

The Summer
We Read Gatsby



Danielle Ganek

Viking

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Also by Danielle Ganek

Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him

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*For Harry,
who just read Gatsby for the first time*

Summer 2008

Hats, like first husbands in my experience, are usually a mistake. But the invitation was specific. And demanding. A GATSBY party. Wear white. And below that, in imploring cursive: “Hats for the Ladies.”

It’s still unclear to me how *hats* were involved in Fitzgerald’s story—only a few are mentioned in the novel—or, frankly, why any adult above the age of twenty would care to attend this sort of *theme* party. I’m also still not sure that this part of the story—how Miles Noble’s first party at the house that took five years to design and build came to be themed around this book he’d once given my sister—was ever fully explained, but as Peck kept pointing out, I was a foreigner, so what the hell did I know?

Like many of her observations, this one wasn’t entirely accurate. Peck, short for Pecksland—that’s the sort of mother she has—is my half sister. We shared the same father, although he died when I was three and she was seven, after he’d left her mother for mine. I’m as American as she is, with the same navy blue passport. It’s just that I never lived in the States and, according to her, I don’t know *anybody*, or any of the sorts of people she would have liked me to know: American celebrities, fashion designers, New York socialites, people who could get a table at a place called the Waverly Inn, those sorts.

I didn’t own any hats of the kind I imagined Daisy Buchanan might have worn, but on this, as on so many things, Peck was adamant. She not only insisted (read: begged, pleaded, and threatened to kick me out of the house) that I accompany her to Miles Noble’s party, but also that I follow the odd, specific sartorial directions. She was often adamant, often about absurd things, but particularly about hats. On this, there’d been no room for argument. She hadn’t seen Miles in seven years and she needed someone—me—by her side for this encounter.

I’d only been in Southampton for three days and I was in no mood for a party. Even one hosted by Peck kept dramatically exclaiming, by the first and only man she’d ever loved. It was the Fourth of July, a holiday about which I’d always been reverent, but at that point in the summer I was still jaundiced and cynical, a divorced twenty-eight-year-old aspiring writer whose creative ambitions had led only to a dead-end job as a translator at a lifestyle magazine for tourists in Switzerland. And my only blood relative, aside from the half sister I hardly knew, had only been gone a couple of months. I was far more saddened by Lydia’s death than I might have expected, especially as I hadn’t seen my aunt in a few years. I was a weepy, confused mess and was finding it hard to be there, in her house without her. So at first I politely declined Peck’s invitation to join her.

But being polite and declining invitations do not agree with my glamorously eccentric half sister, and since I was at the very beginning of what was supposed to be a month of sisterly togetherness

the house we'd jointly inherited from Aunt Lydia, I reluctantly agreed to go with her. In the interest of getting along, I pulled the only dress I'd brought with me from my suitcase of jeans and T-shirts and borrowed a hat from the strange assortment Aunt Lydia had left in the house, unwisely choosing a drooping off-white bowler that made my head itch and kept falling over my eyes as Peck ineptly maneuvered our aunt's ancient station wagon down the driveway.

"There's a situation," she announced as she pulled into the sun-dappled street, spraying gravel like she was commandeering a get-away car. This is a standard expression from Peck, who tends to speak in proclamations and for whom life is one long series of *situations*. A situation could be anything from the mysteriously locked safe in Aunt Lydia's closet that we had not been able to open to the girl wearing nothing but wet tighty-whitey BVDs we'd witnessed just that morning slowly pedaling her bicycle home from the beach. (Or the situation could be *me*.)

"The *situation*," Peck explained, in the aggrieved tone of an irrelevant monarch, "is that you and I can't agree on *anything*."

This was true. I was trying, I really was. But to say it wasn't going well between Peck and me would be an oversimplification. The first three days had been, well, strained. Inheritances will do that, people tell me. Our circumstances weren't necessarily unusual: a beloved elderly aunt bequeathing a small second home to two nieces who must come together to settle the estate. Except the two nieces, half-sisters raised an ocean apart by two utterly different women who'd both loved the same man, had a *complicated* relationship. And it was a house in the Hamptons. Southampton, to be specific. (Apparently there are nuances I couldn't possibly understand, being a *foreigner*.) Also, as Peck kept telling me, nobody calls it "the Hamptons."

Certain types of New Yorkers, I was to learn, and style-obsessed Peck, to her delight, was now one of *these* New Yorkers, go to the Country on weekends and in the summers. To them "the Country" refers to anyplace outside Manhattan, which is "the City." The City is where you live during the week. On the weekends, you go to the Country. Even suburbs like Larchmont and Scarsdale are the Country to such city people, as are Southampton, East Hampton, and Westhampton. These were the sorts of distinctions about which my sister was appalled to find I didn't already know.

"Literally." Peck often started a sentence that way. Lit-*tra*-ly. It was a verbal tic and could be contagious. She sped up and then slammed on the brakes as she cursed the driver ahead of us. "I don't see how we could be related. You have no sense of *priorities*."

This was a theme she kept revisiting. Peck felt vehemently that we should ignore Lydia's wishes—"It's not like she would *know*"—and keep the house we'd inherited. In her view, to trade the house for money was like looking a gift horse in the mouth and, therefore, terrible manners. I was far less prone to vehemence, but on this Lydia's mandate for us had been clear. And I had absolutely no interest in keeping what would only be a sad reminder that all of them, my father, my mother, and my aunt, all the members of that generation of Moriartys, were gone. Only Peck's mother was still around, and she was living in Palm Springs, "where she belongs," as Peck, who adored her mother, put it.

In her opinion, I should have immediately jumped to the obvious solution, one that involved not moving to New York, where *everybody* lives, allowing us to keep the house in Southampton for shared weekends and summers. Or I should go back to Switzerland, where, last she checked, the Hampton Jitney—an evocative name for what was nothing more than a big green bus that took people from Manhattan to the villages of the Hamptons and back—did not make any stops, and simply leave the house in Southampton to her. She didn't see why she should be forced to sell just because I was so determined to be, in her view, *difficult*.

