undercurrent of loneliness. I remember turning back once to see Gatsby's mansion bathed in moonlight, its revelry fading into the soft darkness. There he stood on the porch, a solitary figure waving goodbye with an air of formality that seemed oddly out of place.

Looking back now, I realize I may have given too much weight to those few evenings. In truth, they were but fleeting moments in a season brimming with activity, and at the time, my own pursuits consumed me far more.

Most days found me hurrying through the concrete canyons of lower Manhattan, my shadow stretching long in the early morning sun as I made my way to Probitry Trust. I forged easy friendships with fellow clerks and salesmen, sharing simple lunches in cramped, dimly lit eateries.

There was a brief dalliance with a girl from Jersey City - an accountant at my firm. But when her brother's disapproving glares became too pointed, I let the relationship slip away as quietly as it had begun.

Evenings often found me at the Yale Club, picking at a gloomy dinner before retreating to the library. There, surrounded by the comforting smell of old books, I'd immerse myself in the world of investments and securities. The raucous laughter of other members never penetrated this sanctuary, making it an ideal spot for focused work.

In retrospect, those summer days were a curious blend of ambition and ennui, of connections made and lost, all against the backdrop of a city pulsing with endless possibility.

In the hushed twilight of the metropolis, I found myself drawn to its pulsing heart, wandering past the weathered Murray Hill Hotel and through the bustling Pennsylvania Station. New York's nocturnal allure began to captivate me, its restless energy a balm to my own unquiet spirit. I reveled in the ceaseless parade of humanity along Fifth Avenue,

conjuring fleeting romances with enigmatic women who disappeared into shadowy doorways, leaving only the ghost of a smile.

Yet amidst this urban symphony, a melancholy refrain echoed. I sensed it in the forlorn clerks lingering before shop windows, their youth ebbing away in solitary dinners. As dusk deepened, the Forties came alive with a chorus of taxicabs, their passengers aflutter with anticipation for the evening's theatrics. I watched, both fascinated and excluded, as laughter and smoke mingled in those mobile sanctuaries of joy.

For a time, Jordan Baker slipped from my consciousness, only to resurface like a half-remembered dream in the hazy heat of summer. Her celebrity as a golf champion lent a certain cachet to our outings, though I found myself questioning the nature of fame and its hollow promises.

In this labyrinth of steel and stone, I grappled with the paradox of urban existence – the simultaneous sense of infinite possibility and crushing isolation. The city's siren song beckoned, promising connection and excitement, yet often leaving one adrift in a sea of strangers. Still, I persisted in my nocturnal explorations, seeking meaning in the flickering tableaux of metropolitan life, forever teetering on the precipice of revelation.

In the labyrinth of memory, a figure emerges, not quite love, but a curious tenderness. Her face, a mask of boredom and hauteur, conceals a secret waiting to be unraveled. Like a jigsaw puzzle missing its final piece, the story eluded me until that rainy day in Warwick.

The borrowed car, left exposed to the elements, and the lie that followed - suddenly, the missing piece clicked into place. A whisper from the past, a golf tournament scandal barely averted. The ball moved, the accusation made, then rescinded. Witnesses recanted, and the affair dissolved like morning mist.

Jordan Baker, a name that lingered in my consciousness, now took on new dimensions. Her instinctive avoidance of the shrewd and clever became clear - a self-imposed exile to a realm where deviations from the code were unthinkable. Her dishonesty, an incurable affliction, born from an inability to accept disadvantage.

I imagined her, young and defiant, crafting her first subterfuges. Each lie a brick in the wall that kept her cool, insolent smile intact, satisfying the demands of her hard, jaunty body. A fortress built on falsehoods.

Yet, in the grand scheme of things, it mattered little to me. Dishonesty in a woman, a venial sin at best - a fleeting regret, quickly forgotten. The memory fades, replaced by another: a curious conversation about driving, held during that same house-party. In the rearview mirror of time, these moments blur, leaving only the faintest impression of what might have been.

The car barely missed them, our fender grazing a button off one man's coat like a scalpel. "Careless," I muttered. "You shouldn't drive if you can't control the machine."

She laughed, a tinkling sound like breaking glass. "I'm perfectly in control."

"Clearly not."

"Others will move," she said airily. "It's a dance, this driving. They know the steps."

"Until you meet someone who doesn't."

Her eyes, pale as a winter sky, fixed on the horizon. "I despise the careless. That's why I'm fond of you."

Something shifted between us then, a tectonic movement of emotion. For a heartbeat, I thought I loved her. But my mind is a labyrinth of rules and hesitations, a maze I must navigate before acting. There was still the matter of home, of weekly letters signed with hollow affection. Of a girl whose upper lip glistened when she played tennis, an image that haunted me.

I had obligations, vague and unspoken, that required delicate dismantling. Yet I prided myself on one thing: my honesty. In a world of liars and cheats, I stood apart, a beacon of truth. Or so I told myself, as we sped down the road, leaving chaos in our wake.





## IV

In the heart of our land, as the church bells sang their Sunday hymns across the villages, the world and its mistress danced once more upon Gatsby's grounds, their laughter twinkling like stars on his lawn. Whispers floated among the ladies, their words weaving between cocktails and blossoms. "A bootlegger," they murmured, their fingers reaching for crystal and roses. "They say he once silenced a man who dared speak of his lineage - nephew to Von Hindenburg, cousin to the devil himself."

I recall scribbling names on the margins of an old timetable, now crumbling with age, its heading faded but still legible: "This schedule in effect July 5th, 1922." Those grey names, etched in time, speak volumes of the souls who graced Gatsby's domain, offering the subtle homage of feigned ignorance about their host.

From the East Egg shores came a parade of the privileged: the Beckers and Leeches, Bunsen from my Yale days, and poor Doctor Civet, lost to Maine's waters. The Hornbeams arrived, as did the Voltaires, and the Blackbuck clan, huddled in corners, their noses raised in perpetual disdain. The Ismays and Chrysties made their appearances, though it was truly Hubert Auerbach alongside Mrs. Chrystie. Edgar Beaver joined them, his hair a tale of inexplicable transformation.

Clarence Endive, if memory serves, hailed from East Egg. His sole visit, marked by white knickerbockers and a garden brawl with a vagrant called Ety, became part of the summer's tapestry of tales.

These names, these fleeting ghosts of summers past, paint a portrait of those who reveled in Gatsby's generosity while knowing nothing of the man behind the myth.

Listen, the Island ain't no joke. It's where the real players come to play. The Cheadles and them O. R. P. Schraeders roll up like they own the place. And don't forget Stonewall Jackson Abrams, straight outta Georgia, actin' like he run things. The Fishguards and Ripley Snells, they there too. Snell, that fool, got himself so damn drunk he let Mrs. Ulysses Swett's ride crush his hand. Three days later, his ass in the pen.

You got the Dancies, old man S. B. Whitebait pushing sixty, Maurice A. Flink, them Hammerheads, and Beluga with his girls. Beluga import tobacco, but that ain't all he bringin' in, you feel me?

West Egg sent their own crew. The Poles, Mulreadys, them two Cecils - Roebuck and Schoen. Gulick think he hot shit 'cause he a state senator. Newton Orchid run Films Par Excellence, whatever the fuck that is. Eckhaust, Clyde Cohen, Don S. Schwartz Jr., and Arthur McCarty - all them movie types.

The Catlips, Bembergs, and G. Earl Muldoon showed face. Yeah, Muldoon's brother, the wife-strangler. Da Fontano the hustler, Ed Legros, James B. "Rot-Gut" Ferret - when that fool hit the garden, you know he broke. Associated Traction gonna have to pull some strings.

Klipspringer practically lived there, man. Called him "the boarder" 'cause he ain't got no other spot to crash.

Theater folks came through too. Gus Waize, Horace O'Donovan, Lester Myer, George Duckweed, Francis Bull. New York sent their share: Chromes, Backhyssons, Dennickers, Russel Betty, Corrigan, Kellehers, Dewars, Scullys, and S. W.

In the sultry haze of summer, a parade of souls drifted through Gatsby's grand abode. Among them, the ill-fated Belcher, the Smirkes, and the young Quinns, their union now sundered. Poor Henry L. Palmetto, whose life met a tragic end beneath the wheels of a subway train in Times Square.

Benny McClenahan arrived, ever accompanied by a quartet of maidens. Though their faces changed, their essence remained constant, as if they were but echoes of those who came before. Their names elude me now - perhaps Jaqueline, or Consuela, Gloria, Judy, or June. Their surnames bore the lyrical beauty of blooms and seasons, or the austere monikers of great industrialists, to whom they claimed kinship when pressed.

I recall Faustina O'Brien gracing us with her presence, and the Baedeker girls, and young Brewer, his visage forever altered by the cruel hand of war. Mr. Albrucksburger and his betrothed, Miss Haag, also crossed our threshold, as did Ardita Fitz-Peters and Mr. P. Jewett, once a leader of the American Legion. Miss Claudia Hip arrived with a gentleman rumoured to be her chauffeur, and a foreign prince we simply called Duke, his true name lost to the mists of memory.

As July waned, one morning at the stroke of nine, Gatsby's resplendent motorcar ascended my rocky drive, its melodious horn piercing the air. 'Twas his first visit to my humble abode, though I had twice attended his lavish soirées, soared in his hydroplane, and oft partaken of his private beach at his earnest behest.

"Good morrow, old friend," he called. "I've come to whisk you away for luncheon." He perched upon the dashboard with a fluid grace so quintessentially American - a legacy, perhaps, of a youth unburdened by toil and shaped by the capricious nature of our spirited pastimes.

Hark! This quality did oft break through his mannered mien,  
In restless form, a foot a-tap or hand in motion seen.  
He mark'd mine eyes upon his carriage, gleaming bright,  
"A comely sight, good sir?" He leap'd to show't aright.  
"Hast never gazed upon't before?" I had, in truth,  
As had all souls. A creamy hue, with nickel smooth,  
Its monstrous length with boxes proud did swell and shine,  
While windshields mirror'd suns, a labyrinth divine.  
We sat behind glass layers thick, in leather green,  
And towards the town our journey did begin, I ween.  
Though we had spoke some half a dozen times before,  
His words were few, and consequence I saw no more.  
But then, a ride most strange did come to pass that day,  
Ere West Egg village we had reach'd along our way,  
His speech grew fractured, and his knee he slapp'd in doubt,  
Till suddenly he did these words to me spout out:  
"Pray tell, good sir, what think'st thou of me, on my soul?"  
O'erwhelm'd, I sought to answer with evasion whole.

"Nay, hear my tale," quoth he, "lest rumors lead astray,  
For of my life I would some truths to thee convey."  
Thus did he show awareness of the whispers wild,  
That through his halls like poison'd vines had grown and styled.  
His manner spoke of secrets deep and tales untold,  
A man of mystery, both brazen yet controll'd.

Oh, the divine truth, he says, as if God himself whispered it in his ear! His hand, that right hand, it dances like a puppet master, commanding the heavens to pay heed. A son of the wealthy Midwest, he proclaims, all dust and bones now. America-bred but Oxford-polished, you see, a family custom stretching back generations. But oh, how his eyes dart, a sideways glance that betrays the lie Jordan Baker sniffed out. He stumbles over "Oxford," choking on it like a bone in his throat. And just like that, his grand tale crumbles, leaving me to wonder if there's a touch of darkness lurking beneath.

I prod gently, "Which part of the Midwest?"

"San Francisco," he replies, as if the Golden Gate had suddenly sprouted in Iowa.

He speaks of inherited fortunes with the gravity of a funeral dirge, this sudden vanishing of a dynasty haunting him still. For a fleeting moment, I think he's pulling my leg, but no, his face is a mask of seriousness.

Then comes the grand tour of Europe, a young rajah strutting through Paris, Venice, Rome. Collecting rubies, hunting big game, dabbling in paint – all to outrun some ancient sorrow. I bite my tongue to keep from laughing, his words as worn as an old vaudeville act, conjuring images of a sawdust-stuffed caricature chasing paper tigers through the Bois de Boulogne.

"Then the war," he intones, "a blessed relief. I courted death like a jealous lover, but it seems I bore a charmed life."

As I listened to his tale, I felt a curious mixture of fascination and disbelief wash over me. He spoke of his wartime exploits with a quiet pride, his voice carrying the weight of memories both glorious and terrible. The Argonne Forest, he said, was where he had led his men far beyond the front lines, creating a pocket of resistance that held firm for two days and nights. When reinforcements finally arrived, they discovered the aftermath of his unit's valiant stand - the insignia of three German divisions scattered among the fallen.

His promotion to major followed, along with a cascade of decorations from Allied nations. As he mentioned Montenegro, his eyes lit up with a smile that seemed to encompass the entire history of that small Balkan state. It was a smile that spoke volumes, acknowledging the struggles and triumphs of a people he had never met, yet felt deeply connected to.

From his pocket, he produced a medal, its ribbon slightly frayed but the metal still gleaming. "From Montenegro," he said softly, placing it in my palm. I turned it over, reading the inscription with a sense of wonder. It was then that he showed me another treasured possession - a photograph from his Oxford days. In it, I saw a younger version of the man before me, cricket bat in hand, surrounded by friends who had since ascended to lofty titles.

As he spoke, I found myself drawn into his narrative, each word adding another layer to the complex tapestry of his life. It was as if I were leafing through a personal history, each page revealing new depths to the enigma that was Gatsby.

The man's words came like phantoms, drifting through the Venetian air. I saw the tiger pelts ablaze in his palazzo, rubies spilling like blood from a wounded chest. His voice, a whisper of bygone glories, spoke of a grand favor to be asked.

"I'm no ordinary man," he said, pocketing trinkets of a shattered past. "I wander, a nomad among strangers, fleeing memories that haunt me still."

He paused, the weight of untold stories hanging between us. "You'll learn more soon. At tea with Miss Baker."

"You love her?" I asked, though I knew the answer before it came.

"No, old friend. But she'll speak for me."

The mystery of it all irritated me. I hadn't invited Jordan to dissect the enigma of Jay Gatsby. I regretted stepping onto his lawn of endless parties and whispered secrets.

Silence fell, heavy as a burial shroud. His propriety grew as we neared the city, a mask carefully constructed. We passed Port Roosevelt, glimpsing ships with crimson belts, their hulls promising distant shores. Then came the slums, cobblestones echoing with the ghosts of faded dreams and long-abandoned saloons.

The valley of ashes stretched before us, a wasteland of forgotten hopes. For a moment, I saw Mrs. Wilson, her vitality a stark contrast to the desolation, pumping gas with the desperation of one clinging to life in a world of decay.

In that instant, I understood that Gatsby's request would be as fantastic and doomed as the dreams that brought him to this glittering, hollow world.

With wings of steel, we cast light across half of Astoria's realm. Our journey halted by the familiar growl of a motorcycle, a zealous officer riding alongside. Gatsby, cool as ever, waved a pristine card from his wallet. "We're acquainted now," the lawman nodded, tipping his cap in deference.

Crossing the grand bridge, sunlight danced through its bones, painting the cars below. The city rose before us, a confection of white heaps and sugar lumps, built on dreams and intangible wealth. From this vantage, the city always unveils itself anew, promising all the world's mystery and beauty.

A somber procession passed—a hearse laden with blooms, trailed by carriages of mourning and celebration. The friends' faces, marked by the heritage of southeastern Europe, gazed upon us. I found solace knowing Gatsby's magnificent automobile graced their mournful parade.

As we traversed Blackwell's Island, a sleek limousine glided by, its white chauffeur piloting three fashionable Black folks—two gentlemen and a lady. Their eyes, like polished onyx, rolled towards us in a dance of proud rivalry, eliciting a hearty laugh from my lips.

This journey, this moment, spoke volumes of the America we inhabited—a land of stark contrasts and audacious dreams. Where the weight of the past and the promise of the future collided on every street corner, in every glance exchanged. We were all travelers on this road, some racing ahead, others struggling to keep pace, but all part of this grand, complex tapestry we called home.

"Anything's possible now we've crossed this Rubicon," I mused, synapses firing. "Literally anything." Even the Great Gatsby himself could materialize sans eyebrow-raising. High noon, blazing. In some subterranean, well-ventilated Forty-second Street haunt, I rendezvoused with Gatsby for our midday repast. Squinting away the retina-searing glare

from outside, I discerned his silhouette in the dim foyer, engaged in tête-à-tête with another homo sapiens. "Carraway, meet Wolfshiem." A diminutive, pug-nosed Semite elevated his cranium, subjecting me to scrutiny via twin follicular protuberances luxuriating in each nasal cavity. Post-momentary pause, I detected his minuscule ocular organs in the penumbra. "So I eyeballed him," Wolfshiem declared, vigorously pumping my appendage, "and guess my next move?" "Do tell," I prompted with faux enthusiasm. Evidently, I wasn't his intended audience, as he relinquished my hand to assault Gatsby with his olfactory prominence. "I slipped Katspaugh the greenbacks and proclaimed: 'Katspaugh, withhold payment till he zips it.' He clammed up instantaneously." Gatsby corralled us by our respective upper limbs, propelling us restaurantward. Wolfshiem, mid-sentence, gulped down his unfinished utterance, lapsing into somnambulistic abstraction. "Highballs?" queried the maître d'. "Fine establishment," Wolfshiem opined, ogling the ceiling's Presbyterian nymphs. "But I prefer across the thoroughfare!" "Affirmative on highballs," Gatsby concurred, then to Wolfshiem: "It's sweltering over yonder." "Sweltering and cramped—indeed," Wolfshiem conceded, "yet memory-laden." "Which locale?" I inquired. "The venerable Metropole." "Ah, the Metropole," Wolfshiem ruminated melancholically. "Teeming with phantoms of yesteryear."

The night they killed Rosy Rosenthal is etched in my memory. We were six at the table, Rosy drunk and full. Near dawn, a waiter approached with an odd look. "Someone wants to see you outside," he said. Rosy started to rise, but I pulled him back. "Let them come in if they want you, don't step out," I warned.

It was four in the morning. Daylight waited behind the blinds.

"Did he go?" you ask, your eyes wide.

Of course he did. My nose twitches at the memory. Rosy turned at the door, said, "Don't let them take my coffee!" Then he stepped onto the sidewalk. Three shots to his swollen belly, and they were gone.

"Four were electrocuted," you say.

"Five, with Becker." I look at you, curious. "I hear you're seeking business connections."

The shift in conversation is jarring. Gatsby interjects, "No, no. This isn't the man."

Wolfshiem's disappointment is palpable. "My mistake," he mutters.

A plate of hash arrives, steaming. Wolfshiem begins to eat, his movements precise, almost savage. The sentimentality of the old Metropole fades, replaced by the clink of cutlery and the scent of food.

In those moments, I see the layers of our world - violence and business, memory and hunger, all intertwined. The city breathes these stories, exhales them into the night. We carry on, eating, dealing, remembering. What else can we do?

In the oppressive silence of that dimly lit room, his eyes moved with the slow deliberation of a prison guard surveying his charges. He completed his inspection by turning to examine those seated behind, as if searching for hidden dissidents. I sensed that, were it not for my presence, he would have peered beneath our very table, probing for contraband or whispered conspiracies.

"Comrade," Gatsby said, leaning towards me with the false camaraderie of an interrogator, "I fear I may have provoked your ire earlier in the automobile."

His smile reappeared, but this time I steeled myself against its deceptive warmth. "I have no patience for enigmas," I replied firmly. "Why not speak plainly of your intentions? What purpose does Miss Baker serve in this charade?"

"There is no subterfuge here," he assured me with practiced ease. "Miss Baker is a paragon of sportsmanship, incapable of impropriety."

Abruptly, he glanced at his watch, rose, and hastily departed, abandoning me to Mr. Wolfshiem's company.

"He must make a telephone call," Wolfshiem explained, his gaze following Gatsby's retreat. "A remarkable individual, is he not? A man of impeccable appearance and manners."

I nodded in agreement.

"He is an Oggsford man," Wolfshiem continued, his tone reverent.

"Oh?" I feigned interest.

"Oggsford College in England. Surely you've heard of it? One of the world's most prestigious institutions."

"How long have you known Gatsby?" I inquired, probing for information.

"Several years," he replied, his pride evident. "Our paths crossed after the war. Within an hour of conversation, I recognized him as a man of refined breeding. I thought to myself, 'Here is a gentleman one would proudly present to one's family.'" He fell silent, lost in admiration.

