Sacrifice in Summer

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Sacrifice in Summer

by ElwritesFanworks

Summary

The aftermath of sacrifice reveals the fault lines that reputation and restraint once kept hidden.

*~*THIS IS THE REWRITE!!! *~*
*~*FINALLY COMPLETE!!!*~*~

Notes

I had to rewrite this because historical accuracy blew a giant hole in my logic and frankly there were serious inconsistency issues. However, these chapters are quite similar with minor wording/grammar editing now that I have the time to *DECENTLY PROOFREAD*.

I plan to whip through the edits quite quickly so soon there will be new chapters - they'll just also be consistent and better than they would have been had I not gone through with this now (it's better to do it now than later, since it has to be done either way.)

Sorry if it's an inconvenience.

- Ellis

• Inspired by Sacrifice in Summer by ElwritesFanworks
Jump

Sacrifice in Summer

Summary:


The aftermath of sacrifice reveals the fault lines that reputation and restraint once kept hidden.

Notes:

Would you believe this angsty fic is also a fix-it fic? Well, it is! I swear. It'll just take a while to not be sad.

Chapter 1: Jump

I have, of course, already written at length about my time with Gatsby, yet there were some truths that I could not commit to a page likely to be seen by any eyes but mine. I have, thus, started a separate, private journal, entirely for myself, that will elaborate on these matters.

I must state first that there exists an inexplicable closeness between Gatsby and me. I can't say for certain when it came to be, only that it was there when it was needed most.

I will always, to some extent, regret not having stayed with him outright, on that fateful day when Wilson came to his lavish home, knowing that I might have spared him a few moments of terror and anguish, yet I cannot say I am sorry to have arrived when I did. The realization, if you could call it that, came over me like a chill. I have never given much thought to superstitions, yet the sudden urgency to return immediately to Gatsby was stronger than any feeling I've had before or since. Call it fate, call it an act of God - I don't rightly know what it was. I knew only that he needed me, and so I went. Even as I ran, my heart pounding and my throat raw, I could feel the threat of something evil and dangerous looming over that house. When I approached the pool at last, I had only a moment to take in the sight and to act. I saw Wilson, then the gun, then Jay, his face slack with surprise, and all at once I was soaring through the air, crashing into Gatsby, pain erupting in my side and making me see stars.

For a dizzying moment, I thought I was too late, that it was Gatsby who'd been shot, and that the pain I felt was that of my heart breaking. Then, in a sluggish way, I realized that I was being pulled up and out of the water, cradled against Gatsby's chest.

I stared at my side, where Gatsby's square hand was clasped in a good, tight, military hold to slow the bleeding, and watched as red seeped through his blunt fingers.

Faintly, I was aware of a commotion, of a second gunshot, of screams, and of Gatsby shouting ("Someone call for a damned ambulance!") at which point I lost consciousness. I regained it quickly, but in those few lost moments I had been moved into an ambulance. Gatsby was with me, and the hand that he had offered to stop the bleeding now clutched at mine, his fingers stained and sticky. My eyes rolled until I spotted him, blurred and floating over my shoulder.
"G-" I tried, but the name caught in my throat. He shook his head.

"Don't strain yourself, old sport. We'll be at the hospital soon, and everything will be all right."

I was too dazed to see that as the lie it undoubtedly was at the time, when Gatsby must have known I could easily die before the day was out. It was a comfort then, and even more of one when I realized, days later, that he must have feared the worst, yet put on a brave face for my sake.

When we arrived at the hospital I was once more lifted up and set down and lifted again. I was moved into a room where doctors and nurses poked and prodded at me, and someone gave me something that made me feel nothing but a strange, chemical happiness.

As traces of the drug slipped from my mind and I began to wake, I felt a pain in my side, but it was not as unbearable as it had been before. I opened my eyes and looked down at my bare chest, which was wrapped up in bandages, and at the place where the bullet had entered me. Then I looked up, and saw Gatsby, hunched in a chair, asleep.

I had never seen him sleep, and he looked serene, compared to his wild-eyed mania on that horrible afternoon when he confronted Tom. My fingers twitched and I wished I could touch his face for a moment, just to assure myself that he was really there.

I settled instead for watching the gentle rising and falling of his chest. I took time to study him, his build, his features. I let my eyes linger on the places I had always wanted to stare at, but that didn't dare watch when he was awake. I suppose a better man might have felt ashamed to take such liberties, but I was still an invalid, and decided I was owed something, in case I were to die after all.

When at last Gatsby awoke, I was gazing at him with such longing that I wouldn't have noticed the lifting of his eyelids, had he not also cleared his throat and shifted his weight in the chair.

I met his eyes and smiled faintly. A look of such sincere, beautiful happiness came over him then that I feared for a moment that I kiss him, before I reminded myself of the many reasons why I wouldn't, adding that I was also trapped in a hospital bed, and that he was much too far away.

"Hello," I said to him softly. He stared at me.

"You... you're..."

"Awake? Yes. So are you, at last. You were asleep when I woke - I didn't have the heart to disturb you - you looked as tired as I feel."

He shook his head, blinked, and stared again.

"Forgive me... the nurses said you might not be fit enough to talk for days... weeks... perhaps longer."

"Well, I expect they don't like to get people's hopes up. Anyhow, I'm glad to see you. It's a pleasant surprise."

Gatsby raised his eyebrows.

"Is it a surprise, truly? You saved my life, old sport, I owe you so, so much more than thanks. This," he gestured to himself in the chair, "is nothing at all."

I chuckled weakly, which hurt.
"It's more than enough for me."

He shook his head again in disbelief.

"You're a saint, Nick Carraway."

I snorted.

"Hardly. Say, could you find me a glass of water? I'm terribly thirsty."

Gatsby jumped to his feet, nodding vigorously.

"Of course, of course, old sport. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, that's fine," I replied, and shut my eyes and rested while he went off to fetch me a drink.

I suppose I ought to make a note of this fact: that, as time went on, I had come to empathize with Gatsby, his obsession for Daisy, for I too had developed an unhealthy fixation. In part, it was why I supported him in his mad attempt at winning her hand - as he'd have given my cousin anything, I tried to give him the only thing I had that he wanted. The pursuit of her had ruined him, and it had been quietly ruining me, culminating in the fatalistic impulse to jump between him and Wilson's bullet at the pool.

He returned with a glass and a pitcher of water, poured the cool liquid, and brought it to my lips. It was messy - his hands were shaking and I was too weak to drink properly - but I got some of it down and he wiped my mouth and chin with his handkerchief, which smelled of him. Sitting once more in the chair, he looked me over.

"You look like you've been to hell and back."

"I feel it. How long have I been asleep?"

"Almost a day."

I ran a hand over my jaw.

"I could use a shave," I remarked.

"I could -"

I looked up, surprised.

"What, you'd -?"

He turned a bit pink at my look of shock.

"Well, I won't, if you don't want it, but I could, if it's a comfort, old sport. It's no trouble."

I should have said no, I suppose, but I didn't. I was too weary, parties and people and pain all taking from me until I was nothing but a shade of my old self - I wanted something of my own, some moment to treasure, however insincere.

"Go on, then," I said.

He'd had some of my affects gathered and brought over, and my shaving kit was among them. As he worked some soap into lather, he spoke to me incessantly, and I could see he was on the verge of
collapse - exhausted from worry and guilt.

"You needn't blame yourself, Jay," I insisted. "I certainly don't."

"Blame myself? Oh, of course not, no, I just -" he broke off and stared at the soap. "I suppose I do, a bit."

"I know, but please, don't. I'll be all right."

He looked up at me and I gave him the most reassuring smile I could. He grinned and shook his head.

"A saint, really."

I rolled my eyes and tilted my head back, exposing my throat. He began to spread the lather and I was enthralled by the familiarity that only a man could offer when performing such an act. I could feel a tension in him, a hesitation in his movements, and was not surprised when he broke the silence.

"Why did you do it?" he asked finally. I studied his face - there was an unreadable look there, one I recognized from the night I'd agreed to invite Daisy for tea. He was once more at war within himself, unable to comprehend his gratitude.

"You got lucky. I tripped."

I smiled; he didn't. He shook his head.

"I'm serious... I haven't... even in the War... it takes a special kind of a man to do what you did."

He picked up my razor and turned it over in his hands.

"I need to know why, Nick, please."

The impulse to be honest with him was intoxicating. I sensed that, perhaps, he knew already, even if he didn't realize what that knowledge meant. I felt my lips moving and couldn't seem to close them, try as I might, as I let the truth spill out.

"I would have thought you'd have understood."

He furrowed his brow.

"But, old sport, how could I possibly -"

"You'd have done it for her."

He stared at me.

"For Daisy," I clarified. "Maybe not now, I don't know, but you'd have done it for her, once, wouldn't you?"

He frowned.

"Well, yes, of course, but I - that's different, surely."

"It's not so different," I said quietly. I had the presence of mind to drop my gaze, cheeks burning and heart thudding in my chest, as he realized what I was getting at. I wondered if he'd hit me. He hadn't seemed the type, but sometimes it's so hard to tell if brutality lurks within a man.
"Oh," he said at last, so softly I almost missed it.

"Oh," I replied, and there was a bitterness in my tone that surprised us both.

I looked up and found that he, too, had dropped his gaze. He opened his mouth to speak, swallowed, and coughed.

"I... I don't..."

"We really don't need to discuss it. I didn't tell you because I expect anything. I just thought you ought to know."

*Before you thank me, before you call me a saint. Know that I love you, that I used you, like you used me,* I didn't say, but the meaning was clear. He looked pained. He moved to start shaving my jaw but I shook my head.

"Please, don't. I don't think I could bear it just now," I admitted, and the words sounded more like a sob. He nodded and handed me a cloth to clean my face of lather. He stood beside me, at a loss.

"Would you like me to visit again?" he asked, his voice strange and tight.

I looked at him even though I was sure that my face gave everything away, the pain and the longing both, and I nodded.

"But, friendship… even though -"

"Yes. You had your green light, and I have mine."

That was cruel, and I shouldn't have said it. Gatsby's face crumpled a bit but he composed himself enough to speak.

"Right. Well... I will be back to see you tomorrow afternoon, then, if you'd like. I can bring you any news and any message... and if you want anything to eat, or to drink, I could -"

"Just news is fine, and any messages from work, if there's a way to get them for me."

"Yes, of course."

He walked towards the doorway, paused, and departed. I sighed. I was so terribly weary, and my side hurt. I let myself take refuge in sleep, but it was not pleasant, and all night I tossed and turned with unsettling dreams of trenches, pain, Gatsby bleeding from the gunshot that had been meant for him. He looked at me with his face crumpling in despair.

"I... I don't."

In the dream, I wept, but it was all right, because he did, too.
As it happened, I have no way of knowing if Gatsby visited me after that, except that I was told he did, subsequently, by a kindly nurse. My next months were spent in and out of lucidity, floating to and fro in a comforting painless haze. The doctors administered an opiate to ease the pain of my wound as it healed. Later, I learned that I had narrowly escaped death - the bullet had missed all my vital bits, and my organs were all left intact - but I was also informed that recovering from such an injury took a great deal of time, rest, and care, and that a drug-induced stupor was the best thing for me at the moment. At last, the doctors began to wean me off of the drug, and this is when I began to observe the world around me once again.

The aforementioned benevolent nurse, who washed, dressed, and fed me, spoke to me often of the kind man who came to see me, and how lucky I was to know someone so devoted to my well-being.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Carraway," she said cheerfully, as she emptied my bed pan. "You'll be back on your feet, wooing girls with your handsome friend sooner than you think."

She said so every day, yet one day, she added: "I've heard the doctors talking. They say you should be able to go home by Christmas. Isn't that nice, Mr. Carraway?"

The next morning was the first that I was actually conscious when Gatsby arrived. I woke at seven and noticed that there was a Christmas tree on my bedside table, decorated with miniature ornaments - drums and bobbles and tiny trumpets - and tinsel and garlands, of course. The poor thing seemed
smothered by the weight of it all, but it was a pleasant bit of color in the otherwise bland room. The nurse came to change my dressings and help me shave at 7:30, and at half past eight, a little cart came 'round with my breakfast and the morning paper. I had no desire to eat, but I managed a glass of water and a few mouthfuls of porridge.

At nine o'clock, Gatsby arrived, his cheeks flushed and his eyes moist from the cold. He was startled to see me awake, and, at first, he seemed unsure of how to approach me. When I made no move to forbid him, he tentatively crossed the threshold of my room and sat in the chair by the bed. He appeared to be on the verge of speaking, yet he held his tongue. When it became clear that he would not be the one to break the silence, I sighed and glanced sideways at him.

"I want to apologize," I admitted. Gatsby's eyes widened and he shook his head.

"There's no need to -"

"Please, Jay, let me speak."

He lowered his gaze.

"Of course, old sport."

I cleared my throat.

"I don't want you to think I'm at all upset with you. The nurse told me you visited - you're the only one who did, other than Jordan, and that was only twice. I am sorry if I've caused you an inconvenience - in any way."

He shook his head again.

"You couldn't be an inconvenience... not when... you saved my life, and, whatever your... motivations... I have you to thank for every day I've drawn breath these past months."

He paused and glanced at the tree.

"Do you like it?"

I was not surprised that it was his doing - it seemed gaudy enough. I nodded.

"It's grand," I said, and meant it. I met Gatsby's eyes and offered him a smile, which turned into a grimace of pain as my leg twitched. He shot up from his chair, alarmed.

"What's the matter, old sport? Should I get the doctor?"

I managed to shake my head.

"But surely he could do something!"

"I'm afraid," I hissed through clenched teeth, "that this is quite normal, or so I'm told, for one in my condition."

He blinked at me, confused.

"The drugs."

Gatsby made a noise of comprehension.
"Yes, yes, the opiates... sorry, I didn't think."

"It's quite alright."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I'd appreciate a distraction. Tell me what's been going on - I feel as though I've been asleep for years."

A strange look passed over Gatsby face.

"Of course, you wouldn't know."

He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair, staring into the boughs of the miniature tree as though they held unfathomable secrets.

"Jay?" I prompted. He nodded slightly.

"I don't want to alarm you," he said, and then began to recount what had happened while I had been incapacitated.

"Technically speaking, I'm awaiting trial."

The shock showed on my face.

"But you -" My eyes widened in horror. "You didn't lie for her. Tell me you didn't!"

I had never seen Gatsby look sheepish until that moment.

"I know you don't approve, but please let me continue, as that's hardly the most important development. May I go on?"

I grumbled an affirmative and he began again.

"I'd planned to lie for her, as you said, but then I couldn't help but think of all the trouble you'd gone to on my account. By the time I changed my mind, I had already drawn attention away from her. I am trying to stop it, Nick, but it's a delicate business. I believe that, if I plead not guilty, interest will dry up in finding another suspect as everyone will be hoping to convict me. I know you don't agree with it, but I won't have Daisy suffer in my place - I couldn't bear that. I have spoken to my lawyer and he is sure that it's unlikely I'll be charged. One of the key witnesses changed his statement, and there's evidence that Myrtle was running from her husband - some sort of domestic dispute, apparently. With luck, and a competent jury, I'll be fine."

I could hear the worry in his voice and I reached out and offered him a clammy, sweating hand. He looked at it, then at me, and gave it a brief squeeze.

"I've been learning what I can about what I can expect if I... in the worst possible scenario. I spoke to a man about it, who knows the prison system well. He's - don't make that face, Nick, he isn't a criminal. He's a warden. He has theories about the whole sorry business, and says that it's mostly poor men who face the chair. It's a grisly prospect, but it means that, with my finances, I should be able to preserve my life, at least."

He tried to smile, but it wasn't much of an attempt.

"When is the trial?"
I asked, after some thought.

"In the new year."

"I want to be there," I blurted out and he furrowed his brow.

"Are you sure? I know how you feel about what I'm doing, but I can't have you exposing it."

I shook my head.

"If you are determined to spare my cousin, I will not stop you. No matter what, I'll stand by your decision, and if I'm well enough to get out of this bed, I'll be there in a show of solidarity. Besides, you'll probably need the support."

Jay visibly relaxed and patted my arm collegially.

"I'm glad of your friendship, old sport. Really, I am. You're so much more than I deserve."

"It's nothing."

"I wish... I wish I could give you... what it is you want. I feel so awful, relying on you like this, when you -"

I sighed with displeasure and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"It's all right, Jay, please."

"I want you to be happy."

He took my hand again and met my eyes, his own sad and guilt-filled.

"You deserve to be happy, Nick, more than any of us do."

With what felt like a momentous effort, I forced myself to remove my hand from his.

"Yes, well. That's kind of you to say. If you want to be even kinder, you could read me the newspaper."

I pointed to where it lay, beneath the overladen branches of the pygmy Christmas tree. He picked it up and unfolded it.

"What section?"

"Any one. Sports, I suppose."

Jay nodded and read the sports to me, and then the front page, after which my lunch arrived. He stayed with me while I forced down some soup and a bit of toast. After my meal, the doctor came to give me my reduced dose of medicine, and Jay said goodbye, promising he'd see me again soon and he'd try to find a book to read me. As the opiates came into effect, my concerns about Gatsby's impending trial faded into nothingness, and I spent the afternoon watching light reflecting off the bobbles on the tree, making dappled patterns on the wall.

Chapter End Notes
Right, so, explanations:

The warden that Gatsby mentions is, in fact, the real-life warden, Lewis E. Lawes, who was the warden at Sing Sing in New York at the time this story took place, and was also an advocate against the use of the death penalty. There's more information about him here, if you're interested:


Also, re: the trial, the information I'm working with is this record of historical penal law in New York for the period:
http://ypdcrime.com/penal.law/article125.htm

I don't honestly know what the backlog for trials was back then, and haven't been able to find it, so I estimated that it would take until the new year for it to come to court.
Despite my official designation as an invalid, I was very busy in the weeks that led up to my release. As my use of opiates declined, I was able to do all sorts of things that had previously been impossible. My first task was to write to my boss and tell him that I was going to resign. I decided, during my recovery, that I would find a new job in the new year, something untainted by crooked business, preferably, and more interesting than bonds. Having narrowly escaped death, I felt as though I had been given a second chance, and I intended to make good use of it.

