




**BOBBED HAIR
AND
BATHTUB GIN**

WRITERS RUNNING
WILD IN THE TWENTIES

MARION MEADE


A K N O P F  B O O K



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A KNOPF  BOOK

BIOGRAPHIES

Free Woman: The Life and Times of Victoria Woodhull

Eleanor of Aquitaine

Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth

Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?

Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase

The Unruly Life of Woody Allen

NOVELS

*Stealing Heaven: The Love Story of Heloise
and Abelard*

Sybill



BOBBED
HAIR
AND
BATHTUB
GIN

WRITERS RUNNING
WILD IN THE TWENTIES
MARION MEADE



NAN A. TALESE

DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK ■ LONDON ■ TORONTO
SYDNEY ■ AUCKLAND

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Publisher Condé Nast (center) surrounded by his staff: Vanity Fair editor Frank Crowninshield, Vogue editor Edna Chase, theater critic Dorothy Parker, and managing editor Robert Benchley.

CHAPTER ONE

IT COULDN'T BE WORSE.

Twenty-six, and she was losing her job. *Vanity Fair's* editor in chief broke the news in the grandeur of the Tea Court at the Plaza Hotel, beneath the Tiffany glass dome, amid the Caen stone and Breche violet marble, the Baccarat crystal and gold-encrusted china, the handwoven Savonnerie rugs. He had to fire her, Frank Crowninshield said, because his former theater critic was planning to return to the magazine and of course he needed his old job back. She said she didn't know that. He hoped she would work at home and do little pieces in her spare time. She said she really couldn't. She had no idea how to change a typewriter ribbon.

Vanity Fair had no cause to fire her, thought Dorothy Parker. And so what if every producer on Broadway hated her. It was Sunday afternoon on Central Park South, the carriage horses dozed standing up at the curbs, the leafless trees across the street were dark against the dusk sky. When Dottie emerged from the hotel, she went straight home, round Columbus Circle up Broadway, back to the Upper West Side, where she grew up. From an early age she knew a thing or two about misfortune: a dead mother (*E. coli*), a dead stepmother (stroke), and a brother who vanished without a trace (amnesia, homicide, possibly pique). And not only them but her uncle Martin Rothschild, a first-class passenger on the unsinkable *Titanic*—Martin the family martyr. Sometimes it seemed as if her whole life had been spent waiting for something terrible to happen. Even so, to be canned over tea and scones, with the accompaniment of harp and violin, was the absolutely worst. She had spent four years with the Condé Nast publishing company, her first and only real job.

Her husband was waiting when she walked into the apartment. Edwin Pond Parker II, scion of Congregational clergymen and once a Wall Street broker, had served during the war in the muddy trenches of France as an ambulance driver. His van hurtled into a bomb crater, and Eddie spent two days buried with the dead and the wounded before being rescued.

Handsome, blond, a Connecticut thoroughbred, he had appeared to be an ideal husband before the war. Since the armistice, he'd been devoting himself, almost full-time, to alcohol and morphine.

Not surprisingly, Eddie had little practical advice to offer, and so for counsel and comfort she turned to her best friend. Robert Benchley was the managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, and while everybody called him Bob or Rob, she never did. With her impeccable manners, she addressed him, ladylike, as "Mr. Benchley" (or "Fred," or in times of very bad trouble "Dear Fred"), and he in return called her "Mrs. Parker." The day he walked into the office for the first time, Dottie knew that she and Bob Benchley were kindred spirits sharing a similar sense of humor. For example, he subscribed to *The Casket*, an undertakers' magazine that published everything you always wanted to know about subjects such as embalming ("sometimes in the fresh body of a robust suicide the descending colon may be contracted to the thickness of the thumb"). Dottie had never known anyone who thought it necessary to be well informed about embalming. Immediately she ordered her own subscription. Each month she leafed through the *Casket* ads for hearses and giggled over the humor column (From Grave to Gay). Then she clipped the most interesting anatomic plates to hang above her desk. Over the months her office friendship with Mr. Benchley had deepened steadily (and platonically, despite gossip to the contrary), until now they were practically inseparable.

In the early evening of January 11, Bob left his home in Scarsdale and hurried into town on the seven o'clock train. It was easy to see that Crownie shared none of the responsibility for dismissing Dottie, since he was little more than a hired hand in the Condé Nast empire (*Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *House and Garden*). The man behind her firing was Nast himself. Recently he had denied her a raise and squawked about several pieces, but she'd never given it a second thought. By every reasonable standard, she had done nothing wrong. Unfortunately, the publisher had never figured out that the duty of a critic was to determine what is of high artistic quality—and what isn't. After several hours spent loudly damning Nast for stupidity—the man ought to be horsewhipped, at the least—both of them fell back on personal principles. She knew everything bad happened to her. He always believed the greatest sin was disloyalty. And so the next morning he went to the office and quit.

With evident glee, the New York papers reported the upheavals in Nast's staff—a third editor, Robert Sherwood, also quit—and took the side of the editors. F.P.A. (né Frank Lloyd Pierce Adams), the city's most widely read columnist, wrote in the *New York Tribune*, "I am sorry that Mr. Benchley tells me he hath resigned his position with 'Vanity Fair' because they had discharged Mistress Dorothy Parker; which I am sorry for." The *New York Times* also ran a sympathetic account under the byline of its theater critic, Alexander Woollcott. (Woollcott held court at the Algonquin Round Table, a group of friends—a dozen or so humorists, journalists, and playwrights, including Dottie and Bob—who regularly lunched together at the Algonquin Hotel—the "Gonk"—on West Forty-fourth.) That week the walkout remained Topic A over publishing luncheon tables.

At *Vanity Fair*, Frank Crowninshield continued to shake his head. When Bob submitted his resignation, Crownie concluded that he had lost his mind. Bob's wife, Gertrude, stuck in Scarsdale with their two boys, thought so, too. But to Dottie his willingness to walk away from his job would forever be treasured as "the greatest act of friendship" she could imagine.