In the labyrinth of human curiosities, I found myself drawn to the peculiar adornments on my companion's wrists. Though initially unnoticed, they now commanded my attention with an unsettling familiarity. "These," he proclaimed with an air of cryptic pride, "are the finest specimens of human molars." I examined them, my mind reeling at the macabre ingenuity. "A most intriguing concept," I offered, my voice a careful balance of fascination and unease.

He retreated his sleeves beneath his coat, as if to shield his treasures from further scrutiny. "Gatsby," he mused, "possesses an unparalleled discretion in matters of the fairer sex. He would never dare to cast even a fleeting glance at the wife of a friend."

Upon the return of this paragon of virtue, our enigmatic companion, Mr. Wolfshiem, hastily concluded his repast and rose. "I have savored this luncheon," he declared, "but I must take my leave before I overstay my welcome." Gatsby's perfunctory response barely masked his indifference.

Wolfshiem, with a gesture both benedictory and dismissive, intoned, "Your courtesy is admirable, but I am of another epoch. Indulge in your discourse of athletics and damsels and other youthful pursuits. I, at half a century, shall impose no longer."

As he departed, his tragic visage quivered, leaving me to ponder if I had inadvertently caused offense. Gatsby elucidated, "He is prone to bouts of sentimentality. A veritable Broadway legend, he is."

Intrigued, I inquired, "An actor, perhaps? Or a dentist?"

"Neither," Gatsby replied. "Meyer Wolfshiem is a gambler of notorious repute. In fact," he added with chilling nonchalance, "he orchestrated the infamous fixing of the World's Series in 1919."

The revelation left me staggered, grappling with the enormity of such a claim.



The memory surfaced, unbidden. The fixed World's Series of 1919 - a distant event, seemingly inevitable. But now, a new understanding dawned. One man, with the focused intent of a thief, had toyed with the faith of millions. The realization settled like a weight in my chest.

"How did he come to do such a thing?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

"He saw an opportunity and seized it," came the reply, matter-of-fact.

"Why hasn't he been imprisoned?"

"He's too clever for that, my friend. They can't touch him."

I insisted on settling the bill. As the waiter returned with my change, I spotted Tom Buchanan across the crowded space.

"Come with me," I murmured. "I need to greet someone."

Tom noticed us, his steps quick and eager. "Where have you been?" he demanded. "Daisy's furious at your silence."

"Tom, this is Mr. Gatsby," I said, watching as they exchanged a brief handshake. Gatsby's face contorted into an unfamiliar expression of discomfort.

Tom turned to me, "What brings you to this part of town for a meal?"

"I've been lunching with Mr. Gatsby," I replied, turning to introduce him properly. But Gatsby had vanished.

Jordan Baker's voice cut through the memory, crisp and clear in the Plaza Hotel's tea garden. She sat rigidly upright as she recounted a day in October 1917.

"I was walking, half on sidewalk, half on lawn," she said. "I preferred the grass. My English shoes, with their rubber-knobbed soles, bit satisfyingly into the soft earth."

The sultry air of Louisville shimmered with promise that day, as I strolled along the street in my new plaid skirt. The wind played with its hem, eliciting tut-tuts from the patriotic banners adorning every house, their colors bold against whitewashed walls. But none could outshine the grandeur of Daisy Fay's residence, its lawn a verdant sea, its banner a defiant proclamation of wealth and status.

Ah, Daisy! A vision in white, barely eighteen and already the toast of the town. Her gleaming roadster sat proudly by the curb, a chariot for the golden girl whose telephone never ceased its urgent ring. Young officers, their blood hot with desire and dreams of glory, clamored for even a fleeting hour in her presence.

That fateful morning, I spied her in her car, a handsome lieutenant at her side. Their eyes locked in a world of their own, oblivious to all else. But then, "Jordan!" she called, her voice like honey. "Come here, won't you?"

My heart swelled with pride at her summons, for Daisy was the pinnacle of all I aspired to be. She beseeched me to carry a message to the Red Cross, begging off her bandage-rolling duties. As she spoke, the officer's gaze never left her face, filled with a longing that stirred something deep within my young soul.

Jay Gatsby, he was called. Little did I know then that our paths would cross again, years later on the shores of Long Island, in a tale of passion and tragedy that would forever alter the landscape of our lives.

In the paranoid haze of nineteen-seventeen, reality warped and shimmered like heat off asphalt. By the following annum, yours truly found herself entangled in the web of beaux and tournaments, Daisy's presence fading like a half-remembered dream. She gravitated

towards an older set, when she deigned to socialize at all. Whispers, like wisps of smoke, curled through the air - tales of nocturnal escapades, aborted farewells to doomed soldiers, familial cold wars that stretched for weeks. The military men receded from her orbit, replaced by myopic, flat-footed townie rejects.

Autumn brought a resurgence, Daisy's gaiety a neon sign in the gathering gloom. Post-armistice, she debuted; by February, New Orleans had staked its claim. Come June, Chicago's Tom Buchanan swooped in, their nuptials a fever dream of excess that left Louisville reeling. Four private cars disgorged a centuria of revelers, commandeering an entire floor of the Muhlbach. The pearls - oh, the pearls! - a king's ransom adorning her swan-like neck.

There I stood, a bridesmaid, witnessing the unraveling. Half an hour pre-dinner, I found her - a vision in flowered silk, June night incarnate - sprawled across the bed, pickled as a sailor on shore leave. Sauterne in one hand, cryptic missive in the other, she slurred, "Gratulate me. Virgin drinker no more. Oh, the rapture!"

Trepidation seized me. This tableau of feminine dissolution was terra incognita, a glimpse into some Bacchanalian underworld I'd never fathomed. What eldritch forces had conspired to bring us to this moment, this room, this precipice of something irretrievable?

The old woman's trembling hands rummaged through the wastebasket on her bed, finally producing the string of pearls. "Here," she said, her voice quavering. "Take these back. Tell them Daisy's had a change of heart."

Tears welled up in her eyes, streaming down her weathered cheeks. I rushed to find her mother's maid, and together we ushered Daisy into the bathroom, locking the door behind us. She clutched the letter, refusing to relinquish it even as we lowered her into the cold bath. The paper disintegrated in her grip, fragments floating like snowflakes on the water's surface.

We tended to her with ammonia and ice, then helped her back into her dress. When we emerged from the room, the pearls adorned her neck once more, as if nothing had transpired.

The following afternoon, Daisy married Tom Buchanan without hesitation. They embarked on a three-month honeymoon to distant shores. Upon their return, I encountered them in Santa Barbara. Daisy's devotion to Tom was palpable, her eyes constantly seeking him out. If he so much as left the room, she'd grow uneasy, her gaze darting about.

"Where's Tom gone?" she'd ask, her voice tinged with anxiety.

On the beach, she'd sit for hours, cradling his head in her lap. Her fingers would trace the contours of his face, her eyes fixed upon him with an intensity that spoke of unfathomable adoration.

In the sultry heat of August, they were a sight to behold, those two, inspiring a quiet, mesmerized laughter in onlookers. But the sweetness was fleeting. Barely a week after I departed Santa Barbara, Tom's car collided with a wagon on the Ventura road, tearing off a wheel. His companion, a chambermaid from the local hotel, found her name in the papers due to a broken arm.

When spring blossomed anew, Daisy welcomed her daughter into the world, and the family embarked on a year-long sojourn in France. I glimpsed them in Cannes, then later in Deauville, before they returned to settle in Chicago. Daisy, as you're well aware, became the toast of the town. They ran with a lively crowd - young, affluent, and unrestrained - yet

Daisy's reputation remained unblemished. Perhaps her abstinence from alcohol played a part. It's a considerable advantage, you see, to remain sober among the inebriated. One can guard one's tongue and time any indiscretions when others are too blind to notice or care.

Maybe Daisy never truly indulged in affairs of the heart. And yet, there's something in her voice that suggests otherwise... About six weeks ago, she heard the name Gatsby for the first time in years. It was when I inquired if you knew him in West Egg. After your departure, she roused me from sleep, asking, "What Gatsby?" When I described him - half-awake as I was - she spoke in the most peculiar tone, saying it must be the man she once knew. It was only then that I connected this Gatsby with the officer in her white car.

As the sun dipped behind the towering apartments of film stars in the West Fifties, Jordan Baker concluded her tale. We had left the Plaza, now gliding through Central Park in a victoria. The twilight air, heavy with summer's heat, carried the clear voices of children at play, their words indistinct yet melodious.

I mused on the peculiarity of the situation. "What an odd coincidence," I remarked.

Jordan's response was swift and certain. "It was no coincidence at all."

Puzzled, I asked her to elaborate.

"Gatsby acquired that house for the sole purpose of being near Daisy, just across the bay."

In that moment, Gatsby came alive to me, emerging from the chrysalis of his seemingly pointless opulence. His aspirations on that June night had not been merely to the stars, but to something far more tangible.

Jordan continued, "He hopes you'll invite Daisy to your home one afternoon, allowing him to join you."

The modesty of this request startled me. After five years and the purchase of a grand mansion where he lavished luxury on casual acquaintances, all for the chance to "join" us in a stranger's garden one afternoon.

"Was all this background necessary for such a simple request?" I wondered aloud.

"He's apprehensive, having waited so long. He feared you might take offense. Beneath it all, he's quite vulnerable," Jordan explained.

A thought nagged at me. "Why didn't he ask you to arrange their meeting?"

"He wants Daisy to see his house," she clarified. "And yours is conveniently next door."

"I see," I said, understanding dawning.

Jordan added, "I think he half-hoped she might wander into one of his parties some night, but she never did."

The night unfurled its velvet cloak as he recounted his elaborate scheme, his voice trembling with an almost feverish intensity. How he had sought her out, surreptitiously inquiring after her whereabouts, until fate led him to me. Oh, the intricate dance of his words as he broached the subject at his soirée! I, ever the pragmatist, proposed a luncheon in the city, but he recoiled, insisting with passionate urgency, "No, no, nothing out of the ordinary. I must see her here, next door."

When Tom's name arose, a shadow of hesitation flickered across his face. His knowledge of Tom was scant, save for his devotion to Chicago papers, hoping to glimpse her name among the printed words.

As we glided beneath a bridge, darkness enveloping us, I found my arm encircling Jordan's golden form. The world of Daisy and Gatsby receded, replaced by the allure of this woman beside me – sharp, defined, a universal skeptic leaning into my embrace.

A phrase pulsed through my mind, intoxicating in its simplicity: "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired."

Jordan's voice, soft as silk, murmured, "Daisy ought to have something in her life."

"Does she wish to see Gatsby?" I inquired.

"She mustn't know. Gatsby insists on secrecy. You're to invite her for tea, nothing more."

We passed through a veil of shadowed trees, emerging to the gentle luminescence of Fifty-Ninth Street, its pale light cascading into the park like a beacon in the night.

In the neon-lit night, I stood apart from the gilded men, their phantom lovers haunting the cityscape. Bereft of such spectral companions, I pulled the tangible woman closer, her flesh warm against mine. Her lips curved in disdain, yet I drew her nearer still, until our breaths mingled in the electric air.







## V

Nightfall on West Egg, and I return to a peninsula ablaze. My home, for a moment, seems engulfed in flames. But no—it's Gatsby's mansion, a beacon in the dark, light spilling from every window, every crevice. The glow catches on roadside wires, stretches shadows across manicured lawns. I imagine revelers playing hide-and-seek, sardines-in-a-box, but silence reigns. Only the wind whispers, making lights flicker like celestial morse code.

From the taxi's groan, I see him approach. Gatsby, a specter on his own lawn.

"Your house," I say, "It's like the World's Fair."

"Is it?" His eyes, distracted galaxies. "I've been exploring the rooms. Coney Island calls, old sport. My car awaits."

"Too late," I demur.

"The pool, then? Untouched all summer."

"Sleep beckons."

"Of course." He waits, a coiled spring of anticipation.

"I spoke with Miss Baker," I offer. "Tomorrow, I'll invite Daisy for tea."

"No trouble," he says, too quickly. "Don't inconvenience yourself."

"What day suits?"

"What day suits you?" he echoes, a careful dance of words.

"Day after tomorrow?"

He ponders, time stretching between us like taffy. In his silence, I hear the weight of years, of dreams deferred. The lights of his mansion pulse, a heartbeat of hope and desperation. We stand on the precipice of something monumental, yet fragile as gossamer.

In this moment, West Egg holds its breath. The air is thick with possibility, with the scent of summer grass and distant sea. Gatsby's eyes reflect the stars, or perhaps just the glitter of his own impossible dreams. The night wraps around us, a cocoon of secrets and longing.

In the golden light of afternoon, the two men stood at the edge of their properties, the line between them as stark as the divide between their worlds. The grass on one side grew wild and untamed, while the other was a sea of verdant perfection. The wealthy neighbor shifted uneasily, his words floating on the warm breeze like dandelion seeds.

"I was thinking about the grass," he murmured, his eyes darting between the lawns. "And there's something else..."

His hesitation hung in the air, thick as honey. The narrator sensed the weight of unspoken words, of desires left unvoiced. "Perhaps we should wait?" he offered, but the neighbor shook his head, golden curls catching the sunlight.

"It's not that, old sport. I was wondering... well, your finances. Are they... comfortable?"

The question lingered, delicate as a butterfly's wing. The narrator admitted to modest means, and something in the neighbor's demeanor shifted, like clouds parting after a storm.

"I have a proposition," he continued, words tumbling out like water over smooth stones. "A side business, you see. Confidential, but lucrative. It wouldn't interfere with your bonds..."

In that moment, the narrator felt the universe tilt on its axis, presenting a crossroads he had not anticipated. But the offer, thinly veiled as it was, carried the scent of danger, of deals made in shadows.

"I'm afraid I must decline," he said softly, regret and relief mingling in his voice. "My hands are quite full."

The neighbor persisted, mentioning a name that hung between them like smoke. But the narrator stood firm, rooted in his decision. As the sun dipped lower, painting the sky in shades of amber and rose, the neighbor retreated, leaving behind the whisper of what might have been.

In the hazy glow of evening, I drifted home, my mind afloat on clouds of contentment. Did Gatsby venture to Coney Island that night? Did he peer into countless rooms as his mansion blazed like a carnival of light? These details eluded me, lost in the fog of slumber.

With the dawn came clarity, and I telephoned Daisy, extending an invitation for tea. "Come alone," I insisted, my words a gentle warning. Her feigned ignorance of Tom's identity amused me.

The appointed day arrived, cloaked in a veil of rain. A curious figure appeared at my door, a man wrestling with a lawnmower, sent by the enigmatic Gatsby to tend my grass. This unexpected gesture reminded me of my own forgotten task – to summon my Finn. I ventured into the rain-soaked village, searching for her among the labyrinth of pale alleys, and procuring the necessary accoutrements for tea.

But Gatsby's extravagance knew no bounds. A veritable greenhouse materialized at my doorstep, its floral bounty rendering my modest purchases obsolete.

As the clock struck three, Gatsby himself arrived, a vision in white flannel and gold, his entrance a study in nervous energy. Pallor clung to his features, dark shadows beneath his eyes betraying sleepless nights.

"Is all well?" he inquired, his anxiety palpable.

I gestured to the lawn, now impeccably manicured. His confusion at my words was evident, his gaze unseeing as he peered out the window.

"The weather," he mused, grasping for conversation. "I read it might improve by four."

In the damp pantry, we stood, the Finn and I, eyeing those twelve lemon cakes from the delicatessen, their pale yellow skins glistening under the weak light. "Will they suffice?" I asked, my voice a whisper in the humid air. "Certainly, certainly! They're splendid!" he replied, his words hollow as a deserted church, "...old sport."

The rain, that relentless tormentor, eased its assault around half-past three, transforming into a mist that clung to everything like a desperate lover. Gatsby, his eyes vacant as an abandoned house, peered through Clay's Economics, flinching at every creak of the Finnish maid's footsteps. His gaze darted to the windows, as if expecting some spectral visitation.

At last, he rose, a man defeated by time itself. "I must depart," he mumbled, his uncertainty palpable.

"But why?" I countered.

"No one's coming. It's far too late!" His watch became a talisman of urgency.

"Don't be absurd," I chided, "it's mere minutes to four."

He slumped into his chair, a marionette with cut strings. And then, like an answer to an unspoken prayer, the growl of an engine pierced the silence.

We leapt up, my own nerves frayed, and I ventured into the yard. There, under the weeping lilacs, a grand open car approached, its wheels crushing the gravel beneath.

And there she was. Daisy, her face tilted beneath a lavender hat, her smile as bright and fleeting as summer lightning. "Is this truly your dwelling, my darling?" Her voice, a symphony of joy, cut through the gloom like a sunbeam. For a moment, I was lost in its cadence, my ears straining to catch every nuance before her words took shape.

The rain-slicked strand of hair painted a cerulean streak across her face, her hand glistening with moisture as I helped her from the vehicle. Her whisper was low, intimate: "Have you fallen for me? Why else would I arrive unaccompanied?"

"That's Castle Rackrent's mystery. Send your driver away for an hour."

"Ferdie, return in an hour," she instructed, then murmured gravely, "His name is Ferdie."

"Does the fuel affect his olfactory senses?"

"I doubt it," she replied, all innocence. "Why do you ask?"

We entered, and to my astonishment, found the main room vacant.

"How peculiar," I remarked.

"What is?"

A dignified knock interrupted us. I opened the door to find him there, ashen-faced, hands buried deep in his pockets like anchors, standing in a pool of rainwater. His gaze bore into mine with tragic intensity.

He strode past me, pivoting sharply as if pulled by unseen strings, before vanishing into the room beyond. The situation had lost all semblance of humor.

My heart pounding, I closed the door against the strengthening storm. Silence reigned for an eternity of seconds. Then, from within, came a choked murmur, a fragment of laughter, followed by her voice, artificially bright:

"I'm truly delighted to see you again."

The pause that followed was excruciating. With nothing to occupy me in the entryway, I stepped into the room to join them.

In the drawing room, Gatsby lounged against the mantelpiece, a study in forced nonchalance. His posture was a mockery of ease, his hands thrust deep into his pockets as if to anchor himself against the tempest of emotions that threatened to sweep him away. His head lolled back, resting precariously against an antique timepiece, its face as lifeless as Gatsby's own carefully constructed facade.

From this vantage, his eyes, wild and desperate, fixed upon Daisy. She perched on the edge of a rigid chair, a vision of grace and trepidation, a delicate bird poised for flight.

"We've crossed paths before," Gatsby murmured, his gaze flickering briefly to me, his lips twitching in a stillborn smile. The clock, as if conspiring with fate, chose that moment to

teeter perilously. Gatsby's hands, trembling like leaves in an autumn gale, caught it, steadying both the timepiece and his resolve.

He lowered himself onto the sofa, body taut as a coiled spring, elbow propped, chin cupped in his palm. "My apologies for the clock," he offered, his voice a brittle thing.

My face burned with the intensity of a tropical sun, my mind a desert bereft of words. "It's an old clock," I stammered, the banality of my statement hanging in the air like stale perfume.

"It's been an age," Daisy intoned, her voice a study in forced casualness. "Five years come November."

Gatsby's mechanical response stretched the moment into an eternity. I suggested tea, a desperate lifeline in this sea of awkwardness. The Finn, appearing like a mischievous sprite, materialized with a laden tray, ushering in a welcomed chaos of china and cake.

In the shadows, Gatsby retreated, his eyes darting between us, tense and melancholy, as Daisy and I engaged in the dance of polite conversation.

The tension hung thick in the air, stifling as a summer's day. I knew I must move, must break this fragile peace before it shattered of its own accord. With a mumbled excuse, I rose. Gatsby's eyes darted to me, panic flashing across his face. "You're leaving?" he asked, his voice tight.

"I'll return," I assured him, but he was already at my heels, shepherding me into the kitchen with frantic urgency.

"Oh, God," he moaned, once we were alone. His distress was palpable, filling the small space between us.

"What troubles you?" I asked, though I feared I knew the answer.

"A grievous error," he muttered, shaking his head like a man possessed. "A grievous, grievous error."

I sought to soothe him. "It's mere embarrassment, nothing more. Daisy feels it too."

"Daisy?" he echoed, disbelief etched on his features.

"As keenly as you do," I affirmed.

"Lower your voice," he hissed, glancing fearfully at the door.

His behavior irked me. "You're acting the child," I snapped. "And worse, you're being discourteous. Daisy sits alone, abandoned."

