

CALL
ME
ZELDA

A NOVEL

Author of *Hemingway's Girl*

ERIKA ROBUCK

"You will love it, as I absolutely did."—New York Times Bestselling Author
TATIANA DE ROSNAY

Praise for
CALL ME ZELDA

“You thought you knew everything about the Fitzgeralds, their drama, delight, dazzle, and despair? This gem of a novel spins a different, touching story, drawing you right into their intimacy and fragility through the eyes of Zelda’s caring nurse, Anna. You will love it, as I absolutely did.”

—Tatiana de Rosnay, *New York Times* bestselling author
Sarah’s Key and *The House I Love*

“A Jamesian sense of the uncanny haunts Erika Robuck’s poignant, compassionate portrait of Zelda Fitzgerald’s desperate dance with mental illness. *Call Me Zelda* is mesmerizing, page-turning, and provides us with a fresh, very human look at two literary icons.”

—Maryanne O’Hara, author of *Casca*

“In this richly imagined story, Erika Robuck has captured the creative brilliance and madness of Zelda Fitzgerald. Told through the eyes of a compassionate psychiatric nurse, *Call Me Zelda* is an unsettling yet tender portrayal of two women inextricably bound by hope and tragedy.”

—Beth Hoffman, *New York Times* bestselling author
Saving CeeCee Honeycutt and *Looking for M*

“In this haunting and beautifully atmospheric novel, Erika Robuck pulls back the curtain on the Jazz Age’s most shining couple and offers up a sobering account of the casualties of genius and celebrity. She brilliantly brings Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald to life in all their doomed beauty, with compelling and unforgettable results.”

—Alex George, author of *A Good American*

“Set in the hazy hangover of the Jazz Age, *Call Me Zelda* intertwines the stories of the quietly grieving psychiatric nurse Anna with the postglitterati relationship of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his vibrant, disturbed wife, Zelda. Robuck writes with an open and sympathetic heart about the dark side of the psyche and how friendship and healing are found in the unlikeliest ways. I was utterly absorbed and eager to return to the story. This is going on my reread shelf.”

—Margaret Dilloway, author of *The Care and Handling of Roses with Thorn*

Praise for
HEMINGWAY’S GIRL

“Robuck’s breathtaking alchemy is to put us inside the world of Hemingway and his wife Pauline, and add a bold young woman to the mix with a story uniquely her own. Dazzlingly written and impossible to put down, moving, this novel is a supernova.”

—Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pictures of You*

“Robuck drops the fictional nineteen-year-old Mariella Bennet into the life of Ernest Hemingway in her richly realized newest.... Robuck brings Key West to life, and her Hemingway is fully fleshed out and believable, as are Mariella and others. Readers will delight in the complex relationships and vivid setting.”

“Writing in clear and supple prose, Erika Robuck evokes a setting of the greatest fascination—Hemingway’s household in Key West in the 1930s, where we see her captivating heroine growing in insight and beginning to learn about love. This is assured and richly enjoyable storytelling.”

—Margaret Leroy, author of *The Soldier’s Wife*

“Hired as a maid in the Hemingway household, Mariella learns to navigate the complicated allure of his interest while maintaining her own fierce heart. She weathers many storms with feisty strength and a memorable clarity, coming to recognize the many faces of true love.”

—Booklist

“Robuck pens a love letter to all of us who ache to have more Hemingway. Set against the enchanting, tempestuous landscape of Key West in the 1930s, *Hemingway’s Girl* imagines the powerful and resilient women behind the mythical man. An inspiring story of heartache and renewal. Readers will be sure to enjoy this ode to a literary icon.”

—Sarah McCoy, author of *The Baker’s Daughter* and *The Time It Snowed in Puerto Rico*

“Historical novels rise or fall on how believably they portray their eras and the characters who populate them. Ernest Hemingway comes to life in *Hemingway’s Girl*, but he meets his match in Mariella, a tough, smart nineteen-year-old making her way in a vividly realized Key West. Erika Robuck’s novel is colorful, atmospheric, and a pleasure to plunge into.”