~~DOTTIE SOLD HER FIRST~~ poem to *Vanity Fair* in 1914, before the war, when learning the tango and the turkey trot was the biggest thing on some people's minds. Her verse had appeared earlier in F.P.A.'s Conning Tower column, but this was her first publication for money (the sum of twelve dollars). She felt so tremendously confident that she presented herself at the offices of the new Condé Nast magazine, on West Forty-fourth Street, to apply for a writing job. At that time she was playing piano at a dance school and thinking about a new line of work, but, to be on the safe side, she told Frank Crowninshield that she was an orphan, an exaggeration.

The tall, silver-haired editor would always remember his first glimpse of Dorothy Rothschild: dainty manners, well turned out in a smart suit and bowed black patent pumps, drenched in perfume, brandishing a verbal switchblade. No openings were available, but Crownie, with his gift for spotting talent, directed her to *Vogue*, where for ten dollars a week she was indentured, writing captions for drawings of underwear ("Brevity is the soul of lingerie"). *Vogue* was a fossilized place, manned by lizardy-skinned Victorians wearing lorgnettes. But the job was a good deal better than slaving at the dance studio and living with her sister's family. In a fit of mischief, she once tried to sneak past the proofreaders a caption suggesting that a peekaboo mousseline de soie nightdress would be perfect for a night of debauchery. She was bored, barely managing to stay out of trouble, when Crownie rescued her from peonage in the undies department. In the autumn of 1917 he engineered her transfer to *Vanity Fair*, where she was assigned to write features and comic verse. It took only a few months before she replaced the English humorist P. G. Wodehouse as theater critic.

To Dottie, who had always loved the stage, the chance to become New York's only woman drama critic was incredible good luck, the first she'd ever known. But she soon discovered a tiny worm in the apple: *Vanity Fair* prided itself on being a magazine of no opinion, and she had nothing but opinions. Nevertheless, she tried her best to please by adopting the attitude that her job was to be a sort of weather forecaster. Faced with mediocre shows, she dutifully proceeded to issue regular gale warnings along with solid information theatergoers needed to know: bring knitting, sneak out for "a brisk walk around the Reservoir," go home, or, her favorite of hers, no need to show up at all. Unlike other critics, who confined their reviews to plot and performance, Dottie complained about the locations of her seats, smacked producers for low taste, and pilloried chorus lines for looking motherly. She one time reviewed the performance of a woman seated next to her who'd been searching for a lost glove. Not surprisingly, her columns pleased quite a lot of readers as much as they enraged an awful lot of producers.

In the January issue Dottie was critical of a comedy by Somerset Maugham. She thought that the leading lady, Billie Burke, had overacted badly and compared her performance to that of a well-known vaudeville dancer famous for wild gyrations. After objections from Crowninshield, Dottie toned down the review of *Caesar's Wife* and mildly observed that Burke, at thirty-five, was too old to play an ingenue—and her impersonation of Eva Tanguay ("The I Don't Care Girl") also seemed ill-advised.

Billie Burke happened to be the wife of Florenz Ziegfeld, not only a powerful Broadway producer but also an important *Vanity Fair* advertiser. Affronted, Ziegfeld made a fuss about Mrs. Parker, and within days Condé Nast fired his wiseacre critic.

~~DURING THEIR~~ remaining weeks at the magazine, Dottie and Bob made a point of expressing their disdain for Nast. They pinned on red discharge chevrons and marched around the office in a conspicuous display of scorn, even hung a sign in the lobby of the building requesting CONTRIBUTIONS FOR MISS BILLIE BURKE. As soon as Dottie left, the same week that Prohibition began, the company hastened to cancel her *Casket* subscription and rip down her anatomical art, but could do little about the odor of her favorite perfume, Coty's Chypre, which must have seeped into the upholstered antique chairs. Around the watercooler, secretaries in high-heeled morocco slippers gossiped that the whole office could stand fumigating. What's more, Mrs. Parker had asked to be punished for daring to write something quite vulgar about Billie Burke's having "thick ankles." But Mr. Nast insisted that was not dramatic criticism and ordered it cut. And that was the real story on her dismissal.

By February, Dottie and Bob had begun to share a tiny office in the Metropolitan Opera building at Broadway and Thirty-ninth. Actually, it was not an office but a corner of a corridor that had been glassed off, so cramped that "an inch smaller and it would have been adultery," she joked. There was room for two scuffed tables, three chairs (one for visitors, two typewriters, and a hat rack. They laughed about maybe getting their door lettered UTILE DROP FORGE AND TOOL CO., ROBERT BENCHLEY PRESIDENT—DOROTHY PARKER PRESIDENT. Luckily, she began receiving freelance assignments from magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. Getting fired, she guessed, wasn't the end of the world after all. It might even be for the best. Still, she doubted if she would ever again feel quite so foolishly happy as she had at *Vanity Fair*.

That winter, weeks after leaving the magazine, Dottie and one of her friends bumped into Condé Nast in the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel. Nast, as congenial as he could be, had the gall to tell her that he would be going on a cruise shortly and wished she could join him.

Dottie gave the publisher her brightest smile. If only she could, she replied very politely.

As soon as he had walked on, she turned to Bunny Wilson. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Make that ship sink."

THE TYPEWRITER was a featherlight shiny black Corona No. 3 portable, a real beauty whose carriage folded trimly over the keyboard. It even came with a special leather carrying case. Regrettably, Edna St. Vincent Millay could not afford the pedigreed Corona, because she was a poet and poetry didn't pay. Vincent loved beautiful things but never had money, which was why her own typewriter was an ugly workhorse with a lumbering carriage and sticky keys.

This particular Corona, as it happened, was not for sale. The machine belonged to one of Vincent's beaux, actually to his employer, and had come to her notice by accident one day while she was visiting James Lawyer at the office of the American Red Cross. A decorated war hero who had seen action in France, Jim was a construction engineer who lived in Washington and had to make periodic business trips to New York. At first he was grateful just to have company for the evening. But then he fell in love with Vincent, and she with him, and they began talking about marriage. Only one thing stood in the way: his wife.

During Jim's visits they mainly spent their time in out-of-the-way hotels, and when he was

back to Washington, he wrote passionate letters. Although he was devoted to his wife—fantastic woman, he said—he could not help loving Vincent too and had begun thinking about divorcing Louise. He told Vincent that there was “nothing I wouldn’t do for you, My Darling”

A few weeks into the affair the Corona somehow found its way from the American Red Cross to a dilapidated house on West Nineteenth Street, near the waterfront, where Vincent was living with her mother and two sisters. Having mastered the touch system, she was an excellent typist who could play the machine like Paderewski. Her sister Norma marveled at the sight of Vincie’s fingers “going like hell” across the keyboard. Never had Norma known anybody to type so fast. The sudden appearance of an expensive typewriter was a bit strange but nobody in the family questioned Vincent very closely—miracles had a way of happening around big sister.