He raised a hand to silence me, his eyes filled with a reproach I knew I'd never forget. Then, with exquisite care, he slipped back into the other room.

I fled through the rear exit, mimicking Gatsby's earlier circuit of the house. The rain had resumed its assault, and I sought refuge beneath a great, gnarled tree. Its leaves formed a canopy against the deluge, but offered no distraction from Gatsby's looming mansion.

I found myself staring at the edifice, much as Kant had gazed upon his church steeple. It was a monument to excess, built by a brewer caught up in the 'period' craze of the previous decade. Rumor had it he'd bribed his neighbors with five years of paid taxes, if only they'd thatch their roofs with straw to complete his vision of rustic grandeur.

In the dreary aftermath of his grand ambition, the old man's spirit withered like a forgotten vine. His progeny, unmoved by sentiment, sold off his dwelling while the funereal wreath still adorned the entryway. Such is the American temperament—willing to be subjugated, yet fiercely resistant to peasantry.

The sky cleared after a brief downpour, and a merchant's motorcar wound its way up the drive, bearing provisions for the household staff. I knew instinctively that the master would not partake.

A servant girl, methodically opening the upper windows, paused at each to expel a thoughtful stream into the garden below. The time had come for my departure.

During the rain, their voices had seemed to ebb and flow like the tide of human emotion. But now, in the newfound quiet, I sensed a profound stillness within the house as well.

I entered, deliberately creating a cacophony in the kitchen—short of toppling the stove—yet I doubt they registered my presence. They sat at opposite ends of the divan, locked in a wordless exchange, as if some unspoken question hung in the air between them. All traces of discomfort had vanished.

Daisy's countenance was streaked with tears. Upon my entrance, she hastily rose to compose herself before a looking glass. But it was Gatsby who confounded me. He radiated an inexplicable aura of contentment, filling the modest room with his silent exultation.

"Ah, hello, old friend," he greeted me, as if we had been parted for an eternity.

The rain had ceased, though its absence lingered like a forgotten melody. He noticed it first, this man with eyes that sparkled like dewdrops in the emerging sun. His smile unfurled, a gesture of cosmic relief, as if he alone could command the skies. He shared this revelation with Daisy, his voice brimming with childlike wonder.

Daisy's response came from somewhere deep within, her throat constricting around words laced with unexpected delight. The air between them shimmered with unspoken possibilities.

He extended an invitation then, eager to showcase his domain. I hesitated, suddenly aware of my outsider status in this tableau. But he insisted, his words bridging the gap between us with surprising warmth.

As Daisy retreated upstairs, I was struck by a pang of embarrassment over my humble offerings. We waited on the lawn, the grass beneath our feet still damp with memory.

His house stood before us, a monument to ambition and dreams. He sought my approval, pointing out how the light caressed its facade, how each architectural flourish seemed to breathe with life. I nodded, mesmerized by the spectacle and by the man himself.

He spoke of the time it took to amass his fortune, a casual boast that belied the complexity of his past. When I prodded, his narrative faltered, revealing hairline fractures in the carefully constructed image. He fumbled through explanations of inherited wealth and lost fortunes, of various business ventures that seemed to dissolve upon closer inspection.

There was a moment when our eyes met, and I sensed he was about to revisit a previous conversation, one laden with unspoken implications. But before the moment could crystallize, Daisy emerged, her dress adorned with brass buttons that caught the sunlight, scattering golden fragments across the lawn.

In that instant, time seemed to pause, holding its breath as we stood on the precipice of something profound and irreversible.

Hoo boy, that hulking monstrosity? She jabbed a finger at it, eyes wide. "You dig this place?"

"Dig it? I'm head over heels. But how in tarnation do you manage all by your lonesome?"

"Oh, I keep it buzzing, day and night. Fascinating folks. Real movers and shakers. The crème de la crème, you might say."

We bypassed the Sound shortcut, opting for the scenic route. Through the grand gate we rolled, Daisy cooing over the castle-like silhouette against the sky. The gardens had her swooning - jonquils, hawthorn, plum blossoms, and that kiss-me-at-the-gate flower, all mingling their scents in a dizzying perfume.

Weird though, hitting those marble steps with nary a swish of fancy duds or tinkle of laughter. Just birdsong in the trees. Inside, tiptoeing through Marie Antoinette's music rooms and Restoration salons, I half-expected party guests to pop out from behind every settee, shushed into silence 'til we passed.

Gatsby shut the "Merton College Library" door, and I swear I heard a ghostly chuckle from our bespectacled friend. Up we climbed, past bedrooms drowning in silk, dressing rooms, pool rooms, and bathrooms with tubs you could swim in. We even stumbled on some disheveled fella doing crunches in his jammies - the "boarder," Mr. Klipspringer. Saw him earlier, prowling the beach like a stray cat.

Finally, we hit Gatsby's digs - bedroom, bath, and a fancy-pants Adam study. We plopped down, and he produced some mysterious green liquor from a hidden cupboard. Chartreuse, he called it. Knocked it back like it was mother's milk.

In the heart of this ostentatious dwelling, his eyes never strayed from her face. Every object, every corner seemed to be reassessed through the lens of her beloved gaze. At times, he appeared bewildered by his own possessions, as if her mere presence had rendered them unreal, ethereal. He nearly stumbled on the staircase, lost in her radiance.

His sleeping quarters stood out in their simplicity, save for the gleaming gold toilet set adorning the dresser. She took up the brush with evident pleasure, running it through her hair. He collapsed into a chair, shielding his eyes, overcome by laughter. "It's beyond words, my friend," he chortled. "I simply cannot..."

His emotions flowed like a river through rapids - from embarrassment to elation, and now to pure wonderment at her presence. The idea of her had consumed him for so long, a dream he had nurtured to fruition, waiting with bated breath. Now, in the aftermath, he seemed to deflate like an overwound timepiece.

Regaining composure, he unveiled two massive cabinets housing his sartorial treasures - suits, robes, ties, and shirts stacked high like bricks in a wall. "I have a man in England who procures my attire," he explained. "He sends a selection at the turn of each season."

He extracted a pile of shirts, tossing them before us one by one. Linen, silk, and flannel cascaded onto the table, their folds disappearing as they landed in a vibrant tapestry of colour and texture. The display was both extravagant and poignant, a testament to his longing and his wealth.

The shirts cascaded like a waterfall of dreams, each hue singing its own melody—coral whispers, apple-green secrets, lavender promises, and orange murmurs. Monograms in Indian blue crowned each piece, a testament to a man's longing. Daisy, overcome by the beauty before her, buried her face in the fabric, her tears a river of regret and



wonder. "These shirts," she wept, her words muffled by silk and cotton, "they're so beautiful. I've never... never seen anything like them."

The rain, persistent as memory, tapped against the windows, trapping us inside with our desires. We stood, a line of silent witnesses, gazing out at the Sound's rippled skin. Gatsby's voice cut through the quiet, "On a clear day, you can see your home across the bay. That green light at the end of your dock, it burns all night."

Daisy's arm found its way to his, but Gatsby seemed lost in his own words, perhaps realizing that the light—once a beacon of hope, as close as star to moon—had lost its magic. Now it was just a light, green and ordinary, marking the end of a dream.

I wandered the room, fingers brushing against shadowed objects, until a photograph caught my eye. An elderly man in yachting attire, his face a map of stories untold.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"That's Mr. Dan Cody, old sport," Gatsby replied, the name echoing faintly in the chambers of my memory.

In the fading light of dusk, memories flickered like fireflies. "He's gone now," I muttered, "once my dearest companion." A small photograph adorned the bureau - young Gatsby in sailor's attire, chin jutting proudly skyward, barely eighteen summers old. Daisy's eyes sparkled with delight. "Oh, how marvelous! That dashing pompadour! You never breathed a word about your yacht or that splendid hairstyle."

Gatsby's fingers danced across a stack of yellowed clippings. "Look here," he urged, voice thick with longing. They huddled close, poring over faded newsprint. The telephone's shrill cry pierced the air, and Gatsby snatched up the receiver, his words clipped and cryptic.

"Daisy!" I cried, drawn to the window by her excited gasp. Beyond the curtain of rain, the western sky had split open, revealing a glorious tapestry of pink and golden clouds. "Oh," she breathed, "to pluck one of those cotton-candy wisps and nestle you inside, pushing you gently across the heavens."

I made to leave, but they insisted I stay, as if my presence somehow heightened their intimacy. Gatsby's eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. "Klipspringer!" he called out, "we need music!" Soon, a disheveled young man appeared, all gangly limbs and nervous energy, clad in a garish "sport shirt" and ill-fitting trousers. His thin hair gleamed dully in the lamplight as he shuffled towards the piano, a reluctant maestro summoned to play for ghosts of the past and dreams of an uncertain future.

In the dimming light of the afternoon, Daisy's polite inquiry hung in the air like a delicate perfume. "Did we disturb your repose?" she asked, her voice a melody of courtesy. The man named Klipspringer, startled from his slumber, fumbled for words, his embarrassment palpable in the charged atmosphere.

Gatsby, ever the gracious host, intervened with smooth assurance. "Klipspringer is our pianist," he declared, his eyes gleaming with an unspoken challenge. "Isn't that so, my dear friend?"

The reluctant musician demurred, his protests a feeble whisper against Gatsby's commanding presence. But Gatsby, in his inimitable way, ushered them downstairs, flooding the house with light at the flick of a switch, banishing the grey shadows that lurked at the windows.

In the music room, a solitary lamp cast its glow upon the piano, while Gatsby, with trembling hands, lit Daisy's cigarette. They retreated to a distant couch, shrouded in shadows, save for the faint reflection of light from the polished floor.

Klipspringer's hesitant melodies filled the air, his fingers dancing uncertainly across the keys. As the final notes of "The Love Nest" faded, he turned, seeking Gatsby's approval in the gloom. But Gatsby, impatient with apologies, demanded more music.

Outside, the wind howled its mournful song, accompanied by distant thunder. West Egg came alive with twinkling lights, as electric trains bore weary men homeward through the rain. The air crackled with the electricity of change, of possibilities unfolding in the twilight hour.

As I prepared to take my leave, I caught a glimpse of something in Gatsby's eyes – a fleeting shadow of doubt, a momentary questioning of his hard-won happiness. It was as if, in that instant, he sensed the fragility of his dreams, teetering on the precipice of an uncertain future.

In the tapestry of time, nearly five summers had woven their threads. Daisy, like a delicate flower, sometimes wilted beneath the weight of his dreams. Not by her own doing, but because of the immensity of his illusion - a mirage that had outgrown her, outgrown everything. He had poured his soul into this vision with the fervor of a dervish, embellishing it with every glittering fragment that floated his way. Yet no flame, no matter how fierce, could match the intensity of what a man nurtures in the chambers of his spectral heart.

As I observed him, he shifted slightly, a barely perceptible adjustment. His fingers intertwined with hers, and as she whispered something, he turned to her, awash with emotion. I believe it was her voice that held him captive - its undulating, feverish warmth, a melody that defied even the most extravagant of dreams. A timeless song, impossible to silence.

They had forgotten my presence, but Daisy's gaze flickered towards me, her hand extending in greeting. Gatsby, however, seemed to look through me, unseeing. I gazed at them once more, and they returned my look, distant and consumed by the intensity of their own existence. Then, I stepped out of the room, descending the marble staircase into the rain, leaving them to their shared moment.



## VI

In the languid heat of that summer, a young reporter from New York, brimming with ambition and curiosity, arrived at Gatsby's doorstep. His questions were vague, his purpose unclear, yet he persisted with the tenacity of youth. Gatsby, ever polite, met the young man's fumbling inquiries with a bemused patience.

The reporter's instincts, though imprecise, had led him to a story that simmered just beneath the surface of society's consciousness. Gatsby's name had become a whisper in the hallways of power, a legend growing with each retelling at countless soirées and garden parties.

Rumors swirled like leaves in an autumn breeze. Some spoke of underground pipelines to Canada, while others insisted that Gatsby's house was no house at all, but a boat disguised as one, silently gliding along the Long Island shore under cover of darkness.

Why did these fables bring such satisfaction to James Gatz of North Dakota? The answer lay buried in the depths of his past, in the moment when James Gatz became Jay Gatsby. It was a transformation as sudden and profound as the changing of seasons, occurring on the shores of Lake Superior when he was just seventeen.

On that fateful day, young Gatz, clad in a tattered green jersey and canvas pants, watched Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor. In that instant, Jay Gatsby was born. With the audacity of youth and the cunning of a man twice his age, he borrowed a rowboat and rowed out to the Tuolomee. There, he warned Cody of an impending wind that threatened to dash his vessel against the treacherous shoals.

This act of reinvention, this shedding of an old self like a snake sloughing off its skin, marked the beginning of Gatsby's relentless pursuit of a dream that would consume him entirely.

It was as if the appellation had been simmering in the cauldron of his mind for an age, even in those tender years. His progenitors, mere rustic folk of indolent and unprosperous disposition, had never truly occupied the hallowed place of parentage in the theatre of his fancy. Nay, the veritable essence of Jay Gatsby, that enigmatic denizen of West Egg upon Long Island's gilded shore, had sprung forth from the Platonic ideal he had fashioned of his own self. He was, in truth, a scion of the Almighty—a phrase which, if it bears any weight at all, signifies precisely that—and thus he must needs be about his Father's grand design, in service to a beauty most vast, vulgar, and meretricious.

Thus did he conjure the very sort of Jay Gatsby that a lad of seventeen summers might be wont to conceive, and to this ethereal construct he remained steadfast until his final breath. For nigh on a twelvemonth, he had eked out his existence along the southern fringes of Lake Superior, toiling as a harvester of clams and fisher of salmon, or in any other capacity that might furnish him with sustenance and repose. His form, bronzed and hardened by honest labour, thrived naturally amidst the half-fierce, half-indolent exertions of those bracing days.

The fairer sex he knew in his youth, and as they lavished their attentions upon him, he grew disdainful of their charms—of the maidens for their naïveté, and of the more seasoned ladies for their hysterical preoccupations with matters he, in his all-consuming self-regard,

deemed trifling. Yet his heart beat in perpetual, tumultuous revolt. The most grotesque and fantastical notions besieged his slumbering mind, as a universe of ineffable gaudiness unfurled within his cranium, while the timepiece upon the washstand marked the passing hours and moonlight, sodden and pale, bathed his discarded garments strewn upon the floor.

The ache for his destined greatness had driven him, not long past, to the humble Lutheran halls of St. Olaf's, nestled in Minnesota's southern reaches. Two weeks he lingered there, his spirit crushed by its fierce disregard for the rhythms of his fate, for fate's own self, and loathing the menial labor that was to be his passage through those hallowed gates. He fled back to the shores of Superior, still adrift in search of purpose when Dan Cody's vessel cast its shadow on the shallow waters.

Cody, half a century old, was forged in the crucible of Nevada's silver, the Yukon's gold, every rush for precious metal since '75. Montana's copper had made him rich beyond measure, his body hale but his mind teetering on the brink of softness. Women, countless and cunning, sensed this weakness and circled like vultures, eager to strip him of his wealth.

The sordid tale of Ella Kaye, that newspaper harpy playing at Madame de Maintenon to Cody's Louis, driving him to sea in his yacht, was fodder for the gutter press of 1902. For five years, he had drifted along welcoming coastlines before fate cast him into Little Girl Bay and into James Gatz's life.

To young Gatz, suspended between sea and sky, that yacht embodied all the world's splendor and allure. He must have flashed that smile of his, the one he'd learned could charm and disarm. Cody, intrigued, probed with questions, one drawing forth a freshly minted name. He found the boy quick-witted and burning with ambition. Days later, in Duluth, he clothed him anew: a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a yachting cap – garments of a new life, a new destiny.

In the hazy days of youth, when the Tuolomee set sail for distant shores, young Gatsby embarked on a journey that would shape his destiny. Aboard Dan Cody's vessel, he assumed a myriad of roles - from humble steward to trusted confidant. Cody, a man of excesses, recognized in Gatsby a steady force, a bulwark against his own capricious nature.

For five long years, they traversed the seas, circling the continent thrice. Their odyssey might have continued indefinitely, were it not for the fateful night in Boston when Ella Kaye boarded the ship. Within a week, Cody's life ebbed away, leaving behind only memories and a portrait that would later adorn Gatsby's chamber.

That portrait - a stern visage of a man who had tasted both the bitter and the sweet of life - spoke volumes of an era past. Cody, the pioneer of debauchery, had brought the untamed spirit of the frontier to the refined Eastern shores.

It was Cody's influence that instilled in Gatsby a wariness of drink. While revelers would playfully anoint his hair with champagne, Gatsby remained steadfastly sober. Yet from Cody, he stood to inherit a fortune - twenty-five thousand dollars that would never reach his hands. Through some arcane legal maneuver, the wealth passed to Ella Kaye, leaving Gatsby with nothing but his experiences and newfound wisdom.

Thus, the vague outline of Jay Gatsby solidified into the man he would become. This tale, recounted to me much later, serves to dispel the wild fabrications surrounding his origins - stories as insubstantial as desert mirages.

In the hazy twilight of memory and myth, Gatsby's tale unfolded to me, a story woven from truth and illusion. I found myself at a crossroads, unsure of what to believe about this enigmatic figure. As Gatsby paused to catch his breath, I seized the moment to untangle the knots of misconception that had formed.

Our paths diverged for a time. I drifted through New York, caught in the orbit of Jordan and her aging aunt, while Gatsby's voice faded from my ears. But fate drew me back to his mansion one languid Sunday afternoon.

Scarcely had I arrived when Tom Buchanan materialized, drink in hand, as if conjured by some cosmic jest. The real surprise was that such an encounter hadn't occurred sooner. They arrived on horseback, a trio completed by a man called Sloane and a woman whose brown riding habit spoke of elegance and familiarity.

Gatsby, ever the gracious host, greeted them with practiced warmth. "Welcome," he said, his voice a study in forced nonchalance. "Please, make yourselves comfortable." He flitted about, a restless bird in a gilded cage, summoning servants with the ring of bells. "Refreshments will be here shortly."

Tom's presence cast a palpable shadow over Gatsby, though he masked his unease with feverish hospitality. There was a tacit understanding that these unexpected guests had come only for what Gatsby could offer, not for his company.

Sloane demurred at every offer. Lemonade? Champagne? Each suggestion met with polite refusal. The air grew thick with awkward silence, punctuated by stilted attempts at conversation. "The roads... quite good around here, aren't they?" Gatsby ventured.

"Yeah," came the terse reply.

In a moment of inexplicable compulsion, Gatsby turned to Tom, addressing him as one would a stranger, despite their fraught history. The gesture hung in the air, a testament to the complex web of relationships that bound them all together.

The words tumbled forth, a torrent of recognition and feigned politeness, as Gatsby declared with unsettling intensity, "Surely we've crossed paths before, Mr. Buchanan," to which Tom, his voice a gruff veneer of civility masking vacant recollection, replied, "Indeed, yes," before Gatsby pressed on, "With Nick, it was, some fortnight past," and then, with startling aggression, "I'm acquainted with your wife." The conversation lurched onward, Tom's attention pivoting to Nick, inquiring about his proximity, while Mr. Sloane, a study in haughty detachment, lounged silently, the woman beside him equally mute until, loosened by spirits, she abruptly extended an invitation to Gatsby's next soirée, a suggestion met with forced graciousness by their host, who, having regained his composure, sought to prolong Tom's presence, urging them to stay for supper with tantalizing hints of other guests, perhaps from the city, but the lady, now effusive, countered with her own invitation, sweeping Nick into her grand designs, even as Mr. Sloane rose, a silent command to depart, yet she persisted, her enthusiasm a tide against which Sloane murmured ineffectually, and Gatsby, caught in this social riptide, looked to Nick with questioning eyes, sensing the unspoken refusal emanating from Sloane, prompting Nick's polite decline, which only served to redirect the lady's focus solely upon Gatsby, her insistence growing, Sloane's whispered protests unheeded as she brushed aside concerns of lateness, until at last Gatsby, cornered, confessed to his lack of equine transport, a curious admission of a man once mounted in military service, now bereft of steed in his opulent civilian life.

In the languid heat of the afternoon, a peculiar scene unfolded. The man's insistence on following in his car, the hushed conversation between Sloane and the lady on the porch - it all bore the weight of unspoken tensions. Tom's voice cut through the air, heavy with judgment. "Doesn't he know she doesn't want him?" The irony of his words, given his own marital situation, was not lost on me.