One morning, I spotted an advertisement from a radio program wanting a script writer, and decided to try my luck. Patty, that dear, sweet nurse of mine, took it in herself, and spent her entire day off waiting for them to telephone her with news. The next morning she told me, nearly moved to tears with happiness, that I'd got the job, and was to start work in January. I thanked her profusely, and told her that if I ever wrote any book worth publishing, I'd dedicate it to her, which made her blush and stammer until the head nurse came to snap at her for dallying too long on her rounds.

When I was not writing, I was reading as many legal papers as I could, making note, in a small leather-bound journal, of anything I thought could help Gatsby with his case. In retrospect, of course, I realize that his lawyer must have known everything I was scribbling down, but it kept me busy, and feeling like I was able to help, if only in a small way.

A date was set, December twentieth, that I was to leave the hospital. When Gatsby found out, he insisted that I be relocated not to my small property, but to a guest room in his house, if only for the holidays.

"My house is just next door-" I began, but he interrupted me sternly.

"It's the least I can do. Please, spend the holidays with me. It would do you good to have some company."
I was hesitant at first, but when he insisted that it would only be the two of us there, that there would be no parties, I was swayed, and so, on the morning of the twentieth, I was bundled up in a coat and blankets and transported to his property in West Egg. He was waiting for me, his hands stuffed in his pockets. When I rolled up in the taxi, he came out to greet me himself and helped me up the stairs and into the house.

It was slow going - my side still ached and I was unsteady on my feet after so many months of bed rest and limited exercise. I was acutely aware of just how thin and frail I'd become, as the clothes I'd brought from home, once well-tailored and comfortable, now hung off my frame. Gatsby supported me as he led me indoors, the walls now decorated for the holidays with festive bunting and garlands and sparkle and shine. Even for him, it was excessive, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was trying to make the most out of the last few weeks before the trial, just in case his freedom proved less secure than he thought.

As splendid as the hallways and stairs were, the guest room actually left me speechless. The entire room was full to the brim with poinsettia flowers, glittering silver snowflakes that were suspended from the ceiling, and enormous wrapped presents. Gatsby stepped on one accidentally as we walked from the doorway to the bed, and it crumpled instantly. I frowned – they were all empty.

"What is it, old sport?" he asked as he helped me recline on the luxurious bed. He drew a fur pelt over me and I marveled at it, letting its softness tease at my fingertips.

"Lapland reindeer," he explained and I nodded.

"It's very..."

"Yes?"

"It's very warm."

He looked pleased.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked. "Coffee? Hot chocolate?"

"I'm fine, thanks," I said with a weary smile. "Really."

"You're sure? You need only ask and I'll get it for you."

"Well," I pondered, "perhaps fewer flowers?"

His face fell.

"You don't like them."

"They're a fine gesture, but they're a bit more extravagant than necessary."

There was a tense silence that Gatsby broke with a sigh.

"You know, old sport, I have no idea what it is you do like," he admitted in a small voice.

"You had other priorities - I understand completely. Besides, your company is all I need."

His cheeks colored and he looked away, embarrassed.

"Nick, I..."
"I know you don't share my... inclinations. We're still friends, Jay. That doesn't have to change, unless you want it to," I added hastily. He shook his head.

"I don't. I've had enough of change, this past year. You're one of the only constant things I have left."

The sadness in his voice made my heart ache and I wished that I had something useful to say.

"What would you like me to do, as your friend?" he asked at last, brightening. "Fluff your pillows, perhaps? Read to you? I have a -"

"- a great many books, yes, I know. I have been here before; there's no need to trouble yourself with unnecessary pretense," I said, grinning (as I found his enthusiastic hospitality nothing short of endearing.)

"There must be something..."

I considered. There were a great many somethings, but none of them were things he'd ever do with me.

"To be quite honest, what I'd like to do is to go do some Christmas shopping, seeing as I've had to leave it so late this year. You couldn't take me into town, could you?"

For a moment, Gatsby paused, with a very peculiar expression on his face, but then he seemed, almost immediately, himself again.

"Yes, that sounds like a marvelous idea, old sport. Here, let's get you up out of that bed and down the stairs, and I'll arrange for the car."

When I saw the car, at last, I was surprised for two reasons: first, it was a new car, and this one was everything the old one was not - small, dark, and plain; second, that Gatsby had hired a driver, and sat in the back. I joined him, and nearly asked about it before he interrupted me, asking if I wanted to go to the bank.

We spent the rest of the day in the city. Immediately, Gatsby insisted on buying me a very handsome walking stick so that I wouldn't need to lean on people and walls constantly, and could have some autonomy. At four in the afternoon, we split up for an hour to buy gifts for each other, whereupon I realized that I couldn't think of a single thing to get Gatsby that he didn't already have.

The usual gifts were all out - he had enough ties, cufflinks, and handkerchiefs to last at least a hundred lifetimes. He didn't care for sweets or novelty items and I selfishly refused to so much as consider bringing any more flowers into the house. I exhausted every possibility, but when we met up at five thirty, I remained empty-handed.

We dined at a restaurant in town and then retreated to Gatsby's house, arriving there at about seven thirty. Neither of us was particularly tired, so we retreated to the library with very good wine of mysterious origins and read to each other as we got deliriously drunk.

At first we read silly things to each other - short poems or lighthearted little stories. All around us lingered a warm, light-hearted atmosphere that felt like a balm for the soul, smoothing over some of the damage inflicted by the events of the summer. As the light faded, we lit lamps and scattered books in every direction, piling them up as if to barricade ourselves in, protected from the realities of our circumstances.

We had moved on to a second bottle when Gatsby tossed a book in my direction with a slurred 'have
you read this one?’ I opened it without hesitation, yet as I realized what it was he had given me, my
mind began to race. I couldn’t understand why he would have chosen this particular book, aside from
the obvious assumption that I sympathized with its content, and found myself frozen, my face hot
and my eyes blurred from the drink.

"Well, old sport? What's it say?" Gatsby mumbled from where he lay, sprawled over a small mound
of encyclopedias, a small, linen-bound volume open over his face. When I did not respond, he lifted
a corner of the tome and peeked out at me from under it, and I was so drawn to his boyish charm in
that moment that I had to shut my eyes and count to ten before I could so much as speak.

My voice sounded strange when I raised it, wavering and weaving its way through the words of the
poetry in front of me.

"I have found him who loves me, as I him in perfect love, with the rest I dispense... I sever from all
that I thought would suffice me, for it does not - it is now empty and tasteless to me, I heed
knowledge, and the grandeur of The States, and the examples of heroes, no more..."

I glanced at Gatsby, whose eyes were shining in the lamplight, whose lips, parted, made me burn and
ache, whose hair had fallen out of his place, strands stuck to his forehead with sweat, whose cheeks
were flushed from imbibing, and said the rest of the poem from memory. (He had, all else aside, been
right in assuming I'd read it before, a good many times.)

"I am indifferent to my own songs... I am to go with him I love, and he is to go with me... It is to be
enough for each of us that we are together... We never separate again."

The words lingered, heavy, in the air, and I could sense that a boundary had been crossed. Which
one of us crossed it, I couldn't say, but it was more than likely my fault. It struck me, suddenly, that
neither Gatsby nor I had really considered the implications of maintaining a close friendship after my
declaration. I wondered if it was even possible to do such a thing - after all, had I not told him that
the past was impossible to recapture? In my heart, I still believed it, and yet here I was, drinking with
him in his house, in his library, the two of us like schoolboys out past curfew.

I have never felt as stupid as I did in that moment. The book fell from my fingers and I couldn't bring
myself to retrieve it.

"... wrong, old sport?"

I jumped and found that Gatsby was standing much too close to me. He laid a hand on my shoulder
in what I was sure was meant as a brotherly gesture, and all at once, it was too much. I flinched away
from him, causing pain to shoot through my side. Gatsby cried out in alarm.

"What can I do?" he asked, desperate and stricken, and there were so many answers beading on my
lips and the tip of my tongue, crawling up from the depths of my wounded body and pooling in my
throat like bile, and in that moment, he seemed so oblivious to my suffering, so blindly cruel that I
was tempted to strike him.

The urge was gone as quickly as it came and I fell against the bookshelves, pain and anguish tearing
at my flesh like starved wolves.

"What can I do?" he asked again, and when I met his too-bright eyes, I saw fear in them. Perhaps he
too realized that I could ask for anything, at his own urging. Perhaps, and it was wrong of me to
think it, but I did just the same, perhaps he feared that he’d give in to my demands.

"Nick?"
He reached for me, supporting my sagging body. Words raced out of my mouth to freedom, trampling one another, pushing each other out of the way.

"Morphine," I managed, "for the pain."

Sadness, disapproval showed on his face now, but that didn't hurt half as much as the fact that the fear was gone, replaced with pity and concern.

"Are you sure?"

"You said you would get me anything."

I could see it in his face, that he was retreating, that he was building a wall between us and that I was helping to set each brick in place.

"I know, and I meant it, but it's too late, now, old sport. If you still want it tomorrow, we can try to get you a prescription in the morning."

I nodded, faintly, in his arms, my mind churning with a hundred emotions and not one of them good.

He offered to walk me back to my room but I elected to go there myself, dragging along the wall like an insect. I felt wretched, the wine like a sickness inside me - I hadn't had a drink since I was shot and to suddenly imbibe so heavily made me feel like a marionette who's puppeteer had cut his strings.

When I saw the room again, still full to the brim with flowers, like some seasonal parody of the peacocking that had occurred when I'd invited my cousin and Gatsby to tea in the summer, I nearly left. It wasn't that far to my house and I wanted to be back in my own bed, where the stains of my most secret of dreams lingered, hidden, on sheets that Gatsby would never see.

If I hadn't been exhausted, I might have attempted an escape, but as it was I staggered to the bed and burrowed into it, tugging my clothes off as I did until the reindeer pelt lay against my bare skin. It felt exquisite and the comfort made me cringe.

When sleep took me, I dreamed of nothingness, a black, unending expanse that stretched out infinitely in all directions. It was a lonely sort of a dream, cold and unfeeling, yet it was a comfort to me. There's a freedom in isolation - I could weep or scream or abuse myself and no one would know or care. Even in the dream, I recognized this, yet all I did was sit, alone in the dark, until the universe devoured me and scattered the fragments of my consciousness to the wind.
The next morning, when I appeared for breakfast, Gatsby apologized profusely for the previous night.

"There's no need for you to apologize for my shortcomings," I responded, helping myself to some toast. "I know I've got no chance with you. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. It was the wine, mostly."

I looked at him and shrugged.

"I really am trying."

He sighed

"I know you are. Look, old sport, I had assumed we could get by without ever discussing this but clearly we need to establish some -"

"Restrictions?"

"Boundaries."

I nodded and stared at my eggs. They were going cold, but I couldn't bring myself to eat them.

"Right," he continued, when it was clear that I wasn't going to speak. "What suits you?"

"No more drinking together like that, not for the foreseeable future, anyway," I supplied and he agreed.

"No more unnecessary intimacy -"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you helping me up the stairs, or putting your hand on my arm, or lighting my cigarettes-"

"But you've been shot-"

"I can walk by myself. None of that, Jay. Please."

He nodded and I took a bite of my eggs, trying not to gag as they slid down my throat, cold and
"Would you like to stay here, at all?" he said suddenly. "It occurs to me that I sort of swept you up in all of this..."

I chose my words carefully, thinking them over for some time before I voiced them.

"I would like to stay here, for the holidays. Spend Christmas with you. Be friends, properly, with you. It would help me, I think."

Gatsby nodded and we finished our breakfast in silence. He went out to speak to his lawyer at half past 2, and I went up to the guest room and wracked my brains for something I could do to cement my strictly platonic feelings for Jay. I had been toying with the idea of writing a poem for him ever since I returned from the shops empty-handed, but the intimacy of it, if handled inexpertly, could give me away. I had hesitated to put pen to paper for fear of merely confessing in more detail the feelings that Gatsby was already aware of. Still, the 25th was only a short time away, and I couldn't think of anything else to get him to mark the occasion.

With trepidation, I gathered the necessary supplies and began to write.

As the afternoon wore on, crumpled drafts were scattered all across the floor. It was evening before I'd come up with something I deemed acceptable, what with prose, not poetry, being my strong suit, and then I had to recopy it neatly and without any mistakes. At last, it was finished, and I took a moment to admire it objectively.

I had ultimately chosen to write a sonnet, since it was inherently formal in structure, which would hopefully keep me from simply spilling out endearments and affection all over the page. Even this was a risk. I sincerely hoped that Gatsby wasn't as opposed to traditional poetry as some of the men of our generation - certainly it was, at best, out-of-fashion to write them, when fellows like Owen and Sassoon had remade verse with the scraps and shreds of broken humanity, dispelling illusions and casting harsh light on the uglier aspects of the experience of war. I was relying on the fact that Gatsby had a fondness for decorative things, and that, if all went well, the formality of the sonnet might appeal to him like some sort of antique.

Like it or not, I'd used the last of my writing paper, so I hoped it would do. I folded it and hid it in my bedside drawer, where it sat until Christmas Day.

+++

When Christmas Day dawned, bright and hopeful, and I felt as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The joy was palpable and the cheer of the season was infectious. I descended the stairs and found Gatsby sitting with a cup of coffee, reading the newspaper.

"Merry Christmas," I said as I took a seat beside him. There were plenty of sweets about, including a bowl of sugarplums on the table, and I popped one in my mouth with childish enthusiasm.

"Same to you."

"Any news?" I asked. He shrugged and set the paper aside, helping himself to a slice of gingerbread from a platter to his right.

"Just the usual," he said between bites. "Nearly a dry Christmas Eve for New Yorkers and so on."

I thought of the sheer inaccuracy of that statement and chuckled.
"Any plans for today?" he asked me.

"I don't know. I thought I might go for a walk around the property - the fresh air might do me good - and I plan to call my parents if only to assure them that I'm all right."

"I've never asked, since I didn't want to pry, but you did tell them you were shot, didn't you?" Gatsby asked. I shook my head.

"No sense worrying them. What are you going to do with yourself? Surely you must have been invited to some parties or concerts or something."

"I got a few invitations, but I don't plan on going. They only want me there so they can talk about the trial, and I don't really feel like being their entertainment. I think I'm going to spend the day being horribly self-indulgent and actually get some rest."

"Well, if you need me to keep out of your way, I will. You deserve some peace and quiet, Jay, we both do. It's been one hell of a year."

"You don't need to leave. I don't mind if you're here - it's everyone else who's upsetting me with their constant prying into my legal affairs. Besides, I have to give you your present."

"When would you like yours? Should we wait until the evening, or just do it now?"

Jay shrugged, reaching for a sugarplum.

"I don't see why we shouldn't do it now, if we both want to."

Agreeing, I excused myself and left to retrieve his gift from my nightstand. I read it over and worried if I had made a terrible mistake in writing it. For a moment, I considered tearing it up, but I'd already told him I had a gift for him and there was nothing of mine I could substitute for the poem if I destroyed it.

"Are you coming down, old sport?" Gatsby called from the end of the hall and I shouted an affirmative and slipped the poem into my pocket.

We took a seat on the stairs without pretense, and I was struck by how intimate and comfortable it was - the two of us in our shirtsleeves, mine rolled up, his tie pulled loose and his hair slightly out of place - as he pressed a small box into my hands.

"It's nothing especially fancy, but I know how you dislike gratuitous excess so... I hope you like it," he said with a small smile. I opened the box and my eyes went wide.

Inside were some of the most exquisite cufflinks I had ever seen. They were gold, with tiny carved vines and flowers weaving around each other, surrounding an inlaid disk of polished, dark green jade. I picked one up, turned it over, and saw that they were engraved on the underside in a tiny, cursive script.

To: N

From: J

I felt suddenly that my poem was terribly inadequate.

"Would you like me to help?" he asked, and when I didn't respond, he took the box and cufflinks from me and began to roll down my sleeves.
When his fingertips brushed along the tender skin on the inside of my arm, I watched numbly, entranced. He attached each cufflink with graceful familiarity and I could have sworn that his fingertips lingered against my wrist for a moment longer than necessary before he withdrew his hands and smiled.

"They suit you," he exclaimed. I stared at them, then at him. When I didn't speak, he frowned at me.

"What's the matter, old sport, don't you like them?"

"They're beautiful, Jay, they really are. This is the finest thing anyone's ever given me. I'm afraid my gift is a terrible embarrassment, compared to this."

"I'll be the judge of that. Come on, let me see it," he grinned and I withdrew the paper, which I'd crumpled slightly when I'd stuffed it in my pocket.

"I should warn you - it was a last resort. I couldn't think of anything you didn't already have, so I thought I ought to make you something - it's so terrible, you should just rip it up-"

I fell silent as he unfolded it and the grin slid from his face, replaced with a singular focus. He read the words softly under his breath.

-  

The Jaybird

Once, in summer, I chanced upon a bird

Plain in plumage, humble in origin.

His nest, to make his happiness assured,

Had num'rous treasures tucked away within.

When he went out upon the wing to spy

Each shining stone, each bead, each shard of glass,

He did it with intent to let them lie

Inside his home, enshrined in twigs and grass.

One day, a great wind blew his nest away,

And from his place high in the tree he fell,

And I came to his aid, intent to stay,

And friendship kept him safe till he was well.