Vincent was the oldest of three daughters of an insurance agent and an ambitious mother who divorced when she was eight. She grew up in the coastal villages of eastern Maine, a land of brief summers and endless winters, and spent her childhood writing poems, which were published in a children’s magazine, *St. Nicholas*. When she was twenty, she wrote a long narrative poem in which an adolescent girl finds herself being raped by Eternity and begins screaming. The sins of the world are crushing her (“Ah, awful weight! Infinity / Pressed down upon the finite Me!”). Begging God to revive her, she suddenly springs up from the ground miraculously reborn. Cora Millay found “Renascence” deeply moving and urged her daughter to submit the poem in a competition for a literary anthology, *The Lyric Year*. Despite Vincent’s conviction that she would win first prize, all she received was honorable mention. It was enormously disappointing, but there were a number of poets who noticed the poem and began to champion “Renascence,” insisting it was much better than the winners.

A short time later, this poem about loneliness and fear of death attracted the attention of certain well-to-do older women who stepped forward and offered to underwrite Vincent’s college education. As a result of this charity, she was able to enroll in Vassar College at the age of twenty-one. No question, it was an extraordinary opportunity for a small-town girl whose mother supported the family as a practical nurse and wig maker. On the other hand, such amazing good fortune only proved what Cora had always said: Vincent was brilliant.

With her college degree (Vassar ’17) and her excellent typing skills, Vincent could easily have found employment. But she would never think of working in a business office. Back in Camden, her sisters, Norma and Kay, earned pocket money by waiting tables and selling books door-to-door after school. Vincent didn’t. (And Kay never forgot it: “Oh, no, not you! What did you care how mother worked. You wouldn’t do anything manual, [even] to pay for your music lessons. Not you!”) In Vincent’s opinion, menial jobs were for people such as her sisters. It was different for her. She was an artist—and supremely proud of it.

In New York, Vincent earned money by selling fiction (under the pseudonym Nancy Boyce) to various second-rate magazines. Aside from these stories, two collections of her verse (*Renascence* and *A Few Figs from Thistles*) had been issued by obscure publishers but did not produce royalties. Otherwise, she had performed a few unpaid acting roles at the Provincetown Playhouse, which had produced her play *Aria da Capo* and where Norma was employed sewing costumes. In short, she was barely keeping her head above water. Most of the time, she prayed her checks wouldn’t bounce and was quick to accept when a nice man

invited her out for dinner.

Vincent's affair with Jim Lawyer continued for three months, until one night, in bed at the Hotel Judson on Washington Square, they heard the telephone ringing. When Jim finally answered, a Washington doctor reported the awful news that his wife had tried to kill herself by swallowing a quart of bad bootleg whiskey. Vincent, trying to remember what his coolheaded mother would do in a crisis, got him on the next train home. He looked frightened to death. In a short time Louise recovered, but her suicide attempt shook Jim so badly that he made up his mind to remain in Washington for a while. He needed to do the right thing by his wife.

A blizzard shut down New York City in February, leaving people trapped indoors. Mounds of snow and rubbish sprawled over the sidewalks. After six days without garbage collection Vincent's friend Frank Adams worried in the *Tribune*, "I hope we shall not have a plague." Vincent, meanwhile, waited for news from Jim. She had no way of knowing when—or even if—he was coming back. Impatient, she began referring to him, pityingly, as a "poor fish." Another lover took her to the Biltmore, an especially nice hotel, with its famous clock and house detectives and guests who checked in with luggage. She finally received a letter. He was heartbroken, Jim said, but had to stop seeing her. Nothing, of course, would ever dim his memories of their love. Would she please remember to return the Corona to the Red Cross?

FROM THE WINDOWS at *Vanity Fair*, Bunny Wilson, the new managing editor, looked out at the roofs of office buildings blurring into the winter skies. Outside the tramcars were moving slowly through rivers of gray slush left behind by the blizzard. It was getting dark, and the yellow electric lights blinked like "fiery handwriting"—flat-footed prose, but Wilson liked it well enough to jot it down in his notebook. Bunny, whose real name was Edmund, was a red-haired, moonfaced, highly nervous young man. At twenty-four, he'd never had a sexual experience, much less a girlfriend. As preparation for success, however, he carried in his pocket a condom purchased at a drugstore on Greenwich Avenue.

Born in Red Bank, New Jersey, he was educated at Princeton, class of 1916, and served in the Army Intelligence Corps. After the armistice he visited *Vanity Fair* in hopes of selling some of his undergraduate essays. It was Dottie Parker who came out to the reception area and shook his hand. The whiff of her extremely strong eau de cologne was impossible to ignore. Even though she was awfully pretty, "and although I needed a girl, what I considered the vulgarity of her too much perfume prevented me from paying court," he recalled afterward. In reality, he found himself gently shooed away like a slobbery puppy. All day long his hand smelled of her perfume, as if it had been pickled in Chypre, until he forced himself, reluctantly, to wash.

Recruited on an emergency basis to fill in for Dottie and Bob, he was first assigned to reading manuscripts. Benchley, calling him a scab, offered nonetheless to show him the ropes. Once Bob had left, Crownie offered Bunny a staff job with Benchley's title and duties, for less than half of his hundred-dollar-a-week salary. Since *Vanity Fair* was an influential publication—and because Bunny needed the experience—the position of managing editor represented the perfect stepping-stone into the publishing business.

Before long he found himself doing all Benchley's work and quite a bit more. When additional help became necessary, Crownie gave permission to hire a Princeton friend, John Peale Bishop, an aesthete whose taste for luxury rivaled his distaste for work. A self-styled poet, John looked the part with his languid manner and blue eyes watery as a fish. (In a novel just published, *This Side of Paradise*, F. Scott Fitzgerald had modeled his elegant patrician poet Tom D'Invilliers on John.)