The discourse turned to the perceived looseness of modern women, Tom's old-fashioned sensibilities bristling at the thought of Daisy's associations. His frown deepened the lines on his face, etching his disapproval into the very air around us.

Suddenly, as if fleeing some unseen danger, Sloane and the lady made their hasty exit. Their horses' hooves clattered on the drive, the sound fading into the lush August foliage just as Gatsby emerged, impeccably dressed as always.

Tom's discomfort with Daisy's independence manifested in his presence at Gatsby's next soiree. The party, usually a kaleidoscope of joy and excess, took on a different hue that night. The same faces swirled in the champagne-soaked air, the same cacophony of colors and sounds assaulted the senses, but an undercurrent of unease permeated the atmosphere.

Perhaps it was Tom's presence that cast this pall, or perhaps it was my own shifting perspective. West Egg, once a self-contained universe with its own celestial bodies and gravitational laws, now seemed less substantial when viewed through Daisy's eyes. The harshness I perceived might have always been there, masked by the glitter and glamour that Gatsby so carefully cultivated. In that moment, the fragility of this world we had constructed became painfully apparent.

The twilight settled as they arrived, the air thick with anticipation. She gazed upon the shimmering crowd, her voice a delicate murmur in the gathering dusk. "I'm overwhelmed," she breathed, her words barely audible. "If you desire a kiss, simply whisper my name. I'll arrange it. Or present the emerald card I'm distributing."

"Observe," he urged, his voice low and insistent.

"I am. It's extraordinary—"

"You might recognize faces you've only heard of before."

His eyes, haughty and cold, scanned the masses. "We rarely venture out," he stated, "I realize I know no one here."

"Perhaps that woman is familiar?" He gestured towards an ethereal figure, more bloom than human, seated regally beneath ivory blossoms.

They stared, struck by that peculiar sensation of encountering a previously spectral celebrity.

"She's exquisite," she murmured.

"The man beside her is her director."

He guided them through the throng, introducing them with careful precision: "The Buchanans."

After a moment's pause, he added: "He's a polo player."

"No, no," the other man objected swiftly, but the title seemed to please their host, and it stuck for the remainder of the evening.

"I've never encountered so many luminaries," she exclaimed. "I was drawn to that man—what was his name?—with the curious blue-tinged nose."

Their host identified him as a minor producer.



"Well, I found him charming regardless."

"I'd prefer not to be known as the polo player," he said, his tone light but edged. "I'd rather observe these celebrated individuals in anonymity."

As the night deepened, she danced with their enigmatic host, their movements a silent conversation in the midst of the glittering chaos.

The elegance of his foxtrot caught me unawares—I'd never witnessed him dance before. They meandered to my residence, perching on the steps for a spell, while she bade me linger in the garden, vigilant. "To guard against calamity," she elucidated, "be it fire, flood, or divine intervention."

Tom materialized from his reverie as we settled for supper. "Mind if I dine elsewhere?" he queried. "Someone's spinning yarns."

"By all means," Daisy replied airily, proffering her gilded pencil. "Should you need to jot down particulars."

Moments later, she confided the girl was "common, yet fetching," and I discerned her discontent, save for that brief interlude with Gatsby.

Our table teetered on the brink of inebriation—my doing, as Gatsby had been summoned away. The same company that had amused me fortnight ago now soured the air.

"How fares Miss Baedeker?" I inquired of the young woman unsuccessfully attempting to slump against me. She roused herself, eyes fluttering. "Hmm?"

A corpulent, lethargic woman, who'd been pressing Daisy to join her for golf, interceded: "She'll be right as rain. After five or six cocktails, she always descends into hysterics. I've cautioned her against it."

"I do abstain," the accused protested feebly.

"We heard your outcry," the woman continued, "so I told Doc Civet, 'There's a soul in need of your expertise, Doc.'"

"Much obliged, I'm certain," another companion interjected, devoid of gratitude, "but you've soaked her frock, dunking her head in the pool."

"If there's one thing I loathe," Miss Baedeker mumbled, "it's having my head submerged in a pool."

The air hung heavy with the acrid scent of overindulgence and regret, a stark contrast to the earlier promise of the evening. The garden beyond whispered of secrets and stolen moments, while inside, the veneer of sophistication cracked and peeled away, revealing the raw, unvarnished truth of human frailty.

In the languid heat of a summer's eve, the guests at Gatsby's soiree indulged in their frivolous banter. A lady, her voice tinged with inebriation, recounted a near-drowning incident in New Jersey. Doctor Civet, ever the voice of reason, advised abstinence, only to be met with the violent protestations of Miss Baedeker, her words sharp as a surgeon's scalpel.

Amidst this cacophony of idle chatter, I found myself standing alongside Daisy, our gazes fixed upon the spectacle of the moving-picture director and his starlet. Beneath the white-plum tree they stood, their faces mere inches apart, separated only by a sliver of moonlight. With painstaking slowness, he had inched towards her throughout the evening, and as we watched, he closed that final, infinitesimal gap to place a kiss upon her cheek.

Daisy's assessment was simple, yet laden with unspoken complexity. "I like her," she mused, "I think she's lovely." But beneath her words lay a thinly veiled distaste for the scene

unfolding before us. It was not the gesture itself that offended her, but rather the raw emotion it represented.

West Egg, with its garish vitality, appalled her sensibilities. This place, born of Broadway's union with a humble fishing village, chafed against the genteel euphemisms of her world. Its inhabitants, herded along a path from obscurity to oblivion, embodied a fate too obtrusive for her liking. In its simplicity, she saw something terrible that eluded her understanding.

As we sat on the front steps, awaiting their car, the darkness enveloped us, save for the rectangle of light spilling from the doorway. Above, shadows danced across the dressing-room blinds, an endless procession of figures primping and preening before an unseen glass.

Suddenly, Tom's voice cut through the night. "Who is this Gatsby anyhow?" he demanded, his tone laced with suspicion. "Some big bootlegger?"

"Where'd you hear that?" I inquired, my curiosity piqued by his abrupt query.

The whispers slithered through the night, carrying tales of bootleggers and newfound wealth. I dismissed them, defending Gatsby with a curt word. Silence settled between us, broken only by the crunch of pebbles underfoot.

"He's amassed quite the menagerie," came the grudging observation.

A breeze toyed with Daisy's fur collar as she mustered a response. "At least they're not as dull as our usual crowd."

"You seemed less than enthralled."

"Appearances deceive," she countered.

Tom's laughter pierced the air. "Did you catch Daisy's expression when that girl suggested a cold shower?"

Daisy began to hum, her voice a husky whisper that breathed new life into each familiar word. As the melody climbed, her voice shattered sweetly, scattering fragments of warm human magic into the night.

"Gate-crashers abound," she remarked abruptly. "That girl wasn't invited. They barge in, and he's too polite to turn them away."

Tom's curiosity burned. "I'd like to know more about him. His background, his business."

"I can enlighten you," Daisy offered. "Drugstores. He built an empire of them from scratch."

The long-awaited limousine finally approached.

"Goodnight, Nick," Daisy murmured, her gaze drifting towards the illuminated steps. From within, the melancholy strains of a popular waltz drifted into the night, a bittersweet reminder of the year's fleeting moments.

As they departed, I was left to ponder the enigma of Gatsby, a man who had carved his fortune from nothing, yet remained shrouded in mystery. The music faded, leaving only questions hanging in the air.

The evening lingered, pregnant with possibility, as Gatsby's soirée unfurled its casual charm. What siren song called from within, promising untold adventures in the shadowy hours ahead? Perhaps some extraordinary creature would materialize, a luminous ingénue whose mere glance might obliterate years of steadfast devotion.

I remained, a willing sentinel, as Gatsby attended to his guests. The garden embraced me while revelers, flushed and exhilarated, emerged from the inky waters. Lights winked out in the chambers above, one by one, like stars retreating before dawn.

At last, he descended, his bronzed visage drawn taut, eyes gleaming with fatigue and something more. "She was displeased," he announced, his voice heavy with unspoken disappointment.

I offered reassurance, but he persisted, "No, she found no joy here."

Silence enveloped us, and I sensed the depths of his despair. "I feel adrift from her," he confessed. "Her understanding eludes me."

"The dance?" I ventured.

"The dance?" He dismissed the notion with a flick of his hand. "My dear fellow, such trifles are inconsequential."

His desires ran deeper, more profound. He yearned for Daisy to renounce her past, to declare her love for Tom a falsehood. With that singular pronouncement, she could erase the intervening years, allowing them to chart their future together.

His vision was precise: they would return to Louisville, to her familial home, and wed as if the passage of time had been but a dream. In his mind's eye, he saw them stepping back into a past untouched by the complexities of the present, reclaiming a love unsullied by separation and circumstance.

In the fading light of an autumnal evening, as the last vestiges of day surrendered to the encroaching darkness, I found myself privy to the lamentations of a man consumed by the relentless passage of time. His words, tinged with a melancholy that seemed to permeate the very air around us, spoke of a profound disconnection from one he held dear.

"She no longer comprehends," he murmured, his voice barely audible above the gentle rustling of fallen leaves. "There was a time when understanding flowed between us like water, when we could while away hours in perfect communion..."

His voice trailed off, and he began to pace along a path littered with the detritus of merriment long past - discarded fruit rinds, crumpled favors, and wilted flowers. The scene before me was a poignant reminder of the ephemeral nature of joy, of moments cherished and then lost to the inexorable march of time.

In a moment of misguided empathy, I ventured to counsel him, "Perhaps it would be wise not to expect too much. The past, after all, is irretrievable."

His reaction was immediate and vehement. "Irretrievable?" he exclaimed, his eyes wild with a fervor that bordered on madness. "But of course it can be reclaimed!"

He gazed about him frantically, as though the very essence of bygone days might materialize from the shadows that clung to the corners of his grand house. With a determination that spoke of desperation, he declared his intent to reconstruct the world as it once was, to recreate a reality that existed now only in the amber of memory.

As he spoke of times long past, I sensed in him a yearning to recover something intangible yet vital - perhaps some idealized version of himself that had been lost in the pursuit of his beloved Daisy. In the years since, his existence had been a tapestry of confusion and disorder, but he clung to the belief that by returning to a specific moment, by retracing his steps with meticulous care, he might uncover the elusive truth that had slipped from his grasp.

In the penumbra of twilight, his heart quickened its somber rhythm as Daisy's pallid visage drew nigh. He knew, with dreadful certainty, that upon kissing this ethereal maiden, forever binding his ineffable reveries to her transient essence, his mind would nevermore cavort with divine abandon. Thus, he tarried, hearkening for one moment more to the celestial resonance that had been struck upon a distant star. At last, he pressed his lips to hers. At his touch, she unfurled like a nocturnal blossom, and the incarnation was consummated. Through his utterances, even amidst his ghastly sentimentality, I was haunted by a vague reminiscence—an elusive cadence, a fragment of forgotten verse, echoing from the depths of memory. For an instant, a phrase struggled to form upon my lips, parting them like those of a mute, as if burdened by more than mere startled breath. Yet they produced no sound, and that which I had nearly recalled vanished into the eternal void of the incommunicable.





## VII

It was at the zenith of society's fascination with Mr. Gatsby that his grand abode fell into darkness one Saturday evening—and, as mysteriously as it had commenced, his reputation as a modern Trimalchio came to an abrupt conclusion. Only by degrees did I perceive that the carriages which turned hopefully into his drive lingered but a moment before departing in evident disappointment.

Concerned for his wellbeing, I called upon the house, where I was greeted by an unfamiliar footman of most disagreeable countenance, who regarded me with marked suspicion.

"Pray, is Mr. Gatsby unwell?" I inquired.

"He is not," came the curt reply, followed by a begrudging "sir" after a pause.

I explained my concern at not having seen the gentleman, and requested that Mr. Carraway's visit be announced. The footman's manner grew increasingly uncivil as he demanded clarification of my name before abruptly closing the door.

My housekeeper later informed me that Mr. Gatsby had dismissed his entire staff the week prior, replacing them with a handful of individuals who eschewed the village tradesmen, preferring to order modest provisions by telephone. The general consensus among the locals was that these new arrivals were not servants in the traditional sense.

The following day, Mr. Gatsby telephoned. Upon my inquiry as to his plans for departure, he assured me he had none. I mentioned the rumors of his staff's dismissal, to which he replied that he desired discretion, as Miss Daisy was a frequent afternoon visitor.

It seemed the entire household had crumbled under her disapproving gaze. Mr. Gatsby explained that the new staff were associates of Mr. Wolfsheimer's—siblings who had previously managed a modest inn.

He concluded by extending an invitation to luncheon at Miss Daisy's residence the following day, with Miss Baker in attendance.

The call from Daisy came thirty minutes later, her voice tinged with relief at my impending arrival. Something hung in the air, unspoken yet palpable. I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't the moment for dramatics, especially not the scene Gatsby had painted in hushed tones among the roses.

The following day unfurled like a fever dream, the heat oppressive and all-consuming. As my train burst from darkness into blinding light, only the shrill whistles from the biscuit factory pierced the shimmering noon silence. The train car itself seemed to teeter on the edge of spontaneous combustion, seats radiating warmth.

The woman beside me, at first stoic, gradually succumbed to the sweltering atmosphere. Her crisp white blouse darkened with perspiration, her newspaper wilting in her grasp. With a sound of utter defeat, she slumped back, her handbag tumbling to the floor.

"Oh my," she breathed, the words barely escaping her parched lips.

I retrieved her bag, my movements slow and exaggerated, as if to dispel any notion of ill intent. Yet suspicion clung to me like the oppressive humidity.

The conductor's refrain echoed through the car: "Hot! Some weather, eh? Hot enough for you?"

My ticket returned, marked by his damp fingerprints. In this inferno, who could possibly care about stolen kisses or the warmth of a lover's embrace?

At the Buchanans', a whisper of breeze carried the telephone's insistent ring to where Gatsby and I waited. The butler's voice boomed, incongruously formal in the sweltering afternoon: "The master's body?"

The world seemed to pause, suspended in the heat and the weight of unspoken words.

The air hung thick, oppressive with heat. Words melted on tongues, gestures slowed to a crawl. In this stifling atmosphere, we entered a realm of whispers and half-truths.

The shadowed salon offered a fragile respite. There, Daisy and Jordan reclined, pale and languid as moonflowers. Their dresses, impossibly white, seemed to anchor them against the artificial breeze of whirring fans. "We can't move," they murmured in unison, a shared confession.

Jordan's fingers, dusted with powder that barely masked her sun-kissed skin, brushed mine fleetingly. I inquired about Tom, the athlete, his name feeling heavy and out of place.

As if summoned, his voice rumbled from the hall, muffled yet unmistakably irritated. Gatsby stood motionless, drinking in the crimson carpet, the opulent surroundings. Daisy's laughter, sweet and dangerous, sent a cloud of powder drifting from her chest like ephemeral snow.

Jordan leaned close, her whisper carrying the weight of gossip. "They say it's Tom's girl on the phone." Silence fell, broken only by Tom's rising anger. His words, sharp and defensive, cut through the air.

"He's pretending," Daisy said, her cynicism a brittle shield.

I countered, certain of my knowledge, "No, it's real. I know about the deal."

The door flew open, Tom's substantial form filling the frame before he strode in, bringing with him the scent of tension and unspoken truths.

In this moment, suspended between wealth and want, truth and deception, we teetered on the edge of something profound and irreversible.

The name echoed, "Mr. Gatsby!" His hand, broad and flat, extended with a veiled distaste. "A pleasure, sir... Nick..." Daisy's voice cut through, demanding, "Bring us something cool." As he vanished, she rose, gravitating towards Gatsby, drawing his face to hers, lips meeting. "My love for you," she whispered, "you know it." Jordan's words sliced the air, "A lady's present, remember?" Daisy's gaze wandered, uncertain. "Nick deserves a kiss too." "Such vulgarity," Jordan chided. Daisy, defiant, "I care not!" and began a clumsy dance on the hearth. The heat jolted her memory, and she sank guiltily onto the couch as a pristine nurse entered, a small girl in tow. "My precious," Daisy cooed, arms outstretched. "Come to mother, who loves you so." The child, freed, burrowed shyly into her mother's skirts. "My darling. Has mother's powder touched your golden locks? Up now, greet our guests." Gatsby and I bent, accepting the tiny, hesitant hand. Gatsby's gaze lingered on the child, as if truly seeing her for the first time. "I dressed early," the girl announced, eyes on Daisy. "To be shown off, of course," Daisy replied, nuzzling the child's neck. "You dream, you perfect little dream." "Yes," the child agreed simply. "Aunt Jordan wears white too." Daisy spun her towards Gatsby. "What do you think of mother's friends? Aren't they lovely?"



The child's question hung in the air, "Where's Daddy?" Daisy explained, almost to herself, "She's unlike her father."

The girl bore a striking resemblance to her mother, with the same hair and facial structure. Daisy sank into the sofa, a mix of pride and melancholy in her eyes. The nurse stepped forward, extending her hand. "It's time to go, Pammy."

"Farewell, my darling!" Daisy called out.

The child, well-trained and obedient, cast a longing glance back before allowing herself to be led away. Just then, Tom reappeared, carrying four gin rickeys that clinked with ice.

Gatsby lifted his glass, his voice taut with unspoken tension. "They do look refreshing."

We drank deeply, greedily, as if to quench a thirst beyond mere physical need.

Tom, ever the genial host, mused, "I've read that the sun grows hotter each year. Or perhaps it's the opposite – cooling down gradually."

"Let's step outside," he suggested to Gatsby. "I'd like you to see the grounds."

I followed them onto the veranda. The Sound lay before us, a stagnant green expanse in the oppressive heat. A lone sailboat inched towards the open sea.

Gatsby's gaze followed it briefly before he gestured across the bay. "I'm just across from you."

"So you are," Tom replied.

Our eyes swept over the rose beds, the sun-baked lawn, and the detritus of summer along the shore. The boat's white sails moved slowly against the azure sky, beyond which lay the vast ocean and its scattered islands.

"Now there's a pastime," Tom remarked. "I wouldn't mind being out there for an hour or so."

We retreated to the dining room for lunch, its darkness a shield against the relentless heat. We washed down our nervous energy with cold ale.

Daisy's voice rang out, tinged with desperation, "What shall we do with ourselves this afternoon? And tomorrow? And for the next thirty years?"

"Don't be so morbid," Jordan chided, but her words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken truths.

In the crisp autumn air, life breathes anew, yet Daisy's voice quavered with summer's lingering heat. "It's so terribly hot," she lamented, teetering on the brink of tears, her words a desperate sculpture against the oppressive warmth. "Let's escape to town, shall we?"

Tom's voice cut through, addressing Gatsby with a hint of competition. "I've heard of stable-to-garage conversions, but I'm pioneering the garage-to-stable trend."

"Who's for town?" Daisy persisted, her plea hanging in the thick air.

Gatsby's gaze drifted to her, a subtle magnetic pull. "Oh," she exclaimed, "you look so wonderfully cool." Their eyes locked, suspended in a private cosmos. With visible effort, she tore her gaze to the table. "Always so cool," she echoed, the words heavy with unspoken meaning.

Tom witnessed this exchange, the realization dawning on his face like a slow, terrible sunrise. His jaw slackened, eyes darting between his wife and Gatsby, as if seeing ghosts from a forgotten past.

"You're like that advertisement fellow," Daisy continued, her tone deceptively light. "You know the one—"

"Enough," Tom interjected, his voice strained. "Town it is. We're all going." He rose, his gaze electric between Gatsby and Daisy.

The group remained motionless, the air thick with tension.

"Come on!" Tom's composure cracked. "What's the holdup? If we're going, let's go." His trembling hand raised his glass, draining the last of his ale.

Daisy's voice, like a siren's call, finally stirred us to action, propelling us onto the sun-scorched driveway, the gravel crunching beneath our feet like tiny explosions in the stifling afternoon.

In the sweltering heat of the afternoon, she voiced her reluctance, her words carrying the weight of unspoken desires. "Are we to depart so abruptly? Shouldn't we pause for a cigarette, at least?" Her plea hung in the air, mingling with the scent of earlier smokes that still lingered from lunch.

"Let's indulge in some merriment," she implored, her voice a mixture of longing and defiance against the oppressive warmth. But her words fell on deaf ears, met with silence. Resigned, she acquiesced, "Have it your way, then."