“Lydia made it pretty clear in the will she didn’t expect us to keep it,” I said. “I’d like to honor her wishes.” Whenever I pointed out that Peck couldn’t afford to keep the house, that ~~we~~ we couldn’t afford to keep the house—even together, according to the lawyers, we couldn’t afford to pay the taxes, let alone for any of the maintenance on the place—she would sigh dramatically and change the subject. “You know what your problem is?” she would ask, and then pause, as if awaiting a response. “You’re afraid to *live*.”

Now she made a sound like a harrumph. “Were you always so obedient?”

“I suppose so,” I said.

She looked over at me for far longer than seemed comfortable, considering that we were now going sixty in a thirty-five-mile-an-hour zone. “See, that’s the thing with you. You’ve got to come out of your shell. Life is just too goddamned short for that kind of attitude.”

That morning, I’d made things worse, voicing the perhaps too caustic opinion that she was only interested in seeing Miles Noble again because she’d recently discovered that he’d become such a financial success that he’d built himself an enormous house—a place that grew larger, “twenty thousand square feet,” “thirty thousand square feet, at least,” every time I heard Peck express his enthusiasm about seeing it—in Bridgehampton.

Pointing out that my half sister seemed more intrigued with the idea of this extravagant evidence of wealth than she was with the man himself was not something that needed to be said, I’ll admit. But she had been going on and on endlessly about that very subject—“Literally? I can’t believe he’s so . . . successful”—since I’d arrived, so I wasn’t exactly being the contrarian. I was simply trying to get out of putting on a dress and a hat and going with her.

Since then, she’d been even more impatient with me, and she made another noise when I clutched the armrest as she swerved to avoid a woman walking three Labradors. “*Jesus Christ*,” I muttered, as we then narrowly missed a Range Rover headed in the opposite direction.

“Don’t be so *nervous*,” Peck said in a tone that had grown increasingly peevish all day. She always seemed irritated by me, but since my arrival in Southampton she’d added a dash of what could only interpret as disappointment. “I’m the one who should be nervous. I’m going to see Miles Noble again for the first time since he broke my heart clean in two.”

I opened the window. Air rushed in, smelling intoxicatingly of salt and honeysuckle, and something else too, something like ambition. I breathed in deeply.

“Watch the hair,” Peck warned. She had fantastic hair, a red-gold cascade she liked to wear fluffed out as big as possible around her face. “Otherwise I look like a pinhead,” she’d say, in the self-deprecating manner specific to the truly vain.

A Philip Treacy hat—I knew it was Philip Treacy because she kept telling me, dropping the name as though it might mean something to me—was pinned precariously into her curls, and she had on a lovely cut vintage flapper dress. It was white, of course, and showed off her spectacular cleavage—she referred to her breasts as “the twins”—to advantage. “God, I look a wreck,” she complained, although of course she didn’t at all. She’d made an effort and she looked magnificent, regal and cool and stylish at the same time.

“Look at my nails,” she cried out, flashing a hand in front of my face. “I’ve bitten them all down to the quick with nerves. And of course this dress is wrong. All wrong.”

Peck is what she likes to call a Fashionina. “I coined that term,” she’d explain, whether you cared for an explanation or not. “Everyone calls people like me Fashionistas. But the *Fashionina* is an entirely different creature.” According to Peck, a Fashionina is more elegant than a Fashionista; a Fashionina knows about taste and style, whereas a Fashionista is all about trends. She described her

fashion sense as “rock ’n’ roll Auntie Mame.” She took such things seriously, as befitted a fashion diva, and over the years her style had evolved into full-fledged glamour with a vintage 1930s flair. was ill-mannered, she liked to tell me, not to make an effort.

Of *my* dress—a long white cotton thing—she’d sniffed, “Hippie chic.” And then, “You really should do something with your hair,” because I’d emerged from a shower with it wet and hanging down my back. I was sure I was the one who looked “a wreck.” I felt haggard and exhausted and my nails to were bitten to the quick. “Actually don’t.” She’d reconsidered. “I’m just jealous. I’ve always been *insanely* jealous of you. I wish I could waltz down here with no makeup, in an old nightie and with stringy wet hair, and look like that.”

It was the kind of thing she said but didn’t really mean. Or meant only halfheartedly. She may have carried a tiny bit of residual resentment of the fact that our father left her mother (and her) for mine (and, a few months later, me). But our dad had now been dead for twenty-five years, and she wasn’t jealous of me at all. After all, as she’d pointed out more than a few times in the past few days, there wasn’t any reason for anyone to be jealous of me. I had a boring job in a boring country that wasn’t New York. (Switzerland is a place she and other people often confuse with Sweden.) Peck, on the other hand, was an actor. (She was one of *those* theater people, the ones who tell you about their craft and never, ever stop believing in themselves.) And she lived in Manhattan, or “the greatest city in the world,” as she usually put it. (Yes, she was one of *those* New Yorkers.)

“Maybe you shouldn’t read too much into this party,” I cautioned as we passed the field where I remembered picking strawberries with Aunt Lydia the first time I visited Southampton. I was trying to be conciliatory, but like many of my attempts at communicating with Peck it came out all wrong. She’d read Miles Noble’s calligraphed invitation as a summons, a call to destiny from her past. I had a tendency to be more cautious about people and their intentions. Far too cautious, she would tell me.

“Maybe it’s just a theme,” I went on. “You know, white dresses, green lawns, finger bowls of champagne that change the scene before your eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound.” I was paraphrasing from the novel because that was the sort of annoying thing I did when I was nervous, but she didn’t seem to notice. “*Gatsby* is that kind of book.”

To this she sputtered, “Don’t tell *me* what kind of book it is. You hadn’t even read *The Great Gatsby* until I gave it to you.”

This was true. I was twenty-one that summer I read *Gatsby* for the first time. It was 2001, and I arrived to spend what would then be my third summer at Aunt Lydia’s house with the older half sister who intimidated me. Twenty-one is late to encounter the story of James Gatz and his love for the elusive Daisy, but I’d spent a peripatetic childhood in Europe, and this classic American novel had not been on the curriculum at any of the schools my mother had found for me.