Someday he'll venture back out on the wing,

And surely then, that dear, brave jay, will sing.

I swallowed and stared at my hands, my face burning with shame. It sounded ridiculous out loud - pretentious and horrible - and to hear Gatsby's voice reading my words hurt me terribly.

"Nick... you... wrote this? For me?"
I nodded, unable to speak for fear of being sick all over the stairs.

I was shocked to suddenly be drawn into a tight embrace. I was stiff and unresponsive at first, but slowly my arms wound around his sturdy torso in a hug.

We sat like that for one or two minutes at least before he let go of me, just as suddenly.

"Forgive me that was... this is the nicest thing anyone's ever given me," he admitted quietly, his voice quavering slightly.

"You really like it?" I brightened. He nodded, his cheeks pink and his hair falling over his face.

"It's marvelous – you… you're marvelous, Nick. You're so marvelous."

I couldn't help myself, caught up in the embrace and the praise, and I reached out and smoothed Gatsby's hair back into place. He tensed and something changed in his eyes. I withdrew my hand.

"Sorry," I breathed. He shook his head.

"My fault," he murmured.

He was so close to me, even then, and I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face. I realized that he was going to kiss me as he moved slightly closer and let my eyes fall shut, elated, happier than I'd been in living memory.

The kiss didn't come, of course. When I opened my eyes, he was getting to his feet and leaning on the bannister.

"I'm so sorry, but I just remembered that I promised one of my business associates that I'd meet them for lunch. I'm afraid I have to go."

I was skeptical, disheartened, bitter, but I held my tongue.

"Thanks for the tremendous poem, old sport."

"Thanks for the cufflinks."

He left and I was alone, the stairs uncomfortable beneath me. I buried my head in my hands and sighed.

What did you expect, Nick Carraway? He's never going to be yours.

The thought made tears come to my eyes, but solitary as I was, there was no one to witness them but the twin jade disks, glinting on my wrists, resting on me like a heavy gaze.

Somewhere outside, Gatsby was running from me. Somewhere outside, the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg watched him run.

On the stairs, I tore the cufflinks from my sleeves and cast them down the stairs.
The days between Christmas and New Years were horrible. Gatsby found the cufflinks at the foot of the stairs. I had shut myself up like an exile in the guest room, so I missed the moment when he spotted them, but when I woke the next morning, I found them on my nightstand.

I looked around me at the wilting poinsettias, sagging and curling with the beginnings of decay, and the beautifully wrapped boxes of nothingness - (and of course, she'd have had things in the boxes, if it were her who were injured and not me - he'd have filled all the boxes in the world for her, I thought bitterly) - and back at the cufflinks, and felt sick.

That’s how it began.

We didn't speak about it, but I could see that I had hurt him. Gatsby tread very lightly when I was near, keeping a distance between us, during which time I wrote and drank and wandered around the huge, empty house. I hated that I was being so hot and cold, and I knew I should clear the air, explain my actions to him, but I couldn't help but think that he must have been so unbelievably tired of hearing about me and having to walk on eggshells around my stupid, love-struck heart, and, selfishly, I didn’t feel like wasting my breath.

We did nothing for New Years.

On it went, then. I said nothing, he said nothing, and the tension grew between us as his hurt turned to bitterness, and then to frustration. I wondered if I left it long enough, if he would hate me. I wondered if I could ever hate him and free myself from the bonds of unwanted affection.

Our silence was broken on January 5th, when Jordan telephoned for me.

She wished me a belated Happy New Years and asked about my injury, which was to be expected, and I told her it was all right, which was just as predictable. She asked if I wanted to see her.

I thought about it for as long as I could. I was of two minds about it, but she added that she would like to see me, I decided to say yes.

We met for a luncheon in town and took a taxi to a store that had a beautiful hat on display in the window. She looked at it, and then at me, and then she spoke.

"Your cousin would certainly appreciate such a fine gift."

I raised my eyebrows.
"I'm sure if she wants it, her husband would buy it for her."

"She would appreciate it more if it were to come from you. You should see her, Nick, she's in bits."

I felt my cheeks flushing and I tried to contain my anger.

"She has an interesting way of showing it. She didn't once visit me in the hospital - she didn't even send a card-

"-only because thinking about how hurt you are pains her! She can't bear it!"

"So, this is about appeasing her guilt," I hissed, turning away. Jordan caught my sleeve and tugged until I faced her.

"This is about family. She is your family, Nick. You owe her some compassion -"

"I don't owe her a thing!"

I shook Jordan's hand off of my coat and turned once more.

"What happened to you, Nick? You used to be so reasonable -"

"I was shot! Why should I be anything I don't want to be? I've paid in blood now - haven't I earned some peace?"

I was aware that people had started to stare, and I was making a terrible scene, and the added threat of social humiliation only upset me further, my face burned, and my eyes stung. I was exhausted, too emotionally eroded for even a primitive anger. I swayed where I stood, and she took my arm again, this time to steady me.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time, and to have spoiled our afternoon, but the past is behind us and if you can't see that then this has all been a mistake," I added, over my shoulder, in a hushed voice.

"Why are you living with him?"

The question shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. She continued speaking, her hand squeezing my arm with a desperate frustration that was unbecoming, and didn’t suit her usual, cool demeanor.

"Why are you choosing him, over your own cousin? The doctor said you saved his life, Nick, why? Why, after all the trouble he's caused Daisy - after all the trouble he's caused all of us?"

White flakes were raining down with a sort of sacred stillness. The silence added weight to it - as though each one, when it landed, increased the distance between Jordan and I, as we'd been in the summer, and as we were now.

"I'm sorry," I said, and walked away, my walking stick carving ugly trenches through the newly fallen snow.

"Nick, wait, I-"

"I have to go!" I shouted into the winter wind, and limped away. She did not follow.

Despite it being some time since the summer, I still knew a few places where a fellow could get a drink, no questions asked. I stopped at one such a place on my way back to Gatsby's.

A part of me still itched for opiates - the pleasurable relief that I'd felt in hospital, where there was
nothing that could harm me was very tempting, and I had gone for days without meaningful rest. The fear of becoming one of those hollow-eyed, gaunt strangers who lurked on the edge of society was the only thing that kept me from indulging.

I thought briefly of Hamlet, and of choosing the darkness you know, and had another drink.

When I arrived home, it was dinner time. I had no enthusiasm for the food itself, but I was calm at last, and Gatsby's presence didn't affect me in the slightest. I had no appetite for the meal in front of me, but the way the candles on the tabletop cast a glossy shine to the gravy on the roast and the candied vegetables was remarkably pretty. I traced a pattern around a piece of carrot with the side of my spoon.

"... and the lawyer told me it's going to begin on January t- are you listening, old sport?"

I looked up at him and he frowned.

"Are you all right? You're very flushed."

I looked down at my hands. Honestly, I didn't think I looked all that terribly pink.

"Nick!"

I blinked, and then frowned. Somehow, the world had turned sideways.

There were hands, then, on my shoulders, pulling me upright, and I realized that I had fallen forward, onto the table. Gatsby was wiping my face with a napkin, and it came away brown with gravy.

He murmured something about me needing some proper sleep, and I let him help me to my feet and steer me towards the guestroom, sagging against him and burying my nose in his neck. He tensed but didn't stop walking until he'd got me to my bed. It was then that he noticed the smell of me, the reek of cheap liquor. He swallowed and sat me on the bed, holding my chin so that I looked at him. He peered at my eyes and I tried to lick the end of his nose when it came close to my face.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"I love you," I sighed and ran the tips of my fingers along his jaw. He recoiled but I didn't care. I sank into the luxurious reindeer pelt and beckoned to him.

"Stay," I pleaded, reaching for him. He shook his head, dodging my clumsy hands.

"I can't do that... Nick, you know that."

"Why not? I won't tell," I whispered, and it all seemed so funny, all this secrecy, so I laughed. He cringed and shook his head again.

"I can't."

"You said you'd..."

I trailed off and nuzzled the pelt.

"Nick..." he said softly, and there was a sadness there. I couldn't understand why he was sad - not when there was this wonderful silken fur stretched out everywhere, and when there were beautiful boxes and big red flowers, and Gatsby's eternally handsome face...

"Where's your smile, Jay?" I asked, reaching to touch his lips. He was too far away and my arm felt
like lead, so I relaxed it and it flopped beside me on the mattress.

"I don't feel much like smiling."

"Why not? You have such nice things."

"You... sometimes you sound just like her."

"She? Oh, you mean Daisy. Pre-e-e-etty Dai-sy," I drawled, and reached for him again. He took my hand and placed it back on the bed.

"Daisy the bore," I added, and chuckled. "Daisy the cruel."

"She's your own family, Nick, please."

"I'd sooner have you over any family. She can rot for all I care."

"You're not yourself, Nick, please don't talk like this. I can't listen to morbidity, not from you."

"Why must I play the optimist? I'm more myself now than I've been in years and I mean every word I say - I'd've let her crash, let her go down for it, let her pretty pretty curls burn when they put her in the chair -"

"Don't!" Gatsby screamed and smashed his hand over my mouth, into my teeth. I tasted copper, though whether it was his blood or mine, I couldn't tell, I looked up at him, wide-eyed with terror. I had never thought he'd be like this to me - to Tom, maybe, but never to me. He was shaking with rage and savage and frightening. He recoiled, cradling his hand - it was his blood, then.

His hands fell from me and settled on my chest, and he began to sob. I watched him, too drunk to be shocked by his outburst.

"Why," he lamented, his voice wretched and broken, "why would you say such hateful things? I thought you, of all people..."

"Come... come here," I said, and pulled him to lie next to me. He resisted at first, then relented and I felt like I was in heaven, warm and safe with fur and flowers and Gatsby in my arms at last.

"Didn't mean it, Jay, you know... you need happy, I'll be happy. I'll be anything."

I rolled over slightly and slid my leg over him, cradling him close to me. He struggled but I shushed him.

"Too drunk for that. Just need to hold someone."

He nodded and returned the embrace, his face burning hot, tucked into my chest.

We clung like that together for what felt like hours. Sometimes he wept, sometimes I hummed little comforting tunes, but mostly it was silent but for the sound of our breathing. At some point I drifted off and when I woke, it was morning and he had gone. I sat up, my head aching, and noticed that all the flowers and boxes had gone too.

In their place was an envelope, which I opened, and inside were two tickets to the theatre and a note, hastily written in a familiar hand.

Trial on the 10th.
2 days of freedom.
“Spend them with me?”

- Jay

I read the words, stunned, and slowly began to smile.
Chapter Summary

The boys get their emotional turmoil on, a date for the trial is set, and Nick finally gets some, almost, but not really.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for: butchering classical history, emotions (which I suck at writing, so be warned), Gatsby being all tragic and sad, Nick being all indignant and sad, boys being sad.

You wanted me to get to Gatsby's man-pain, so, we are now getting to Gatsby's man-pain.

The theatre that Gatsby chose was the sort of place where he wouldn't be remembered or recognized, where he could forget about the publicity that awaited him at the trial. He said he wanted to spend his last few free days with me. He did specify it was my company he desired, and the thought was enough to brighten my spirits, even considering the darkness that loomed over us as the trial drew nearer.

The evening held a special quality, a rare sort of magic, a sense of purpose. It was a peak before a fall, the last gasp of soldiers before going over the top. Somehow, the threat of Gatsby's conviction made the lights brighter, the showgirls prettier. The gaudy costumes and thick makeup the actors wore became works of living art before our eyes. The play was an off-Broadway release, some bawdy comedy set in the Classical age, which was mostly an excuse for the near-nudity of slave girls, whores and priestesses, historical inaccuracy, and bad slapstick, but in the moment, the aging actors and aspiring young starlets seemed to be their characters, convincingly, in the flesh.

Gatsby had a couple of bottles of wine hidden in the car, and orders for his chauffeur to take his time driving us home, and we drank with abandon as the driver, likely hired for his pragmatism regarding minor breaches of legality, turned a blind eye. Unlike his old car, this new little one was cramped at best, and each time we rounded a curve, we fell into one another, warm, swaying and intoxicated, laughing as we stumbled through explanations of the shortcomings of the ridiculous play. I remembered, belatedly, that I'd sworn I wouldn't drink with him again - yet here we were. Of course, he'd sworn he wouldn't encourage me to, and it was his wine and his car and his knee brushing mine, so I let my feelings of guilt fade as desire warmed me.

At last, the house came into view, and we got out and made our way indoors. We were giddy, near hysterics as we stumbled up the steps, clinging to one another for support. Half a bottle of wine remained, and I cradled it in my arms as I staggered across the threshold. Gatsby steered me to the ballroom and told me to sit on the floor, which I did, however irregular a request it seemed at the time. He made to leave and I called after him.
"I'll be back," he swore. "I have to get something."

"More wine!" I shouted and he made a sound of agreement and vanished through the doors. I drained the last of my supply and smiled, happy and dazed. Setting the bottle aside, I took my shoes off and loosened my tie, lying flat on the ground, my head pillowed on my arms, which I folded behind my head. I looked up at the lofty ceiling and marvelled at it.

Gatsby returned momentarily and when he did, I found myself in stitches with laughter.

In one hand, he had another bottle of wine, retrieved from goodness knows where, in the other, the head of a mop, and a bunch of grapes, and he had abandoned his jacket and vest for a bed sheet and a handful of leaves which were balanced precariously on his head.

"What are you supposed to be?" I coughed, my sides aching.

"Bacchus, of course. We're having our own play, since that one was so terrible. Here, put this on - you can be one of my priestesses."

He threw the mop at me and I put it on my head obediently. The sight made him chortle and stumble towards me. He stood over me, his glorious body wrapped in that ridiculous costume, and I realized that I was, once again, dangerously drunk, yet not quite drunk enough to be incapacitated - I burned for him. He had already uncorked the wine, I noticed, and he held it over my head, grinning.

"What have you to say to your god?" he boomed theatrically, then leaned forward and hissed at me in a stage whisper. "We're blessing the wine."

"O, great Bacchus, it is I, your priestess -" I began in a comical falsetto.

"Devoted priestess," he interrupted.

"It is I, your devoted priestess -"

"Fidelia, most beautiful virgin of Rome -"

"I'm not saying that," I snorted and he held the wine away from me.

"Bacchus demands it! Go on, play your part!"

I rolled my eyes and adjusted the mop, which was falling off my head.

"It is -"

"From the top!"

"O, great Bacchus, it is I, your devoted priestess Fidelia, most beautiful virgin of Rome."

He looked as impressed as I felt that I got all that out without mangling it.

"The blessing's up to you," he prompted.

"Bacchus, dear Bacchus, let there be wine," I declared and grinned at him. When he hesitated, I batted my eyes at him.

"Aren't you going to give me my benediction?" I teased and his face flushed, but he nodded.

"You have been a good priestess, and so, I give you the wine of the gods!" he declared and tilted
the bottle. Wine poured down into my open mouth, over my face, down onto my clothes. I didn't care. I couldn't care, not with him lowering the bottle to my lips. I mouthed at the opening greedily. He leered at me, caught up in his character, and I lost all restraint at the sight. I performed obscenities on the bottleneck with mouth and tongue, looking lustily up at him, and his hands shook so that he nearly let the object go. I placed my hands on it without thinking - I swear, I intended only to steady it. The glass was warm and seemed to thrum with life beneath my fingers, and I slid them along its length until they met the soft, warm skin of his hand.

I have gone over the moment in detail, the instant my eyes narrowed and his went wide, the way that Gatsby shivered and almost pulled away but didn't. Then all at once I was rising to my feet as he was crouching down and we met half way, the wine abandoned as I wrapped my arms around him at last.

I could have kissed him at once. I expect he'd thought I would, and I did want to, but holding him, in that moment, clutching him to me without restraint, was in itself an act that I had longed for so that I had to savor it separately for a moment. I pressed my nose into his neck and felt the heat of his skin and the rasp of his stubble against my face. I pressed my first kiss to him there, my mouth closed and my lips pressed tight together.

I had had too much to drink - I had had too much to drink and surely I had dozed off and Gatsby had helped me up to bed and I was asleep, dreaming, yearning fruitlessly.

If it was a dream, then, I would make the best of it.

I shut my eyes and shifted so that my mouth covered his own.

At first, I was still sure it was an illusion, but then I realized that no dreamed-up Gatsby would falter, would hold me as delicately as he would a woman, and even then show such tension, such hesitance.

It was no dream.

My eyes flew open and I pulled back, shocked. The picture he presented was not a flattering one - his mouth swollen and dewy with moisture, his brow furrowed with fear, his face a splotchy beet-red, slightly sweaty, and his hair full of those damned leaves. I lifted a hand and ruffled his hair, scattering the leaves around us.

"I want you terribly," I murmured, and he swallowed visibly. I let my hand fall to his throat and felt his pulse racing beneath my fingertips.

"Nick, I... I don't... I don't know what I'm doing," he blabbered. The hysteria was catching and I felt myself break out in gooseflesh.

"You don't have to do anything. I can compensate, Jay, please," I begged, and pressed a kiss to his jaw.

"I don't-"

"I'll make it good for you, Jay, I promise. Please." My plea sounded like the last request of a dying man.

"N-no. No, Nick, I'm sorry."

It felt like being shot a second time, as he gently pushed me away. After the sudden hurt came an intense anger that burned hotter than my lust.
"What the hell was that?" I barked at him and he covered his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he moaned like a chant, rocking back and forth on the floor.

"You're sorry? How do you think I feel?"

I could feel tears threatening to spill over and I prayed to whatever divine powers might be listening that I wouldn't cry in front of him. If I was heard, I was ignored, and hot trails of shame dripped down my face. I turned away, scrubbing at them with my shirtsleeve, the mop falling to the floor. He reached for me and I flinched away before reeling around and surging towards him. He raised his hands to defend himself and caught me by the shoulders. I swung at him half-heartedly and he took the feeble blow to his stomach before drawing me close to him. I collapsed against him and sobbed, drunk and disgusted with myself.