As the women retreated upstairs to prepare, we three men remained, our feet absently disturbing the hot pebbles beneath. The sky above us held the promise of evening, a silver crescent moon already visible.

Gatsby, his composure wavering, attempted speech but faltered. Tom, ever watchful, turned to him expectantly. With visible effort, Gatsby inquired about stables, to which Tom responded curtly.

The tension swelled as Tom violently objected to the notion of going to town, his words laced with disdain for women's whims. Daisy's voice floated down from above, inquiring about drinks, prompting Tom to fetch whisky.

In Tom's absence, Gatsby confided in me, his words tinged with unease about speaking in this house. I remarked on Daisy's voice, its indiscretion, but struggled to define it further.

"Her voice is full of money," Gatsby declared suddenly, unveiling a truth I had never before grasped. It was the essence of her charm, the allure that rose and fell like the jingle of coins, the song of cymbals.

As Tom emerged with a bottle wrapped in a towel, Daisy and Jordan followed, adorned in metallic hats and light capes. Gatsby, ever the gracious host, suggested we take his car, his words a thin veil over the complexity of emotions that swirled around us in the stifling afternoon air.

In the sweltering heat, Gatsby's fingers brushed against the verdant leather of the automobile seat, its warmth palpable. "I should have sheltered it from the sun's merciless rays," he mused, a tinge of regret coloring his voice.

Tom, with his characteristic brusqueness, inquired, "Is it equipped with a standard transmission?"

"Indeed," Gatsby replied, his tone measured.

"Then I propose an exchange," Tom declared. "You shall take my coupé, and I shall pilot your vehicle into town."

The suggestion elicited a barely perceptible grimace from Gatsby. "I fear the fuel may be insufficient," he demurred.

"Nonsense!" Tom exclaimed, his voice booming with unwarranted enthusiasm. He cast a perfunctory glance at the gauge. "And should we exhaust our supply, a simple stop at an apothecary will suffice. One can procure virtually anything at such establishments these days."

A pregnant silence followed this seemingly inconsequential observation. Daisy's brow furrowed as she regarded Tom, while an enigmatic expression flitted across Gatsby's visage—a look at once unfamiliar and yet vaguely recognizable, as though I had encountered it only in the realm of literature.

"Come, Daisy," Tom urged, his hand pressing insistently against her back, guiding her towards Gatsby's automobile. "Let us embark in this carnival contraption."

He swung the door open, but Daisy deftly eluded his grasp. "Take Nick and Jordan," she countered. "We shall follow in the coupé."

With deliberate steps, she approached Gatsby, her fingers grazing his coat in a gesture of unspoken intimacy. Jordan, Tom, and I clambered into the front seat of Gatsby's vehicle. Tom grappled with the unfamiliar gears, and we lurched forward into the stifling afternoon, leaving the other pair to vanish in our wake.

In the sweltering heat, the conversation turned to Gatsby, that enigmatic figure who had insinuated himself into their society. The man in the pink suit, an Oxford man? Preposterous, thought Tom, his contempt palpable. Yet Jordan insisted, her voice tinged with irritation at Tom's snobbery.

The truth about Gatsby's past remained elusive, shrouded in mystery and conflicting accounts. Tom had conducted a cursory investigation, but the depths of Gatsby's history remained unplumbed. The mere mention of a medium drew laughter from the group, a moment of levity in the oppressive atmosphere.

As they drove, the mood soured with the fading effects of their earlier libations. The vast, faded eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg loomed on the horizon, a silent witness to their journey. The spectre of running out of petrol loomed, a concern voiced by Jordan as they approached Wilson's garage.

Tom, impatient and irritable, brought the car to an abrupt halt. The dust settled around them as Wilson emerged, his hollow eyes reflecting a deep malaise. "Gas," Tom barked, his manner brusque and demanding. Wilson's response came slowly, each word an effort. "I'm sick," he managed, his illness evident in every movement.

Tom's impatience grew as Wilson struggled to perform even the simple task of unscrewing the petrol cap. The heat bore down on them all, exacerbating tempers and highlighting the stark differences between those who served and those who were served.

In this moment, the fragile veneer of civility wore thin, exposing the raw nerves and simmering tensions that lay just beneath the surface of their gilded world.

In the merciless glare of the sun, his visage bore a sickly verdant hue, and he spoke, his words tumbling forth in a torrent of desperation, "I had no intention of disrupting your repast, but I find myself in dire need of funds, and I couldn't help but wonder about the fate of your previous automobile." Tom, his voice laden with a peculiar mixture of pride and indifference, inquired, "What are your thoughts on this one? It's a recent acquisition." Wilson,

his muscles straining against the unyielding pump handle, replied, "It's a striking yellow, to be sure. Might you be inclined to part with it?" A faint smile played across Tom's lips as he countered, "Hardly likely. But perhaps there's some profit to be had from the old one?" Wilson, his eyes narrowing with sudden intensity, declared, "I've overstayed my welcome here. The West beckons, and my wife and I must heed its call." Tom, visibly startled, exclaimed, "Your wife?" to which Wilson wearily responded, "For a decade, it's been her constant refrain." He paused, shielding his eyes from the relentless sun, before continuing with grim determination, "Now, willingly or not, she'll make the journey. I'll see to that." A cloud of dust billowed in our wake as we sped past, a fleeting hand waving farewell. Tom's voice, now harsh and demanding, cut through the air, "What's my debt to you?" Wilson, his tone heavy with unspoken knowledge, remarked, "Recent days have brought strange revelations. Hence my desire to depart, and my persistent inquiries about your vehicle." Tom, impatient now, repeated his question, to which Wilson tersely replied, "A dollar twenty." The oppressive heat began to cloud my senses, and for a moment, I feared Wilson's suspicions had alighted upon Tom. But no, he had merely glimpsed a fragment of Myrtle's clandestine existence, the shock of which had left him physically diminished.

In the sickly haze of a fevered dream, Wilson's pallor betrayed a guilt as palpable as if he'd seduced an innocent maid. Tom's voice dripped with false generosity, promising the car's delivery on the morrow. This cursed place, even in daylight's harsh embrace, whispered of hidden horrors. I turned, half-expecting a spectral warning, only to find the colossal eyes of Dr. Eckleburg looming over the ashen wasteland. Yet closer still, barely twenty paces distant, another gaze pierced the veil of normalcy.

Through a sliver of parted curtain above the garage, Myrtle Wilson's visage emerged, transfixed by our vehicle. Unaware of my scrutiny, her countenance became a canvas for a parade of emotions, each more vivid than the last. I recognized that look, one I'd glimpsed on countless female faces, but on Myrtle it seemed a grotesque mask of misplaced passion. Her eyes, wide as saucers and brimming with jealous dread, fixated not on Tom but on Jordan Baker, mistaken for his lawful bride.

Oh, the exquisite chaos of a simple mind! As we fled, Tom writhed beneath panic's burning lash. His carefully constructed world of wife and mistress, once inviolable, now crumbled like a sandcastle before the tide. Instinct seized him, foot pressing the accelerator with dual purpose: to chase his fleeing Daisy and escape Wilson's specter. We hurtled towards Astoria at breakneck speed, the elevated railway's skeletal frame blurring past until, at last, the azure coupé materialized ahead, a tantalizing mirage of normalcy in this fever dream of desire and deceit.

Listen, child, to the tale of a sweltering New York summer, when the streets are empty and the air hangs heavy with possibility. Jordan, she speaks of those grand picture houses on Fiftieth Street, cool as a blessing in this heat. And she speaks of the city itself, ripe and sensuous, as if it might burst open and spill its secrets into your waiting hands.

But Tom, he doesn't like this talk of sensuous things. His mind, it's always turning, always suspicious. Before he can object, our car stops, and there's Daisy, calling us over like a siren. "Where to?" she asks, and someone suggests the pictures. But Daisy, she complains of the heat, tells us to go on without her. She'll meet us later, she says, joking weakly about being the man with two cigarettes.

Tom, impatient as always, directs us through the traffic. He's watching, always watching for their car, slowing down if they fall behind. He's afraid, you see, afraid they'll slip away and be lost to him forever.

But they don't disappear. Instead, we all end up in some fancy suite at the Plaza Hotel, though how we got there, I couldn't tell you. I remember only the feeling of my damp clothes clinging to my skin, sweat rolling down my back like tiny marbles.

It started with Daisy's wild idea about cold baths, then morphed into talk of mint juleps. We all kept saying how crazy it was, talking over each other, laughing too loud. We thought we were being so clever, so amusing.

And now here we are, in this vast, stifling room. It's four o'clock already, but opening the windows brings no relief, only the hot breath of the Park's greenery. We're trapped, you see, trapped by the heat, by our desires, by the games we play with each other. This is New York in summer, child, where the air is thick with possibilities and the fruits of temptation hang low, waiting to be plucked.

Lawd, Daisy done swanned over to that mirror, her back turnin' on us while she fussed with her hair. "Dis here suite is somethin' else," Jordan whispered all respectful-like, and we all bust out laughin'.

"Crack another window," Daisy ordered, not even botherin' to look our way.

"Ain't no more to open," somebody said.

"Well, we best be callin' for an axe then—"

Tom, he cut in all impatient-like, "Forget 'bout the heat. Y'all makin' it worse carryin' on." He unwrapped that whisky bottle and set it down.

Gatsby, he piped up, "Why don't you leave her be? You the one wanted to come to town."

Everything went quiet for a spell. That phone book came loose and hit the floor with a thud. Jordan whispered, "My bad," but ain't nobody laughed this time.

"I'll get it," I offered.

"I got it," Gatsby said, checkin' the string and mumblin' to himself before tossin' the book on a chair.

Tom's voice got sharp. "That's your favorite thing to say, ain't it?"

"What's that?"

"All this 'old sport' business. Where you pick that up from?"

Daisy whirled 'round from the mirror. "Now listen here, Tom. You start in with them personal remarks, I'm out. Call down and get some ice for the mint julep."

Just as Tom grabbed the phone, that heat done burst into sound, and we heard them heavy chords of Mendelssohn's Wedding March floatin' up from downstairs.

"Lord, who'd get married in this heat?" Jordan moaned.

"Well," Daisy said, "I got married in June."

"June in Louisville! Somebody done fainted. Who was it, Tom?"

"Biloxi," he snapped. "Some fella named Biloxi."

The conversation drifted, as conversations do, like leaves on a stream, touching upon memories and moments long past. "Blocks Biloxi," someone murmured, "he crafted boxes, you know, and hailed from Biloxi, Tennessee." Jordan's voice floated in, a whisper of recollection, "They brought him to our house, just two doors from the church. He lingered for

three weeks until Father insisted he depart. The day after, Father passed away." She paused, then added, as if to ward off any misunderstanding, "The two events were unrelated, of course."

I found myself speaking, words bubbling up unbidden, "I once knew a Bill Biloxi from Memphis." "His cousin," came the reply, "I learned his entire family history before he left. He gifted me an aluminium putter, which I still use."

The music had faded, giving way to the ceremony, and now a cheer floated through the window, followed by sporadic cries of "Yea—ea—ea!" and finally, a burst of jazz as dancing commenced.

"We're aging," Daisy sighed, her voice tinged with melancholy. "In our youth, we'd have risen to dance."

"Remember Biloxi," Jordan cautioned, her words a gentle rebuke.

"Where did you encounter him, Tom?" The question hung in the air.

Tom's brow furrowed in concentration. "Biloxi? I didn't know him. He was Daisy's acquaintance."

"He was not," Daisy protested, her voice sharp. "I'd never laid eyes on him before. He arrived in the private car."

"Well, he claimed to know you," Tom persisted. "Said he was raised in Louisville. Asa Bird introduced him at the last moment, asking if we could accommodate him."

Jordan's smile was enigmatic. "He was likely seeking a free passage home. He told me he was president of your class at Yale."

Tom and I exchanged bewildered glances. "Biloxi?" Tom began, "First of all, we didn't have a president—"

Gatsby's foot tapped a restless rhythm, drawing Tom's sudden attention. "By the way, Mr.—"

In the drawing room, a scene unfolded with the precision of a well-orchestrated ballet, each participant acutely aware of their role in this delicate social choreography. Tom, ever the boor, attempted to corner Gatsby with his clumsy inquisition.

"Gatsby, I understand you're an Oxford man," he proclaimed, his voice dripping with affected casualness.

"Not exactly," Gatsby replied, his words measured and careful.

"Oh, yes, I understand you went to Oxford," Tom persisted, his tone betraying a desperate need to assert dominance.

"Yes—I went there," Gatsby conceded, his response a masterclass in understated elegance.

A pregnant pause ensued, broken only by Tom's voice, now laced with incredulity and thinly veiled contempt. "You must have gone there about the time Biloxi went to New Haven."

The silence that followed was interrupted by a waiter's entrance, bearing crushed mint and ice. His polite "thank you" and the soft click of the door closing went unacknowledged, lost in the tension that permeated the room.

Gatsby, sensing the moment had arrived to clarify this "tremendous detail," spoke with quiet dignity. "I told you I went there."

"I heard you, but I'd like to know when," Tom pressed, his hostility barely concealed.

"It was in nineteen-nineteen. I only stayed five months. That's why I can't really call myself an Oxford man," Gatsby explained, his honesty disarming.

He continued, his voice steady, "It was an opportunity they gave to some of the officers after the armistice. We could go to any of the universities in England or France."

In that moment, I felt a surge of renewed faith in Gatsby, a familiar sensation that washed over me like a comforting wave.

In the heat of confrontation, voices rise and hearts pound. A man, Tom, his face flushed with indignation, stands as if on the precipice of a crumbling world. He speaks of family, of tradition, his words a desperate plea to hold onto a fading reality. But his passion blinds him to the truth that lies just beyond his grasp.

Jordan, her voice a soft whisper in the storm, reminds them of their shared heritage. Yet Tom, consumed by his own righteousness, lashes out at the very fabric of society. He sees himself as the last guardian of a dying order, unaware that his words reveal more about his own fears than the world around him.

I watch this scene unfold, torn between anger and amusement. Tom's transformation from libertine to moralist is a spectacle both tragic and comical. And there, in the midst of this tempest, stands Gatsby, his eyes alight with a fire that threatens to consume us all.

Daisy, caught between these two forces, pleads for peace. Her voice trembles with the weight of unspoken truths. But the men, locked in their battle of wills, refuse to yield.

Then Gatsby speaks, his words cutting through the tension like a blade. He lays bare the truth that Tom has refused to see – that Daisy's heart has never truly belonged to her husband. Tom recoils, disbelief etched on his face, as Gatsby's passion pours forth in a torrent of long-suppressed emotions.

As Jordan and I attempt to retreat from this battlefield of the heart, Tom and Gatsby insist we stay. They stand before us, these two men, each believing in the righteousness of his cause, each blind to the other's pain. And we remain, unwilling witnesses to this raw display of human emotion, caught in the crossfire of love and pride.

In the somber drawing room, an air of tension hung like a heavy fog. Tom, his voice straining for paternal authority, bid Daisy take her seat. "Pray, enlighten me on these recent events. I yearn to hear every detail."

Gatsby, his eyes betraying a hidden sorrow, spoke with quiet resolve. "I have already divulged the truth, sir. Our hearts have been entwined these five long years, though you remained oblivious."

Tom rounded on Daisy, his countenance dark with suspicion. "Have you truly been in this man's company for such a duration?"

"Nay," Gatsby interjected, his voice low and measured. "We were denied the solace of meeting, yet our love endured. I confess, I oft found grim amusement in your ignorance."

Tom's fingers drummed a restless rhythm as he leaned back, his face contorting with sudden fury. "Madness! This tale you weave is naught but falsehood. Daisy's heart was mine when we wed, and it remains so."

"You err," Gatsby countered, his tone tinged with melancholy. "Her affections have long since strayed."

Tom, his eyes blazing, declared, "She may at times be led astray by flights of fancy, but her love for me is constant. And I, though I may stumble, always return to her embrace."



Daisy's voice, cold as winter's chill, cut through the air. "You sicken me." Turning to the narrator, her words dripped with disdain. "Are you not privy to the sordid tale that drove us from Chicago? I marvel that they have not regaled you with that particular escapade."

Gatsby, ever the devoted knight, moved to stand beside his lady fair, a silent sentinel in the face of the gathering storm.

The voices echo through time, fragments of a shattered past...

"It's over, Daisy," he pleads, his eyes burning with desperate hope. "Tell him the truth. You never loved him. Say it, and we can start anew."

She stands there, lost, her gaze drifting to us as if seeking rescue from this moment. The weight of her choices presses down, suffocating like the heat rising from below.

"I... I never loved him," she whispers, the words hanging in the air like smoke.

But Tom, he won't let it go. His voice cuts through, sharp with memory. "Not even at Kapiolani? Not when I carried you, keeping your shoes dry?"

I can hear the pain in his words, see it etched on his face. The past refuses to die.

Daisy turns to Gatsby, her hands shaking as she fumbles with a cigarette. "Jay," she says, but the rest catches in her throat. The burning match falls, a tiny inferno on the carpet.

"You ask too much!" she cries out suddenly. "I love you now. Isn't that enough? I can't change what's happened."

Her sobs fill the room, raw and helpless. "I did love him once – but I loved you too."

Gatsby's face is a canvas of emotions – hope, doubt, fear. "You loved me too?" he echoes, clinging to those words.

Tom's voice is venom. "That's a lie. She didn't even know you existed. There are things between Daisy and me you'll never understand, things we can never forget."

Each word is a dagger to Gatsby. I watch him flinch, see the pain etched in every line of his body.

"I need to speak to Daisy alone," he insists, his voice barely more than a whisper.

The air is thick with unspoken truths and lingering lies. In this moment, the past and present collide, leaving us all trapped in the wreckage of what might have been.

In the sweltering heat of a summer afternoon, emotions simmered and tensions rose, thick as the syrupy air. Daisy, her voice trembling like a delicate leaf in the wind, confessed, "Even in solitude, I cannot deny my love for Tom. It would be a falsehood."

Tom, his ego swelling, concurred, "Of course it would be."

Daisy turned to her husband, her eyes pools of conflicted emotions. "As if my feelings held any significance to you," she said, her words laced with bitterness.

"They do matter," Tom insisted, his voice suddenly gentle. "I'll cherish you more dearly from this moment on."

Gatsby, panic fluttering in his chest like a caged bird, interjected, "You misunderstand. Your time caring for her has come to an end."

Tom's laughter echoed, hollow and controlled. "Is that so? And why, pray tell?"

"Daisy is leaving you," Gatsby declared, his words hanging in the air like smoke.

"Nonsense," Tom scoffed.

Daisy, summoning her courage, affirmed, "But I am."

Tom's gaze bore down on Gatsby, his words sharp as daggers. "She's not leaving me, certainly not for a common swindler who'd resort to theft for a ring."

Daisy, her composure crumbling, pleaded, "I can't bear this! Let's depart, please."

Tom, his curiosity piqued, demanded, "Who are you, really? One of Wolfshiem's associates, I gather. I've been looking into your affairs, and I'll delve deeper tomorrow."

Gatsby, maintaining his composure, replied, "Do as you please, old sport."

Tom, his voice dripping with disdain, revealed, "I've uncovered your 'drugstore' scheme. You and Wolfshiem acquired numerous side-street pharmacies, peddling grain alcohol. I pegged you for a bootlegger from the start."

Gatsby, unfazed, inquired politely, "What of it?"

Tom pressed on, "Your friend Walter Chase wasn't too proud to partake, was he? And you abandoned him to a month in a New Jersey jail."

In the stifling heat of that afternoon, the words hung heavy in the air, laden with accusation and barely concealed contempt. Tom's voice, sharp and cutting, sliced through the pretense of civility. "God! You should hear Walter's take on you," he sneered, his eyes glinting with malice. "He was desperate when he came to us, happy to scrounge up any cash he could."

Gatsby stood silent, his face a mask of studied indifference. But beneath that carefully constructed façade, something stirred — a flicker of recognition, perhaps, or a shadow of unease. Tom pressed on, relentless in his assault. "Walter could bring you down with the betting laws, but Wolfshiem put the fear in him."

As Tom spoke of drug stores and hidden dealings, I found my gaze drawn to Daisy. She sat frozen, her eyes darting between the two men like a trapped animal seeking escape. Jordan, ever the picture of nonchalance, seemed to be balancing invisible worlds on her chin.

When I looked back at Gatsby, I was struck by the transformation that had come over him. For a brief, haunting moment, his expression bore the weight of unspeakable acts — as if he had indeed taken a life. The look passed quickly, replaced by frantic denials and impassioned pleas to Daisy.