Bunny felt uncomfortable around Crowninshield. He viewed him as an unsympathetic person whose peculiarities included smelling his mail before opening it and who liked to declare he was not as "genial" as he appeared. (Bunny agreed.) To certain visitors the sight of Crownie mincing around the office in his frock coat brought to mind "the manager of some exclusive seaside resort," an apt observation because his type must have sustained Gilbert and Sullivan through numerous operettas. His fey mannerisms fed rumors that the forty-seven-year-old bachelor was a homosexual. But Bunny disbelieved these stories because Crownie told him in confidence that a prostitute made regular house calls to his apartment.

Still, he never really came to trust his boss. Crowninshield once invited him to lunch—free lunch—at the Coffee House, his private social club, where he held forth to the long tables of diners about Dottie Parker and Bob Benchley in the most tasteless language. Then he turned to Bunny and warned him not to listen. But Bunny was already offended.

As the weeks passed, gaining self-confidence, Bunny loosened up. He began sporting a flashy yellow necktie with his Brooks Brothers suits. He rented an apartment in the Village with three friends and hired a West Indian woman to cook. At the office he and John Bishop horsed around playing "The Rape of the Sabine Women," a game in which they galloped about holding aloft Condé Nast's secretaries.

BUNNY FELL IN LOVE with Edna St. Vincent Millay on an April evening in Greenwich Village. Her husband and John met her at a party given by one of their Princeton friends, Hardwick Nevin, who had raved about her brilliance. Nevin explained that she would be arriving late, because she was performing a few blocks away, in a small role, at the Provincetown Playhouse. But they should be sure to wait. She was worth it. Bunny, who knew the poet by reputation for her admirable antiwar play *Aria da Capo*, needed no urging.

The party was crowded, and it was almost midnight before he spied her settled on the divan with a drink and a cigarette. Her slender body was draped in a brightly colored batik print dress, her mass of un-bobbed red hair spilling around flushed cheeks. Not a true beauty—her features were far from perfect—she conveyed the impression of being "almost supernaturally beautiful," he decided, and she had the aura of a person of importance.

Invited to recite, she replied that she was tired. Nonetheless, the room had already hushed. For some reason, she began offering information instead of poetry, telling the crowd how, after a reading in Ohio, a member of the audience had the temerity to ask her question. Interrogating a serious poet was shocking, she thought. What did they think? Since she did not wait for a reply, all of this appeared to be patter with a purpose, a bit of stage setting. She finally took a last puff of her cigarette. With a theatrical instinct for timing, she suddenly straightened her neck and threw back her head. Then she began to recite. The lovely, long

throat, the fake British accent, the way she pronounced every syllable distinctly, even her cigarettes, transfixed Bunny and John and everyone else in the room.

Afterward, observing her flanked by admirers, Bunny pondered the best approach. He finally stepped over and introduced himself as an editor at *Vanity Fair*, which got her complete attention. There were better showcases for her material than *Ainslee's* and *Current Opinion*, he said. Had she considered a magazine of high literary quality?

SLEEPING WITH THE BOY from *Vanity Fair* was probably a bad idea. But Vincent did it anyway. The chance to get “Dead Music—an Elegy” published in the magazine’s July issue was too tempting. Even better, the poem was accompanied by a plug for *Aria da Capo* and a paean to her brilliance—“One of the most distinctive personalities in modern American poetry”—although she knew herself to be a tiny fish swimming in a vast literary ocean.

Bunny, poor sweet Bunny, so naive about the opposite sex, had fallen in love with her. To prove it, he turned into a pest, penning very poor love poems and fussing over various strategies to advance her career. Complicating matters, his friend John Bishop had begun chasing her, too. Before long, she was resenting both of them. Why couldn’t they understand the complexities of the artistic temperament? A poet needed to be alone.

When she accompanied Bunny to his apartment one day to play the piano, he was enraptured. Glancing around his parlor, she complimented him on the handsome hand-carved mantelpiece.

It wasn’t hand-carved, he corrected her.

Well, she replied, the old mantel was just like life, “so much work and care put in on it and then look at it!” Following these preliminaries, she relieved him of his virginity, because sex meant little to her and he was obviously dying to do it. She would not deny having great fondness for sex, and she also enjoyed being in love, although not quite as much as she liked men and women falling in love with her. Once that happened, she soon got bored and wished they would disappear. Fortunately, most of her adventures ended fairly quickly, sometimes after a single encounter.

Bunny, however, refused to go away. Would she marry him? She didn’t want to hear it. She was three years his senior, she told him, and no Madonna to boot, having had more sexual partners than she could count on both hands, eighteen, give or take a few, by her calculations. (Her accounting methods may not have included the women, though.) But he insisted that neither age nor history made any difference; he still wanted to make her his wife.

ZELDA SAYRE WAS going to be married in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. She stepped off the train at Pennsylvania Station with her older sister Marjorie Brinson on Good Friday, April 2, the day before the wedding. Waiting for them were Gofo and his best man and also Zelda’s sister Rosalind, who lived in the city with her husband, Newman Smith. From the station the sisters went to the Biltmore Hotel, where rooms had been booked so they could freshen up and rest, but Zelda was too excited to relax. Montgomery, Alabama, where nothing had happened since the Civil War, lay behind her. So did Mama and the Judge and being the baby

of the family. Nobody in the wide world could tell her what to do now.

Zelda did not expect to accomplish grand things in life. As she saw it, this was less about laziness than from a complete lack of ambition. To hell with a career of her own. Being Zelda was quite enough. For girls such as herself, girls who believed in miracles, fame would come through a man. All she wanted was to be nineteen always. To find her soul mate. To be madly in love. To be horribly irresponsible. Who cared about the rest?

In February, when Zelda's period was late, Goofy mailed her a handful of pills from New York that were supposed to get rid of the baby. Disgusted, she threw them away, because everyone knew that only prostitutes had abortions. "God—or something" would make it turn out right, she told him. Sure enough, due to the grace of God or something, she was not pregnant after all. That very same month Metro Studios purchased a story of Goofy's for twenty-five hundred dollars, and Charles Scribner's Sons—the prestigious publisher of Edith Wharton and Henry James—prepared to release his novel. Undoubtedly, *This Side of Paradise* would become an enormous success. With the arrival of a platinum-and-diamond wristwatch engraved FROM SCOTT TO ZELDA, it was all settled. She was going to marry Scott Fitzgerald.