—Joseph Wallace, author of *Diamond Rule*

“Even if you aren’t a Hemingway aficionado, you’ll love this robust, tender story of love, grief, and survival on Key West in the 1930s. And Hemingway fans should agree that because of its strong heroine and writing, *Hemingway’s Girl* is a novel of which Papa himself would approve. Addictive.”

—Jenna Blum, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Those Who Save Us* and *The Stormchase*

“I read *Hemingway’s Girl* in a single sitting—I couldn’t put it down. I fell in love with Robuck’s Hemingway and with the fiery Mariella Bennet, but what I loved most was the novel’s message: that we can inspire each other to be better human beings.”

—Ann Napolitano, author of *A Good Hard Look*

“Erika Robuck brings to vivid life the captivating and volatile world of a literary legend. Like a Key West hurricane, *Hemingway’s Girl* gains power and momentum, destroying much in its path, and reminds the reader of the strength found in healing. Fans of Ernest Hemingway will devour this book!”

—Kristina McMorris, author of *Letters from Home* and *Bridge of Scarlet Leaves*

“Fans of Paula McLain’s *The Paris Wife* will adore Erika Robuck’s spellbinding tale of Hemingway and the fiercely independent Cuban girl he befriends in 1930s Key West. Robuck is a gifted storyteller, and in *Hemingway’s Girl*, she brings the literary legend to life: his passions for boxing and fishing, the tumult of his second marriage, his curious tenderness toward Mariella, whose beauty he is enthralled by and whose grit he admires. Evocative and taut, *Hemingway’s Girl* is an irresistible,

exhilarating story of love and adventure, impossible to put down.”

—Dawn Tripp, bestselling author of *Game of Secrets*

Hemingway's Girl

Receive Me Falling



CALL ME
ZELDA

ERIKA ROBUCK



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

Version_2

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Excerpt from FALLEN BEAUTY



FIRST ACT

“Ah! How rapidly descending,
Falls the avalanche of fate!”

—Tobia Gorrio, *La Gioconda*



February 1932, Phipps Psychiatric Clinic
Johns Hopkins University Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland

The ward was never the same after that February afternoon when Zelda Fitzgerald stumbled into the psychiatric clinic with a stack of papers clutched to her chest, eyes darting this way and that, at once pushing from and pulling toward her husband like a spinning magnet.

I opened my arms to her. She would not look at me, her nurse, or allow me to touch her, but walked next to me down the hallway to her room. We left Mr. Fitzgerald at the desk preparing to meet with the resident in charge of his wife's case, when Mrs. Fitzgerald suddenly stopped and ran back to him, nearly knocking him over with her force. Her husband wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hair with an intensity that filled me with longing and squeezed my heart. They both began to cry like two lost, scared children. They were not what I expected in any way.

As quickly as she'd run to him, she pulled herself out of his arms and came back to me. It was then that I met his gaze—ice-green eyes underlined by dark circles, his hair and clothing a rumpled mess. I was overtaken by a sense of pity for the two of them and thought that he too might benefit from a stay with us.

“On my left, my left,” said Mrs. Fitzgerald.

“Pardon me?” I asked her.

“You must walk on my left. I can't see out of the right eye.”

I knew the doctor's notes said she claimed to have blindness in her right eye, so I obeyed her wishes as we walked down the hall. I noticed a red rash creeping up her neck that she scratched with her jagged nails. By the time we reached the room, she'd succeeded in making her neck bleed.

As soon as we arrived, she collapsed onto the bed, still clutching her papers as if they were a precious infant. She cried in a low moan. An orderly carried in her bags and placed them on the shiny floor next to the door.

“Mrs. Fitzgerald, I'll need to look you over for admission,” I said. “Is it okay with you if I take your blood pressure and listen to your heart?”

“My heart,” she whispered. “My poor broken heart.”

I walked to her and gently pulled her to a sitting position.

“May I place your papers on the bedside table?” I asked.

She looked at me with fear in her eyes, and then out the door.

“Don't show him. He can't see it,” she said.

I wondered who she was afraid would see the papers. Was she referring to her husband? If so, why was she simultaneously distressed at being separated from him, but emphatic that he not see what she clutched in her hands?

“If you'd like to keep the papers with you,” I said, “I can work around them.”

She nodded with some reluctance and put the papers on her lap. I glanced down and saw pages of what must have been her handwriting, surprisingly straight but with the loops and embellishments of a young girl. I was curious about their contents but didn't want to press her, especially since she began to wheeze.