I would have missed many of the American classics had it not been for my aunt Lydia, an English teacher at an all-boys academy, Saint Something’s, in Manhattan. Lydia was the first person to encourage me to write. “Start early,” she’d advised. “Get a first novel under your belt now.” I was nine years old, spending my first summer with her in Southampton. After that, every year she would send me the summer reading list she always gave her class, and a box of books. Occasionally she visited and brought the books and the list in person. I got used to cataloguing my summers according to the books she gave me. There was the Summer We Read *Nancy Drew*, the Summer We Read *The Catcher in the Rye*, the Summer We Read Edith Wharton, and the Summer We Read *Catch-22*.

The summer of 2001 became the Summer We Read *Gatsby*. My aunt had assumed I’d already read it, and because she taught the book during the school year, it didn’t appear on the reading lists she gave her class. It was Peck who gave me the book. That summer, she introduced me to many things

besides F. Scott Fitzgerald: the dressing drink, a topspin forehand, thong underwear, proper smoking technique, and Woody Allen. Her introduction to Woody Allen took the form of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, not literally Mr. Allen, but it was powerful all the same.

Peck was twenty-five then, already plump and gravel-voiced, theatrically and obsessive recovering from what she called “the denouement of the greatest love story ever told.” Her recovery took the form of chain-smoking, devouring cupcakes, and mooning about pretending to read the copy of *The Great Gatsby* that Miles Noble had given her when they first met. “I’m *obsessed*,” she would tell me, waving her paperback. “I’m absolutely mad for this book. You know, a literary fetish is the new black.”

Miles had read everything Fitzgerald ever wrote, he told her. “Like the Dylan song,” I said when she repeated this detail, telling the story of how they met. She didn’t get the reference. “Bob Dylan?” she’d muttered irritably. “What’s he got to do with the price of tea in China?”

Her first words to me that summer of 2001 were “I hate you,” but she’d delivered them in a cheerful enough manner, which was confusing to the pale and fragile student I was then, still grieving my mother’s death, overwhelmed at the random nature of life’s ironies. She’d just finished at NYU—she hadn’t graduated, she’d simply *finished*—and was planning to become famous, and she held the pages of her book with one finger and gazed at me with curiosity. “Just kidding,” she said a few seconds later. “It’s just that you’re so freaking skinny. And you look just like Daddy.”

Daddy? He’d been dead for eighteen years. But I did resemble our father, or at least the few photographs of him I’d seen. I had his dark wavy hair and brown eyes and I was angular, like him, while Peck took after her mother, with freckled Irish skin that burned easily and wide-set blue eyes.

Miles Noble looked like Jim Morrison, according to Peck. He was brilliant, sexy, the funniest guy she’d ever known. His name had come to be a sort of shorthand for the perfect guy, an inside joke for the half sisters who grew up separated by an ocean, without much in the way of inside material. When Jean-Paul, the now-ex-husband my friends referred to as “that awful Jean-Paul”—as though that were his full name, That-Awful-Jean-Paul—turned out to be so, well, awful, Peck said to me, “He was never your Miles Noble, was he?”

Men were always falling in love with Peck, or so she would tell me. And she did have a regal air that seemed to bring out the passion in even the mousiest little creatures. But inevitably she’d come up with several reasons to be disappointed. A passion for cats, for example. Or ordering a salad for dinner. Or the wrong sorts of shoes. “Tasseled loafers,” she would whisper into the phone, as if such a thing were so awful it couldn’t be voiced too loudly. It explained everything. Afterward, she’d always add, “Well, he was no Miles Noble.”

“For someone who wants to be a writer, you don’t seem to understand about this book,” she complained now as she slammed on the brakes at a red light. We were on Route 27, the traffic-snagged highway that runs all the way along Long Island to Montauk, making our way from Southampton to Bridgehampton. “You, of all people, should know when a book had this kind of significance, a person doesn’t just randomly send an invitation after *seven* years of nothing, with such a theme, if he doesn’t intend it to mean something.”

“True,” I acknowledged. “But what does it mean?”

“It means, I suppose, that he’s come to his senses and he wants me back. But it’s too late for that. And you know what? You were right.”

Her words surprised me. Peck was not in the habit of telling me I was right about anything.

“This morning.” She gestured at me with one hand. “When you implied I was only going so I could see the house. It’s true. To satisfy my curiosity.” She nodded, as though she needed confirmation.

would never go through that again, that kind of love. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. wouldn't even wish it on *you*.

"It's a sickness," she continued. "That kind of obsessive, all-consuming, intense feeling, where you can't eat and you can't sleep. And God, remember how tragic I was that summer we broke up? Moping around a whole summer, reading and rereading *The Great Gatsby*, as though it contained all the answers to the mysteries of life."

I did. It had been rather impressive, a heaving performance of grief and self-pity that I'd witnessed with a combination of awe and amusement. I had always believed such intense displays of emotion to be the stuff of books and movies and songs and therefore purely fictitious. I didn't think people could actually feel that strongly about each other and I viewed my half sister's dramatic display as characteristic hyperbole.

"So what do you think *he* wants?" I asked her, as a gut-wrenching sunset began to tinge the wide open sky with pink, the famous "painters' light" about which Lydia had spoken so evocatively and adoringly, and we turned off the highway in the direction of the former potato fields that had been transformed over a period of five years into Miles Noble's fantasy of a country estate.

"He wants what every man wants when he's built a house. He wants to fill it," she said. We fell in behind a long line of cars snaking toward the driveway that would lead to the house.

"He's been living in Hong Kong and Dubai," she went on, her syllables rounded and carefully defined. "An international man of mystery, from the sound of it. Now he's come back home to roost. There's an apartment in New York too, I hear. A penthouse, all raw and ready to be designed. What he *wants* is a wife."

I'd always admired the way Peck could speak with such authority about the unknown wishes of others. She delivered her opinions as though she'd received some divine wisdom that told her she was right, despite any evidence or logic to the contrary.