But Daisy was retreating, pulling away with each word. Gatsby's dream, already slipping through his fingers, fought desperately against the dying light of day. His words reached out, grasping for a connection that was no longer there, chasing the echo of a voice that had grown distant and cold.

And so they departed, without a word, vanishing like ghosts, snapped out of existence, rendered accidental, isolated, beyond even our pity, and Tom, he rose, began wrapping the unopened whisky in a towel, asked if we wanted any, Jordan, Nick, but I, I did not answer, for I had just remembered, today, it was my birthday, thirty years old, and before me stretched the ominous road of a new decade, portentous and menacing. At seven we got into the coupé with him, set off for Long Island, Tom talking incessantly, exulting and laughing, but his voice, it was remote from Jordan and me, like the foreign clamour on the sidewalk or the tumult of the elevated overhead, for human sympathy, it has its limits, and we, we were content to let all their tragic arguments fade with the city lights behind. Thirty, the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair, but there was Jordan beside me, who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age, and as we passed over the dark bridge, her wan face fell lazily against my coat's shoulder, and the formidable stroke of thirty, it died away with the reassuring pressure of her hand. And so we drove on toward

death through the cooling twilight, and the young Greek, Michaelis, who ran the coffee joint beside the ash-heaps, he was the principal witness at the inquest, but that is another story, for another time, when the weight of thirty years does not press so heavily upon us.

Through the sweltering afternoon, he'd slumbered, only rousing past five to saunter over to the garage. There he stumbled upon George Wilson, a man unwell in every sense - his pallor matching his colorless hair, body quivering uncontrollably. Michaelis, ever the good neighbor, suggested bed rest, but Wilson, fixated on potential lost business, stubbornly refused.

Their exchange was interrupted by a cacophony from above. Wilson, with unsettling composure, explained, "The missus is locked up there. She'll stay put 'til we scarper day after tomorrow."

Michaelis was gobsmacked. Four years of neighborly coexistence had never hinted at Wilson's capacity for such... decisiveness. Typically, Wilson was the epitome of a man worn thin by life - when not toiling, he'd perch in his doorway, a silent observer of the world's comings and goings. His laughter, when coaxed out, was agreeable yet somehow hollow. He was, undoubtedly, his wife's creature.

Naturally curious, Michaelis probed, but Wilson remained tight-lipped. Instead, he began eyeing his visitor with suspicion, peppering him with oddly specific questions about his whereabouts on particular days.

Just as the atmosphere grew unbearably tense, salvation arrived in the form of Michaelis's workers, headed for his restaurant. Seizing the opportunity, he made his exit, fully intending to return later. But he didn't. Perhaps he simply... forgot.

Emerging once more just after seven, Michaelis was jolted back to their earlier conversation by Mrs. Wilson's voice - a shrill, admonishing presence emanating from the garage below.

So there's this chick, right, and she's like screaming at some dude to beat her, calling him a coward and whatnot. Real charming stuff. Then bam! She's out in the twilight, flailing and hollering, and before you can say "postmodern ennui," it's all over. This car—the papers, in their infinite wisdom, dub it the "death car"—comes barreling out of the murk, does this tragic little dance, and poof! Gone.

Now, this Mavro guy, he's all discombobulated, can't even nail down the color. Tells the first cop it's light green, which, let's face it, is about as helpful as a screen door on a submarine. Meanwhile, this other car, heading New York-ward, stops a ways down, and the driver books it back to where poor Myrtle's sprawled out, mixing her blood with road grit in some macabre cocktail.

Michaelis and this other dude get there first, and man, it's a scene. They rip open her shirt, still sweaty 'cause, you know, dying's hard work, and her left breast is just hanging there like a broken door. No need to check for a pulse—that ship has sailed, capsized, and sunk to the bottom of the metaphorical ocean.

Her mouth's all jacked up, torn at the corners like she choked on her own life force or something. It's pretty gnarly.

So we're cruising along, Tom and I, and we spot this whole circus from a ways off. Tom's all, "Sweet, Wilson's gonna get some business," 'cause he's a real prince. But as we get closer, the vibe's so heavy it's like gravity cranked up to eleven, and Tom has to stop.

"We'll take a gander," he says, sounding about as enthusiastic as a cat at bathtime. And then we hear it—this wailing from the garage, like some kind of existential air raid siren. As we mosey up, it coalesces into "Oh, my God!" on repeat, like a broken record of despair.

The scene reeks of death, thick as molasses. Tom, all muscles and sweat, pushes through the crowd like a bull, his voice a growl in his throat. We follow, Jordan and I, thrust into the heart of this madness. The garage, bathed in sickly yellow light, holds secrets darker than night.

There she lies, Myrtle Wilson, wrapped tight as a mummy, as if the heat of her demise still clings to her bones. Tom hovers, a statue of grief or guilt, his back a wall between us and the truth. Some pig in blue scribbles names, his pen a feeble weapon against the chaos.

But it's Wilson who draws the eye, a man unhinged. He sways in his doorway like a tree in a hurricane, clinging to the frame as if it's all that's left of his world. His eyes, they dance a mad jig between the swinging light and his wife's body, never settling, never accepting.

And that sound, Lord have mercy, that sound. It starts low, a rumble in the gut, then rises, a wail to wake the dead. "Oh, my Ga-od! Oh, my Ga-od!" Over and over, a broken record of despair. Some fool tries to comfort him, but Wilson's beyond reach, beyond reason.

Tom finally stirs, his head snapping up like he's just remembered where he is. His eyes, glazed as marbles, roll around the room before he mumbles something to the cop. Words without meaning, sound without sense, in a night where nothing makes sense anymore.

The air's thick with more than just heat now. It's heavy with questions, with secrets, with the stench of lives unraveling faster than a cheap sweater. And us? We're just spectators in this tragedy, helpless as babes, watching the storm roll in.

The scene unfolded like a broken jazz record, skipping and stuttering, each fragment a dissonant note in the cacophony of tragedy. The blue-uniformed man fumbled with the letters, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar name. "M-a-v—o—"

"Nah, man, it's r—" the witness cut in, his voice a raspy counterpoint. "M-a-v-r-o—"

I felt the rage bubbling up inside me, threatening to spill over. "Listen here!" I growled, my words a low, menacing rumble.

The cop continued his clumsy spelling bee. "r—o—g—"

My hand came down hard on his shoulder, a percussive punctuation to the chaotic rhythm. He looked up, startled. "What's your deal, brother?"

"What went down here?" I demanded, my voice tight with tension.

"Car hit her. Dead on impact."

The words echoed in my head, a mournful refrain. "Dead on impact," I repeated, my eyes fixed on some invisible point.

"Fool ran into the street. Bastard didn't even slow down."

Another voice chimed in, adding to the discordant symphony. "Two cars, man. One coming, one going, you dig?"

The cop's interest perked up. "Going where?"

"One each way. She—" the man's hand rose, then fell, a aborted gesture of futility. "She ran out there, and the one from the city just plowed right into her. Doing thirty, forty easy."

"What do they call this joint?" the cop asked.

"Ain't got a name."

A well-dressed Negro stepped forward, his voice smooth and cultured. "It was yellow. Big yellow car. Brand new."

The cop's questions continued, a relentless interrogation. "You see it happen?"

"Nah, but it passed me down the road. Faster than forty. More like fifty, sixty."

As the conversation swirled around us, I noticed Wilson swaying in the doorway. Suddenly, his voice rose above the din, a new theme in this twisted composition. "Don't need to tell me what kind of car it was! I know!"

I watched Tom, saw the muscles in his back tense up like coiled springs. He strode over to Wilson, gripping him by the arms. "Pull yourself together, man," he growled, his voice a mixture of gruffness and forced calm.

In the harsh light of that fateful evening, Wilson's gaze fell upon Tom, his legs buckling beneath him as if struck by an unseen force. Tom grasped him, steadying the man with firm hands. "Listen closely," Tom commanded, his voice low and urgent. "I've only just arrived from New York. That yellow automobile you speak of—it wasn't mine. I brought you the coupé we discussed, nothing more."

Only the negro and I stood close enough to catch Tom's words, but the policeman, ever watchful, sensed something amiss in Tom's tone. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What's this about?" he demanded gruffly.

"I'm his friend," Tom replied, turning his head while maintaining his grip on Wilson. "He claims to know the car responsible... A yellow one."

The policeman's gaze lingered on Tom, filled with distrust. "And what color is your car?"

"Blue. A coupé," Tom answered without hesitation.

I interjected, "We've come directly from New York." Another motorist, who had been driving behind us, confirmed this statement, and the policeman's interest waned.

"Now, if you'll provide that name again, correctly this time—"

Tom, with surprising strength, lifted Wilson as if he weighed nothing, carrying him into the office and depositing him in a chair before returning. "Someone needs to stay with him," he ordered authoritatively, watching as two reluctant men entered the room. Tom closed the door behind them and descended the single step, his eyes deliberately avoiding the grim scene before us.

As he passed me, Tom whispered urgently, "We must leave now." With an air of forced authority, we pushed through the growing throng, passing a hurried doctor clutching his medical bag—a beacon of futile hope summoned half an hour earlier.

In the manner of Leo Tolstoy:

We proceeded at a leisurely pace until the road curved, whereupon Thomas applied considerable force to the pedal, propelling our vehicle swiftly through the darkened landscape. Presently, I detected a muffled, guttural sob emanating from my companion, and observed tears cascading down his visage. "The contemptible coward!" he lamented, his voice trembling. "He failed even to halt his conveyance."

The Buchanan residence materialized before us, emerging from the rustling foliage. Thomas brought the automobile to a stop adjacent to the veranda, his gaze fixed upon the

second story, where two illuminated windows shone amidst the climbing vines. "Daisy has returned," he remarked.

As we exited the vehicle, he cast a glance in my direction, his brow furrowing slightly. "I ought to have deposited you in West Egg, Nicholas. There is naught to be accomplished this evening." A transformation had overcome him, his speech now grave and resolute.

We traversed the moonlit gravel towards the veranda, Thomas succinctly addressing the situation. "I shall summon a cab to convey you home. While you await its arrival, you and Jordan would do well to procure sustenance from the kitchen, should you desire it." He opened the door, inviting us to enter.

I declined his offer, expressing my preference to remain outside while awaiting the taxi. Jordan, however, attempted to persuade me otherwise, gently grasping my arm. "Won't you join us, Nicholas?" she implored.

"No, I thank you," I responded, feeling somewhat unwell and desiring solitude. Jordan hesitated momentarily. "It is merely half-past nine," she observed. I found myself unwilling to acquiesce, having had quite enough of their company for one day—a sentiment which now extended to Jordan as well. Perceiving this in my countenance, she abruptly turned away, ascending the steps and disappearing into the house.

The night air hung heavy with unspoken words as I slumped on the drive, my head cradled in my hands. The butler's voice drifted from inside, summoning a taxi. I rose, intending to wait by the gate, but before I'd taken twenty paces, I heard my name. Gatsby materialized from the shadows, his pink suit luminous under the moon's glow.

"What brings you here?" I asked, unease creeping into my voice.

"Just lingering, old sport," he replied, his casual tone at odds with the gravity of the moment.

I half-expected to see Wolfshiem's men lurking in the shrubbery, ready to pounce. Gatsby's next words cut through the silence:

"Any trouble on the road?"

"Yes," I answered tersely.

He paused, then asked, "Was she killed?"

"Yes."

"I suspected as much. I told Daisy. Better for the shock to come all at once. She handled it rather well."

His words betrayed his singular focus on Daisy's reaction, as if nothing else mattered in the wake of tragedy.

"I came by a back road," he continued. "Left the car in my garage. I don't think we were seen, but one can never be certain."

By now, my disdain for him had grown so intense that I saw no need to correct his assumption.

"Who was she?" he inquired.

"Wilson. The garage owner's wife."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, I tried to turn the wheel—" He stopped abruptly, and in that moment, understanding dawned on me.

The night hung heavy with the weight of tragedy as we stood in its aftermath. Daisy, her hands trembling on the wheel, had steered us into chaos. A woman, perhaps mistaking us for familiar faces, had rushed toward our car just as another approached from the opposite direction. In that fractured moment, Daisy's resolve faltered. She veered away, then back again, her panic palpable in the air.

I reached for the wheel, but it was too late. The impact reverberated through metal and bone, a sickening finality. The woman, I knew without seeing, was gone in an instant.

My companion winced as I began to describe the gruesome scene. "Don't," he pleaded, his voice thick with regret.

Daisy, wild-eyed and frantic, accelerated. I fought to stop her, finally wrenching the emergency brake. She collapsed against me, and I drove on, the weight of what we'd done pressing down upon us.

"She'll recover," he said, more hope than certainty in his words. "I'll wait here, make sure he doesn't trouble her about this... unpleasantness. If he tries anything, she'll signal with the lights."

"He won't," I assured him, knowing Tom's mind was elsewhere.

"I can't trust that, old friend. I'll stay all night if I must."

A chilling thought struck me then. What if Tom discovered Daisy had been driving? The implications could be devastating. I gazed at the house, its windows glowing with false normalcy, Daisy's room bathed in soft pink light. The night stretched before us, long and fraught with possibilities.

The sultry evening air clung to my skin as I whispered, "Wait here." My footsteps, light as a feather, traced the lawn's edge before crossing the gravel. I ascended the veranda steps with the stealth of a cat.

The drawing room lay vacant, its curtains parted like an invitation. I glided past the porch, memories of that June night three months ago flitting through my mind. A sliver of light caught my eye – the pantry window. The blind was drawn, but a small gap at the sill offered a glimpse inside.

There sat Daisy and Tom, face to face at the kitchen table. Between them, a plate of cold fried chicken and two untouched bottles of ale. Tom leaned in, his words intense, his hand resting possessively over hers. Daisy nodded occasionally, her eyes meeting his.

They weren't happy, no. But neither were they unhappy. It was a tableau of intimacy, of shared secrets and unspoken understanding. To an outsider, they might have appeared to be conspirators in some clandestine plot.

As I retreated, I heard my taxi approaching, its engine a low hum in the night. Gatsby stood where I'd left him, his face a mask of anxiety. "Is all quiet?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," I replied, hesitating before adding, "You should go home, get some rest."

He shook his head, determination etched in every line of his face. "I'll wait until Daisy retires. Goodnight, old sport."

With hands thrust deep in his pockets, he turned back to his vigil, as if my presence somehow tainted the sanctity of his watch.

I turned and departed, abandoning him to his solitary vigil beneath the moon's glow, a sentinel over emptiness.





## VIII

Through the long, tormented night I lay awake, assaulted by the mournful wail of a foghorn on the Sound. My mind churned, caught between the grotesqueries of reality and the savage terrors of my dreams. As dawn's pallid light crept in, the rumble of a taxi ascending Gatsby's drive jolted me to action. I leapt from bed, compelled by an urgent need to speak with him, to issue some nebulous warning before the opportunity slipped away.

I found him in his cavernous hall, a dejected figure propped against a table. "Nothing," he mumbled, his voice as wan as his countenance. "I waited. She appeared at the window around four, lingered briefly, then extinguished the light."

We prowled through the vast chambers, hunting for cigarettes. The house seemed a labyrinth, its proportions monstrous. We pushed aside draperies as voluminous as circus tents, our hands groping along endless stretches of shadowed walls for elusive light switches. At one point, I stumbled upon a phantom piano, my fall punctuated by a discordant splash of keys.

Dust lay thick everywhere, and a musty pall hung in the air, as if the rooms had been sealed for an age. I discovered a humidor on an unfamiliar table, containing two stale, desiccated cigarettes. We flung open the drawing room's French windows and sat smoking into the encompassing darkness.

"You should leave," I advised. "They'll trace your car, no doubt about it."

"Leave now, old sport?"

"Atlantic City for a week. Or Montreal."

He dismissed the notion outright. He couldn't possibly abandon Daisy until her intentions were clear.

In the darkness of that night, he clung to a fragile hope, and I could not bring myself to shatter it. His tale of youth with Dan Cody poured forth, for the facade of "Jay Gatsby" had crumbled under Tom's cruel assault, and the grand illusion had reached its end. I sensed he would have bared his soul entirely, but Daisy consumed his thoughts.

She was the first woman of refinement he had truly known. Though he had encountered such people before, an invisible barrier always separated them. Her allure captivated him completely. He visited her home, initially with fellow officers, then alone. The grandeur overwhelmed him, having never before set foot in such a place. But it was Daisy's presence that breathed life into every corner, as natural to her as his humble tent was to him.

An air of mystery enveloped the house, hinting at chambers more exquisite than any he had seen, corridors alive with joyous activity, and love stories not yet faded but vibrant and fresh. These tales seemed to echo the gleam of new automobiles and the lingering scent of flowers from recent dances.

The knowledge that Daisy had been loved by many only heightened her worth in his eyes. He felt the ghostly presence of past suitors, their emotions still resonating through the halls. Yet he was acutely aware that his presence in Daisy's world was a monumental twist of fate.

In the shimmering heat of that October night, young Jay Gatsby, a mere wisp of a man without past or pedigree, clung desperately to the borrowed dignity of his uniform. He was acutely aware that at any moment, this flimsy disguise might dissolve, leaving him exposed and vulnerable. And so, like a starving creature, he gorged himself on every morsel of opportunity, his hunger knowing no bounds of morality or restraint.

It was in this state of ravenous desperation that he claimed Daisy, plucking her like a ripe fruit he had no right to touch. Perhaps he should have loathed himself for this deception, this grand illusion of equality and capability he had woven around her. But self-loathing was a luxury Gatsby couldn't afford.

He hadn't promised her phantom millions, no. But he had wrapped her in a cocoon of false security, letting her believe he was cut from the same gilded cloth as she. In truth, he was untethered, at the mercy of faceless bureaucrats who could scatter him to the winds on a whim.

Yet in the aftermath of his conquest, Gatsby found himself ensnared by an unexpected emotion. What had begun as a fleeting dalliance transformed into a quest for something profound and elusive. Daisy, he discovered, was not merely extraordinary - she was a revelation of what a "nice" girl could be, a glittering enigma that both captivated and confounded him.

She slipped away into the opulent embrace of her world, leaving Gatsby clutching at shadows. He felt bound to her, married in spirit if not in law. Their next encounter left him breathless, betrayed by the intensity of his own feelings. On her porch, bathed in the artificial starlight of wealth, he kissed her curious, lovely mouth, sealing his fate with a touch.

In the soft hush of a cold's embrace, her voice grew richer, a melody that stirred the soul. And he, this man called Gatsby, felt the weight of wealth's embrace, how it held youth and mystery captive, preserving them like precious jewels. He saw Daisy, radiant as moonlight on water, floating above the struggles of those less fortunate.

"I tell you, it caught me unawares," he confessed, "this love that blossomed in my heart. I almost wished she'd cast me aside, but she held on tight, for her heart beat in time with mine. She saw wisdom in me, simply because my knowledge differed from hers."

He paused, his eyes distant with memory. "There I was, my dreams left behind, sinking deeper into love's embrace. And suddenly, those grand ambitions paled. What use were great deeds if I could bask in the joy of sharing my dreams with her?"

On that last afternoon, before duty called him across the sea, they sat entwined, silence their companion. The chill of fall crept outside, but within, a fire danced, painting her cheeks with its glow. Time stretched like honey, slow and sweet. His fingers traced the silk of her hair, dark as night and just as mysterious.

That afternoon gifted them tranquility, a balm against the impending separation. In all their weeks of love, never had they been so close, so attuned. The brush of her lips against his coat, the whisper of his touch on her fingertips - these were their truest words.

And when war came, he rose to meet it, extraordinary in his courage and resolve.

In the languorous heat of those uncertain days, the Captain, now a Major after the blood-soaked battles of the Argonne, found himself adrift in Oxford's dreaming spires, far from the arms of his beloved Daisy. Her letters, fragrant with perfume and desperation, spoke of a world closing in around her, a gilded cage of orchestras and champagne that marked the

passing of time like the ticking of an ornate clock. She yearned for his presence, a talisman against the relentless tide of society that threatened to sweep her away.

Nights in that gleaming world were a fever dream of saxophones wailing their mournful blues, while golden shoes shuffled through the glittering dust of shattered dreams. In the gray twilight hours, when reality seemed most distant, rooms pulsed with a sweet, low fever, and fresh-faced youth drifted like petals on a breeze, carried by the melancholy notes of unseen horns.