"It's not fair!" I bawled and he tightened his hold on me. "You toy with me and apologize and I'm the one stuck in the lurch!"

He nodded and stroked the back of my neck.

"I'm sorry, old sport, I'm -"

"None of that!" I shouted, louder than I meant to, and dragged myself away, wiping my face clean with my dry sleeve. He let me gather my wits before I spoke.

"I'd give you everything, and you... you'd take it."

I hadn't meant to say that, yet once the words were out, I didn't want to retract them, seeing as they were true. He nodded grimly.

"I know."

"Then why won't you fix it? Why won't you stop, or let me go on with my life?"

He looked up at me, his eyes wet and shining.

"You're the only person who's ever loved me, really loved me. I can't let you go," he admitted sadly.

"So you'll keep me here, bound to you, never reciprocating -"

"I don't know if I could-"

"For God's sake, I'm not asking you to go to bed with me! I just want you to stop pushing me away when you're the one instigating all of this! I could go home right now and pack my things and move away and never see you again -"

"Is that what you want?"

He had no right to sound so heartbroken.

"I want you, Jay, it's all I ever wanted! I've made no secret of that. But if I can't have you properly, I won't settle for pining anymore. Look how that turned out with you and Daisy. It can't last - I'd come to hate you. I couldn't bear that."

Gatsby stared at his hands, balling them into fists, unclenching them, spreading his fingers.
"Wilson should have shot me," he said suddenly, and I felt as though all the air had been sucked out of the room.

A silence stretched between us for over a minute.

"What?" I said at last.

"I've been thinking about it ever since you... if he'd shot me, all of this could have ended. All my... legacy, if you could call it that... it could end. Everyone could forget me. You could forget me."

He sighed - a despairing sound.

"What good is any of this, anyhow? What have I to look forward to, after this trial? Prison? Or the empty life I've built for myself here? I don't think I can stand it - I can't even drive anymore! I get sick just thinking about it. I have to walk by that pool every day and the sight of it makes me wish, more and more, that you'd stayed away, that you'd let it happen! I'm torn between gratitude and resentment, Nick, and you don't deserve it... I just wish sometimes that you'd let me die."

The admission sparked many emotions inside of me. The first was horror, that he would contemplate such things, him, of all people. The second was guilt. I had been so caught up in my own feelings that I'd completely ignored the possibility that he had been changed by the events, as I had.

Worse, I thought. I reached out instinctively and took his hands in mine. We sat like that for some time before I spoke.

"I had to save you," I said and he looked at me, his face puffy and tearstained. It was not a pretty sight, yet I loved it, loved him, so much more deeply that before.

"If you'd died, all the light in the world would have died with you. All the flowers, all the music, all the joy, all the hope... you'd have taken that with you. If I'd known for certain that Wilson's bullet would kill me, I'd still have done it, because the world needs you, Jay. I need you."

I shuffled closer to him and placed his hands on my side, clasped over the spot where the bullet pierced me.

"I love you."

He made a tortured sound and shut his eyes.

"I don't know how to love," he whimpered. "My whole vision of it's wrong, I got it backwards and I don't know how to -"

"But do you want to learn?"

He was staring at me like a frightened animal, close to bolting. I was pushing my luck - this was my last chance - I couldn't stand rejection, not again - but I lifted his hands to my lips and I kissed them tenderly.

When he nodded, I started to weep in spite of myself, and he did too, and I leaned in and rested my forehead against his as we sobbed for all of it, all the pain and the loss and the scars we carried.

"Look at us," I laughed weakly. "Crying when we should be celebrating what's left of your freedom."
He laughed too and accidentally whacked our foreheads together, which stung enough to sober us up a bit.

This second meeting of lips was slower and so I remember it more clearly. There was an edge of desperation to it - a sadness that I'm sure he felt in some capacity - and that crushed my soul. A sense of 'if only'. If only he'd let me try to show him months ago, if only he'd let me take my cousin's place, if only we'd made the most of the squandered summer -

- the thoughts gave way to blurred fragments as he began at last to respond to my kissing, to hold me more tightly.

When we parted to breathe, he seemed almost shy.

"You have to understand, there's only ever been Daisy, before," he admitted. "I've never... not with a man."

I nodded.

"I was in the army, so I've heard stories, you know. Talk. I don't want to do... that, not now."

It took me a moment to put together the vague statement and realize what he meant.

"We don't have to - look, you don't even have to touch me," I said quickly, aware that I must seem unbecomingly eager. He shook his head.

"That wouldn't be fair. I want... I don't know what I want. What do you want?"

That was a dangerous question, but I was weary, drained of emotions, completely exhausted, and he was the same.

"I'd like to get some sleep, actually," I said, and he looked relieved.

"Good idea, old sport."

We both stood up and looked at one another, unsure of how to proceed.

"I'm going to my room," I said slowly, and Gatsby nodded.

"But if you would like to join me, I'll leave it up to you. Just to sleep, mind. Just like we did before."

He nodded again.

"I'd like that, awfully," he said. I smiled and left him to clean up the evidence of our aborted dramas. As I dressed for bed, I pinched myself. I wasn't sure what to feel - joy and sadness were at war inside me. He was letting me take liberties with him, at last, but only because he had nothing else left to live for. It was hard to get my head around, least of all when I was tired and full of wine.

When my head hit the pillow, I immediately began to doze off, and scarcely noticed the door opening and shutting. I did notice the presence of someone joining me under the covers, keeping a modest distance from me until I reached out, eyes closed, and pulled him close. He relaxed somewhat and I listened to his breathing, trying to match it with my own until the slow rhythm put me to sleep.
Gatsby was entangled with me when I woke in the morning. He had rolled onto my leg, which had gone numb, and had stolen most of the sheets, but I didn't mind. I would have laid there for an eternity, just watching him snoring softly, his mouth softly open, a bead of saliva clinging to his lower lip and crusting there. It was so different from the Gatsby the world saw. Somehow I doubt he'd even have shown this side of himself to Daisy - so fearful of shattering his illusion with anything less than perfection. Yet the imperfect humanity, the intimacy of seeing him, unguarded, in sleep, filled me with joy. It was mine to see, mine alone, a gesture of trust that I couldn't, for all my writer's ways, put into words.

I took my time getting out of bed, did my best not to wake him. I performed my morning ablutions, cleaned my teeth and washed my face, and dried it with a towel. When I returned, Gatsby was awake, but he had not moved. When he saw me, he smiled slightly, and I saw there was anxiety in his eyes.

"You look spritely, given how drunk we were last night," he chuckled nervously.

"That's not, strictly speaking, all that drunk, for me. How about you, how do you feel? I imagine your mind must be in quite a muddle today."

It was a sportsmanlike gesture, on my part, a last chance for him to turn and run.

"I remember it well enough," he said. "Let's not... dance around it, Nick. We both remember what we said."

"And did," I added, and he nodded, cheeks coloring.

"Yes," he echoed, and ran his hand over his hair. He pulled out a leaf, which, against all odds, had survived the evening. I took it from his hands and placed it on the nightstand, moving to sit beside him on the bed.

"I enjoyed what we did. Immensely," I said softly and reached out to touch his jaw. He clenched it instinctively and a shudder ran through him. I continued as considerately as I could, aware that I might have to prompt him, but also that I could conceivably push too far, too fast.

"I'd like to do more of it. Would you?"

He squinted and nodded.

"I... I'll have to wash up first, if you don't mind."
"I don't."

I settled back into the softness of the bed and stroked the reindeer pelt passively. I hoped he wouldn't change his mind on me, but it was a possibility. More likely was the possibility that I'd come on too strong and scare him off - the evidence of my interest in him was visibly tenting my sleep pants. I had just managed to adjust them so that he wouldn't be the wiser when at last he returned, his face flushed from having been freshly washed - water dripping from the ends of his hair, his nose, and his chin.

He sat by me and I wound my fingers in his hair. He swallowed reflexively as I brought my lips towards his.

"Shut your eyes, if it helps," I suggested and he did so. I kissed him, our third, real kiss, and it was everything I had longed for. Yes, he was timid at first, slow to take to the affection, and yes, he tilted his head the wrong way and bent my nose at an odd angle, but it was warm and gentle and genuine and crystal clear in my mind, without the haze of drink.

I scraped my fingernails over his scalp in light, repetitive movements and he groaned against my mouth, giving me the chance to kiss him deeper still. When his tongue slid along mine, my heart sang.

I had never really loved, not with all my heart, until Gatsby. I had read about it - had seen people who seemed to think the world of each other - and didn't doubt that such a phenomenon existed, but the thought that I could find it seemed extraordinary, when the majority of my experiences with intimacy had been awkward schoolboy fumbling or hasty trysts in sordid rooms where men met each other for impersonal coupling with fear of policemen ever-present on my mind. Relations of the kind to which I was partial were not typically long-term affairs, given the need for secrecy and anonymity.

Yet I had hoped...

Gatsby was a delight to kiss, by far an ideal subject if ever there was one. He was a quick study, and increasingly bold with his gestures, though, when he dared to catch my lower lip between his teeth and I failed to suppress a grunt of enjoyment, he tensed and restrained into himself until I repeated the gesture on him and assured him that I was more than satisfied with his actions.

The positioning of it, with both of us seated side-by-side, my torso twisted sideways, put a strain on my wound, and the pain made me hiss, breaking away from Gatsby, pressing my hand to the spot.

"Sorry," I coughed, "not all that comfortable, for me."

Gatsby's response was to pull me by my wrist until I was kneeling over him, one of his thighs between my open legs. It was an invitation to take things further, but one I wasn't certain he'd intended to offer me. For the moment, much as it made me ache and yearn, I kept from sinking down to straddle the limb.

"Are you enjoying this?" I asked when we paused to catch our breath. He nodded, seemingly at a loss for words.

"You could tell me," I murmured against the corner of his mouth.

"I just di-"

"Tell me what you like," I breathed against his ear and caught the lobe of it between my teeth. Gatsby's moan caught in his throat. I wanted to hear it - to recapture the openness I'd seen while he slept. I moved to suck on his throat and when he groaned, I felt the vibrations against my lips.
I reached for the top button of his pyjamas and he stiffened, eyes wide and dark, pupils so big I swore I could have drowned in them.

"Can I-?"

"Yes, God yes."

Our tongues sparred as I worked his shirt off him. Once it was off, I tossed it roughly to the floor, impatient. I pushed on his shoulder and he reclined, so that I could finally look at him.

I placed my palms over his pectorals, spread my fingers against tanned, hot skin.

"You're perfect," I murmured in spite of myself and he tried to chuckle self-deprecatingly, but the sound became a gasp as I scratched lightly over his skin and leaned over to kiss his clavicle.

"Talk to me, Jay, please. So I know I'm not dreaming," I requested quietly.

"N-Nick," he stammered as I bit down gently on his nipple and soothed it with kisses.

"Nick," he tried again as I licked across to the other side of chest and repeated the action.

"I like this," he whimpered as I teased him, alternating between rough nips and tender kisses. I ghosted my fingers over his stomach and he laughed breathlessly and squirmed.

"I'd never have guessed you were ticklish," I grinned and he smiled back, and I was sure I saw some of the old Jay, eternal optimist, in it.

"I'd like to - ah - to know if you - you are," he panted as I shuffled backwards and moved down to his navel. I bathed him in kisses and swipes of my tongue and when I shifted my weight, I felt evidence of his interest swell against me. I reached down to touch him, but he rolled me onto my back so suddenly it was as though the wind were knocked out of me.

"Sorry - your side - I wasn't thinking-"

"It's fine," I assured him and tried to remain suave and composed as I unbuttoned my shirt. Of course, my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly manage the buttons and Gatsby had to help me half way, but all things considered, I did a commendable job.

My own chest wasn't anything too handsome, in my opinion. It was narrow and lean, a bit pale, and marred on one side by scar tissue where Wilson's bullet had ripped through me. It was an ugly wound, not something most people would want to look at, let alone touch, yet Gatsby's fingertips traced it faintly and his eyes shone with wetness at the sight.

"To think you did that for me," he murmured and shook his head. "You're so good, Nick. So good and kind. You're the best man I know."

I warmed at the praise and luxuriated against the pelt as he began to kiss my neck and shoulders, mirroring the affection I'd given him earlier. I took the chance to show him just how I'd hoped he'd vocalize his pleasure, threading my fingers through his hair and letting my moans flow, unrestrained, from my lips.

"Yes, Jay, just like that," I keened when he licked at my earlobe and he repeated the action diligently. His broad palms slid over my fevered skin, ghosting across the planes of my body, always settling near the wound.
When he lowered his mouth to that spot, I was surprised and even afraid. His tongue traced along the web of raised tissue, the violence that marred my flesh, and he kissed the injury with genuine affection.

I chanted his name, a private litany, and let affection hang on every word. *I love you, I love you, I love you, perfect, darling Jay,* and as I cried out my adoration I clutched him close to me, pulled him up to kiss me on the mouth and held him tight and desperate, delirious with love.

As he bit down teasingly on my throat, I pushed my hips against his and ground into the hardness there that surged against my answering arousal.

"I want you to fuck me," I blurted out and all at once he was retreating from me, into himself, and I'd as good as thrown our romancing into the fire for all he looked like he'd been burned, been stung by my demand.

I should have said something, anything to break that awful silence but I couldn't. Like a third party, it settled, uninvited, between us on the bed.

"Nick, I can't..."

"Of course you can't."

My response wasn't bitter or angry, it was dead. Dead words on my tongue. Dead sentiment.

"You didn't like it."

"I did, Nick... too much - I - you must realize how difficult it is for me!"

"For you."

"Yes! You... you're asking me to break the law, for one thing."

"You've had no qualms about breaking it before."

He looked aghast and I shook my head.

"That was unkind of me. I'm sorry. I just... I've wanted you for ages, and of course I'll stop, I'll always stop, if you don't like it, but the trial is tomorrow and if I lose you now I won't be able to cope."

His frown softened and he took my face in his hands and kissed it gently - the first kiss that was entirely his idea. He bumped his nose against mine and the corners of his mouth twitched upwards.

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you, Jay. You know I do, more than -"

"I think I could... could grow to love you. Someday, if you show me what it means. But I won't spoil this with haste. It has to be perfect."

I shook my head.

"Who wants perfect? I want imperfect. I want to see every flaw and every scar and I want to know them, to know you better than anyone else in the world. Perfect was for Daisy, Jay, what she wanted. I just want you."
He looked as though he might cry, and given that, for two grown men in our prime, we had both done far too much of that, as of late, I continued before he could begin.

"But if you want to do this without the threat of trial pushing us on, then I'll wait. Even if..." and I paused, for the gravity of what I was saying was not lost on me, "even if you are convicted, sent to prison... I'll wait."

He smiled then, and it was as close to his old smile as he'd gotten since the summer.

"Thanks, old sport."

And for once, there was a quality to the term that was weighted, pointed. It wasn't a brotherly title, anymore, it was a loving endearment. I smiled back, I couldn't keep from smiling. It was the first time I'd ever been rebuffed and yet remained joyful, beaming, hopeful.

With that bit of reciprocal affection, he'd restored my hope.

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"What would you like to do today?" I asked as I dressed.

Gatsby sat on the bed, watching me, the reindeer pelt pooled around his waist. I took some satisfaction at the thought of what it might be concealing, and made a bit of a show of it, practicing some morning stretches in the nude, before I put my clothes on. I caught him stealing a glance at my person, and when I asked if he'd like a better view he turned crimson and stared at the floor.

"I'd like to go out," he said. "Enjoy the daylight. Go for a drive, maybe."

"I'm game. Come on, let's get you dressed and we can have breakfast."

I followed him into his room and sat expectantly on the bed.

"Go on, it's only fair," I grinned and he turned from me before shucking off his clothes with impressive speed. With his back to me, I could marvel, unabashedly, at the firm, round globes of his buttocks, which reduced me nearly to tears with their impeccable pertness. He laid out some underpants and an undershirt on the bed, and I reached for the articles childishly, holding them behind my back. He grabbed for them, realized they'd gone, and looked over his shoulder at me.

"You'll have to fight me for them, I'm afraid," I leered. "I've commandeered them."

He rolled his eyes and turned to face me, one hand cupped over himself as he reached with the other to swipe them back.

"You're at a distinct disadvantage," I teased, passing the bundle of clothing back and forth between my hands. He blushed and made a grab for both of my hands, exposing himself to me at last. I barely got a look before he was turned round again, dressing with haste.

"Sometimes you're no better than a schoolboy," he chided, but there was no anger in it.

"I know. You should have known me AS a schoolboy, I was much worse."

"I think you weren't. I think you were one of those too-good children whose corruption goes unnoticed until adulthood."
"I think you're a bit of a prude for a military man," I laughed and tickled him, and he squirmed away to put his trousers on. As he buttoned his suspenders to his waistband, I continued taunting him, playful as a child.

"I imagine you were quite a character yourself, at that age. All daydreams of success, goals, ambition."

He shrugged.

"I don't think about my boyhood, often."

There was a tone in his voice that suggested that, while he'd enjoyed himself thus far, he'd appreciate if I dropped that particular topic, so I did.

"Where'd you like to drive to?" I asked instead.

"I haven't made up my mind yet. I've got a few places in mind."

"Well, if you could ask your driver to take us to the shops I could do with a trip to the barber. I'd like to look presentable for your trial, else the judge and jury and everyone thinks you go around with the wrong crowd."

He paused, his hands stilling halfway through buttoning his shirt.

"I don't want to use my driver today," he said slowly. I grew solemn at the realization.

"Oh... you're sure...?"

"No," he admitted, "but I have to try sometime."