The third of April was a cold spring morning that felt more like Christmas than Easter to Zelda, accustomed to Montgomery's heat and humidity. At noon the wedding party gathered in the vestry of Saint Patrick's. Zelda, carrying a bouquet of orchids, wore a dark blue suit and matching hat trimmed with leather ribbons. The attendants were Scott's best man, Ludlow Fowler, and Rosalind Smith, the matron of honor, and her husband. Still to appear was Zelda's third sister Clothilde, who was coming from Tarrytown with her husband, John Palmer. But Scott began to grow restless after a few minutes of waiting. Before anybody realized what was happening, he impatiently brushed off Zelda's protests and hurried the priest into performing the ceremony. By the time Clothilde and John arrived, it had ended. Worse yet, Scott had neglected to plan a luncheon. There was no reception of any kind, not even a wedding cake to slice. The bridal couple simply turned and marched away from the cathedral, vanishing into the Easter crowds on Fifth Avenue. Zelda was nineteen, Scott a few years older, but even so, nothing excused such shocking rudeness. (The sisters would never forgive Scott and find any number of additional reasons to hate him.) Left to celebrate alone, Zelda's relatives found themselves shivering on the sidewalk and wondering where to eat lunch.

A cold drizzle fell in the days after the wedding. But to Zelda, who had never seen a building taller than ten stories, never ridden a subway or a taxi, the metropolis seemed like a Babylonian circus where everything and everybody was in a hurry. She could hardly wait to explore the town. On Fifth Avenue she climbed on the hood of a cab and discovered that riding on top of a taxi costs more than inside, and in Washington Square she did not hesitate to jump into the fountain. She and Scott got themselves chased out of *George White's Scandal* after they began giggling and he stood up and pretended to undress in the middle of the theater. To their room high above the city on the twenty-first floor of the Biltmore, which to her smelled sweetly like marshmallows, they were constantly inviting people over for all-night parties. She could not have been more surprised when the hotel management, seeing the room being trashed, insisted that they leave. They checked out—and then immediately checked into the sleek new Commodore with its two thousand rooms, where they spun mad

in the revolving door, did cartwheels down the rose-carpeted corridors, and continued to make a ruckus with Scott's friends.

Acting like a couple of nuts was perfectly natural to Zelda. She'd always been different, a girl whose brain did not work in the same way as others'. At home, where she stood out as a cutup, some people called her wild; others just said nobody had more guts than the Judge's daughter.

DURING THE WAR Montgomery was overrun with soldiers from Camp Sheridan. At the country club one night, Zelda danced with a boy who introduced himself as Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, a Yankee who immediately said one of his ancestors (a second cousin three times removed) had written the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Never would she forget her first glimpse of him strolling around the club as if angels' wings were lifting him off the ground. His canary-colored hair and light green eyes were like no other boy's she had ever seen. His features were as pretty as a girl's. Dancing with him, she thought that "he smelled like new goods," as exciting as an unwrapped Christmas package. Before long, the lieutenant from Minnesota was camping on her front porch on Pleasant Avenue. He was a writer, he said; indeed, he talked nervously and incessantly about a novel he had written, a tale inspired by his experiences at Princeton, a school he had flunked out of. *The Romantic Egotist*, twice rejected by Scribner's, was being revised. Someday he was going to be terrifically famous.

Without any way of judging his ability, Zelda was almost tempted to take his word for it, but what she did know—and this was her main concern—was that this Romeo had no money. Her purpose in life was to be a wife, preferably a rich and pampered wife. While she could never marry a man unable to support her, Scott Fitzgerald and his wild ideas were intriguing. Montgomery girls did not usually meet writers; they more often brought home football players from Georgia Tech.

DOTTIE GLANCED at Scott's bride. No, she decided, Zelda was not particularly beautiful.

They were lunching at the Algonquin. To avoid the clubbish atmosphere of the Round Room, the backdrop for daily gatherings of the Round Table, they met in the small Oak Room restaurant next to the lobby. Same \$1.65 blue-plate special—same broiled spring chicken, cauliflower hollandaise, buttered beets, fried potatoes, same free popovers—but no celebrities. At a narrow table they snuggled shoulder to shoulder on a banquette with their backs propped against the wall, Dottie, Bunny, Scott, and Zelda. The seating arrangement made conversation a bit awkward.

"This looks like a road company of the Last Supper," Dottie said.

Listening to Scott's goofy ideas, his enthusiasm, and, above all, his unshakable confidence in the future made Dottie smile. He seemed much younger than his twenty-three years—"God! How I miss my youth," he once cried to Bunny—and everything about him was small-town. There was, however, nothing provincial about his ambitions. No sooner had Scribner's accepted *This Side of Paradise* than he began predicting sales of twenty thousand.

Some of the editors laughed. Face facts. First novels were lucky to sell five thousand.

Not sell twenty thousand? he replied. Why of course it would.

Scott's editor was a quiet young man in his mid-thirties, guarded, sensitive, and shy. Maxwell Perkins had put his job on the line for Scott Fitzgerald, or, as he wished to call himself, F. Scott Fitzgerald, because of an overwhelming feeling that the boy from St. Paul had talent worth fostering. Perkins was perhaps the only one at Scribner's not surprised when the novel sold twenty thousand copies within two weeks of publication, transforming Fitzgerald into the most-talked-about author in town.

Success made Scott giddy. At lunch he talked about nothing but himself, his sales figures, his ads ("WERE YOU EVER UNDER THIRTY? Then Read This Side of Paradise"), his state of mind ("manic depressive insanity"). But he was also itching for this chance to show off his new wife, all fresh and pouty-lipped, like a baby being wheeled along in a pram by a dotingly daddy.

For months Scott had been bragging about the most beautiful girl below the Mason-Dixon Line, and so Dottie had imagined the kind of fiddle-dee-dee coquette found on her veranda by Sherman's army. It was surprising to discover that this person with the odd name Zelda was anything but frivolous. Her hair, honey-colored, was bobbed daringly around her ears in the latest fashion. She was chomping gum and speaking in an Alabama drawl. As for the face Dottie had seen it any number of times on various chocolate tins: the tiny, petulant boy's mouth and the girly-girl pout. (A spoiled brat who thinks she's "queen of the campus," sniffed one of the Round Table regulars.)