Daisy, caught in this whirlwind of artifice, found herself once more a butterfly, flitting from man to man, engagement to engagement, until dawn found her sprawled amidst the wreckage of another night's revels, beads and chiffon entangled with the wilting corpses of once-proud orchids.

Yet beneath this frantic dance, a voice cried out for certainty, for shape, for the comforting boundaries of a life decided. She longed for a force - be it love's tender caress, money's cold embrace, or the iron grip of practicality - to seize her fate and mold it into something tangible, something real, something that could withstand the relentless erosion of time and champagne.

It was in the midst of spring when Mr. Thomas Buchanan made his appearance, and with him came a force that would alter the course of events. His person and position exuded a certain wholesome robustness that did not fail to flatter Miss Daisy. One might surmise there was both struggle and relief in her acceptance of his suit.

Mr. Gatsby, still at Oxford, received the missive that would shatter his hopes. As dawn broke over Long Island, we set about opening the windows on the lower floor, allowing the grey light, slowly turning to gold, to flood the house. The shadow of a tree fell suddenly across the dew-laden grass, and ethereal birds began their morning song amidst the azure foliage. A gentle movement in the air, scarcely more than a zephyr, promised a day of pleasant coolness.

"I cannot believe she ever truly loved him," Mr. Gatsby declared, turning from the window to regard me with a challenging air. "You must recall, my dear friend, her state of agitation this afternoon. He spoke to her in a manner most alarming, painting me as some manner of unscrupulous fortune hunter. In her confusion, she scarcely knew her own mind."

He seated himself with a melancholy air. "Perhaps she did love him, if only for a moment when they were first wed—but even then, her affection for me was greater, do you not see?"

Suddenly, he made a most curious pronouncement. "In any case," said he, "it was entirely personal." One could only surmise that his conception of their attachment possessed an intensity beyond ordinary measure.

Upon his return from France, while Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan were still on their wedding journey, he embarked on a miserable yet irresistible pilgrimage to Louisville, funded by the last of his military stipend. For a week, he wandered the streets where once they had strolled together in the November night, revisiting the secluded places to which they had driven in her white motorcar.

Lawd, that city was somethin' else to him now. Even with Daisy gone, it still glowed with a sorrowful beauty, like twilight on the bayou. As he left, his heart whispered that

maybe, just maybe, if he'd looked harder, she might've been there waitin'. He felt like he was leavin' her behind, lost in them city streets.

The train car was hotter than a midsummer's day in Eatonville, and he was broke as a church mouse. He wandered out to the open bit, planted himself on one of them foldin' chairs, and watched the world slip by like a dream. Buildings he ain't never seen before danced past, and then they was out in the open fields, green as hope.

A yella trolley raced 'em for a spell, full of folks who might've once caught a glimpse of Daisy's face, shinin' like moonlight on water. The track curved away from the sun, which spread its golden fingers over the fadin' city where Daisy had drawn her first breath.

He reached out, desperate-like, tryin' to grab onto somethin', anything, to hold onto the magic she'd woven 'round him. But it was all slippin' away faster than he could see, and he knew in his bones that the sweetest part was gone for good.

Come nine o'clock, we finished our vittles and stepped out onto the porch. The night had brought a chill, and you could smell autumn in the air, like ripe persimmons. The gardener, last of Gatsby's help, came up and said he was fixin' to drain the pool on account of the leaves fallin' soon. But Gatsby, he just shook his head and said, "Not today."

In a whirlwind of regret and revelation, I found myself teetering on the precipice of departure, my watch ticking away precious minutes like grains of sand in an hourglass turned upside down. The pool, that shimmering oasis of untouched potential, lay dormant all summer long, a metaphor for missed opportunities and unspoken truths. Gatsby, my enigmatic host, stood before me, a kaleidoscope of emotions flickering across his face.

"I'll ring you up," I stammered, the words tumbling out like reluctant confessions. "At noon, perhaps."

We descended the steps, our footfalls echoing the beating of our hearts. Gatsby's voice, tinged with hope and desperation, hung in the air. "Daisy will call too, won't she?"

As I turned to leave, a sudden surge of emotion overwhelmed me. "They're a rotten lot," I cried out, my voice carrying across the manicured lawn. "You're worth more than the whole damned bunch put together!"

Those words, the only genuine compliment I ever bestowed upon him, hung between us like a fragile bridge spanning the chasm of our differences. His face transformed, breaking into that radiant, understanding smile – as if we'd been conspirators in some grand cosmic joke all along.

There he stood, resplendent in his pink suit, a splash of vibrant colour against the stark white steps. I was transported back to that fateful night three months ago when I first crossed the threshold of his ancestral home. The memory of faces, hungry for a glimpse of his supposed corruption, flooded back. Yet there he had stood, waving goodbye, his incorruptible dream safely tucked away behind that enigmatic smile.

As I left, I thanked him for his hospitality – that endless wellspring of generosity we all drank from so greedily. In that moment, I realized the true cost of dreams and the price of being extraordinary in an ordinary world.

In the hazy aftermath of a Gatsbyesque morning repast, I bid adieu to my enigmatic host and ventured into the pulsating heart of the metropolis. There, ensconced in my revolving throne, I attempted to decipher the cryptic hieroglyphs of stock quotations, only to

succumb to Morpheus' siren call. The shrill cry of the telephone roused me from my slumber, beads of perspiration pearling upon my brow.

It was the elusive Jordan Baker, her voice usually a cool zephyr of freshness wafting through the wire, now harsh and brittle as sun-scorched grass. She spoke of departures and destinations, her words a staccato of movement and unrest. Her pronouncement of having absconded from Daisy's domicile irked me, though I could not fathom why.

Then came the barb, sharp and unexpected: "You weren't so nice to me last night." The words hung in the ether, pregnant with unspoken accusations. I parried weakly, my defenses as flimsy as gossamer. We engaged in a verbal pas de deux, circling each other with words that meant everything and nothing.

"I want to see you," she declared, a statement both invitation and challenge.

"I want to see you, too," I replied, the words tasting of ash and regret.

We continued our dance of evasion and half-truths, until suddenly, abruptly, the music ceased. The line went dead with a decisive click, though whether by her hand or mine, I cannot say. In that moment, I realized the chasm that had opened between us, as vast and unbridgeable as the sea.

In a fit of... something—desperation? hope?—I dialed Gatsby's number, only to be met with the engaged tone's mocking buzz.

In the labyrinth of time, I found myself trapped, a puppet of the telephone's capricious whims. Four attempts, each a futile dance with the invisible threads of communication, until a disembodied voice, exasperated and ethereal, informed me of Detroit's long-distance monopoly. My fingers, as if guided by some unseen force, circled the 3:50 train on the timetable, a small ritual of hope in the face of uncertainty.

Noon struck, and my mind wandered to the morning's journey, when I had deliberately avoided the ash-heaps, crossing to the other side of the car like a superstitious traveler. I imagined the curious crowd that would gather there, little boys with eyes like searchlights scanning the dust for dark secrets, and a garrulous storyteller, his tale growing less real with each retelling until Myrtle Wilson's tragic aria faded into silence.

But the night before, ah, the night before! The garage, a stage for a peculiar drama. Catherine, the elusive sister, materializing like a specter, her sobriety shattered, her comprehension dulled. The ambulance, already a ghost on its way to Flushing, leaving Catherine to collapse in a heap of incomprehension.

A Good Samaritan or perhaps a voyeur of tragedy, whisked her away in pursuit of her sister's mortal remains. The garage became a magnet for the curious and the morbid, a crowd ebbing and flowing against its front, while inside, George Wilson rocked in a rhythmic trance of grief.

The office door stood open, a portal to sorrow that no passerby could resist. Until, in a moment of merciful shame, someone closed it, sealing off the spectacle of despair from the world's hungry eyes.

In the hush of night, whispers of sorrow and secrets intertwined. Michaelis, a steadfast presence, remained by Wilson's side as others came and went like shadows in the dim light. The air hung heavy with unspoken truths and the bitter aroma of hastily brewed coffee.

As dawn approached, Wilson's incoherent ramblings took on a new tenor. His words, once a torrent of grief, now flowed like a gentle stream, carrying fragments of a yellow car



and a bruised face from the city. The revelation of his wife's battered visage months ago escaped his lips, only to be swallowed by his own anguished cries.

Michaelis, in his clumsy compassion, attempted to steer Wilson's mind from the treacherous waters of memory. "George, how many years have you been wed?" he asked, his voice a lifeline in the darkness. "Twelve," came the reply, a number laden with untold stories.

"Any children, George?" Michaelis persisted, his questions a futile attempt to anchor Wilson's drifting thoughts.

The night air pulsed with the rhythmic thudding of beetles against the pale light, each impact an echo of the car that had sped away hours before. Michaelis, uneasy in the garage where death had left its mark, paced the office like a caged spirit, each object a familiar stranger in the pre-dawn gloom.

Time stretched like taffy, each passing moment an eternity as Michaelis sat beside Wilson, his presence a silent sentinel against the encroaching madness of grief. In this liminal space between night and day, two men grappled with the weight of tragedy, one seeking solace, the other offering what little comfort he could in the face of overwhelming loss.

In the shadows of despair, George sat, his soul as tarnished as an old mirror. His companion, a well-meaning interloper, probed the depths of his faith with clumsy fingers.

"Haven't you a sanctum, George? A holy place where you once sought solace? Perhaps I could summon a man of the cloth to minister to your wounded spirit?"

George's reply was as hollow as a raven's cry. "I've no such refuge."

"But surely, George, you must have knelt before an altar once? Didn't you pledge your troth in hallowed halls?"

"Eons ago," George murmured, his rocking momentarily stilled by the effort of speech. His eyes, like faded forget-me-nots, held a mixture of confusion and half-formed understanding.

"The drawer," he rasped, gesturing weakly. "Look there."

His companion obliged, opening the nearest compartment. Within lay a single item: a dog's leash, an extravagant thing of leather and silver, pristine in its newness.

"This?" he asked, holding it aloft like a talisman.

George nodded, his gaze fixed and haunted. "Found it yesterday. She tried to explain, but I knew... I knew it was a harbinger of something sinister."

"Your wife's purchase?"

"Wrapped in tissue, atop her vanity."

The companion offered a litany of innocuous explanations, each one falling on ears deafened by suspicion. George's whispered mantra of "Oh, my God!" grew more frantic with each word.

"Then he killed her," George declared, his mouth a cavern of despair.

"Who?"

"I have ways of discerning the truth."

"You're descending into madness, George," his friend cautioned, but the words were lost in the miasma of George's growing obsession.

In the fading light of that sultry evening, the two men stood in the cramped room, their shadows elongating on the wall. George Wilson's eyes, glazed with grief and anger, bore into Michaelis with an unsettling intensity. The air hung heavy with unspoken accusations.



"You're not thinking clearly," Michaelis murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "Try to rest until morning comes."

But Wilson was beyond reason. "He killed her," he insisted, his words cutting through the stillness.

Michaelis sighed, "It was an accident, George."

A ghost of a smile, tinged with bitterness, played across Wilson's lips. "I may be trusting, but I'm not a fool. I know what I saw. That car, that man... she ran out to him, and he just... kept going."

Michaelis recalled the scene, but its significance had eluded him at the time. He had assumed Mrs. Wilson was fleeing her husband, not chasing after someone specific.

"How could she...?" Wilson's voice trailed off.

"She's deeper than you think," he added cryptically.

As Wilson began to rock back and forth, Michaelis fidgeted with the leash in his hand. "Is there anyone I could call for you?"

But he knew it was futile. Wilson was a man alone, barely substantial enough for his wife, let alone friends.

A blue light began to seep through the window, heralding the approaching dawn. Michaelis switched off the lamp, allowing the pale morning to infiltrate the room. Wilson's vacant gaze drifted to the ash-heaps outside, where wispy clouds danced in the faint breeze.

After an eternity of silence, Wilson mumbled, "I spoke to her."

The words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of unresolved questions and impending tragedy.

In the languorous haze of memory, I recall how she was admonished, her deceptions laid bare before the omniscient gaze of the divine. With trembling hands and faltering steps, he guided her to the window, his frail form silhouetted against the fading light. "God," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion, "sees all that you have done, every clandestine act you believed hidden." His face, etched with sorrow, pressed against the cool glass, seeking solace in the vast expanse beyond.

As I stood behind him, my eyes were drawn to the spectral visage of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, emerging from the dissipating darkness like a phantasmagoric apparition. "God's eyes are everywhere," he intoned, his words a litany of despair. I attempted to assuage his anguish, explaining the mundane nature of the image, but my words fell on deaf ears.

The night stretched interminably, his vigil unbroken as he communed with the encroaching twilight. As dawn's first tendrils crept across the sky, exhaustion claimed me, and I welcomed the arrival of another, sharing a simple repast as Wilson's fervor abated.

Upon awakening, I hurried back, only to find him vanished. His peregrinations, undertaken on foot, were later traced through Port Roosevelt and onward to Gad's Hill, where he partook of meager sustenance – a sandwich left untouched, a cup of coffee sipped in solitude. His journey, slow and deliberate, bore witness to his weariness, for it was not until the sun reached its zenith that he arrived at his destination.

Along his path, he left a trail of bewildered observers – youths who spoke of a man unhinged, and travelers who met his vacant stare from the roadside, his presence a haunting enigma in the tapestry of that fateful day.

In the sweltering heat of that fateful day, Wilson vanished like a ghost for three long hours. The authorities, clinging to his cryptic words about "finding out," imagined him scouring every garage in the vicinity, hunting for a yellow automobile. But no mechanic ever came forward to confirm his presence, and perhaps Wilson possessed a more effortless, more certain method of uncovering the truth he sought.

By mid-afternoon, he materialized in West Egg, inquiring about the location of Gatsby's mansion. The name had taken root in his mind by then, a poisonous seed ready to bloom.

As the clock struck two, Gatsby donned his swimming attire and instructed his butler to relay any phone calls to the pool. He retrieved an inflatable mattress from the garage, a frivolous remnant of summer revelry, and enlisted his chauffeur's aid in filling it with air. Strangely, he forbade the use of the open car, despite its damaged fender crying out for repair.

Gatsby hoisted the mattress onto his shoulder and set off towards the pool. He paused once, adjusting his burden, and brushed off the chauffeur's offer of assistance. Then he vanished into the autumnal foliage, its leaves tinged with the golden hue of decay.

No telephone call disturbed the silence. The loyal butler maintained his vigil until the early hours, long after hope had faded and there remained no one to receive any message that might arrive.

I suspect Gatsby himself had abandoned all expectation of that call, and perhaps he no longer cared. If true, he must have felt the warmth of his world slipping away, the exorbitant cost of clinging too long to a solitary dream finally coming due.

In the fading light of day, he gazed upon an alien sky, its vastness framed by trembling leaves. A shudder passed through him as he beheld the grotesque beauty of a rose, its petals unfurling beneath the harsh glare of the sun upon the tender grass. This new realm, tangible yet unreal, where restless spirits drifted aimlessly, their dreams as weightless as the air they breathed.

A ghostly figure emerged from the shapeless trees, gliding towards him with ethereal grace. The chauffeur, a protégé of Wolfsheimer, heard the gunshots but dismissed them as inconsequential. It was I who first raised the alarm, my frantic ascent of the front steps breaking the eerie calm.

In silent understanding, we four - the chauffeur, butler, gardener, and myself - hastened to the pool. The water's surface rippled almost imperceptibly, disturbed by the gentle current flowing towards the drain. Upon it floated the burdened mattress, its irregular journey marked by faint undulations.

A whisper of wind was enough to alter its course, while a cluster of leaves set it spinning slowly, tracing a thin crimson circle upon the water's surface. As we bore Gatsby towards the house, the gardener's eyes fell upon Wilson's lifeless form, sprawled upon the grass nearby. And thus, the tragedy reached its bitter conclusion, leaving us to ponder the fragility of dreams and the cruel whims of fate in this unforgiving world.



## IX

In the sweltering aftermath, memories blur like smeared ink on newsprint. Two years on, that day, night, and following morn merge into an endless parade of uniforms and flashing bulbs, invading Gatsby's sanctum with their intrusive presence. A rope, a sentinel - futile barriers against the curious throng. Yet the young ones, those clever urchins, they found their way through my plot, clustering like minnows around the shimmering pool.

A voice cuts through the chaos, authoritative and cold. "Madman," it declares, setting the tone for the morrow's headlines. Oh, what a circus of fabrication followed! Grotesque tales spun from half-truths and eager imaginations, a cacophony of sensationalism drowning out reason.

But Catherine, ah Catherine! When Michaelis's words threatened to unravel the facade, she stood firm. Her eyes, beneath that meticulously plucked brow, met the coroner's gaze unflinchingly. She wove a tapestry of denial - her sister's innocence, her marital bliss, her unblemished virtue. Such conviction! As if the very suggestion of impropriety was a dagger to her heart. She wept, she raged, she believed.

And so, the narrative shifted. Wilson, no longer a cuckold seeking vengeance, but a man unhinged by grief. A simpler tale for simpler minds. The case closed like a book snapped shut, its pages unread.

Yet in this maelstrom of lies and half-truths, I found myself adrift, clinging to Gatsby's memory. Alone, I stood on his shore, watching as the green light of his dream faded into the gathering dusk.

Yo, listen up. The moment I hit up West Egg with the 411 on the maldito disaster, every pendejo and their abuela started coming at me with their theories and their questions. At first I was like, "What the fuck?" but then, as homeboy just lay there, quiet as death, not moving, not breathing, not saying shit, hour after fucking hour, it hit me like a baseball bat to the dome that I was the one holding the bag. Why? 'Cause nobody else gave dos cojones about him - not with that ride-or-die intensity we all deserve when we check out, you feel me?

I rang up Daisy's ass thirty minutes after we found him, didn't even think twice about it. But she and Tom had bounced early, luggage and all. "No forwarding address?" "Nada." "When they coming back?" "No clue." "Any idea where they at? How I can reach 'em?" "Sorry, bro. Can't help you."

I was desperate to find someone, anyone, for Gatsby. I wanted to roll up to his room and be like, "Yo, G, I got you. Don't sweat it. Trust your boy, I'ma find somebody."

Couldn't find Wolfshiem's digits anywhere. The mayordomo hooked me up with his Broadway office number, but by the time I got through to Information, it was mad late. No one picked up. "Can you try again?" "I've tried three times, homie." "It's mad important." "Lo siento. Nobody's there."

I stumbled back to the sala, thinking for a hot second that all these official-looking motherfuckers were just random visitors. But even as they pulled back the sheet and

eyeballed Gatsby like he was some alien shit, his voice kept echoing in my cabeza: "Listen here, old sport, you gotta find somebody for me. You gotta."

In the fading light of a late summer afternoon, I found myself grappling with the aftermath of tragedy, a solitary figure navigating the murky waters of loss and obligation. The weight of responsibility pressed upon me, a mantle I hadn't sought but couldn't shirk. "You must persevere," I muttered to myself, echoing the sentiments of those who'd thrust this burden upon me. "This is not a journey for the faint of heart."

Curiosity, that insatiable beast, gnawed at me. I ascended the stairs, my footsteps muffled on the plush carpet, and rifled through the accessible portions of his desk. My quest for familial ties yielded nothing but frustration and the haunting gaze of Dan Cody's portrait, a relic of bygone violence adorning the wall.

With the dawn came a flurry of activity. I dispatched the butler to the city, armed with a missive for Wolfshiem, beseeching information and his immediate presence. The request seemed almost superfluous as I penned it, certain that the newspapers would spur him into action. I anticipated a telegraph from Daisy, her words crackling with urgency across the wires. But as the hours ticked by, neither materialized. Instead, a parade of uniformed officers, flashbulb-wielding photographers, and ink-stained journalists descended upon us.

When Wolfshiem's response finally arrived, carried by the returning butler, a curious sense of defiance welled within me. It was as if Gatsby and I stood united against the world, bound by a shared secret.

The letter, penned in Wolfshiem's distinctive scrawl, spoke of shock and disbelief. He professed himself "tied up in important business," unable to involve himself in our sordid affair. His words rang hollow, a thin veneer of concern masking his true intent. As I read the hastily scribbled postscript, inquiring about funeral arrangements, I felt the last tendrils of hope wither and die.