She tapped her fingers on top of the steering wheel in time to the music, the Grateful Dead's "Eye of the World," from a CD I'd brought along. "I wonder what he looks like now."

Miles Noble lived, for just a summer, in what could only be described, in Fitzgerald's words, as a *coherent failure of a house*. It was the biggest thing I'd ever seen. Also the ugliest. There were small windows in strange places and a huge arched door and two turretlike structures, one at each end, giving it the feel of a mad castle, and not in a good way. As we followed the line of cars down the driveway toward a gaggle of valet parkers, we both gazed up at the house before us in awe. The front of the house was lined with purple and pink hydrangeas and far too many wood chips, a whole garden store's worth of bright reddish things. It rose awkwardly out of its landscaped acres of lawn like an ungainly pubescent girl uncomfortable with her sudden size and lack of beauty.

"Isn't this fantastic?" Peck asked breathlessly.

I glanced over at her, assuming she was being sarcastic. I was about to say something about how I'd never seen anything more hideous when I realized her awe at the sight of the house before us was not the same as mine. There was reverence in her eyes.

"It sure is big," I said.

She nodded. "Forty thousand square feet, at least. Indoor and outdoor pools. The gardens are modeled after a place in Ireland."

We stepped out of the car and a valet parker handed Peck a ticket. Then we were greeted at a long table by five or six very attractive women in tiny black dresses. Peck took my arm in excitement and she stated regally, "Pecksland Moriarty. And guest."

We made our way behind other white-clad arrivals along a path, lined with hurricane lanterns, the

led to the back of the house. "I can't believe Miles lives here," Peck whispered to me, still holding on to my arm. "It's out of a movie, isn't it?"

"*The Shining*?" I whispered back, but she was too excited to realize what I meant.

"*Everybody's* here," she said as we came around the corner to a vast terrace where a sea of people were already gathered. *Everybody* was obediently wearing white. And hats. Some of the people were smart and elegant. And some were hard and bored. On them, the white dresses and the dinner jackets appeared cheap. But, I couldn't help noticing, they were, for the most part, an extraordinarily attractive group of people. So this is the Hamptons, I thought, as I allowed myself to be pulled along into the fray with my sister at my side.

"Look at that," I said to her, pointing at the lights that spelled out three letters on the bottom of the swimming pool. "What does that say? MAN?"

"Those are his *initials*," Peck exclaimed. "Miles Adam Noble. That's cool."

"Very existential," I remarked as we headed to one of several lit-up bars set up on the grass. Everything was blazing with lights, from the monogram in the pool, which was now changing color, to the trees hung with lanterns and the tables set with candles. Even the flagpole in one corner of the back lawn was surrounded by at least four or five lights, shining upward from the base at the American flag flapping in the breeze.

As we waited for a couple in matching white tuxedos and fedoras to select something from the many choices of cocktails, Peck shook an American Spirit from a pack she carried in the tiny white box she was using as a purse. She smoked the elegant, old-fashioned way that glamorous women used to smoke, her right elbow in her left hand and the long fingers of her right hand lined up flat against her face. She'd take a deep drag and then fling her right hand with its cigarette all the way out to the side.

The His-and-Hers pair in the tuxes turned and waved their hands in front of their faces, ostentatiously fanning away her smoke. "How *rude*," Peck exclaimed as they quickly moved away from us. She blew a stream of smoke at their retreating backs.

She ordered two dirty martinis—and when I interrupted to change mine to a Coke, she exclaimed "What are you, the mayor of Sobertown?" Peck turned back to the bartender, a pretty older man, one of those character-actor types in a white dinner jacket and bow tie, and clarified. "Make hers double."

The bartender gave her a blank look as he poured the vodka. There were small signs on the bar indicating that the bar was "sponsored" by this particular brand.

"She's a *divorcée*," Peck felt compelled to explain. She pronounced the word as though she were speaking French, with a rolling *r* and the emphasis on the last syllable—*de-vorr-SAY*.

He handed us each a martini speared with three massive olives and winked at me as Peck clinked her glass against mine. "Big and stiff," she proclaimed, making sure the bartender and everyone else in our midst could hear her. "Just the way I like them."

She introduced me to *everyone*, her arm encircling my waist as she showed me off. She bounced from cluster to cluster, sharing an entertaining tidbit of gossip about some person or a sharp observation about another. They were all immediately friendly to me, including me in the small talk that seemed to flow effortlessly from their mouths. Some of the guests whispered in judgment at the lavishness of the party, even as they fanned out to the tins of caviar on ice and mounds of Kumamoto oysters and what looked like sculptures of fresh shrimp on skewers, and lined up for the Nobu charring sushi and the Chinese man in an extra-tall hat wrapping Peking duck in pancakes. There were tiny little cheeseburgers dripping juices and ketchup onto white silk and little slivers of *toro*, a fat

tuna so fresh it tasted like it had been caught that afternoon. There was foie gras on toast and smoked salmon with crème fraîche and a man in a white suit and a sombrero at a table with hundreds of avocados, mixing guacamole to order.

Peck didn't seem nervous at all, despite her professed anxiety about seeing Miles Noble again, and she drew admiration, particularly from the male guests, some of whom couldn't help but stare adoringly at her magnificently cleavaged chest as she spoke.

"This is my half sister," she'd say proudly, as though this, a half of a sister, were a thing so special, only she was fortunate enough to have one. "This is Stella Blue."

Technically this was true. My parents had named me after the Grateful Dead song. (That's the song of mother I had.) Stella Blue Cassandra Olivia Moriarty. Flows daintily off the tongue, doesn't it? The Dead played "Stella Blue" the night I was born, or that was the story as told by my mother, the queen of the unreliable narrators. Her tales were always entertaining and always embellished. They just weren't always true.

They'd added the Cassandra Olivia because they wanted me to have options. I exercised those options at the age of four and encouraged everyone to call me Cassie. But Peck could never resist an opportunity to remind me of my hippie roots. To her, I was Stella Blue. Or just Stella. Often, she'd give it the full dramatic Marlon Brando delivery: STELLAAAH! Especially when calling on the phone from overseas.