We took a quick breakfast, over which we agreed to go to the shops so that I could get my hair cut and Gatsby could run some undisclosed errands. As we made our way to the garage, I could see by the way his skin paled and his breathing changed that he was hesitant to get behind the wheel.

We made it as far as my house in the little black car before he pulled over suddenly, wrenched open the door, and was sick all over the road. I patted his knee as he retreated inside, shutting out the cold air, and offered him my handkerchief to wipe his mouth.

"That was a disaster," he said bitterly. I shook my head.

"You made it farther than you'd have done yesterday."

He nodded, but I could tell he was unhappy.

"How about you drive us back to your house, and we'll call for the driver and get him to take us into the city. Can you do that, or shall I run over and have him meet us here?"

Gatsby shook his head.

"I think I can manage... at least, I'll try."

We drove back to the house at a snail's pace, Gatsby gripping the steering wheel for dear life, but we got there nonetheless. The driver, if he'd noticed our efforts, made no comment.

In town, I found a cheap barber who gave me a trim and a shave, and stopped to buy some chestnuts from a man on a street corner as I walked towards the car. Gatsby appeared shortly after, holding, of
all things, a bouquet of flowers.

"Those had better not be for me," I teased and he shook his head. We both settled into the back of the car and Gatsby leaned over and murmured something to the driver. I ate a chestnut and burnt my tongue. We drove in silence.

I wasn't sure where we were going, yet I had not expected that we'd wind up at a cemetery, of all places. I held my singed tongue and followed Gatsby as he waded through the snow, weaving between gravestones. We must have walked for all of five minutes. All at once, he came to a sudden stop before a handsome marker. On impulse, I wiped the snow off the name and recoiled when I realized who it was we were visiting.

Myrtle Wilson's gravestone was a fine one - one that spoke perhaps of a rich benefactor. My mind immediately suggested that Tom might have, feeling something akin to guilt, paid for it for her, yet, it was just as likely, if not more so, that Gatsby would simply have ordered her a nicer stone after George had shot himself - done it anonymously in an effort to put things right.

I looked over at him, but he seemed disinclined to speak. He placed the flowers on the ground and stared at them for a few minutes before turning and heading back the way we'd came. I followed and waited until we were back in the car before opening my mouth to speak. Something in his eyes made me change my mind, and I turned and looked out the window instead.

"I'm sorry all of this happened," he said suddenly. I glanced back at him and set my hand next to his. "Me too," I said. "But the past is the past."

He didn't reply, but he squeezed my fingers. I sensed that this moment was a profound one, and that I ought to say something, yet the only thing that came to mind seemed inappropriate. I said it anyhow.

"Chestnut?"

He looked confused, and then relieved, and nodded, and I handed him the paper bag. He pried open the cooling ball and its flesh slid out perfectly onto his palm. I took one for myself and when I cracked it, the insides crumbled and broke.

I wondered if I was reading into it, that I feared this was some ill omen, some tension between us. The silence was back again, but as I hadn't caused it, I didn't know how to make it disappear. The ups and downs of the past two days had exhausted my ability to think or speak, and still I had the trial to worry about, and a script to write for work which was due on the fifteenth. I hadn't even started. I stared down at the nut in my hand, and gave it to Gatsby. My appetite had entirely gone.
The night before the trial brings courage to Gatsby, and hope to Nick.

I went to bed alone that night. I retired early but I couldn’t sleep. I lay awake for hours, tossing and turning, and stared into the blackness until my eyes stung.

I debated taking some time to write but I couldn’t find the motivation.

I wanted Jay.

I always wanted him but it was so much worse now that I had a memory of his kiss. I was bothered and restless and my blood was hot as fire. I peeled off my clothes and lay, sweating, on the reindeer pelt. It felt scratchy and stifling against my back, and I couldn’t bear it for long. I rose from the bed and paced until my feet hurt.

Jay, Jay, Jay! It would be too easy to tiptoe to his room and wake him, to join him in bed, to take his face in my hands and, with him still dazed from sleep, kiss him. Coax him to kiss me.

Of course, I wouldn’t. I would wait for him, always, I respected him too much to do otherwise, but the thought of going there as I was, hot and hard, of showing him how truly desperate he made me, made me shake with need.

I sank to the floor and lay flat. It was cool against my back and I arched into it, wrenching my legs apart. How long I lay there I am not sure; the minutes bled together as I palmed myself with an edge of unforgiving roughness. It went on for some time, but I could not find release, not with anxiety about the trial looming over me.

Giving up at last, I sat up and stayed there, cross-legged, on the floor, and stared down at the scar that marred my torso.

I needed a drink.

The thought, once it came to me, would not leave my head. Once I had retrieved a robe, I slipped out of my room and felt my way along in the dark until I reached the end of the hall and realized I didn’t know where the alcohol was currently being housed. If I did want my drink, I’d have to go elsewhere to get it.

I returned to my room and glanced at the clock, which read half past two. I threw on some clothes and hurried back downstairs, intending to make a quick jaunt over to my house where I knew there were a few bottles of wine safely hidden away.

When I ducked out of the door, the night air shocked me so that I paused, frozen in place. I could feel the presence of that sinister place where I had nearly lost my life; I knew it was close.

My feet began to move, seemingly of their own accord, and the rest of me followed in stunned silence. Within me, disturbance built and swelled towards a terrible crescendo and, when the breeze
suddenly chilled tracks on my cheeks I realized, burst forth as tears.

There it was.

Drained, empty, it looked so different from how it had looked with Jay in it, with Wilson looming over it, with me jumping, and the surface of the water coming towards me.

The pool.

A pool without water looks wrong, unsettling somehow, and the scene was made more repulsive by the knowledge that George Wilson had shot himself a few feet from where I now stood.

“Can’t sleep, old sport?”

I started and turned to find Jay standing behind me, an unreadable look on his face.

“How did you know I was here?” I blurted out and he shrugged, looking past me at the clear night sky.

“In all honesty, I wasn’t looking for you.”

He walked to the edge of the pool and peered down into it.

“I can’t explain it, but I felt like I had to be here tonight. It seemed like some calamity was looming and that I could not refuse the impulse. Strange, isn’t it?”

I shook my head.

“I felt the same way, the day Wilson – the day that everything happened. I suppose that would be strange to most people, but –”

“You’re not most people,” Gatsby interrupted, flinging a sad sort of half-smile my way. He sat down on the rim of the pool and patted the ground beside him. I joined him warily, partly concerned at being this close to the place where I’d nearly bled to death, and partly afraid of putting excessive pressure on my scar.

“Nick,” he said softly, and I turned to look at him, taking in the striking angles of his profile in the moonlight.

“I’ve been a fool,” he said, and hung his head. I made to protest but he continued, unabated.

“I loved someone who didn’t love me, and I scorned someone who did.”

“You never scorned me.”

“Well, I used you, which is as bad, if not worse.”

I sighed.

“We’ve been here before, we’ve had this entire conversation. I used you too. It’s over with now, don’t torture yourself.”

“No,” Gatsby murmured. “I don’t think it shall ever be over, not for me. I don’t like losing, Nick. I hate it. I hate being so damned wrong about everything. Sitting here, now, seeing Daisy’s house across the way… I feel…”
I waited for him to find the right word.

“I feel fragmented. I feel as though there are holes all through me, and there’s cold air rushing in. I feel as though that’s all it will take to make everything crumble to dust because there’s no foundation left to stand on. Daisy was it, and now she’s gone. And then there’s you.”

He turned to me, his eyes moist.

“And you scare me most of all.”

It shocked me, hearing him say it outright, but I was not surprised.

“You know why, don’t you?” he said, his voice near to pleading. “You understand?”

I simply stared at him, mesmerized. His face was so close to my own.

“You want me. Please, say it.”

“Yes,” I whispered hoarsely. “Yes, of course. God, Jay, if you only knew how much.”

“And I want… I want to be wanted.”

“Everyone does.”

Jay shook his head violently, pulling away.

“No, no I never have! I only wanted to provide, to love, to cherish Daisy. I didn’t do it for myself, I did it for her!”

“Really,” I pushed. "That's a bit of a stretch, even for you."

He rubbed his face with his hand.

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. I’m babbling terribly, but only because I'm not used to… whatever this is.”

I nodded and, boldly, reached out to rub the back of his neck in what I hoped was a friendly, non-coercive manner.

“It's macabre, I suppose, but I'm glad that we're here. Together. In the place that started all this. Not that I'm glad you were shot, of course. But you know. It seems right, being here.” He smiled weakly, and added:

“Here’s as good a place as any.”

“For what?”

“For this,” he said, and screwed his eyes up, as if trying to garner courage.

And all at once, my senses were filled with Jay.

Our first kisses, good as they were, were not like this. Not so strangely revealing. I could taste his restraint and his eagerness in turns as they warred with him. When he pulled back, fear and need were in his eyes.

With no regard for the consequences. All the ways you said. Just… just in case.”

_In case I don’t come home._

For a moment or two, I was lost, my mind a mess of half-formed responses and erotic tableaus.

“Not here,” I managed. “Not where someone could see.”

Jay conceded. We rose together and left the pool behind us.

I occurred to me, as I followed him up the stairs, that it was finally happening, that the great Gatsby was inviting me to his bed. At last, at last my hopes and dreams and months of yearning and heartache were being reciprocated in the ways I had hardly dared to dream about. My heart was pounding in my ears so loudly that I could not hear him when he turned to me and spoke, guiding me towards him.

We weren’t half way up the stairs.

We weren’t half way up the stairs and Jay was kissing me, clutching me like his life depended on it. Better still, he was letting me kiss back. At last, my hands were roving over the planes of his back and down, further, squeezing at him, pressing him against the banister. Dimly I knew that we were moving much too fast, that surely this was not the way we ought to go about this dalliance, whether or not he’d had a change of heart with the threat of imprisonment looming on the horizon, and yet neither of us showed any sign of stopping.

I slid my leg in between his thighs and felt him swell against me, and felt him shiver in my arms, and felt his moan against my lips, and all at once it was too much of what I’d hoped and pined and burned for, and all the world dissolved into nothingness, and all that remained was the weight of him in my arms.

Presently, when my thoughts were back in some kind of order, I realized he was speaking to me. My face was buried in his neck and I was slouched against his chest.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice deeper and breathier than usual. I managed a nod.

“Would you like to continue?”

I shook my head.

“Can’t,” I croaked, and my cheeks burned so hot I was sure he could feel it. “Not just yet. I’ll need a moment.”

It took him a moment to catch on.

“You mean you-”

“I’m sorry!” I said, more than a little embarrassed. “It’s not like I normally – only that this is so sudden. Your reciprocation. Oh, God.”

He pried me off of him and took my jaw in his hand, prompting me to him in the face.

“Don’t apologize, please. I very nearly lost it myself,” he said, though I doubted it was true. Still, even dazed as I was I noted that was kind of him.

“You didn’t, though.”
“No, I’m afraid not,” he blushed, and gave a genuine smile this time, if a bit sheepish.

“We could fix that.”

He swallowed visibly, the smile leaving his face.

“We could.”

“Not on the stairs,” I said firmly. He furrowed his brow.

“I can’t kneel on them easily and I’d hate to fall off part way through,” I elaborated, savoring the way Jay turned crimson in spite of himself. He inhaled deeply, steadily.

“My room’s not far.”

“I know.”

His fingers found my hand and he squeezed it. Both our palms were sweating and I’m sure we must have looked a right mess. His eyes met mine and he held my gaze determinedly.

“Then let’s... let’s.”

Hardly the most eloquent thing he'd ever said, but in that moment I would have ranked it as finer language than any I’d ever read in the great classics of literature. My agreement tingled on my lips and lit fresh fire in my belly.

"Yes," I replied. "Let's."
Chapter Summary

Jay tries to set aside his worries and take Nick to bed. Nick tries to prove his worth in a carnal way.

For once, the boys share a little peace and mutual happiness. But is it to last...?

Chapter Notes

The boys are finally getting physical. At last, Nick has a hope of not dying from blue balls.

More seriously, though, I hope it's clear that Jay is really pushing himself here. He likes Nick, he wants Nick, but he's scared still, a bit. He's learning and trusting as best he can.

Nick, on the other hand, is just happy for the opportunity. Also, his fixation on the phallus is very much inspired by myself, I'm ashamed to say. I just really think that a guy like Gatsby would have a monumental, beautiful cock. (I spend way too much time thinking about this.)

Hope you enjoy. :) If there's typos or errors, let me know - I'm still mad hungover from New Years, so I'm not the sharpest right now. :P

Gatsby’s back had no sooner met the wall in his bedroom than I was sinking to my knees before him. He didn’t bother with the lights, so all I had to see by was a sliver of moonlight that shone in from the window. The chiaroscuro illuminated choice details: the line of his jaw, his temple, his cheek. It cast a shadow where his hair had fallen out of place, hanging in front of his brow, and it served to accentuate the way his trousers were tented. For me, I thought, and warmed with a sort of awestruck pride.

My hands shook so violently that I couldn’t get his flies open. He didn’t fare much better at it himself, but he managed, at least, to shove the fabric out of the way and finally, finally I could see him as I’d always wanted to.

I’ll admit that I have always been very fond of the phallus, as an anatomical part. It was a crucial component of the sort of classical ideal that I’d held dear as a schoolboy, when the closest thing to the erotic I knew were ridiculous fantasies about broad, thick men with perspiring, muscled bodies, turgid shafts, and pendulous testicles. It was all very grandiose, and the idea of being kidnapped as a prisoner of war by some Roman legion, or being taken by some embodiment of Herculean heroics was somewhat laughable now, but though my expectations now had a more realistic foundation, I still, putting it bluntly, really enjoy handling a good prick.

My Jay, of course, was beautiful in every other possible way, and I thrilled to see that he was
beautiful there, too. His organ was of average length, but thick and full, and I knew it would weigh fat and heavy on my tongue. Every inch of him beckoned to be kissed and worshiped, and I was glad to lean in, to exhale warmly with my mouth open wide against the soft curls that framed the base of his length. Above me, Jay whimpered, and his strong hands settled in my hair.

I ran my lips over him at first – just my lips, dry and a bit chapped, but soft and swollen enough from our kissing that they didn’t chafe. A chaste beginning to an act that was anything but, I knew, but I couldn’t help but draw it out, having waited so very long.

Resting my cheek against his thigh, I traced the shapes that were particular to him and took note of every touch that made him shake and gasp. He smelled familiar, masculine, heady. My patience reached its end and I had to taste him properly. I parted my lips and kissed the side of his cock, and if I was a bit sloppy and the kisses too wet, neither of us cared. I cradled his privates as though they were made of fine china. Every piece of him was precious to me, and I wanted him to know it. I was sure that, sometime, if the universe would be kind enough to allow me a second chance at this, I would be firmer, my touches more of a man’s and less of a coltish girl on her wedding night, but I was much more nervous than I’d anticipated, desperate to ensure that I be best at this, better than my cousin, better than anyone else he’d ever known, the best my Jay would ever have so that he’d keep me. Dear God, let him keep me.

I wrote my love on his skin with kisses.

He was already so far gone. When I finally ran the flat of my tongue over the head of his prick, he sobbed and tightened his grip on my hair.

“Sorry,” he choked out, struggling to unclench his hands. “Sorry, I –”

“Shh,” I whispered against him, rubbing his shaft against my cheek, my chin. I looked up at him, meeting his glazed, dilated stare.

“Pull my hair if it helps.”

He did, though he tried his best not to make it hurt, bless him. I rewarded him with a little finesse, flicking my tongue rapidly against the underside of his cockhead, then sliding around to lap at his slit, and he groaned, his hips bucking against my face.

“Please, Nick,” he begged. “Please…”

I swallowed him whole.

It wasn’t as easy as I thought – my skills, which once were passable, had never been exceptional, and they had grown rusty with disuse. As I took him in deeper, my jaw threatened to cramp. When he bumped against the back of my throat, I had to pause to keep from gagging, tears coming to my eyes.

“Nick,” he breathed, and I looked up again, having broken eye-contact when the cramp started up in my jaw. He looked majestic, the moonlight shining in his eyes and his damp skin, his brow knit and his lower lip clamped between his teeth. As lovely as his hushed groans were, I knew he was swallowing most of his vocal praise, and I wanted to hear it so badly. Desperately, I hummed around him, hoping it would prompt him to keep saying my name. To say nothing but my name, forever, for there was no sound more pleasing to my ears.

“Nick, wait,” he mumbled, half-heartedly pushing against my forehead. “Nick, get off, I’m going to...”
I hummed again, and that’s what did it. Once more I found that I had overestimated my prowess somewhat, as I swallowed what I could and still managed to choke. I spent the next few minutes coughing and snorting in a way that was surely off-putting. Once Jay regained some control of himself, his hand returned to my hair and stayed there, a welcome weight. I sneezed and blinked a few times.

“I think I might have aspirated a bit,” I managed. Jay looked stricken.

“Will you be alright? I could get you some water –”

“I’m fine. Really. I’m better than fine. In a moment, I’ll stop coughing and then I’ll be on top of the world.”

Jay had a muddled expression on his face which was entirely too bleak for a man who’d just had his cock sucked. I said something to that effect and he blushed, but he did grin, which I took as a victory.

“Did you enjoy that?” I asked. He scoffed.

“Of course I did, I’m only human.”

“It’s easy to forget, the way you carry yourself. You’re so much better than other people, you really are.”

“Nick, that’s not necessary –”

“It’s true. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I mean it, you know.”

“Do you need me to…?”

Jay trailed off, gesturing towards my groin. I was half-hard again, but content to leave it. I shook my head.

“Not really. Though if you don’t mind, I’d love to wash up and get a bit of sleep.”

“You could sleep here, if you like.”

Sleep there, in Gatsby’s bed. It felt like an honor, it really did.