The phone call came that afternoon. Long Distance said Chicago. I reckoned it'd be Daisy at last but the voice was a man's, thin and distant like wind through barbed wire. Slagle, he called himself. Name meant nothing. He spoke of wires and bonds and trouble. Young Parke caught handing over papers, numbers from New York arriving just minutes before. Can't trust these backwater towns, he said. I cut him off, breathless. Told him Gatsby was dead. Silence stretched long as a prairie night, then a squawk like a dying animal as the line went dead.

Three days passed. A telegram came from Minnesota, signed Henry C. Gatz. Said he was coming, to hold off burying the body. Gatsby's father arrived, old and solemn as a preacher at a hanging. Bundled against the September warmth in a cheap coat, eyes leaking constant as spring melt. His hands shook like aspen leaves as I took his bag. He pulled at his beard, grey and sparse as winter grass. Nearly fell over so I sat him in the music room, went to fetch food. But he wouldn't eat. Milk spilled from his trembling fingers like blood from a gunshot wound.

The old man sat there, defeated by a world he couldn't comprehend. His son dead, his dreams buried with him. In that moment, the weight of all that was lost hung heavy as storm clouds over the prairie. The room was silent save for the old man's ragged breathing, a reminder of how quickly life can turn from promise to despair.

Well, I'll be hornswoggled if this ain't the saddest tale I've had the misfortune to relay. It all started when this feller comes a-hollerin' about some Chicago newspaper. Says he saw it there, plain as day, and hightailed it straight away. Poor soul didn't know how to get ahold of nobody.

His eyes were dartin' about like a couple of spooked jackrabbits, not seein' a blessed thing. "It was a madman," he kept mutterin', "Must've been plumb loco." I offered him some coffee, but he weren't havin' none of it. Said he was right as rain, though I had my doubts.

I escorted him to where his boy was layin', and left him be. Some young'uns were peekin' in, curious as cats, but they scampered off when I told 'em who'd arrived.

After a spell, out comes Mr. Gatz, lookin' like he'd seen a ghost. His face was redder than a tomato, and his eyes were leakin' like a rusty bucket. Death don't shock a man his age like it used to, I reckon. But when he got an eyeful of that fancy house, his grief got all mixed up with a kind of awe-struck pride.

I helped him upstairs and told him we'd been waitin' on him to make arrangements. He didn't want to take the body out West, said Jimmy always favored the East. That's where he made his name, after all.

"Were you a friend of my boy's?" he asked, and I told him we were thick as thieves. "He had a big future ahead of him, you know," he said, and I couldn't help but agree. It was a crying shame, the whole business, but that's the way the cookie crumbles sometimes.

The young man possessed a remarkable intellect, she mused, her thoughts drifting like leaves on a gentle breeze. His potential, now forever unrealized, might have rivaled the great minds of the age. She imagined him, had he lived, shaping the very fabric of the nation, his brilliance illuminating the path of progress. The notion hung in the air, a melancholy whisper of what might have been.

As night descended, the telephone's shrill cry pierced the silence. A voice, trembling with trepidation, inquired after her identity. Upon learning her name, relief flooded through the connection. Klipspringer, it seemed, had emerged from the shadows of memory.

She spoke of the impending funeral, her words measured and deliberate. The desire to shield this final farewell from prying eyes and curious onlookers weighed heavily upon her. She had reached out to those few who might wish to pay their respects, though locating them had proved a Herculean task.

Klipspringer's tone, however, gave her pause. His promises rang hollow, like distant echoes in an empty room. She pressed him, gently but firmly, seeking a commitment to attend. His excuses flowed forth, a torrent of words meant to disguise his reluctance. He spoke of obligations, of picnics and expectations, each syllable a thin veil over his true intentions.

Exasperation bubbled within her, threatening to overflow. A sharp, involuntary sound escaped her lips, causing Klipspringer to stumble over his words. He continued, his voice now tinged with nervousness, speaking of trivial matters – a pair of forgotten shoes, left behind in the grand house that now stood as a monument to unfulfilled dreams and shattered illusions.

In the heady, sweltering air of the city, I found myself caught in the absurd machinations of the recently departed Gatsby's world. A phone call, a plea for tennis shoes - such trivialities in the face of death. The voice on the line, detached and unaware, babbled on

about B.F. something-or-other, but I'd already slammed down the receiver, a wave of secondhand shame washing over me.

Oh, Gatsby, even in death you provoke sneers from those who once supped at your table. I made the mistake of calling one such ingrate, forgetting how deeply the roots of resentment can grow, nourished by the very liquor that once loosened their tongues in false friendship.

The morning of the funeral, I ventured into the concrete jungle of New York, seeking the elusive Meyer Wolfshiem. Following the advice of a pimply-faced elevator boy, I found myself before a door emblazoned with "The Swastika Holding Company." The irony was not lost on me.

My calls of "hello" echoed in the seemingly empty office until, like a apparition from some fevered dream, a striking Jewess materialized, her obsidian eyes regarding me with undisguised hostility.

"Nobody's in," she lied, the faint strains of a butchered "Rosary" giving lie to her words. "Mr. Wolfshiem's in Chicago."

I persisted, giving my name, but she rebuffed me with the practiced ease of a seasoned gatekeeper. Then, a voice - unmistakably Wolfshiem's - called out "Stella!" from beyond.

The woman, Stella, I presumed, bristled visibly, her hands sliding up and down her hips in a gesture of indignation. "Leave your name," she snapped, but I stood my ground, caught in this absurd pantomime of denial and deception.

In the manner of the great Chinua Achebe, I shall recount this tale:

The old woman's voice was sharp as a thorn. "You young men think you can barge in here whenever you please," she chided. "We grow weary of your ways. When I say he has gone to Chicago, then he has gone to Chicago." I spoke the name of Gatsby, and her eyes widened. "Ah!" she exclaimed, peering at me anew. "What is your name, again?" And with that, she vanished like smoke.

Before long, Meyer Wolfshiem appeared in the doorway, solemn as an elder at a funeral. He extended both hands in greeting and ushered me into his office. "These are sad times for us all," he intoned, offering me a cigar.

"I remember well when first I met him," Wolfshiem began. "A young major, fresh from the army, his chest heavy with medals from the war. He was so poor he could not afford proper clothes and had to keep wearing his uniform. I first saw him when he came to Winebrenner's poolroom on Forty-third Street, seeking work. He had not eaten in days. 'Come, share a meal with me,' I said. He devoured food worth more than four dollars in half an hour."

"Did you set him up in business?" I asked.

"Set him up? I created him," Wolfshiem declared. "I lifted him from nothing, from the very dust. I saw at once he was a fine-looking, gentlemanly young man. When he mentioned Oggsford, I knew he would be useful. I had him join the American Legion, where he rose quickly. He soon did work for a client of mine in Albany. We became as close as two fingers," he said, holding up his hand. "Always together."

I wondered if their partnership had extended to the World's Series affair of 1919.



The monsoon rains had begun to fall, a fine mist that cloaked the city in grey, as I made my way to his office. The news of death hung heavy in the air, like the scent of jasmine after dusk.

"He's gone," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "You were his dearest companion. Surely you'll attend the funeral this afternoon?"

"I would like to," he replied, his eyes betraying a deep sorrow.

"Then come," I urged.

But he shook his head, tears welling up. "I cannot involve myself in such matters," he said, his voice trembling like a leaf in the wind.

"There's nothing to involve yourself in. It's all finished now."

"When a man dies violently, I prefer to keep my distance. In my youth, it was different. I stood by my friends, no matter the circumstances. You may find it sentimental, but I remained loyal to the very end."

Realizing his mind was set, I rose to leave. Suddenly, he asked, "Did you study at university?"

For a moment, I thought he might suggest a connection, but he merely nodded and shook my hand.

"Let us cherish our friends while they live, not after they're gone," he said.

"Afterwards, I believe in leaving things be."

As I stepped out, the sky had darkened, and I returned to West Egg in a drizzle. After changing, I visited next door to find Mr. Gatz pacing the hall, excitement etched on his face. His pride in his son and his possessions had grown, and now he had something to show me.

"Jimmy sent me this photograph," he said, his fingers trembling as he reached for his wallet.

The photograph emerged from the depths of memory, cracked and stained, a relic of a past that never quite faded. The old man's eyes lit up, his trembling finger tracing the contours of a house that existed more vividly in this image than in reality. "Jimmy sent it," he murmured, his voice a mixture of pride and longing. "Isn't it beautiful?"

I nodded, watching as he clung to the picture, reluctant to let it slip back into the void of time. He spoke of Jimmy's visit, of a house bought with newfound success, of a rift healed by ambition realized. The photograph lingered between us, a bridge spanning years of absence and reconciliation.

Finally, he tucked it away, only to produce a tattered book - Hopalong Cassidy, a childhood treasure. "Look," he insisted, flipping to the back cover. There, in faded ink, lay a schedule, a blueprint for greatness dated September 12, 1906. The day's hours parceled out with militaristic precision: dumbbell exercises at dawn, electricity studies before breakfast, work until late afternoon. Baseball and elocution carved out their own slices of time, followed by inventions and resolutions.

The schedule read like a manifesto, a young man's declaration of war against mediocrity. No time wasted at Shafers, no indulgence in tobacco's embrace. Each minute accounted for, each action a step towards some grand, undefined future.

I stared at the yellowed page, feeling the weight of unfulfilled ambitions and realized dreams. The old man's eyes shone with a mixture of pride and melancholy, as if seeing both the boy who penned those words and the man who had lived beyond them. In that moment,

past and present collided, leaving us suspended in a shared understanding of time's relentless march and the power of a child's determination.

The small book fell open, its pages yellowed and worn, a testament to time's relentless march. The old man's eyes, rheumy with age, sparkled as he stumbled upon it. "Look," he whispered, "Jimmy's resolves."

His gnarled finger traced the faded words: Bathe regularly. Read to elevate the mind. Save what you can. Honor thy parents.

"Jimmy was destined for greatness," the old man mused, his voice a mixture of pride and wistfulness. "Always striving, always reaching. Once told me I ate like a swine. I walloped him good for that."

He lingered over each entry, reading aloud, seeking validation in my eyes. I sensed he hoped I'd transcribe these pearls of wisdom for my own betterment.

As the hands of the clock crept towards three, the Lutheran minister arrived, punctual as sin. Our eyes, the old man's and mine, began to flit nervously towards the windows, anticipating the arrival of other mourners.

Time stretched like molasses. Servants materialized, hovering uncertainly. The old man's blinking intensified, his words about the rain taking on a frantic edge.

The minister's repeated glances at his watch prompted me to pull him aside, pleading for patience. But it was futile. No one came.

At five, our pitiful procession - three cars in total - wound its way to the cemetery. The hearse led, a gleaming black beetle in the drizzle. Behind it, the limousine carried Mr. Gatz, the minister, and myself. The station wagon brought up the rear, laden with damp servants and the equally sodden postman from West Egg.

As we crossed the threshold into that final resting place, the sound of tires on wet gravel pierced the gloom. Footsteps splashed urgently behind us, a latecomer racing through the mist to bid farewell to the man who had once been the great Gatsby.

The rain fell heavy, obscuring the world beyond the gravesite. I recognized him then, the man with the owl-like glasses who'd marveled at Gatsby's library months ago. How he'd learned of the funeral, I couldn't say. Water streamed down his lenses as he removed them, wiping furiously to see the canvas unfurled over Gatsby's final resting place.

I tried to conjure Gatsby in my mind, but he'd already faded, leaving only the bitter knowledge that Daisy hadn't sent so much as a flower. Someone murmured about the blessing of rain on the dead, and Owl-Eyes added a solemn "Amen." We hurried through the downpour to our waiting cars.

At the gate, Owl-Eyes caught me. "Couldn't make it to the house," he said. "No one could."

"What?" I asked.

"Lord, people used to flock there by the hundreds." He cleaned his glasses again, inside and out. "Poor son-of-a-bitch," he muttered.

The scene shifted in my mind, and I was transported to memories of returning home from school. The old Union Station in Chicago, dim and bustling, filled with familiar faces and excited chatter. It was always six o'clock on a December evening, and those of us heading further west would gather to say our goodbyes.

I could see it all so clearly – the fur-draped girls fresh from their finishing schools, breaths forming clouds in the frigid air, hands waving wildly at the sight of old friends. The rapid-fire exchange of invitations echoed in my ears: "The Ordways? The Herseys? The Schultzes?" Our gloved hands clutched those long green tickets, our passports to home and holiday cheer.

The murky yellow cars of the railway gleamed like festive ornaments on the tracks, a cheerful counterpoint to the encroaching winter. As we pulled away, the real snow - our snow - began to dance beside us, twinkling against the windows. The dim lights of small Wisconsin stations slipped by, and a wild, sharp breath of air filled our lungs.

We inhaled deeply as we moved through cold vestibules after dinner, acutely aware of our fleeting connection to this land. For one strange hour, we were part of it before dissolving back into anonymity. This is my Middle West - not the wheat fields or prairies or forgotten immigrant towns, but the thrilling homeward journeys of my youth. It's the street lamps and sleigh bells piercing the frosty darkness, and the shadows of holly wreaths cast by warm windows onto virgin snow.

I am woven into this tapestry, sobered by endless winters, slightly smug from growing up in a place where houses bear family names for generations. I realize now that this has always been a tale of the West. We were all Westerners - Tom, Gatsby, Daisy, Jordan, and I - perhaps sharing some inherent flaw that left us ill-suited to Eastern life.

Even when the East captivated me most, even as I recognized its superiority to the tedious, sprawling towns beyond the Ohio with their relentless scrutiny of all but the very young and very old, it always seemed slightly warped to me, like a funhouse mirror distorting reality.

In the twilight of my recollection, West Egg looms like some Grecian fever dream: a sprawling tableau of architectural oddities, hunched beneath a brooding sky and pallid moon. The scene unfolds with cinematic precision – four gents in their finest threads, solemnly ferrying a bedazzled damsel, her inebriated form draped across a stretcher, jewels glinting coldly from her limp hand. They march on, these unwitting pallbearers, towards a house that isn't hers. But in this peculiar pantomime, her identity is irrelevant, her fate inconsequential.

After Gatsby's demise, the East took on this same surreal quality, warped beyond recognition. So when autumn's crisp fragrance permeated the air and laundry lines stood rigid in the breeze, I knew it was time to scarper. But first, one last bit of unfinished business – a rather awkward affair that perhaps should've been left well alone. Still, I couldn't bear to leave loose ends for the indifferent sea to tidy up.

I sought out Jordan Baker, that paragon of nonchalance. We danced around the subject of our shared history and its aftermath while she reclined, still as a statue, in an oversized armchair. Kitted out for golf, she struck me as some living illustration – chin tilted just so, hair the shade of fallen leaves, her skin matching the fingerless glove perched on her knee. As I wrapped up my rambling monologue, she casually dropped the bombshell of her engagement to another chap, her tone as flat and unremarkable as if commenting on the weather.

I harbored doubts about her claim, despite knowing several suitors who would have eagerly wed her at the slightest inclination. Nonetheless, I feigned astonishment. For a

fleeting moment, I questioned my judgment, but swiftly reassessed the situation before rising to bid farewell.

"You did, however, cast me aside," Jordan interjected abruptly. "Over the telephone, no less. I care not a whit for you now, but it was a novel experience that left me momentarily disoriented."

We exchanged a perfunctory handshake.

"And do you recall," she added, "our discussion about operating motorcars?"

"Not precisely," I replied.

"You posited that a reckless driver remained safe only until encountering another of their ilk? Well, I encountered just such a driver, did I not? My misjudgment was inexcusable. I had presumed you to be a person of integrity and directness. I believed it to be your private source of pride."

"I've reached thirty," I stated. "I'm five years beyond the age where I can deceive myself and label it honor."

She offered no response. Filled with a mixture of anger, lingering affection, and profound regret, I turned away.

One late October afternoon, I caught sight of Tom Buchanan. He strode ahead of me along Fifth Avenue with his characteristic alertness and aggression, his hands slightly extended as if to ward off interference, his head pivoting sharply, eyes restlessly scanning his surroundings. As I slowed to avoid overtaking him, he halted abruptly, scrutinizing the display of a jeweler's shop. Suddenly, he noticed me and retraced his steps, extending his hand in greeting.

The late afternoon light slanted through the windows, casting long shadows across the room as Nick stood, his hands clenched at his sides. Tom's face was a mask of forced casualness, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of unease.

"What's eating you, Nick? Too good to shake my hand now?" Tom's voice held a brittle edge.

Nick's reply came low and tight. "You know exactly why."

"You've lost it, Nick," Tom snapped, a tremor in his words. "Completely off your rocker."

Nick pressed on, his voice steady. "What did you tell Wilson that day, Tom?"

The silence stretched between them, thick and heavy with unspoken truths. Tom's fingers twitched, then shot out to grasp Nick's arm.

"I told him what he needed to hear," Tom said, his words tumbling out. "He was at the door, wild-eyed, a gun in his pocket. What choice did I have?"

Nick listened, his face impassive, as Tom continued his frantic justification. The story spilled out – Wilson's desperation, the car's true owner, Myrtle's fate. Tom's voice cracked as he spoke of returning to the apartment, breaking down at the sight of abandoned dog biscuits.

In that moment, Nick saw Tom clearly – a man trapped by his own actions, clinging desperately to his version of events. Nick couldn't absolve him, couldn't even find it in himself to pity Tom. But he understood, with a clarity that left him cold, that in Tom's mind, every action had been necessary, even righteous.

The room fell silent again, the weight of unspoken judgments hanging between them like a shroud.

In the manner of Gustave Flaubert, I offer this rephrasing:

They were creatures of carelessness, Tom and Daisy, their lives a tapestry of reckless abandon. They shattered the world around them, then retreated into the sanctuary of their wealth, their indifference, or whatever mysterious force bound them together, leaving others to mend the fragments of their destruction.

I extended my hand to him in a gesture that felt absurd, as if I were addressing a child rather than a man. He then ventured into the jeweler's, perhaps in pursuit of a pearl necklace or mere cufflinks, while I stood liberated from my provincial sensibilities.

Gatsby's mansion lay dormant as I departed, its lawn as unkempt as my own. In the village, a particular taxi driver never passed the gates without pause, gesturing towards the estate. Perhaps it was he who had chauffeured Daisy and Gatsby on that fateful night, crafting his own narrative of the events. I evaded him upon disembarking the train, unwilling to indulge his tales.

My Saturday evenings were spent in New York, for the memory of Gatsby's opulent soirées clung to me with such vivacity that I could still perceive the distant melodies and laughter emanating from his gardens, accompanied by the ceaseless procession of automobiles along his drive.

One evening, I did observe a tangible vehicle approach, its headlamps illuminating the entrance steps. Yet I refrained from investigation, surmising it to be some final guest, ignorant of the party's conclusion.

On my last night, with my possessions packed and my automobile sold, I gazed once more upon that grandiose monument to failure, that incoherent edifice that had once been Gatsby's dream.

In the pale moonlight, a vulgar word etched by a child's mischievous hand stood stark against the white steps. I wiped it away, my shoe scraping the stone in an act of cleansing. Drawn to the shore, I stretched out on the sand, gazing at the quiet coastline. The grand houses stood silent, their windows dark, save for the ghostly glimmer of a ferryboat cutting across the Sound.

As Mwezi climbed higher, the landscape transformed. The trappings of modern life melted away, revealing the ancient island that once bloomed for the eyes of Dutch mariners - a verdant bosom of Dunia Mpya. The vanished trees, sacrificed for Gatsby's opulent mansion, had once whispered of humanity's grandest aspirations. For a fleeting, enchanted moment, our ancestors must have stood breathless before this vast land, forced into a contemplation beyond their understanding or desire, facing for the final time in history something that matched their capacity for awe.

Lost in thought about this bygone world, I pondered Gatsby's wonder when he first glimpsed the green light at Daisy's dock. He had journeyed far to reach this azure lawn, his dream seeming so tangible he could almost grasp it. Yet he failed to realize it had already slipped away, lost in the sprawling darkness beyond the city, where the somber fields of the republic stretched endlessly into the night.

Gatsby clung to his faith in that green light, that elusive future forever retreating before us, a mirage of prosperity always just out of reach. His story, like our continent's, is one of relentless pursuit, of dreams both realized and shattered on the shores of a new world.

We chased it, always just out of reach. But we'll keep trying, pushing ourselves harder each day. And maybe someday... Yet we're like boats fighting the tide, forever pulled back to where we began, memories echoing through time.

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