She wasn't the only one who refused to call me Cassie. There was also That-Awful-Jean-Paul. He always opted for Cassandra and sometimes Cassandra Olivia because That-Awful-Jean-Paul was Swiss and didn't believe in nicknames or names that Deadhead mothers pulled from songs.

I became a Deadhead myself when my mother took me to see them in Germany. I was ten years old. And a few years later, I found a Web site that posted song lists from every show the Dead ever played. The shows were listed by year and I did find one in Hartford, Connecticut, on the date I was born. They played "Peggy-O." And "Althea." Both of which could inspire the naming of a female child, I suppose. But "Stella Blue" was not played that night.

When I asked my mother about the discrepancy in her story, she said, "We take creative liberties with the fictional narratives that become our memories. Anthologized, these are the tales that become the story of your life." Right. That was the kind of thing she would say, a too-broad elaboration of one of the many life philosophies she'd cobbled together on her spiritual quest, one that did nothing to alleviate how the slight falsities in her tales bothered me. But when I expressed my distaste for the name my mother always said the same thing: "It could've been worse. They could've played 'Bertha'."

Peck and I were sucked into the crowd, greeting what seemed an endless stream of the same anxious men and gregarious women. There was kissing and squealing and handshaking and we were pulled along by the riptide of her acquaintances. We were on our second round of martinis and Miles Noble had yet to make an appearance when Peck launched into the story of how they met, for the benefit of the small crowd of listeners. Later I would look back at this moment as the beginning of what I would come to think of as a sort of awakening in me, the first in a series of shifts that led me to want to write a different story for myself.

"The first time I laid eyes on Miles Noble," she began, "I was about to be kissed." I'd always known Peck could weave a good tale but now, as she entranced us with her words, I recognized that I could learn from her. She paused before delivering the next line. "By someone else." Another pause. "And I knew. Immediately, I knew. It was the *coup de foudre*." She pronounced the words *coup de foudre* in a thick French accent, her words now rehearsed and perfectly enunciated, as though she'd performed

this script a thousand times, and gotten the timing and pronunciation and the blocking just right.

~~“He wore a crisp white shirt, and he looked just like Jim Morrison. He had this thick wavy hair you could just run your hands through. And he was sinewy, with dark skin that would turn bronze in the sun. God, he was good-looking. But it was more than that. He had that thing, charisma, or whatever it is, that just draws you in. And after I was finished being kissed, by a freshman boy whose insignificant name I never retained, I saw that he was waiting for me. It was one of those parties where there’s a keg of beer and too many poets and actors in desperate need of haircuts. I said, ‘Do I know you?’ And he replied, ‘I’ve known you all my life.’ ”~~

This was the point in the story when she let out a small, stylish laugh and lit up one of her cigarettes.

As she exhaled a long, slow plume of smoke, I eyed the crowd, looking for Finn Killian. Peck had mentioned that this friend of Lydia’s, an architect who’d lived in the studio above the garage the summer I was twenty-one, might be there that night. We thought we would ask him if he knew how we might open the locked safe in Lydia’s closet. I hadn’t seen him since that summer right after my mother died, when I’d moved through a fog of grief. I hardly remembered him. He’d seemed a distant presence, appearing on weekends and then trying annoyingly to engage me in conversation when I was busy pretending I was Hunter S. Thompson, teaching myself to write by typing out all of *Gatsby*. (I read this somewhere, that Thompson had learned to write by copying *Gatsby* over and over again, and it was the kind of thing I had to try, if only because it seemed an awfully easy way to go about becoming a writer.)

I didn’t like Finn that summer. I remembered that he seemed so much older than Peck and me. He had a beard and talked about wine. Later, I’d come to know him better as a character in Lydia’s marriage letters, always written in her distinctive Catholic schoolgirl cursive on crisp white stationery with a purple border and purple tissue in the envelopes. In them, she described Finn, this architect who was becoming a close friend, as wry. A quality that is uniquely underrated, she wrote.

He was very tall; that much I recalled. He played the guitar, knew more about the Grateful Dead than I did, and always seemed to be going on about a cabernet that was astute or a Sancerre that was crisp. He called me “kid,” which I didn’t think was necessary. And he had a *beard*. Need I say more? What made men think women liked it when they grew that pubic-type hair on their faces? Did I mention that my ex-husband Jean-Paul grew a beard the last year of our ill-fated marriage? I later figured out this was right around the time he started the affair with the buxom office manager. He said he liked the way it—the facial hair—defined his *chin*.

I realized as I scanned the crowd looking for a tall guy with a beard that I didn’t have a very good memory of what Finn Killian looked like. Still, I said to myself, I would know him when I saw him.

“Pay attention,” Peck admonished me before she continued her story, through another exhale. “The room fell away. All those earnest college students, still so full of their *potential*, and we talked all night. Oh, I don’t remember what we said, but our eyes were glued to each other the entire time and when it was light out we walked the streets, all the way to the Hudson River and then north. There was a slight breeze and the smell of salt air.”

Here she paused. “That’s *him*?” she exclaimed.

I assumed this was simply an expression of how she felt that evening, walking up the West Side with a good-looking older guy, already successful compared to the college boys she’d been hanging out with. But Peck grabbed my arm with one hand and gestured with the other one, jabbing the cigarette toward the person who’d appeared on a balcony above us.

Later in life, had he lived, Jim Morrison himself wouldn’t have looked like Jim Morrison. B

Miles Noble was, well, *ugly*. That sounds meaner than I'd like, but there is no other way to say it. He looked exactly like a frog. Everything about him except, unfortunately, his hair, was thicker than the photograph Peck had made me look at four times just that morning.

He stood on the balcony surveying the lavish and increasingly loud party sprawling over the back terrace and lawn. He sported a white Nehru-style jacket, like something designed for a *maître d'* at a hip Asian restaurant. Was that supposed to be a cool look? Or was he a fashion victim? I was in no position to judge, having been married to a European who wore brown socks with his man-sandals, but even I knew this guy was trying too hard.