In his optimism over the book, F. Scott Fitzgerald was cute, Dottie decided. But the Kewpie-doll bride was a bit of a bumpkin.

DURING LUNCH Zelda had an opportunity to take the measure of "Mrs. Parker," whose shadowy husband was never seen and for all Zelda knew may not even have been alive. She was not particularly impressed. To Zelda, who had perfected the gift of smiling politely without listening (so that you wondered what she was really thinking), Dottie was one of those older professional women, no doubt pushing twenty-five, who continued to wear old-fashioned long hair and Merry Widow hats. Her condescension, the almighty superiority of the native over the foreigner, could not have been more obvious. But Zelda didn't mind. In fact, she showed so little curiosity about others that she sometimes appeared indifferent, not slow-witted. Unlike Scott, she wanted people to like her, but if they didn't it was no concern. She found women especially boring. "The only excuse for women was the necessity for a disturbing element among men," she was made to say in Scott's novel, a cheeky statement but nevertheless an accurate summation of her feelings. Most women were cowards, she thought.

In Montgomery, Zelda's father was a circuit-court judge, later associate justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, where he was known as "The Brains of the Bench," and she was his father's daughter. Graduating from Sidney Lanier High School, class of 1918, she had more formal schooling than Dottie, whose higher education ended at fourteen, when she dropped out of Miss Dana's School after one semester, for reasons she declined to explain. But unlike Dottie, a prodigious reader, educated herself and could recite Shakespeare from memory.

Zelda made no pretense of being a scholar, let alone a reader. She had never finished a serious book in her life. Where she came from, girls washed their hair and powdered themselves and slipped into dainty dresses. Each afternoon was “a garden party and the whole town bathed and dressed and set out in the summer sunshine smelling of talcum powder and orris root,” she would write. Nobody was the slightest bit interested in memorizing Shakespeare.

“NO EVENING CLOTHES,” the man mumbled.

On opening night Edna Ferber was standing at the back of Ford’s Grand Opera House in Baltimore next to a beefy, neckless fellow with a dead cigar pasted to his lips. *\$1200 a Year* was practically over, but Sam Harris had yet to utter a single comment. Knowing him to be slightly deaf, she took care to speak distinctly.

“Well, Mr. Harris?” She waited.

Finally the Broadway impresario turned and glanced at her. “Needs a lot of work,” he said. What made him think so?

“No evening clothes,” he repeated.

But her play had nothing to do with evening clothes, she objected. *\$1200 a Year* wasn’t mindless fluff. It was about teachers’ salaries, please. There were insights.

Harris shook his head.

Edna shook her head back at him. For one thing, this was a comedy. For another, there was plenty of food for serious thought. (An economics professor struggles to make ends meet on twelve hundred dollars a year, while the town’s mill workers are earning twenty to thirty dollars a day. He gives up his job to work as a laborer.)

Harris did not look overly pleased. Where are the laughs? he said.

Where indeed. But she knew what he meant. The dialogue had sounded hilarious when she and her collaborator, Newman Levy, were blocking out the script, but the opening-night audience sat there like mourners at a funeral Mass. Clearly, they just didn’t get it. And neither, apparently, did the Baltimore critics, who next morning would call it a propagandic play about capital and labor, which made no sense to Edna.

Ford’s Grand Opera House offered its patrons a full season of shows bound for Broadway. Productions opened every Monday, and closed every Saturday, with some pushing on to fame in New York and the rest meeting their demise at Ford’s. At the end of the week Sam Harris dispatched *\$1200 a Year* to the graveyard.

In overwhelming disbelief, Edna went home to New York, back to the hotel suite she shared with her mother. She had failed.

HANGING ABOVE the edge of Central Park and Seventy-second Street, opposite the Dakota, was one of those lofty hotels that Edith Wharton described as a fleet of battleships moored “along the upper reaches of the West Side.” The lobby of the battleship in which Edna lived, the Hotel Majestic, was a palette of palm fronds and red carpet. On the tenth floor she sat

hunched over the Underwood all day. She was in the habit of working in her bathrobe, stockings rolled at the knees, hair drooping, fingernails as chipped as a charwoman's. No telephone calls. No cigarettes either. No food except water and chewing gum. Sometimes her mind wandered downtown, to Aleck Woollcott and the rest of them around the big lunch table at the Algonquin. Edna, who never bothered with lunch, found it a bit ridiculous that the Round Table would continue to hum well into mid-afternoon. When did those people work? To Edna, writing involved a combination of "ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill and childbirth," not hanging around the Gonk trading wisecracks. She waited until afternoon to read her morning mail and warned people never to telephone "unless someone in the family is murdered."

Fond of presenting herself as a humbly born daughter of the soil, Edna actually came from a family of shopkeepers. When a kid, she was shaped by prairie anti-Semitism in a succession of whistle-stops such as Ottumwa, Iowa, a coal-mining burg where "there was [not] a day when I wasn't called a sheeny." Far more pleasant was Appleton, Wisconsin, with its forty Jewish families, where her mother ran a dry-goods store. Julia Ferber, a shrewd businesswoman who supported the family after her husband lost his sight, had become the real-life prototype for many of Edna's characters.

For months Edna had been struggling with a novel about three generations of Chicago women. Each morning she would station herself religiously at the Underwood and shove fresh sheets of paper into the machine, but the writing only inched along until she was frantic. She was a successful writer of short fiction for magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Woman's Home Companion*. She had also published a half-dozen collections of stories and two novels. Several movies and a Broadway play, *Our Mrs. McChesney*, starring Ethel Barrymore, were based on her work. After ten years, shouldn't she be in her prime? She expected fiction to be easy by now.

It wasn't. Interminable hours at the Underwood sometimes produced a mishmash of awkward sentences and dumb metaphors. She found herself taking wrong turns and wandering down blind alleys, until finally *The Girls* just squatted there like a stubborn child. Edna was sensitive to criticism, and she was painfully aware of belittling remarks made by certain other writers. In an offensive recent novel a Princeton boy named Fitzgerald had laughingly lumped her with Zane Grey the popular writer of Westerns. Edna did not like being laughed at.