“I have asthma,” she said while she gasped.

~~There was a note in the file about asthma, but here, watching her, I thought it more likely that she had panic-induced breathlessness. Her heart rate was elevated and her blood pressure high.~~

“There, there,” I said. “You are in a state. Let’s try to get you calm.”

The place on her neck that she’d scratched needed attention, so once she seemed more settled, I stepped away to fetch some antiseptic and a bandage. When I returned, she still sat on the bed, clutching her papers, crying out every now and then in anguish. I cleaned her wound, but she soon began to recoil from my touch and questions as if they were flames licking at her face.

I watched her eyes glass over and she entered into the catatonic state sometimes present with schizophrenic patients. She looked through me with her large gray eyes in the most unsettling way, and I had the distinct feeling of having encountered such eyes before, but could not place them. Her limbs were stiff, but I helped her to lie on the bed and moved the papers close to her heart. I covered her with a blanket, drew the curtains, and locked her in the room.

As I left her, dread pushed down through my shoulders and into my chest. It was as if someone closed a fist around my lungs, and sweat beaded along my brow. I stopped and leaned against the door to catch my breath, wondering whether I was suddenly becoming ill, when it hit me: Mrs. Fitzgerald’s eyes were like my own, reflected in the mirror across from my bed years ago, after the war and my great losses.

Memories of my husband and daughter roared up like waves in my ears, along with the crippling sensation that accompanied the remembrance of their absence. I could not think of them here in this place, so I wished them away and they retreated.

Later. Later.

Mrs. Fitzgerald’s eyes, however, would not leave my mind. I had no idea what those haunting eyes would lead me to do. If I’d known then, I don’t think I would have become as involved as I did.

No, I still would have.

Mr. Fitzgerald’s strain was palpable in the room.

We sat near Dr. Meyer’s desk in his warm study—young resident Dr. Mildred Squires, Scott Fitzgerald, and I. We let Mr. Fitzgerald talk while we took notes, each of us judging him in spite of ourselves, and trying to understand his broken wife.

It was clear that Mr. Fitzgerald was near a breaking point himself. His hands shook and he chain-smoked. He often stood to pace the room while he gathered his thoughts. Then he would sit abruptly, cough, and continue. I listened to him with great interest, for he spoke like a storyteller.

“She was born and raised a free and indulged child in Montgomery, Alabama,” he began. “Her mother allowed her at the breast until she was four years old and never told her no. Her father was a stoic and admired judge.”

“Was her relationship with her father difficult?” asked Dr. Meyer, a stern, spectacled German in charge of the Phipps Clinic.

“Yes, I’d say so,” said Mr. Fitzgerald. “Judge Sayre was a practical sort of old Southern gentleman. He didn’t understand his daughter.”

“But Mrs. Sayre did?” asked Dr. Squires.

“I don’t think she understood Zelda, either,” said Scott. “She encouraged her, especially as a wild debutante.”

He stood again, walked to the window, and lit a new cigarette. His nervous energy disturbed all of us. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the usually steady and solid Dr. Meyer squirming in his chair.

“Zelda is strong willed and stubborn. Hates taking instruction,” continued Fitzgerald.

“I know she was previously at Malmaison and Valmont clinics in Switzerland and diagnosed as schizophrenic,” said Dr. Meyer. “What precipitated her first collapse?”

“There was a”—he faltered a moment—“relationship of mine with a young actress when we were in Hollywood in ’twenty-six or ’twenty-seven that affected her. Entirely chaste, mind you, but Zelda wouldn’t hear otherwise. This was following a relationship Zelda had with a Frenchman. Then there was her suicidal practice of ballet. She’d dance six, even eight hours a day until her feet bled and there were pools of sweat on the floor. That’s the pattern, you know. She gets manic about some form of art, becomes closed off from me, aggravates her asthma and eczema, then breaks down.”

I was fascinated by his justification of his affair and her behavior patterns. Was either of them unfaithful? Was Zelda punishing herself through art or trying to find herself? My thoughts again returned to the stack of papers she’d guarded so closely.

“What are the papers she brought?” I asked.