The small crowd that had gathered around Peck followed her gesture and we all looked up at the man on the balcony. He didn't appear to notice.

"I don't think this was a very good idea." Peck put the cigarette out on the bottom of her shoe and then tossed it into the flower bed. "We should just go the fuck home now." But she threw back her shoulders and marched into the house as Miles Noble left the balcony above us. Our group dispersed as performers on stilts passed around test tubes of shots. I stood briefly alone at one end of the wide stone terrace with a fountain in the center, a shallow limestone pool with spewing cherubs and an enormous dancing fish spraying water through thick unsightly lips.

As I finished my drink and contemplated another, I was approached by what I took to be a typical good-looking and boyish American with the healthy-looking carriage of a former athlete and the knowing and charismatic smile of the charmer who is certain he will be well received.

I was determined to be uninterested. But I felt his presence as something of a shock, an immediate and intense physical chemistry I'd never experienced before. My determination, in the face of the very strong drinks to which I was entirely unaccustomed, immediately fizzled as his eyes—the palest light brown, the color of caramels—fixed on mine and locked in.

He wore his white dinner jacket as though he'd been born in it, and he said he was sorry for my loss. He didn't introduce himself but he'd known Aunt Lydia well, from the sound of it, and he expressed his sadness that she was gone. He had slightly long hair, lightened by the sun, that fell over his forehead and curled up where it met the collar of his shirt. But his presence was that of a courtly, well-mannered athlete, one to whom life had been kind. He carried himself with supreme confidence, only slightly bordering on arrogance, and he struck me as someone who'd always been cool, like he'd had one of those American boyhoods during which he'd always sat with the other sports stars at the right lunch table.

I'd always been too cynical to believe in love at first sight, or the "*coup de foudre*," as Peck would carefully pronounce it. Besides, I was wearing that ridiculous hat. But when he looked at me, something clicked into place in a way that I'd never experienced before. It took my breath away.

He had two martinis in his hand and eventually he held one out to me. "Drink?"

I think my mouth gaped open like a fish's for a few seconds as I sought air. But then I helped myself to another martini, which I definitely did not need, and said, in a flirtatious tone that was totally uncharacteristic of me, "You're very dexterous."

"Dexterous, huh?" He smiled, intelligent eyes crinkling. He held the other glass up in a gesture of greeting. "Are you flirting with me?"

"I never flirt." This was true. That-Awful-Jean-Paul was hardly the flirtatious type. His earlier words as foreplay had been "I'll pay for lunch." Of course, he said them in French. But flirting was not something I knew how to do. I was much more inclined to make sarcastic remarks that were usually misinterpreted.

This fellow, on the other hand, was clearly used to having people flirt with him. Most women would

find a guy with a smile like his irresistibly attractive. But, I told myself in the stern tone that had become a habit, there must definitely be some kind of rule—like waiting an hour after lunch to swim—about waiting at least two years after a divorce before flirting with anyone.

“Really?” He sounded genuinely surprised. “I figured you as quite the subtle expert.”

I found myself saying something like, “If I were inclined to flirt, which I’m not, I certainly wouldn’t opt for such an obvious choice.” As I said, I wasn’t good at it.

He wasn’t beaten down the way men in their thirties could start to look, as they gave up their youthful dreams and settled into the reality of adult expectations. Not like my ex-husband, for whose life had been a series of disappointments, all someone else’s fault. “I’m an obvious choice, am I?” He asked, a smile playing at his lips. He had the loose confidence I’d always associated with people who grow up with many siblings, and he grinned at me like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

I took a sip of the drink he’d handed me, feeling wildly out of control, the alcohol taking hold. I was nodding and grinning and probably even blushing as I realized I was speaking words that did not seem to belong to me.

“What’s so *obvious* about me?” He had a unique voice, deep and raspy like sandpaper, and I felt it in my chest. It made me want to think of things for him to say, just so I could hear what they sounded like coming out of his mouth.

Another sip of the martini. “Well, for one thing, you’re overtly charming. Clearly something of a ladies’ man. So, an obvious choice for someone inclined to flirt. If I were that kind of person.”

Suddenly there was an explosion and I jumped. “What was that?”

He pointed to a riot of color in the sky. “Fireworks.”

People stopped talking and dancing and mingling and gazed upward, childlike glee on their faces. The handsome stranger whose name I never got and I watched together, standing side by side with other faces tilted to the sky.

We spent the rest of the evening together on the terrace. I couldn’t help thinking of Jordan Baker’s line from *Gatsby*, about liking large parties for their intimacy. He was extremely funny. Humor had always been important to me. My mother was quite the wit and she always said she fell in love with my father because he made her laugh. “Find someone who can make you laugh,” she’d advised me, though it were that simple, as though comedians were just lurking about on the street corners waiting to meet young women and dazzle them with their funny lines. Instead I somehow ended up with Jean Paul, whose ability to make me laugh existed only when I would repeat his more outlandishly self-inflating words to my friends, turning them into amusing anecdotes.

I hadn’t laughed as much as usual in the past year, but that night I made up for it, cackling like a hyena at this odd, funny man whose name I never got. Later, when it should have been time to fire Peck and head home, there was a commotion. I heard splashing and a familiar guffawing and I turned. Peck was dancing in the fountain. She had Miles Noble’s Nehru jacket draped around her shoulders and she was kicking up shapely legs, doing the cancan and spraying a crowd of clapping spectators with the drops of water that flew off her feet.

“That’s my sister,” I said, as it dawned on me—slowly, the way things will *dawn*, after several martinis—that this was going to be a very strange summer.

It wasn't just the pounding head, the sour stomach, and the paper-dry mouth that greeted me in the morning. There was also the attendant shame, the worst part of any hangover. I was in the bedroom occupied every time I'd visited my aunt, wrapped in the white popcorn bedspread, wishing I could temporarily be put into a coma so I wouldn't have to try to unglue my eyes. I vowed never to drink again.