A latecomer to fiction, Edna published her first short story when she was twenty-four. It was more or less an accident. After a half-dozen years as a newspaper reporter, she suddenly fell into depression, quit her job, and spent her time in bed staring at the wallpaper, going steadily downhill. She was on the verge of becoming a real basket case when she bought a secondhand typewriter and decided to try writing. The story she began pecking out was about a fat girl who weighs two hundred pounds, "ugly, not only when the story opens, but to the bitter end"—not your ordinary heroine. Pearlle Schultz was Edna, who always believed herself ugly. (Everyone said so, she told a friend, "except mother and even she has moments of doubt.") When *Everybody's Magazine* accepted "The Homely Heroine" and sent her a check for \$50.60, Edna had mixed feelings. She never did figure out the sixty cents, but it made her so furious—"the old stingy-guts!" she thought—she never sent *Everybody's* another story. For

her first novel, published by Frederick A. Stokes a year later, she used her own experiences as a newspaperwoman. The heroine of *Dawn O'Hara, the Girl Who Laughed* is not homely or fat. She is beautiful, thin, and Irish, and her adventures sold ten thousand copies.

By 1920 Edna had built a loyal audience, fans who appreciated good storytelling about great literature, but this didn't satisfy her. She was still sitting in the cheap seats, without a "literary" novel that would ensure her a decent obituary in the *New York Times*. Why kill herself?

The failure of *\$1200 a Year* was a bitter disappointment. Her trouble starting the new novel was another blow to her confidence, and so she grumbled about everything: the city that she normally loved ("I hate New York"), the new fashions that put grown women in skimpy schoolgirl skirts, the writers who earned more than she did. "Everybody who is writing," even those with tin ears for language, was earning a minimum of \$100,000 a year. Every writer except herself, she fumed.

"Stop it," scolded her good friend Bill White. (William Allen White, a well-known political journalist, was editor and publisher of the *Emporia Gazette* in Kansas.) She should quit worrying about other writers' bank accounts.

Of course, hardly anybody was earning \$100,000 (\$1 million in current dollars)—plenty of writers were living on beans—and she knew it. Several years earlier, a big-money literary agent asked to represent her. She gave Paul Reynolds a cool reception. What was in it for her? Why should she throw away her earnings on commissions when she could place her own writing?

Could he have just fifteen minutes of her time to talk it over? Reynolds asked.

Why not? she replied. "There are heaps and shoals, and floods of money in this country that I might get, and don't. I know that."

So did Reynolds, which was why he continued his pursuit.

Edna usually took out her frustrations on Bill White. Another close friend to whom she regularly complained was F.P.A. Frank Adams was an experienced journalist, a wit who wrote a weekly diary in the style of Samuel Pepys, but he also happened to be a superb editor, a purist when it came to language. For many years he had been married to a handsome showgirl (a former member of the famed Floradora sextet), their only offspring a large white cat, and his column constantly mentioned both Minna and Mistah, giving the impression of conjugal happiness, deliberately leaving out conjugal warfare. Frank, probably the sexiest homely man in the city, had a roving eye for long-legged beauties, but he also got along famously with smart women such as Edna, and it was not unusual for the two of them to spend several evenings a week together. Frank, though sympathetic to Edna's writing paralysis, had no idea how to help her get unstuck.

Edna's goal was to complete "three pages if possible—a thousand words a day—a thousand words a day—a thousand words a day, day after day, week after week, month after month. On her worst days she could manage to squeeze out only fifty or a hundred words, on a good day as many as three or four thousand, enough for her to feel satisfied when she left the typewriter. What was the secret to decent writing? Sitting there until you got it right? As she knew, this was not a trivial question. Throughout the spring Edna spent hours in her bathro-

each day. There really was nothing else to do.

. . .

ALL ZELDA MANAGED to do some days was soak in the tub and lunch on tomato sandwiches. But this time the Fitzgeralds had begun to feel so exhausted they had to get out of the city. Hopefully, peace of mind could be found in Westport, Connecticut, a shorefront town on Long Island Sound where they rented a shingled colonial cottage on Compo Road. They hired a Japanese servant to cook and keep house, and Zelda joined a beach club. While writing short stories for the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Metropolitan*, earning up to nine hundred dollars a piece, Scott made plans to work on his next project, *The Flight of the Rocket*.

Within weeks, however, Zelda began to chafe at being stranded in the suburbs. Scott spent long stretches at the typewriter and wearily insisted that bills were giving him the jitters. Her withdrawal into work during the day left her alone with nothing to do but baby her hangovers and sip lemonade. When the weather warmed up, she went swimming in the afternoons.

Despite her moaning and groaning about feeling useless, she was in fact contributing more than she realized to the family business. In *This Side of Paradise*, the Rosalind character was originally modeled on Scott's rich Chicago girlfriend Ginevra King, but by the final revision he had spliced in the unmistakable traits of the far more unconventional Zelda Sayre. His book immediately immortalized the "flapper," a word now being used for trendsetting young women with short hair and short skirts who smoked, drank, and used powder and rouge, everybody hot to defy traditional female roles. In stories such as "The Ice Palace" and "The Jelly-Bean," Scott reproduced the thoughts and behavior of his own flapper, until eventually he would have trouble creating a female character who was not a portrait of his wife. Around his friends, he made no effort to hide how much he owed Zelda for supplying the content of his current stories as well as *The Flight of the Rocket*.

Beyond borrowing Zelda's personality and ideas, he had begun to appropriate her writing as well. Before her marriage Zelda kept a diary so original that Scott took the liberty of copying whole passages verbatim, without any attempt to paraphrase, as if it were his own work. Typed extracts went to his editor. "You'll recognize much of the dialogue," he told Max Perkins. "Please don't show it to anyone else." Zelda saw nothing wrong with being her husband's muse. It was flattering.

Newly settled on Compo Road, the Fitzgeralds started giving out their number, Westport 64 Ring 4, and consequently the telephone never stopped ringing. Even though Westport was only an hour from New York, it was considered the country. "They filled the house with guests every weekend, and often on through the week," as Scott would write in *The Beautiful and Damned*, because they "hated being there alone." The visitors were largely Scott's bachelor friends from Princeton, and soon the gray house began to resemble a fraternity where Zelda was the only woman, a situation that made her happy. In Montgomery she had always sought the company of boys, who were more willing than her girlfriends to serve as accomplices for stealing a streetcar or begging change at the train station. In Westport there were plenty of men, drunk or sober, willing to drive her down to the city whenever she fe

like getting away from Scott.