“I would like that, very much. You settle in, I’ll be right back.”

I hurried to my room and washed and changed at breakneck speed. I bolted back to Jay’s room to find him reclining, nude, with the bedside lamp casting a golden glow over him, smoking and staring off into space. When I shut the door behind me he smiled at me.

“Cigarette?”

“That’s exactly what I need.”

I abandoned my robe, since nudity was apparently tolerated. He seemed at ease, which surprised me, though I couldn’t say I minded.

Getting some smoke in my lungs felt like the perfect ending to a wonderfully imperfect evening. It was wonderful and I told him so, resting my head against his shoulder.

“The only thing that would make this moment better is a drink,” I declared. Jay, being the living
miracle he is, set his cigarette on the bedside ashtray and felt around behind the nightstand and passed me a little flask of what turned out to be bourbon. I very nearly wept.


He took a swig from the flask as well, wiped his mouth on his wrist, and put out his cigarette. I put mine out too and lay still beside him as he turned off the lamp. In darkness once again, he hesitantly slipped his arm around me. I listened as his breathing gradually slowed and I tried to match it with my own.

His hand lay atop mine, over the place where Wilson's bullet struck, when I drifted off to sleep.
Chapter Summary

The day of the trial dawns with hope and domestic bliss. But will it last? Nick has his worries.

Chapter Notes

Also, Gatsby gets a little bolder. And yes, the boys get up to mischief in the bedroom once more before they leave.

(A/N: I'm still working on this story, don't worry! But school is hectic, Fallout: New Vegas is eating my soul, and I have been at family get-togethers for weeks, so bear with me if you can. Thanks, all, for the readership and the reviews. This chapter is a short little teaser for you as I get the next stuff ready.)

I woke at Gatsby’s side, my arm draped over his chest and my nose pressed against his neck. I squirmed closer to him and sighed happily.

“Are you awake?” he rumbled, his eyes still shut. I kissed his throat.

“No,” I murmured in response. “Are you?”

“Mmm… I might be dreaming,” he smiled.

I nibbled at his ear and let my hand slide, slow and languid, over his chest. His mouth fell open with a soft ‘ah.’

“Is it a nice dream?” I asked, tangling my fingers in the coarse hair between his legs, scratching and tugging. He spread his legs instinctively, letting his head fall sideways on the pillow. The sheer wantonness of the motion was unspeakably erotic – the primal display of willingness had me aching at once.

“Yes,” he said. He opened his eyes when I kissed him softly on the mouth.

“Good morning,” he yawned.

“Good morning, Jay,” I answered, and, peering down at his growing arousal, added, “and good morning to you too!”

Jay was only at half-mast so I licked my palm and eased back his foreskin with the pad of my thumb. He grinned broadly. It was so good to see a smile on his face. As I worked him to full hardness there wasn’t a trace of anxiety to be seen in his eyes. When I grazed the underside of his cockhead he groaned, low and long.
“You like that,” I said, practically purring in his ear. I couldn’t help but feel a bit smug with him responding so enthusiastically. I repeated the motion and he shifted his hips away, shaking his head.

“This can’t go on,” he panted, looking over at me fondly. My confusion must have shown on my face, so he clarified.

“I can’t keep taking without reciprocation like this. It isn’t fair.”

Having only recently awoken, my mind was not at its sharpest.

“How?” I managed dumbly.

He spat in his own hand and reached for my prick, which stood, red, leaking, and terribly hard. The moment his knuckles brushed me I practically yowled, my thighs clenching of their own volition. He chuckled at me.

“Would you say you’re a touch over-eager, old sport?”

I responded by pulling a face at him and reaching down to fondle him some more. We lay like that, side by side, in silence save for the puffs of our breathing and the occasional pleased hum. After a time, my scar began to hurt, and once it reached the point when I could no longer maintain the motion comfortably, I paused, letting go of him to press my hand over the painful spot.

“Sorry,” I breathed. “I need a moment.”

Rather than wait for me to recover, Jay showed some welcome initiative, nudging me to lie on my back. He climbed over me and sat astride my lap, where he commenced rutting slowly against me. I pulled him close to me and kissed him hard, twisting my fingers in his hair and delighting in the increasing roughness with which he bucked his hips. It didn’t take me long to find completion, and he followed soon after, sinking, face-down, next to me on the mattress. I glanced over at him, my chest heaving.

“Well, that’s one way to wake up in the morning.”

“Mmph,” he mumbled into the pillow.

When it became clear he wasn’t going to move anytime soon, I got up, retrieved my toiletries from my bedroom, and wandered to the nearest bathroom where I went about my morning routine and set to work shaving – I wanted to look presentable for the trial. My encounters with Jay in the night and the morning had given the upcoming events an optimistic tone, but I wanted to be there to support him, just the same.

I was half-way through lathering up when Jay wandered in, yawning and reaching for a cloth to clean himself off with. I feared for a moment that, fully woken, we would be tense around each other, uncomfortable, but so far, Jay seemed unusually calm. I wondered if he, too, was putting on a brave face for the trial.

“What would you like for breakfast?” he asked as he walked passed me unselfconsciously. I glanced at the sight of his flaccid cock, committing its non-aroused state to memory. I took my eyes off him long enough to bring my razor to my face, and as I began to shave I heard Jay emptying his bladder a short distance away. I took another glance over at him and became mesmerized by the sight of him in such an intimate, vulnerable state. God bless military men, and their disregard for their own privacy! I could have sung the praises of the service till I fainted from exhaustion, moved as I was. Distracted as I was, it was no surprise when my razor slipped and I cut my chin. I swore and Jay, shaking off, turned to look at me, his eyes wide with surprise.
“That looks deep,” he said, furrowing his eyebrows. He washed and rinsed his hands and beckoned to me to let him take a look, which he did, squinting at the cut and wiping it with a towel.

“Please, Jay, I’m not an invalid,” I laughed. “It’s not the first time I’ve cut myself shaving.”

“Yes… well, it seems discourteous of me to invite you to share my bed and then have you slicing yourself to pieces in the bathroom.”

“I’m hardly in pieces, Jay. I think you’ll find that I’m still quite intact.” I posed like a strongman to prove my virile wholeness, making him laugh and sling his arm around me. He patted my scar gently.

“You never answered my question,” he smiled.

“I missed it.”

Just being so close to him with both of us nude had me lovesick.

“Breakfast. I figured we should go out and have a hearty one, so that we’ve got our strength up for this afternoon.”

The thought of the trial sobered me up immensely and I pulled away from him.

“Then I’d best go get dressed,” I said.

Jay squeezed my hand.

“Don’t be too depressed. I’m sure we’ll manage. We have to.”

The hope in his eyes was too much. I looked away but nodded.

‘I believe in you,’ I wanted to say.

“I’d like eggs,” is what I answered instead.
I wasn’t sure what to expect from the first day of the trial. Jay assured me that nothing much would be likely to happen – it was mostly going to be introductions and procedure. Still, I was profoundly on edge.

Over the period since the fatality of Myrtle Wilson, Jay and I had spoken in detail about the case – not just what happened, but what Jay intended to do in court. I can’t say I was happy about him lying under oath, but he maintained he wasn’t, really.

He intended to straddle a very thin line. He needed to ensure that he looked just guilty enough to throw suspicion off of my cousin, but not so guilty that he actually landed in jail. He made it sound much easier than it was. The fact of the matter was that he was playing with fire and we both knew it.

The scene at the courtroom was a somber one. Jay looked solemn and formal in muted colors – a dark suit and a solid navy blue necktie. He showed his age, and then some. There were shadows under his eyes, and a sort of weariness settled about his shoulders.

Daisy was there – which shouldn’t have surprised me – looking every bit the tragic heroine. She dabbed delicately at her eyes with a handkerchief and held on to her husband’s hand like a lifeline. Stubborn to a fault, she’d made her choice and clearly intended to stick to it. Tom, to his credit, seemed to have forgiven her, or at least conceded that he’d won.

Jordan glanced at me when I sat down, as far from them as I could without making a scene of it. She eyed me curiously, as if to say ‘fancy seeing you here.’ There was no accusation in her face – merely
mild interest. I dropped my gaze and stared at my hands.

Jay had been right about the first day of a trial not amounting to much. My attention waxed and waned as the day wore on. With each hour, I grew angrier.

Truth be told, it became difficult to separate it all: how much of it was fury at the situation, how much of it was jealousy, that even now, Daisy had some sort of hold over the person I cared for most, and how much of it was fear. Jay was slick – slicker than most – but even the sharpest minds and the smoothest talkers had been known to slip up. Look at Oscar Wilde – a brilliant creative force, undoubtedly, but nevertheless, ultimately convicted.

I needed a drink. No – I yearned for one. Just one drink would’ve helped to ease my nerves, I was sure of it. When the day finally concluded, and Jay and I were making the journey home, I said as much.

“I have a fine vintage that might do the trick,” he suggested, but I declined. I could see the disappointment on his face, but I didn’t have the will to change my plans.

“I need to spend some time alone. Just one night should do it. I just… I have to think.”

Jay blinked.

“Today brought out a lot of ugly thoughts in me, I’m afraid. I don’t want you to be in the crossfire when I inevitably react. It’s not you that I’m angry at. So grant me that, please. One night away, and I’ll be at your side come morning.”

“Does that… do you –”

“I’ll stay at my house tonight,” I clarified. He nodded stiffly. I took his hand and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

“I swear to you, I’ll be at the courthouse first thing. I won’t let you down,” I promised. A tired smile reached Jay’s eyes.

“I know you won’t. I need to be considerate of your needs, as well as mine. This must be terribly hard for you, with your family caught up in it, and with me… well. I understand.”

Then, speaking more loudly to address the driver, he added.

“Drop Nick off at his house on our way back.”

“Yes sir,” the driver answered, and, sure enough, he did.
Surrender

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaack. One of the benefits to being unemployed is that I can write, at least. (It's pretty much the only benefit. Other than that, it sucks.) A short little update. Poor Nick's not making the wisest life choices...
(trigger warning for some fairly dark thoughts)

It was strange, being in my own house again. It scarcely felt like mine. There was a sort of lifelessness about the place that upset me. Loneliness weighed on me like a ship's anchor. I hated the place so badly, so instantly, that I was very nearly sick to my stomach.

I moved through the rooms like a ghost, doing this and that, puttering around in a daze. As night came and the sun sank below the horizon, I found my stash of liquor and started working to forget the unease which had followed me from the courthouse.

I set the needle in the groove of a moody jazz record and lit a cigarette, sitting on the floor in the dark of my bedroom. The melancholy music made my chest ache, and I took a long drink of vodka. I couldn’t help but cringe a little at the burn – I didn’t like Bolshie beverage if it wasn’t mixed with something to soften it, but on this night, I felt I needed the pain.

Jay had looked vulnerable, up there on the stand. It had been all I could do to sit quietly, when my instincts told me to once more put myself in the line of fire.

Supposing he lost? Supposing he was sent away? I’d thought having him for my own before the trial would help mitigate my grief, but it had increased it ten-fold.

I glanced at the clock – lit by a lonely little moonbeam – and sighed. Ten past midnight. I drank some more. The record made me angry. What right did it have, to be so damned sad? What did the composer know of sadness, anyway? I was certain I was the first person feeling it, for if anyone else had ever felt as I did, they would’ve found a way to outlaw heartbreak altogether, for there was no greater torture. The pain of the bullet could not compare to my spirit breaking under the strain of Jay’s impending doom.

My clothes smelled of him, I realized it slowly, and my stomach turned, even as I stripped off my shirt and lifted it to my face. Somewhere between breathing out and breathing in, I began to sob into the fabric. I flung the article away and took another vicious swallow of the vile drink.

The whole room seemed to be steeped in some sort of thick haze. I lifted my cigarette to my lips and missed my mouth, twice. The record was skipping. I fumbled for it. Frustrated, I kicked in its direction until it abruptly stopped and the sound went dead. My socked foot throbbed. I felt another pain in my chest, remembering, with momentary panic, a great uncle of mine who’d had a bad heart.

I choked out a laugh, frantic and blind drunk in my dark little room.
What if I were to die? Who would care, other than Jay? If they convicted him, even if he escaped capital punishment, prison would all but kill him.

My eyes felt heavy. I curled in on myself, shuddering. Horrible thoughts. A horrible, horrible thing, the human mind.

The clock read quarter to one.

I yawned, pillowing one arm beneath my head. The floor was hardly comfortable, and my scar already hurt. I couldn’t find it in myself to care.

Somewhere around one o’clock, I fell asleep.
Pain. Heat. I was lost for a time in primordial darkness.

Then, all at once, a sudden burst of light.

I awoke in a state of confusion. I heard shouting. Someone was jostling me, pulling on my arms and legs. My chest felt tight and the air was thick and vile. I struggled to open my eyes, kicking feebly at whoever it was had a hold of me, panic taking hold.

“Easy now, sir, you’re going to be alright!”

The voice sounded far off and garbled, as though I had cotton wool in my ears.

“What… what’s happening?” I coughed. My eyes were open but unfocused. The noise and commotion made my head pound with what felt like the worst hangover of my life.

“Do you know your name, sir?”

“Nick –” I began, but broke off into a coughing fit.

More shouting. More commotion. Someone gave me something and then I went under again.

I didn’t wake for some time. When I did, I had an eerie sense that I’d done all this before. The bed, the walls... even the linens were familiar. I attempted to sit up and my lungs burned. I looked down at myself. My right arm was all in bandages. I was still staring at them, confused, when a woman entered the room.

The nurse recognized me at once, her face softening into an expression of genuine sadness.

“Oh, Mr. Carraway, I was hoping I wouldn’t be seeing you back here so soon! Here, but you must be thirsty after being sedated for so long.”

I wracked my brains to remember her name.

“P-Patty – what’s happening?”

She hurried to my side and gave me a drink of water which felt like heaven to my dry throat.

“You’ve been in a bit of trouble, Mr. Carraway,” she said. “The police say it wasn’t anything malicious... only that you must’ve fallen asleep with your cigarette still lit...”

My brow furrowed as my brain, sluggish with medication and the fog of sleep, struggled to make sense of her words.

“Do – do you mean –?”
She nodded, taking my hand.

“The doctor says you’re lucky – escaping with just the burns to your arm. Your house…”

She paused. I nodded, impatient.

“My house –”

“Gone, Mr. Carraway. I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you like this. Here, look, it’s in the paper.”

She dug around on the little supply tray she brought with her on her rounds and produced the day’s newspaper. I held it in my one, good hand, which shook slightly.

HOUSE FIRE IN WEST EGG CAUSES
IRREVERSIBLE DAMAGE – ONE MAN INJURED

Inspectors are saying a house fire in the village of West Egg resulted in the complete disintegration of one property and the partial destruction of another, which has since been condemned.

The second house belongs to none other than Jay Gatsby, whose tarnished reputation has been all but incinerated along with the property, which once played host to some of Long Island’s wildest parties.

I stopped reading. The sight of Gatsby’s name had stirred me.

“Where’s the rest of this paper?” I demanded. Patty fetched it and I tore it apart frantically.

“The trial – where does it talk about the trial?”

“One of the other girls might’ve taken that bit – if you like I could ask –”

“Just go, buy me another. Hurry, it’s most important. There should be money in my coat pocket – go, quickly!”

Patty opened the small closet in the room, taking the change to cover a paper. She ran off at top speed, her shoes clicking in the hall. She returned moments later, flushed and out of breath, and handed me the bundle, which I unfolded recklessly until I at last found the section I was looking for.

“Jury was in session… three hours… unanimous…”

I struggled to read, to speak, to think. When at last I saw those two, small, simple words, I whooped with delight and disbelief, causing myself to once more succumb to violent, nasty coughs. Patty hurried to my side, laying her small hand on my shoulder, and in a fit of excitement I caught it and pulled her down onto the bed, kissing her cheek and wrapping my arms around her shoulders.
“Goodness! What is it, Mr. Carraway?” she exclaimed in alarm.

“He’s done it – by God, he’s done it! Not guilty, Patty – Jay – Gatsby – he’s free! It’s going to be alright!”

I began to cry but I didn’t care. I had to talk to Jay. I had to get out of bed and go see him.

“Careful – you’re in no state to be running around the place, Mr. Carraway – just you lie down and I’ll see if the doctor will let you use the telephone.”

It took some coaxing to calm me enough to stay trapped in the confines of the bedclothes. When Patty left, there was no one to think it foolish of me as I laughed and swore and cried, trembling all over with relief, as though I had only just released a breath I’d been holding since the summer. I’d never thought much of religion, yet I found myself thanking anything and everything – the heavens, the Lord, the universe itself, for sparing my Jay. Somehow, the loss of all I owned, of my property and full use of my arm, seemed more than a fair trade.

He was free. He was free, and everything would surely be alright now. I wiped my eyes with my good hand, beaming through my tears. Yes – I was sure of it.

Patty returned, and something in her face sobered me up instantly.

“What is it? Is the doctor not letting me out?” I asked. She shook her head.

“It’s… it’s not that. We have… a note, sir. On your file. An instruction – from Mr. Gatsby himself.”

I stared at her, baffled.

“He… he says you’re not to contact him,” she said hesitantly. “And that he’d rather you not come see him once you’re well.”

I was stunned. This… this wasn’t right! It made no sense!

“I’m sure it’s all just a misunderstanding, Mr. Carraway,” Patty said, trying to lighten the mood. “Now, if you don’t need anything else, I’m afraid I have my rounds to get back to.”

I let her leave.

*How could this be? Why wouldn’t Jay want to speak to me?*

I swallowed, clenched my jaw, and resolved to find out.
Empathize

Chapter Notes

The plot thickens... and a certain someone pays Nick a visit.