Lydia's house—I'll always think of it as Lydia's house, although it was now half *my* house—was what is generally referred to in real-estate circles as a *teardown*, a crumbling, shingled place that listed far to one side like an aging dowager at a cocktail party that's gone on far too long. It was redeemed by its location in Southampton, a proper seaside town of manicured meadows that was part of the string of towns that stretch along the south fork of Long Island and make up "the Hamptons." The house was in the desirable area "south of the highway," close to the much larger and more elegant summer homes tucked behind the hedgerows that stand sentry along wide streets leading to the ocean. It was accessorized by a sagging wraparound porch that was far too wide and high for the scale of the little place. Legend always had it that Aunt Lydia won the house playing backgammon. According to my mother, my father, who was Lydia's younger brother, never believed that version of the tale.

But Lydia, a renowned beauty with prematurely white hair, had always preferred a more engaging story to one that was true, and in her telling she won the house on back-to-back rolls of double sixes. In her version, the man from whom she won the house—one of her many lovers, she'd always implied—disappeared into the ocean one night and was never seen again, except when he appeared in the form of the friendly ghost who was known to move things around and finish backgammon games left unattended. She'd liked the ghost story so much she'd allowed it to be included in a book entitled *Spirits of the East End*, a copy of which still sat on the coffee table in the living room.

My bedroom, which Lydia had called the "white room" to differentiate it from the room Peck had always taken, which was the "pink room," contained a wrought-iron double bed and two pieces of white painted furniture. There was a chest of drawers and a little desk at which Lydia had suggested I would write my "opus." My room was minimalist and spare and had windows that looked out to the scraggly, weed-infested front lawn and a crumbling tennis court. Peck's on the other hand was wallpapered in a lavish floral and featured a canopy bed with a pink quilted spread. Hers faced the wilted garden at the back of the house.

A knock forced my heavy eyelids open. "Room service," Peck called from the hallway. When I didn't answer, she swung open the door to my bedroom, brandishing a Bloody Mary, complete with a tall celery frond, and her dog, a sanctimonious mutt with a pug face and a big-city attitude. In one hand she held the drink. The other hand was tucked under the dog, who was frowning at me morosely and disapprovingly.

I was the dog's "godmother," if such a designation can be applied to a four-legged friend, and such, I'd been offered naming rights when she acquired the little fellow. To be funny, because I, sadly, had always been one of *those* people, too eager for a laugh, I'd suggested Trimalchio. This was after the ostentatiously nouveau riche vulgarian in *Satyricon* that F. Scott Fitzgerald had used as the inspiration for the character of Jay Gatsby. One of the suggested titles for the book was *Trimalchio West Egg*, and once I finished *Gatsby*, Lydia had given me a copy of *Trimalchio*, the first version of the book that Fitzgerald revised into *The Great Gatsby*. I never thought Peck would actually take the name for her dog. But she loved it.

Now she sashayed—Pecksland Moriarty was born to *sashay*—into my bedroom, in a silk paisley men's robe with a velvet collar, like she'd raided Hugh Hefner's closet at the Playboy Mansion, and dropped Trimalchio, who was now approaching late middle age in dog years, unceremoniously onto the floor, from where he gazed up at me in jaded fashion. That dog could really work an attitude.

Peck sipped the Bloody Mary that I'd assumed was intended for me and gave me her own disapproving frown. She never had much patience for hangovers, not being especially susceptible to them, although she did fancy herself an expert in the art of the cure. "Did you know the Bloody Mary was invented at the Ritz in Paris for Hemingway when he was married to his fourth wife, Mary? She didn't like him to drink so the bartender invented this"—she stirred the drink with the celery stalk—"the odorless cocktail. He drank it and the next day, when the bartender asked him how it went, he said, 'Bloody Mary never smelt a thing.'" She took another sip. "The eleven o'clock Bloody is a time-honored tradition here at Fool's House."

Of course the house had a name. Apparently all the best ones do. Lydia had named hers after the Jasper Johns painting. This was a gray painting featuring items from the artist's studio: a broom with a wooden handle hanging by a hinge, a cup dangling from a hook, a stretcher, and a towel. Fool's House was what Johns called that place where the art came to him. Peck always referred to the house by its full name, *Fool's House*, just as she always referred to herself as Pecksland, and to anyone named Kathy as Katherine, or Lizzie as Elizabeth. Peck prided herself on being well-mannered, often to the point of rudeness.

We were an artistic and literary family, the name of the house implied, with its whiff of the bohemian Hamptons and all the creative souls who'd sought refuge and inspiration in the romantic landscape's vast ocean and sky and wide, pale beaches. The ramshackle little farmhouse with its wide porch was not the sort of place one would expect to find in this part of Southampton. Or not anymore. Most of the smaller mildewed places had been torn down and replaced by oversized ones. But Lydia had made Fool's House the center of the universe for a merry band of artistic souls, none of whom, to her surprise, ever became famous.

Fool's House was *known*, my aunt would always tell us, for its creative energy, although the people who'd supposedly been inspired by it were mostly ones nobody ever heard of. "Dick Montpelier wrote all of *Fire at Sunset* here and John Tallucci finished the last twenty chapters of *Mister Nowhere* on my porch," Aunt Lydia used to love to tell anyone who'd listen. "Oh, and Rusty Cohen and his musician Esme, they lived in the studio for a summer while he painted all six of his masterpieces."

Lydia couldn't make art, she always said, so she supported it. She viewed herself as a patroness and a collector, although her taste ran to things that were produced in her presence rather than great works of art that, on a schoolteacher's salary, she could hardly afford to buy at auction. I was not exactly a connoisseur, and I wrestled with paints and canvas and words on my own enough to know how hard it is to get any sort of beauty out of them, but the stuff that cluttered every nook and cranny of Fool's House was some of the ugliest art I've ever seen.

Every wall was covered in bad paintings, hung salon-style, three and four high, mostly abstracts ~~thick oily seascapes and watery sunsets with too-round balls of orange and yellow at their center~~. Lydia had never been able to find a cheap poster of the Jasper Johns painting entitled *Fool's House*, but she did hang a reproduction, now torn and peeling, of his best-known work, *Flag*, in the dining room, where a warped round table surrounded by mismatched chairs had been the site of many raucous meals.