Despite good intentions, it was turning out to be a summer of a thousand giant orange blossoms, with their biggest household expense the bootlegger. On a single night in July, Scott dropped forty-three dollars for booze (an enormous sum equal to almost five hundred dollars today). For both him and Zelda evenings were spent getting drunk, and mornings feeling like hell.

Westport, a peaceable village characterized by lawn mowers and cocktail shakers, was infested with marital land mines. A good deal of petting and patting of other men's wives took place. After Scott became flirtatious with Tallulah Bankhead's sister Eugenia, Zelda retaliated with George Jean Nathan, co-editor with Henry Mencken of *The Smart Set*. Nathan had become friends with both of them, and Scott was basing a character in his new novel on the editor. "Dear Blonde," George began letters to Zelda, and wittily concluded them "Prisoner of Zelda." Certainly he admired her sass, and she in turn was pleased by his attention. One of her favorite stops in the city became his apartment in the Royalton Hotel on West Forty-fourth across the street from the Algonquin. A debonair bachelor of thirty-eight, a sophisticated man-about-town, he was known for his absinthe cocktails and affairs with married women. When Zelda showed some of his amorous letters to Scott, George became alarmed. She was a bewitching creature, he told her, but she was also an idiot. Why didn't she rent a post office box? At one of Nathan's parties, she told a friend, "I cut my toe on a broken bottle and can't possibly sit on the three stitches that are in it now—The bottle was bath salts—I was boiled—The place was a tub somewhere." What she could not remember was exactly how she wound up naked in George's bathtub. "It's been a wild summer, thank God."

Everybody, in fact, was wild and boiled and never cared what he or she did. The Boston Post Road between Westport and New York roared with drunks running their motorcars in stone walls and fireplugs. It didn't matter, because nobody would arrest them. The police minded their own business.

Zelda wrote, much later, about the sights and sounds of that first summer of her marriage: the roadhouse where they always stopped to stock up on gin, George Nathan playing "Cudd up a Little Closer" on the piano, the upsetting quarrels with her husband—and her need for him too. "Without you, dearest, dearest I couldn't see or feel or think—or live—I love you so..." Scott, too, was to look back later. But in contrast to Zelda's cool, dry-eyed recitation of details, he would become overwhelmed with nostalgia. On one afternoon, he recalled, he rode through midtown in a taxi and "I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and I knew I would never be so happy again."

To a great extent, *This Side of Paradise*, which went through nine printings in its first year, appealed to the younger generation. Scott was being compared to Rupert Brooke, the British soldier-poet who had died in France. (His title was from a poem of Brooke's.) While the book was extensively reviewed, and praised for its originality, not everybody liked the writing, and some detractors were inclined to view the novel as an example of crass commercialism having nothing whatsoever to do with literature. Heywood Broun, the *New York Tribune's* most important reviewer, found it so juvenile that he wondered if this F. Scott Fitzgerald could actually be twenty-three. His writing was "complacent," "pretentious," and "selfish."

conscious;" the unlikable characters, Amory Blaine and his snobbish Ivy League friends, were effete creatures, best described as "male flappers." Scott, bristling over this slap in the face, had dismissed Broun, who was thirty-one, as an old codger. As if Broun weren't bad enough, Frank Adams scorned *This Side of Paradise* as "sloppy and cocky." Every chance he got, Frank printed lists of mistakes and spelling errors—"flambuoyant," "Ghunga Dhin"—to the amusement of *Tribune* readers. It was embarrassing for Scott, though. "FPA is at it again," he complained to Max Perkins.

Scott's admirers, oblivious of his atrocious spelling, continued to snap up the book. They were crazy about the story, the author, and the author's wife. By this time Zelda had earned national reputation as the ultimate flapper, a figure of extreme glamour personifying the new image of "flaming youth." In interviews Scott proudly announced, "I married the heroine of my stories," while Zelda posed for rotogravures with her skirt inches above her knees. A few months ago she had been living in Montgomery, and nobody knew her name. Now she had her picture in magazines. And this was her real life, no fairy tale.

THREE HUNDRED MILES north of the city the June sun beat down at midday and turned the sand the color of burned sugar, and the mosquitoes whizzed all through the salty night. Vincent and her family left behind the furnished rooms on Nineteenth Street to spend the summer in a borrowed bungalow near the tip of Cape Cod, in Truro. It was a weathered two-story cottage on Old King's Road, just behind the dunes, the kind of house that lacked indoor plumbing and electricity. But a hedge of wild roses studded with whining bees bloomed along the front porch, and there was a nostalgic resemblance to the homes of her Maine childhood—wrong-side-of-the-tracks places with a few sticks of furniture and no electricity or heat.

Despite minor discomforts, Vincent had her Corona portable, which was everything she needed to work. She was happy to be away from the noise and speed of the city, where crossing the streets petrified her sometimes. Gone, too, were the people who had cluttered up her life. With a borrowed Victrola, on which she continuously played Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, she wrote sonnets such as "Pity Me Not Because the Light of Day" for *Vanity Fair* and short stories for the dependable *Ainslee's* magazine. Unfortunately, this idyllic state did not last. Before many weeks had passed, men she left behind in New York, the ones who could not live without her, began nipping at her heels. Bunny, for one, had encouraged her leaving, but his enthusiasm was far from genuine. He became cranky after learning she would be gone four or five months. Sometimes, though, she couldn't help missing him and remembering how sweet he'd been to her. More often she lost patience with his doglike mooning.

He no longer knew what to say to her, Bunny moaned.

That made two of them, she said. "What would you like me to write?"

Another morose lover was John Bishop, who had spent the spring attempting to lure Vincent to his midtown apartment as often as possible. At their last meeting she breezed in late and did not hesitate to admit that she had just come from another man's bed. What's more, she was pressed for time because she was meeting someone else (her third sexual encounter of the day). Where two-timing treatment of this sort might have cooled most men,

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