Also - YAY I'm pretty much up to date answering comments. Finally! I am so sorry I left some of you hanging so long!
Please know that while I'm not always the best at replying or updating, I am thinking fondly of all of you readers so often. I struggle sometimes to have the emotional fortitude to do much of anything, but having you guys waiting for me to continue this fic is a true Godsend as it has helped me through some really dark times. I love you all and really hope you're enjoying the fic. You guys are the greatest. God bless and thanks for all your wonderful kind words. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Convalescence was tantamount to pure torture without Jay visiting me. I was so morose that poor Patty worried a great deal, and took it upon herself to cheer me up with extra time in the recreation room and the occasional biscuit to go with my morning coffee. I appreciated it, but it did little to raise my spirits.

I was a week into the process. My right arm had suffered some damage and the dressings concealed a very unsightly burn. I could not feel two of my fingers. This upset me, not only because it was ugly to look at, but because I had a fundamental fear of losing the command of my right hand. With the doctor’s permission, I took up letter writing to help maintain dexterity.

I was midway through transcribing my fifth desperate plea to Jay when Patty appeared, smiling widely.

“Oh, Mr. Carraway – I’ve got news that’s sure to brighten your mood! You’ve got a visitor.”

My heart soared as a grin stretched across my face. Hurrah! My letters had done some good, after all. Jay had finally seen the error of his ways and come to speak with me.

“Hello, Nick.”

I froze, my eyes fixed on the door. My smile waned until it was gone completely.

I could not have expected her. Even as I stared at her it didn’t seem real that she was standing in front of me, her dress muted, somber, with something unreadable in her eyes.

“I'll leave you both to chat,” Patty said, and excused herself. Daisy took a hesitant step towards the bed.

“May I...?”

“If you must.”

She took a seat at the end of my bed and when she caught sight of my arm, her face crumpled in a
look of anguish.

“Oh, Nick… I’m so sorry.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked flatly. She looked stricken.

“I just said – Nick, I know I’ve done things you’ve seen a-as wrong. We’re still family.”

I felt cold.

“When I was shot, you didn’t come to see me. What do you want that warrants a visit this time?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t –”

“What do you want?” I grimaced with more force. She turned away, ashamed.

“For...
“Do you think I didn’t know that? I read the papers,” I snapped. “There was no question of his innocence, not for me. I knew the truth from the start! And anyway, it doesn’t matter now. Jay’s made his choice and kept me out of it!”

Daisy frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s told me to keep away from him. I imagine now that the trial’s over he wants to leave our awful family as far behind as possible and move on to greener pastures.”

She paled. The bitterness in my tone was so biting it seemed to physically pain her.

“I imagine he’s already left Long Island – maybe he’s gone to Chicago or Washington. Someplace where he can reinvent himself.”

Daisy shook her head.

“No, Nick, no! He’s devastated – he hasn’t been seen in weeks. Jordan told me there’s a rumor he’s just shut himself up in a room at the Waldorf, and is taking nothing but soup and weak tea! He won’t have visitors – he’s completely broken up with grief. Whatever you did, he’s taking it personally and making such a spectacle of himself that it’ll be a wonder if any shred of his reputation survives.”

I was baffled.

“That doesn’t make any sense. I didn’t do anything!”

She stared at me.

“You didn’t come to the trial. After that first day.”

I exploded with anger.

“My house was on fire! I was in here, with this!”

I waved my mangled arm.

“And what landed you in here?” she shot back. “You think there aren’t rumors circulating about you, too? What are the chances you’d forget to put out your cigarette before bed? Even if you weren’t a close personal friend of Jay’s, you’d still be under suspicion. You’re just lucky that Tom paid off the fireman who found the liquor bottles in the wreckage!”

She sounded young, petulant, cross, but I scarcely noticed, distracted by this newly gleaned information.

“Tom?” I repeated in disbelief.

“Yes. Our family has suffered enough brushes with scandal, Nick, we couldn’t have you going to prison for being a drunk.”

“I’m not a drunk –”

“Well, you were drunk enough not to know your arm was on fire. Jay seems to think you are. Certainly the papers would think it.”

She continued, in a lowered voice.
“That’s also why you can trust me not to blackmail you. What good would it do me to tell the world my cousin is a homosexual?”

The word sounded foreign and ugly on her tongue and as she said it, she pulled a face, as though the syllables tasted foul. Fear took root in my gut.

“Does Tom –?”

“No. No I don’t think he pays you any mind at all. He can be very obtuse with these things. It’s a woman’s nature to empathize with the lovelorn.”

I resisted the urge to point out the hypocrisy, given how she’d treated Jay.

“So, why are you here?” I asked again. “Really. You’re not here about the trial – surely you knew I’d have heard. You’re not here to blackmail me. So what is it?”

She sighed, and suddenly looked weary, faded. She slipped her gloved hand into my bandaged one.

“I still hold certain a fondness for Jay,” she confided. “Not to trespass on your territory or anything like that. Just… he cared a great deal for me, and it’s hard to wish harm on someone who thought you were so grand. He’s lost most of his reputation, and his house now, too. I don’t want him to lose what he has left.”

I stared at her, silent with shock. She removed her hand and rose from the bed. At the door, she paused and looked at me one last time.

“I don’t want anyone to be unhappy,” she said softly, her voice thick, her huge, tearful eyes pleading with me to believe her. “Really, Nick. I never did.”

There was a sorrow in her voice that I doubted even she could understand, and for the first time, I genuinely pitied her. When she left, I stared down at my hand, which still felt the ghost of her fingers clasping mine.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I really don't hate Daisy. She's pathetic more than anything else - a product of her time and environment. So I hope I conveyed her in a way that shows she has some shitty behaviors but isn't actively trying to be malicious to people.
I struggled to heal as fast as I could, the new knowledge that Jay had misinterpreted my absence making me determined to set things right as soon as possible. I hated waiting around doing nothing but lying in bed. I tried to prepare for my inevitable discharge even while I was still an invalid. My biggest concern, short of uncovering Jay's location, was what I'd wear when I left. Other than the burned clothing I’d been wearing when I was found, I’d lost everything, and I was grateful, albeit surprised, when a package was delivered to me from none other than my cousin, containing a winter coat and a gray suit, along with a note which read

*Had to guess your measurements. Wish you well.*

*Daisy*

Not in a position to look a gift horse in the mouth, and truly not wanting to, after she’d spoken to me, I took the suit. It was a little long in the arms and a little wide in the waist, but that was easily mended. Patty made the alterations while she was taking lunch, and returned the suit to me, now properly tailored, free of charge. I thanked her profusely, and meant it – her acquaintance had been one of the best things to come out of my multiple hospital stays.

When at last the doctor agreed that my burns had healed and that my lungs were no longer full of smoke, I was permitted to take my leave. Patty helped me shave and dress in my new suit, and once I’d combed my hair and stuck a flower from the hospital garden in my button hole, I looked as good as new, provided, of course, that no one looked at my hand, which was permanently disfigured.

Daisy surprised me yet again with another delivery - the gift of a finely tailored glove which fit over my hand like a second skin, minimizing my emotional distress about being seen in public.

Once all the papers had been signed and I was given the go-ahead, I stepped out into the cool, clean air. It felt good to be outside again, but I did not stop to enjoy it. My cousin’s snooping had turned up an address – Jay was not at the Waldorf - he had not even left Long Island - though the rumors about his miserable state were otherwise true. He was, instead, in an unremarkable, rundown hotel, although his name could not be found in any registry.

Unless, of course, one knew what to look for.

The man at the desk eyed me up and down with a neutral expression, before shrugging his shoulders.

“Sorry, sir. Mr. Gatz doesn’t want any visitors.”

I had come too far to be turned away now. If I had to lie, then I'd lie till the devil himself appeared to drag me down to Hell.

“I need only deliver a message. It’s about his… his father. He’s taken ill. Please, I’m an old family friend. He’d make an exception for me – I know he would.”
The man looked doubtful, so I offered him my last crisp ten dollar bill. His eyes widened and he grinned.

“Room 457,” he said. “Good luck.”

I walked up to the fourth floor, pausing on each landing to catch my breath, for my lungs were still tender from the abuse they’d suffered. When at last I found the hallway, and reached the door, fear gripped me, and a moment’s doubt made me want to turn and run. I forced myself to stand my ground, and knocked on the door three times, loudly and firmly.

The door opened.

“I already told you, I don’t want housekeeping coming around here and –”

Jay froze.

We took in the sight of each other. He looked terrible, with days’ worth of growth on his cheeks and dark shadows under his bloodshot eyes. He wore only a cheap, non-descript robe and the smell that came off it made it clear to me that he hadn’t bathed in days.

His eyes darted to my lone, gloved hand, then back up to my face.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I’ve only just been released from hospital and the journey here used up most of my strength. Would it be alright if I came in and sat down, just until I recover?”

He faltered, then nodded and stepped aside. I moved past him and took a seat on the divan, folding my hands in my lap. He was staring at them again.

“You were burned,” he murmured.

“Yes. It’s strange, wearing only one glove, but I didn’t want to frighten any children on my way over. I don’t suppose you’d care if I took it off now?”

It was not for my sake, but for his discomfort that I removed the article and let him take in the sight of my right hand. He inhaled sharply, looking like he might be sick.

“Not too attractive, anymore, I’m afraid,” I said, holding it up for him to see more clearly. The wrinkled, pink-red skin was leathery, and it caught the light most gruesomely.

“Nick…” Jay began.

“I must congratulate you,” I continued, “on your freedom. Your lawyer sounds like he did a fine job. Shame about your house, though.”

“Nick –”

“Of course, I only found out from the papers, and then from Daisy. Yes, Jay – why does it surprise you? That a man might speak to his cousin? She’s the reason I found this hole you’re hiding in. She can be very shrewd, when she puts her mind to it –”

“Nick, for God’s sake!”

Jay looked at me with such devastation in his eyes that I fell silent at once.

“You think I wanted this?” he exclaimed, his voice wavering. “My God, Nick, are you as blind as that?”
“Oh, I’m blind now, am I?”

“You’re not listening – you bastard, you’re the one who ought to be apologizing to me!”

I gaped at him.

“For what? For being in an accident? For being disfigured?”

“No, Nick, for scaring me half to death!”

His words, screamed in a raw and desperate voice, sat between us in the air, weighty and condemning.

“I needed you,” he whispered, tears misting his eyes. “I was counting on you to be there.”

“I needed a drink,” I replied in an equally hushed tone.

“No, Nick, you didn’t. You wanted a drink. You wanted a drink and you damn near got yourself killed for it. Don’t you think it was hard enough to almost lose you once? We were only friends, then, and still it almost destroyed me. You’re all I have, Nick. You’re all I’ve had for a long time. Now, more than ever, you’re my… you’re my whole world.”

He swallowed, taking a seat beside me. He took my hand – my ruined one – and held it tight.

“I’ve never been so frightened in all my life,” he added, and the tears began to roll down his cheeks. “Not in the trenches and not in the courthouse and not in that damned car with Daisy! When I heard that your house had caught fire, and no one would give me an answer as to your condition, after I’d left you there to have that one goddamn drink, Nick, I –”

He sniffed, shaking his head.

“I swear, something in me died.”

He looked up at me, and his face with that of a child whose last bit of innocence had just been viciously ripped apart.

“I’ve only just found a reason to live again. And then it was gone. For those few, horrible hours, I thought you were dead. I was in hell and you were gone and none of it – my freedom, my money, my house – none of it mattered. It was worthless. My whole life, but for the part I’d shared with you, was… worthless.”

I stared at him, shame and remorse roiling in my gut.

“You… you’re not worthless, Jay,” I began but he shook his head.

“How can you say that?” he cried. “How can you say that and then throw away the only – the only thing that I –”

And all at once, he was in my arms. He clung to me, sobbing, and I found myself clinging back.

“I love you,” he forced out, his face buried in my shoulder and his voice muffled. “Only you, Nick. If I’m not worthless, then you aren’t either.”

He pulled back and, as if to cement the truth in those words, repeated them.

“If I’m not worthless, then you aren’t either.”
It was too much. The combination of him saying he loved me and looking so damned tragic had me in bits. All at once, I was the one doing the crying and clinging. I fumbled to cup his jaw with my burned hand, wincing as his stubble dragged over the sensitive, new skin. I kissed him clumsily, sobbing.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he murmured against my lips. I nodded, pulling him closer still.

“I thought I’d lost you,” I echoed.

He laughed at that – a sound that came from deep inside of him, borne of the grief and horror of our generation, and a lifetime of loneliness, but also of an all-consuming wave of relief that was crashing over us both.

“You made it,” I said, torn between disbelief and awe. I shook my head and stared at him in wonder. “You made it, Jay.”

He tried to smile and linked our hands again.

“We made it.”

He didn’t just mean the trial, and I knew it. So much had happened since that summer, and earlier, in those years before we’d known each other – before I’d know what love could feel like. The brave new world, the modern age we lived in was a lion’s den and we had survived the bloodshed and the carnage and somehow, by some impossible stroke of luck or fate or providence… we’d emerged alive. Not unscathed – not without scars, though only mine were of the body. But alive.

“Please,” he continued. “Stay with me tonight. Be with me.”

It was all I could do to stop rejoicing long enough to answer ‘yes.’
Jay insisted on having a wash and a shave before we went any further, and I didn’t stop him. Truthfully, I was so eager that I’d have taken him as he was, but I knew he wanted to feel like himself again, and for that I could not blame him.

I left the hotel to buy a few things that I thought might benefit us for the oncoming evening. Nothing extravagant – just a few sandwiches from a nearby deli and a small pie for dessert. I debated seeking out a contraband bottle of wine, but then I remembered the pain in Jay’s face when he’d seen the state of my hand, and decided against it. If he was on the straight and narrow now, then so was I. I went to a drug store and bought some petroleum jelly instead, a look of innocence on my face so that the cashier may as well have been serving a cherub for all that I was giving away.

I was in a mood that could be described as downright chipper as I returned to the hotel and nodded at the doorman, who gave me a sympathetic glance when he saw the sandwiches – he probably thought that Jay’s ‘sick’ father had taken a turn for the worst and we were planning some sort of impromptu, two-man wake upstairs.

I stopped outside the door to 457 and knocked awkwardly, balancing the groceries on my good arm.

The Jay who answered the door this time looked like a new man. He’d changed into a fresh shirt and slacks, and had combed his hair and shaved. I even noted a trace hint of cologne in the air. He grinned at me when he saw the food.

“Goodness, Nick – what’s all that?”

I moved past him and set the purchases down on the table.

“No use us getting reacquainted on an empty stomach. Come sit with me. I’ve brought pastrami from the place down the street.”

Jay locked the door and ambled over, sinking into the old couch with a grunt and a yawn. I raised an eyebrow.

“I haven’t been sleeping much,” he admitted sheepishly.

The sandwiches went down easy, as did the pie, and only when we were both full and comfortable did I look over at him and take his hand.

“You’re gorgeous, you know,” I said, and smiled at his blush.

“Don’t be shy about it. You are. Surely people have told you that before.”

Jay nodded.
“Of course, only… never a man. Until you.”

I smirked at that and leaned over, placing my good hand on his knee.


I punctuated my speech by walking my fingers slowly upwards along his leg. I slid my hand quickly downwards to the sensitive skin of his inner thigh and tickled him.

The gesture surprised him completely and he yelped, laughing and squirming away. There was no escape, however – the arm of the sofa had him pinned. I swung a leg over him and sat astride his hips, leering down at him. Already he was hardening, which sent a delirious surge of satisfaction through me. I moved my hips and he trembled.

“How would you like this to go?” I asked him. “I can do anything you like.”

He shrugged, laying his hands on my thighs.

“I don’t really know,” he admitted. “I’d rather you lead the way. We can muddle along – if you do anything I don’t like, I can just say so.”

I agreed wholeheartedly.

“Well then, we’re going to do this right,” I said and he nodded. I slid off of him and settled back onto the couch.

“Take off your clothes.”

He opened his mouth to make some witty retort but I glared at him, the smile that pulled at my lips betraying my true benevolent intentions.

“Go on now, Major. That’s an order.”

Jay turned red as a beet and stood up, fingers fumbling with buttons and braces until at last he stood before me, with all the poise and posture of a soldier. I eyed him hungrily.

“Show off for me,” I breathed, reaching down to rub myself through my trousers. He cocked his head.

“Pose, you know. Show me that winning physique of yours.”

My commands sounded more like pleas now. He clenched his muscles, hunched and stretched like a strongman. He began to enjoy himself once he saw how frantic he was making me, and grew playful, smiling mischievously as he trailed his fingers down over his bare chest, stopping to palm and cup at a pectoral. I whimpered.

“Like what you see?” he chuckled, and I made an incoherent noise. My hips were stuttering against the seat of the divan. I ground against my hand and nodded.

“Touch yourself,” I instructed. “Show me how you like it.”

He let his hands fall to his person. He had a workmanlike hold on himself and stroked off at a steady, even pace. I bit down on the inside of my cheek, tears welling in my eyes.

He was rough with himself. Oh hell, I thought. He really was perfect. His left hand yanked on his pubic hair while his right was otherwise engaged. Sweat stood out on his skin, and he was such a
magnificent specimen of Man that I could resist him no longer.

“Use my mouth,” I whispered, outright begging now. “Please, Jay.”

He stepped forward and I leaned in. I nuzzled against his shaft, shoved my nose into the tangled hair at the base, inhaling rich, masculine arousal. My cock ached, confined as it was, but I couldn’t think to open my pants. I looked up at him, making no effort to hide how much I wanted him. He stared down at me, wide-eyed, his pupils huge and dark. Then, in a gesture that shocked us both, he grabbed a handful of my hair and slapped the head of his prick against my face.

My mouth fell open. I groaned, my voice a full octave deeper than usual.

“Do that again.”