His laugh was bitter. “Her latest obsession: a novel. She thinks she will outdo me.”

His pretension could not hide that he felt threatened by her. Did he wish to be the only one in their marriage with any accomplishment? Did he undermine her attempts at expression? Or perhaps she antagonized him.

“Once she gets an idea in her head she won’t change it for a stack of Lincolns,” he said. “Do you know she thinks I dallied with Ernest Hemingway?”

We all looked up from our notepads.

“I did not, of course, but she’s convinced.”

His weary tone caused me to believe him, though I wondered what made her make such an assumption. I began to pity him again.

He returned to his chair and asked for a glass of water. His skin was pale, and sweat formed along his upper lip. I poured him some water from a pitcher on Meyer’s side table, and Fitzgerald met my eyes directly when he thanked me.

“That is enough for today,” said Dr. Meyer. “It’s clear that you both need rest. Will you be staying in Baltimore long?”

“No, I’ll return to Montgomery tomorrow. My daughter, Scottie, needs me. I don’t want to uproot her again. Not yet, anyway.”

I knew in some vague way that they had a ten-year-old child. The fact was in a file somewhere in black and white, and at the time I’d read it, I did not internalize that information. Now, however, seeing the emotional state of the two of them, my heart went out to the young girl. How did she manage with parents like these? Inevitably, I thought of my own daughter, Katie, and that she would have been thirteen this year. Just a bit older than Scottie.

Suddenly the room seemed very small and full of people. Mr. Fitzgerald’s wool coat on the chair next to me scratched my arm, and the pungent aroma of his cigarettes made me nauseous. The clock on the wall behind Meyer’s desk showed two o’clock. I still had three hours in my shift.

I had to get out of the room.

I stood and placed my notebook on the desk. The others stood around me. The meeting was over. There was a shaking of hands, discussion of a call, and an exchange of addresses. Mr. Fitzgerald picked up his coat and again looked into my eyes.

“You’ll take good care of her,” he said. It was not a question, but a reassurance to himself.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “The very best care.”

His face relaxed and he even smiled. I saw a hint of what he must have been in his younger days. He kept his gaze on mine and reached for my hands.

“Thank you,” he said.

With that, he was gone.

~~I walked out after him and watched him move down the hall and out the doors. The afternoon slipped in for a moment, then was shut out. Everything in the ward seemed different now, and I no longer felt its calming presence. The Fitzgeralds stirred something in me that had been dormant for a long time, and I was not prepared to face it.~~

An hour later, I returned to Mrs. Fitzgerald to reassess her vitals and begin a relationship with her. It was Dr. Meyer's philosophy that people with mental illness needed a comforting place of physical and emotional calm to work out their disturbances. He was revolutionary in the practice at a time when sanitariums often involved starched areas of decay and neglect, overcrowded dormitories polluted with the noise of people with not only mental illness, but all forms of physical handicaps, sexually transmitted diseases, or simple homelessness.

But this was not a public institution. It was an expensive private clinic connected to a research hospital, for those with the means to afford it. The wall hangings and tapestries were warmly colored and calming. There were moldings, chandeliers, and various rooms of amusement for billiards or bridge. It had the look of a posh hotel, and I'd felt an enormous sense of relief since I'd begun working here, years ago. The schedule and routine framed my existence in small, manageable blocks the way Walter Reed General Hospital had done at the start of the war, and the clean, muted environment soothed me.

Until today.

With Mr. Fitzgerald gone, at least the air seemed lighter. Mrs. Fitzgerald was standing at the window when I knocked and opened the door. Her bags were open and she looked as if she'd brushed her hair and washed her face. She continued to hold the papers.

"White February, with the crispness of a paper envelope," she said in her graceful Southern drawl, nodding to the snow-sprinkled garden outside her window. "Sugarplum fairies were playing in the bushes there, but your knock scared them off."

She gave me the smile one would give a child. I returned it, relieved to see her lightness and feel my own.

"It's the white uniform," I said. "Intimidating."

Mrs. Fitzgerald's smile touched her eyes, and she regarded me warmly, seemingly happy that I played along. This was a very good sign and one I'd not expected.

"He's gone," she said. "My husband?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fitzgerald, he left to tend to your daughter."