Above the mantel in the living room, enjoying pride of place, was an abstract piece, all dabs and dribbles of brown, black, and silver paint. Neither Peck nor I had ever asked about it and Lydia herself had never brought it up. There were also many framed photographs of the sharp-cheekboned Lydia at various stages of gray with assorted friends and lovers, images of her with groups of people at the many parties she hosted over the years. There were pictures of Peck and me, school photos sent by our mothers and snapshots of us, separately, with Aunt Lydia in Paris, or at the Coliseum in Rome, and together, from the summers we'd spent at Fool's House.

Peck handed over the Bloody Mary with ceremonial seriousness. I took a medicinal sip as my private conscience—that petulant voice of reason—suggested that more alcohol was the last thing I needed. Trimalchio eyeballed me in his judgmental way.

“Southampton has always been known as a cure-all,” she intoned, like a tour guide. “You’re going to enjoy the health benefits of being by the sea. The ocean air will fix what ails you.”

“I have a hangover, not a disease,” I protested, taking a sip as the previous evening’s activities came back to me. I’d never even asked his name, the handsome stranger with whom I’d uncharacteristically spent most of the night flirting and acting silly.

“Sea air has the same components as lithium,” she announced. “That’s why you feel so good at the beach.” She stared me down in a knowing fashion before continuing. “You’re ailing, Stella. Anyone can see that.”

“I just drank too much,” I said in protest, not wishing to be analyzed. I knew she was right. I arrived at Fool's House in a terrible state, seized with grief but also with the sense of opportunity. I had been simply marking time, plodding along in detached and restless fashion, when the news of Lydia's death dealt me a jolt. I took another sip of the Bloody Mary.

“Or someone slipped me something,” I added as she watched me, waiting for me to praise the drink. “Was it Ecstasy? Ludes? A roofie cocktail?”

Peck grinned, passing me two Tylenol she'd been holding in her other hand. She had a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of her robe and she pulled it out, lighting one of her American Spirits with a silver lighter. “So,” she said, blowing smoke directly at me. For someone who was obsessed with manners, she was cavalier about cigarette smoke and old-fashioned in her view of smoking as a glamorous pastime. “There’s a bit of a situation.”

Trimalchio gave me a pissy look, as if he didn't think I fully understood the severity of what Peck was saying to me. We have a situation, you hear? *A situation*.

“What now?” I asked, rubbing my still-throbbing temples.

“You really were *overserved*, weren't you?” Her opinion of me seemed to have been raised three notches by my louche behavior of the previous night. I murmured my assent as she continued.

“The *situation* is this.” She spoke as if the words had been scripted for her. In italics. Life for Peck was not a dress rehearsal. “He. Never. READ. It.” She paused, waiting for my reaction.

“Never read what?”

Peck rolled her eyes at my obtuseness. “*Gatsby*,” she said, one hand on her hip. “Miles Noble never fucking read it. Didn't even know Gatsby dies at the end.” She stared down at me as if this were

somehow my fault before explaining.

Apparently the Gatsby theme had been concocted by a party planner with an unlimited budget and a little guidance from a single male host with a new house he wanted to show off. The event coordinators hired to pull off the extravaganza had invited everyone on Miles Noble's contact list as well as adding a few names of their own to yield the list of the five-hundred-something people who had ended up at his house that night. "He didn't even know I was going to be there," Peck said now, shocked the pants off him. And he didn't remember giving me the book." She seemed almost amused rather than saddened or offended by this unexpected revelation that her preconceptions of the evening had been so off base.

"How could he not remember?" I asked.

"Because, Stella," she said, gesturing with her cigarette. "He's an *idiot*." She paused. "Not only that, I'm afraid he's got horrible *taste*."

"You said the house was fantastic," I reminded her.

She shook her head and then presented a revised version of the prior evening. "God, no. I never would have said that. The man is downright vulgar. I mean, a monogrammed pool? Could we be any tackier?"

"I thought you liked it." I knew there was no point in even saying it, though. Peck now believed her sensitive taste buds had been offended and she would not acknowledge that she'd initially been impressed with Miles Noble's obviously lavish spending.

"The thing I can't figure out," she went on, "is how, and more importantly *why*, he could spend all that time with me back then talking about this damn book."

I nodded. I felt a pang of sadness for her, recalling that summer we spent together right after the divorce broke up, when there'd been so many tears that the pages of her paperback stiffened. Even if some of them were crocodile tears, she'd experienced pain. "I'm sorry, Peck," I said, handing her the Blood Mary.

"Don't be," she said, after a long sip. "Let it be a life lesson. We never know how big a role we play in someone else's drama." She paused, allowing her words to hang in the air like an edict. "Here I had built up this whole story about the two of us and our great love, and somehow I believed his version of the story would be the same. But, of course, that's not how life works."

"He must have been happy to see you," I said.

She shrugged. "I guess he was. He kept saying, 'You look fantastic.' Over and over again. And, of course, I couldn't say, 'So do you.' So I asked him to show me around. He has a lot of art. A Jackson Pollock, a Warhol, an Ed Ruscha, stuff like that. No Jasper Johns, though. I told him about Lydia and how she came up with the name for Fool's House. He was very interested in all that. Especially his *collection*. Said he wanted to come see *my* house. So I invited him to the party." I remembered through my haze that we were to host our first party of the summer that very night.

Lydia had always held a party when she arrived in Southampton. (The first party of the summer was called the Fool's Welcome, while the last one would be, for obvious reasons, the Fool's Farewell.) On this, her will was more than clear: Lydia wanted us to spend at least one summer month living together in the house while we settled her estate and sold the house, and she fully expected us to continue all the traditions during this time.

Aunt Lydia had died in Paris. This was a detail in the story of her death she would have enjoyed that it happened in her favorite city. Paris had been Lydia's "spiritual home" and a constant conversational reference point. If something was expensive, for example, "you could spend a week in Paris for less," and if she wanted to describe something she didn't like, it was, "Well, it's not Paris is

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