He did, smacking my lips until they were sore. He dragged his tip over my skin, pre-ejaculate gathering on my lower lip and tongue, and then plunged into my mouth without warning. My hands came up to grip at him – the nails on my left digging crescents into the meat of his thigh, my right moving to hold him steady. When my burned flesh touched his privates, his hips slammed forward, seemingly of their own accord.

*Good Lord, but he was rough.* I had hoped he had such fire in his gut, but I had not wanted to push him when the mere fact that he was doing this with me at all was unconventional enough. I moved off him with a slick ‘pop’ and began to nose and lick at his testes. His breath hitched and he shrugged my head closer against him.

My left hand, while not dominant, was coordinated enough to pull on him in a sort of clumsy rhythm. I let the roughened digits of my right scrape over the skin behind his sac, rubbing at the spot that I knew drove many a fellow wild. Jay was no exception and he mewled at the attention.

“Careful,” he panted, his fingers clenching and unclenching in my hair. “You’re gonna bring me off.”

I retreated, chuckling at the twitch of his hips that followed. He stared, eyes blazing, chest rising and falling with great, heaving breaths. Without dropping his gaze, I reached for my necktie and pulled it loose, tossing it to the floor. Then I started on my shirt buttons, but found it difficult. My right hand wasn’t as dexterous as it had been. The heat in Jay’s eyes subdued into something softer and kinder, and he pushed me to lie back against the couch, making quick work of my buttons.

When my shirt and undershirt were gone, his breath hitched. He flinched as he took the extent of the damage the year had held in store for me. Now, the scarring wasn’t limited to my chest, spreading all the way up to my shoulder on my right side. There were a few places along my ribs where the flames had licked my skin. Jay shook his head.

“It doesn’t seem right, that all this should have happened to you.”

I pulled him down to sit in my lap.

“It happened to both of us,” I said, petting his chest absently. “My wounds are visible. Yours are up here.”

I touched his temple gently. He pressed a kiss to my wrist.

“You asked me something once,” he said. “When we were… close.”

I nodded.
“At the time, I couldn’t imagine… but now with everything that’s happened between us…”

He swallowed.

“I’d like to fuck you. If you still want it.”

I groaned as he echoed my choice of words and I rutted up against him.

“Absolutely – hold on. Let me up.”

He frowned but obeyed.

“What is it?”

“Just… have to get something. From my coat.”

He waited as I hobbled over to rife through my pockets. I grabbed the tin of petroleum and unbuckled my belt while I was at it, slipping quickly out of my trousers and racing back to the couch. He took a look at my drawers and his eyes bugged out.

“Well, you’re enjoying this.”

It was an understatement – of course I was enjoying it – I knew what he meant. My organ was hard as granite and straining to escape the white fabric that held it down. There was a visible wet spot where the tip was pressed against the material.

“I’ll never get used to that,” he murmured. “Seeing how much you want me.”

I responded by pulling the final barrier down and off, before handing him the petroleum tin.

“Hold that for me, will you?” I asked. I rolled onto my front and braced myself against the sofa.

“Normally I could slick myself up,” I confessed. “But what with my hand… do you think you could…?”

He squinted at the tin, as working through a puzzle in his head.

“Is it like… like on a girl?” he asked, and mimed the action with his fingers. I nodded.

“Similar enough.”

He nodded and coated his thick fingers in the grease.

“I… er… I’ll start with one,” he said. His voice was thick with embarrassment. I rested my head against my folded arms and shuddered at the first exploratory touch. He circled his target a few times before pressing slowly in. I groaned, widening my kneeling stance, one of my sock garters coming unfastened, the sock sliding down to bunch at my ankle.

“How is that?” he breathed, starting up a careful rhythm.

“Good,” I whispered. “You could add another.”

He waited until he’d adjusted to the pace he’d set before slipping a second finger in alongside the first. I couldn’t help but press back, forcing the touch deeper, until it hit upon that spot that made stars burst behind my eyes.

Within minutes, I was a wanton mess, spread open, wanting and yearning for more of him.

“Ready,” I murmured, and whimpered as Jay’s fingers retreated. He applied some more of the jelly
to his person and pressed the fat, blunt head against me.

“Can I just...?”

“Yes.”

He rocked his hips forwards a little and the tip breached me. I forced myself to remain inviting and
yielding as he inched forwards again.

“Oh my God,” he whispered, hands gripping my hips.

“Tighter than what you’re used to?” I forced out through my teeth. He moaned in response, pressing
forwards the rest of the way. It wasn’t exactly painful – I had enough experience to avoid discomfort
in these matters – but it was close to limit of what I could take. I arched back against him and he
laughed breathlessly.

“This is... Nick,” he mumbled. “Oh, Nick.”

“Go on – you can be rougher than that.”

He thrust a little harder, but I could feel him trembling with restraint. I looked over my shoulder.

“I’m not made of glass – if you want to do something, do it. I’m yours, Jay. I can take anything you
can give me.”

To encourage him, I leaned back into him and attempted a sort of twisting rotation that I’d had done
for me once. I was not as good as I’d hoped – it was more clumsy than anything – but it worked well
enough for Jay, it seemed, as he charged at me like a bull, tangling his fingers in my hair and tugging
my head back to kiss me. I grinned against his mouth.

Here it was – here was the fire I knew had to be in him. Jay, not broken, not defeated, but whole and
strong as a hurricane. The airs and cultivated mannerisms and other trappings of high society melted
off of him in waves of sweat and heat, until it he was no longer Jay Gatsby pounding into me, but a
veritable force of nature. I had a vision of another version of myself, bent over some nondescript
haystack, a North Dakota farm boy behind me, and knew such a coupling would have been very
much like this one. His hands gripped me with the physical sureness of a laborer, and the voice that
grunted and keened could’ve belonged to anyone. But they belonged to him. My dear Jay. My
lovely, perfect James.

I realized, with some flash of clarity, that that was the truest lesson of all. Dress him up how you
pleased, change his name, teach him manners and business – at the end of the day, Jay was a man.
That’s all any of us were, when you got down to it – him, Tom, me, even George Wilson. The
superficiality meant nothing – it was only a veneer, applied to cover the horrible, honest truth that no
one among us wanted to face.

It was worthless. The parties. The money. The reputation. All of it. This was what mattered.

I started sobbing and laughing simultaneously, quietly at first, but then loud enough that Jay paused
and loosened his hold on my hips.
“What is it, Nick? What’s wrong?”

I turned over and tugged him down to sit beside me. I straddled him and sunk down onto him, making him sigh.

“This is what it’s always been about,” I murmured. He looked at me, confused, so far gone with pleasure that I was probably making very little sense.

“My house is gone. All my things. My hand and chest will never be the same again. And if I found out I were to die tomorrow – that all of this had gotten me just one day of freedom with you – I would do anything to jump in front of that bullet again anyway.”

He mumbled something – not quite words – and I rode him to completion, kissing him as hard as I could – as desperately as I could. I tried to say with a kiss what I barely understood, could barely articulate myself.

This was love. This was love and I saw then why men go mad for it, why they fight and die and slave away for it. This was why people devote themselves to impossible causes, to dreams, to faith. This was what dams us, what drives us to every battle, every act of bravery and heroism; this alone was what always saves us. The same force that drove Jay to seek that green light that was sure to break him, was the same force that drove him, broken and hurt, into my arms.

As he spent, he reached for me, and my thoughts were lost to a cataclysmic storm of sensation, the likes of which I’d never felt. This little death – such a common thing, in itself – somehow went beyond the physical – I felt it in my very soul.

Afterwards, I just held onto him. I couldn’t stop trembling, so overwhelmed was I by the whole experience.

“Are you sure alright?” he asked, fighting to stay awake long enough to find out.

“I’m so much more than that,” I said, and led him to the bed, where we collapsed in a heap. He put his arms around me, eyes drooping. He yawned.

“I’ve lost a good portion of my money,” he said. “Legal costs. My house is worthless.”

He sounded thrilled. I grinned sleepily, my face buried in his neck.

“I’ve lost my job – one too many missed deadlines,” I replied. “Everything I own is gone. I expect my family thinks I’ll go home to them with my tail between my legs.”

He stroked my back lightly.

“We could run away together,” he suggested haltingly. “Make a new life for ourselves someplace where no one’s ever heard of the great Jay Gatsby.”

I moved to kiss him on the mouth, quite softly.

“I’ve never heard a better idea in all my life. I’ve always fancied Canada, myself.”

He rumbled his agreement.

“What say we talk about it in the morning?” I asked, and smiled to myself in response, for Jay was already quite aslepp.
I have this deeply disquieting feeling that someone out there already wrote a fic that ends with the lads going to Canada... I don't know if I'm right or not in thinking that. If so, I'm truly sorry. I'm not trying to rip anyone off. If anyone knows if I'm right or not, and knows of a fic that has such an ending, please don't hesitate to let me know.
Wow, I can’t believe it’s done.

This has been a real journey for me. When I started writing this story, I had limited experience with death and grief, and had never lived on my own - now, I have lost a beloved relative, whose passing helped me to better empathize with loss, and who taught me more about love than anyone else I’ve ever known. I moved away from my home, from my province, and lived independently in Montreal for the length of a trade apprenticeship, learning to love the city that’s been home to 5 generations of my family before me.

I’m a different man than I was at the start of this. Maybe that’s what inspired my finally ending this story - I couldn’t write about the boys finding peace until I found some for myself.

You readers have meant the world to me - you always will. Your feedback, your praise, have been some of the highlights of my life. You’ve all helped me grow as a writer and as a person, and I am SO grateful for that.

Is this the last we’ll see of the boys? I don’t know. I like writing them. This story may be over, but one-shots are definitely something that might happen down the line. Regardless, I will never forget how much I loved writing them in this story - and how much I loved interacting with all of you lovely people.

THANK YOU FOR READING and GOD BLESS EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU. :D
Love and kind thoughts,
- Ellis

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**EPilogue**

January, 1924

Montreal, Quebec

I woke up to someone shaking my shoulder. I didn’t have to open my eyes to know who it was, because if I’d had any doubts, the soft kiss pressed to my throat, and the murmured “Morning, old sport,” gave it away.

I smelled fresh coffee and something salty and brined that turned out to be fresh lox bagels from our favorite deli. I sat up with a yawn, smiling at Jay, who was lounging in the window seat, casual in a cable knit sweater and slacks, balancing a plate on his knee.

“I bought breakfast,” he grinned.

I got out of bed with a sigh, wincing as my bare feet met with the cold floor of our apartment. I
retrieved my robe from where it was slung over Horatio’s cage, and bid him a good morning as I fastened the belt around my waist. The parrot cocked his head and made a happy, clicking sound at the sight of me.

“What time is it?” I asked, padding over to the table to collect my plate of breakfast and my cup of coffee.

“Ten. I let you sleep in. Thought you might be tired after last night.”

“You sound mighty smug,” I said with a grin, ambling over to him. He chuckled.

“Well, am I wrong? I wore you ragged.”

I responded by taking a seat next to him and kissing his freshly shaven jaw.

“Mm. You smell good.”

“New aftershave. Do you like it?”

I nodded. We ate in silence for a while, accompanied by the sound of Horatio singing a tune to himself.

“What’s on your agenda today?” Jay asked through a mouthful of salmon and capers. I shrugged.

“I have to turn in my piece. The Quebec Chronicle and Quebec Gazette will not be kept waiting. Everyone wants the ubiquitous New Year’s reflection from their good man Carraway, in the field.”

I nodded to the typewriter that sat at the desk one corner of the room, the final draft neatly stacked beside it.

“And after that?” Jay prompted.

“Hmm… I don’t know. I was going to go for a walk down to the Vieux-Port, but I could be persuaded to stay in… it being our anniversary, after all.”

He beamed.

“So it is. I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Me? Never.”

He nuzzled the spot below my ear that made me shiver.

“I don’t suppose you’d have time for a little… dalliance before work? After all, like you always say, the news waits for no man.”

I arched my back and leaned into the fleeting pecks that were peppering my skin.

“It’s only a fluff piece… and I am rather good about my deadlines, aren’t I?”

Jay hummed in agreement.

“Well… I suppose… it being our anniversary and all.”

Jay cleared our plates away and returned, but when I made to get up, he pushed me back down into the seat.
“I must say,” he said as he lowered himself to the floor, “that I don’t sing the praises of bathrobes nearly enough. They are wonderfully convenient, aren’t they?”

My response was a serious of expletives as he worked to quickly reduce me to an incoherent mess.

Afterwards, he lingered in the doorway as I stood in the bathroom, running through my regular morning ablutions. He looked good like that – rumpled, with his belt open and his hair mussed, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth as he mooned over me. I said as much as I shaved, peering at him out of the corner of my eye.

“I could go with you, you know,” he said. “To turn your segment in. I could wait for you and then we could hire a calèche and ride around the city a little. Maybe we could take in a show.”

For once, I agreed to the indulgence.

We rarely had the money for excesses – the few expensive things we owned came to us second or third hand. I made a good living on my salary – nothing extravagant, but reasonable, and took care of the usual things like rent and food and so on. Other than Horatio, we only had ourselves to look after – Jay was constantly surprised at how little food we needed, having grown used to buying enough to feed hundreds upon hundreds of houseguests.

Jay was doing the best he could, bless him. It hadn’t been as easy for him to find work as he’d thought – or rather, what work he found was difficult to adjust to. He did not want to return to bootlegging, but the fact remained that it took longer to earn an honest dollar than it did a crooked one. Only the fact that he’d grown up poor saved him from complete shock at having to adjust to living within more modest means.

He’d told me about his upbringing in greater detail ‘round about the same time he changed his surname back to Gatz. Jay Gatz – past and present, mixed together. It suited him – the real him. The him I’d come to know.

It has not been easy – any of it. Immigration was a lengthy ordeal, and Jay is still waiting on his papers. His record, though he’d been acquitted, made things a bit more complicated for him than they were for me. For now, he does odd jobs – menial work. The kind of thing his father might have done, had he not stuck to farming. He told me, once, under cover of darkness, that he had doubted his father would’ve been proud to know that he had turned out to be poor – richer than he’d started off as, but much, much poorer than he’d ever been as Gatsby. I’d told him his father would’ve appreciated his work ethic all the more, now that he was an ordinary, middle-class fellow, and though he’d changed the subject that night, I’d been proved right in due time, when I at last convinced him to write to old Henry and tell him a heavily edited version of our recent Canadian adventures, and the old man had sent us written confirmation of his praise.

What didn’t make it into letters will probably one day make it into this journal, though I admit I’ve grown quite lax at adding to it. I haven’t had the time – I’ve been so busy living.

I still here from Daisy from time to time. She’s trying, bless her. She says she’s taken up patronizing charities. I’m not sure what Tom thinks about it, but she seems to think it will help ‘build her character.’

Jordan I hear of only in passing, through Daisy’s letters. I don’t wish her any ill.

Even Tom, who I’ve always found a bit difficult to take in large doses, I’ve learned to forgive for what transpired.
Jay says it’s because I’m getting wise in my old age. Ha! The wisest one in our little family is Horatio by far. He’s the only one who’s been able to train two grown men to bring him treats whenever he wants them.

In the end, it was like I’d thought. Love. Who would have thought so much love could exist in one place? Sometimes, as I’m falling asleep, I fear I’ve dreamed all this, and that any minute I will wake up and Jay will be in prison – or worse, that this is all some momentary flash in my mind as I bleed to death in Jay’s pool.

I’m always reassured, in those moments, by Jay holding my scarred hand in his. Such a simple touch, reassuring me of all things.

I won’t add this to my newspaper piece, though it feels as though it would fit:

1924 has only just begun. Goodness knows what the future holds. I can’t imagine it can be any worse than what’s come before. With every day that passes, the world grows a little brighter. Perhaps it’s not just Jay and I who are healing. I really don't doubt that we’ll always have better tomorrows to look forwards to.

Ah, but I’m rambling now. Horatio wants my attention – he’s been whistling at me for the past five minutes. Once Jay gets out of the bath, I imagine he’ll want me to stop writing so we can finish celebrating. Setting down my pen is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.

So I’ll leave it here, for the time being. We’ll see what the future holds. I know we’ll manage. It was love that guided me to save Jay’s life, and it is love that guided him to, in a more abstract sense, save mine. We’re both better men for it.

It’s always been about love, after all. I never saw how much, until I finally got to live it. But perhaps I ought to have guessed, for it’s been said before, in words more tried and true than mine.

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

I Corinthians 13:7

Chapter End Notes

I just moved back from Montreal recently, and as you might be able to tell, am missing it. It has always been kind of an amazing place, and while you couldn't be openly queer there in the ’20s, like other major cities, you weren’t likely to be alone as a queer person. My research into Montreal’s queer history is limited, so I’ll admit I idealized things a bit here, but nonetheless, I have certainly read about the odd case where people were able to discreetly live their lives in various places around the world. A lot of it was luck, really. Much like today, there have always been good people and bad people, accepting people and hateful people. For the ending of this fic, since it's a fix-it, I chose to focus on the positive people in the world.

Also for anyone wondering about the newspaper, it's real and still published (though it's now called the Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph. It's bilingual and has been around one one form or another since 1764!!) Over the years, it went through a series of incarnations, buy-outs, etc. The Quebec Chronicle and Quebec Gazette was it's name in the period this chapter takes place in. It was only in 1925 that it changed to the more manageable Chronicle-Telegraph.
Also, for those of you who don't know, a calèche is basically a horse-drawn carriage/buggy type thing. You get used to seeing them all over the place if you live in Montreal long enough, lol. (I have only ever ridden one once, as a very young kid, but I've always liked them. There's something romantic about them. Also horses are adorable.)

Lastly... yes. I did, in fact, give them a parrot. There was one where I worked in Montreal and goodness me, he was a little darling. Seeing as this epilogue is VERY self indulgent already... where's the harm in a parrot?

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