"But he can't really leave if we don't drop his name, can we?" she said. "Call me Zelda."

Her gentle voice, which had been so light just moments before, grew as sharp as an icicle. I'd meant to address her formally and as a lady of some position, but she clearly resented the shadow his name cast.

"I'd be glad to call you Zelda," I said. "I'm glad we can cut the pretense. I'm Anna, and I'll be your nurse while you stay with us."

"Had I on earth but wishes three, the first should be my Anna," said Zelda. "Robert Burns. The poetry of ballet is something to consider but seems so far from this cold, weary desert."

Her thoughts flitted through her mind and out of her lips in a tumble I had trouble following, though her words suggested her brilliance.

I needed to reassess her vital signs, and she allowed me to lead her back to the bed, but the shift from personal to professional conversation once more set the emotional barrier between us. She wouldn't look me in the eye, but kept her gaze fixed at the window.

I slid her blouse open to listen to her heart and noted her prominent collarbones and the eczema that continued to splotch her skin. She suddenly grimaced, then broke into an enormous smile. I couldn't help but look over my shoulder at what she saw, but was greeted with only the window. Her face must have been reacting to a film of memories I could not yet access.

"Your blood pressure is much improved, as is your pulse," I said.

She blinked and directed her large eyes at me, again unnerving me. She slid her gaze over my face and down my arms to my hands, where it lingered there a bit.

"Long, graceful fingers with short blunt nails," she said. "The hands of a piano player. Chopin, Debussy, Beethoven."

Patients rarely noticed me so closely, and commented on me even less, so her scrutiny felt strange though not unpleasant.

"I do play a bit. I used to a lot," I said, allowing my thoughts of Ben to hover at the edges of my consciousness, teasing me. I had a sudden memory of him behind me as I played, his fingers along my collarbone, his arms lifting me off the bench, my hands in his hair—

I snapped the memory shut, but a faint heat remained in my neck. She saw the flush, stood abruptly, and walked back to the window, again recoiling from me.

I was astonished by the height of her perception. It was clear that she read others well—maybe too well. Dr. Meyer would not be pleased. He often spoke to us about the emotional sensitivity of his patients to the feelings of others. I had never seen anything to this degree, though.

"Dinner will be served in the dining room at five thirty," I said. "Your evening nurse will arrive at five o'clock to introduce herself and escort you there. Tonight you may rest and read if you'd like. Tomorrow we'll begin counseling with Dr. Meyer and Dr. Squires. Do you have any questions for me before I leave?"

She looked at me and shook her head in the negative.

"Then good evening, Zelda," I said. "I'm glad to meet you, and I look forward to working with you."

She continued to stare at me and it was difficult to remove myself from her gaze, but I managed a nod and turned to leave the room.

"Play again," she said.

I turned back to her. "Pardon me?"

"The piano. You should play again."

I forced a smile.

"Good advice," I said. "Thank you."

She turned back to the window, and I locked her in on my way out.

It was waiting for me when I pushed open the door to my apartment. The piano, that is. Stiff, upright, accusing.

A neglected wife, I thought.

Where have you been? it said with its posture.

My fingers longed to touch its keys, but sound is memory, so I resisted the urge. I was of no mind to raise old ghosts.

I closed the door behind me and placed my bag on the table next to the door. I could hear pats and thumps from the girls above me, two ballerinas from the Peabody Institute. The muffled melancholy of an opera singer conjured by the point of a needle on a gramophone competed with the scrape of strings on a violin in the apartment below me, where an intense Romanian musician lived.

I had fallen in love with the building in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood on a walk after

my shift at the hospital years ago, when my mother had encouraged me to find a place of my own. Its rounded, swirled, and layered woodwork, chimneys, and impressive leaded windows gave it the appearance of a Victorian dollhouse. The little colony of artists felt safe, though I did feel a bit out of place. When I had asked the landlord whether he was sure a psychiatric nurse fit in with dancers and musicians, he laughed and said I couldn't be a more welcome addition.

When he'd shown me the room, the piano was the only thing in it. It was covered with a sheet, but its presence was heavy. I flinched when I saw it. He must have seen, because he said, "We can have it moved if you'd like. It's been in the house forever, though. The last one who lived here was a painter, so it never got used beyond being a prop for canvases."

"I do play," I'd said.

"See, you're a good fit," he had said. "These rooms were waiting for you."

I thought of this as I stood by the window and stared outside. Winter's dark muted the city and left me feeling tired to my bones. Hoping to ward off any illness that might be trying to nestle into my body, I had a bowl of chicken soup for dinner and retired early.

Sleep had long been an antagonist that thrilled as well as tormented me, so I fell into it easily, the way one would opium. The dreams were getting further apart until entire months went by without Ben or Katie in any of them, but I knew from my experiences with the Fitzgeralds that day and the emotions they'd stirred in me that someone from my past would be waiting in my dreams.

It was Ben.

It was the day at the train station when he had to return to the front. Emotion had rendered me speechless all morning. Ben's eyes were dark and heavily lashed, and his newly shorn brown hair made him look so young. He brushed a tear away gruffly with the back of his hand.

"I'm not doing this to you," he said. "I have to do it for them."

This stirred me enough to shake loose the hold on my throat.

"For whom?" I said. "To them you're just a speck on a map. A number. To me..." I wouldn't continue. I couldn't say it any more.

"If I didn't go back, I couldn't live with myself—not with all of them fighting. I have to go back."

I looked down the platform at the women and men kissing and embracing one another. I saw a man nearby chuck his little son under his chin. He saluted the boy, who saluted back. A brave little soldier for his mother, who struggled with an infant on her hip.

Ben's eyes followed mine down the platform and rested on the family. We looked back at each other and at once, I understood. I finally allowed myself to hug him.

He felt so warm in his uniform. I buried myself in his neck, clean and shaved. It would soon be covered in grime and stubble. I wanted to press myself into him so I could go with him, but the departure whistle blew, and I pulled away.

"I'll be back," he said.

"I'll be waiting."

He stepped up into the train and slid into the seat nearest the window. Our lips formed *I love you* at the same moment. This made us smile. He put his hand on the glass.

Then the bomb slid through the air with a scream, destroying the train and everyone before me in a ball of fire and smoke.

I woke up, sweating, with my heart hammering in my chest.

I hadn't had the dream in so long, and it took me some time to recover, to tell myself that he didn't get blown up at the train station, to allow the little bird of hope, which had weakened through the years, to continue to flutter in my heart that he might still come back to me the way my daughter never could.

TWO



“I can’t continue with Mrs. Fitzgerald,” I said. Zelda had been in my care for only two weeks and already I could see that I needed to be shaken free from her.

Dr. Meyer regarded me with a sharp eye. When he looked at me I could feel him assessing all the time. I closed my mind and emotions to him as much as possible, willing a sturdy wall of confidence. He mustn’t see my unease. He allowed only those with the strongest, steadiest mental health to work in his ward, and I couldn’t bear to lose my place there.

“Might I ask why that is your opinion?” he said.

I faltered a little. I couldn’t let on how upset I was. My nausea, elevated heart rate, flashbacks, and now nightmares caused me serious alarm. If I continued with Zelda, how much worse would it get?

“I just feel that someone better versed in dementia praecox might help her more,” I lied. “She is extremely fragile, by my assessment, and would benefit from Nurse Thompson or even Nurse Lombard—women more maternal by age. Women with whom Zelda might feel safe and nurtured.”

“You do yourself a disservice,” he said. “Age makes no difference. You exude as much maternal warmth at thirty-five years of age as Nurses Thompson and Lombard in their fifties, and you don’t even have children.”

I flinched and hoped he didn’t perceive it.

“I’m sorry, but I need you to stay with her,” he continued. “If for no other reason than she calls for you often in the night.”

I was startled by this. “Pardon me?”

“Yes, the night nurse recorded that Mrs. Fitzgerald wouldn’t allow her to touch her, take her vitals or interact with her in any way. She wants you.”

I was at a loss. I never expected that Zelda would have thought twice about me once my shift was over, because she often paid me no attention. In the weeks that she’d been here, she had not even been able to complete a full therapy session. She was too volatile and unsettled. Hearing that she called for me softened me, and I nodded.

“Good,” said Dr. Meyer.

I prepared to leave the room when he stopped me.

“Are you all right, Nurse Howard?” he asked. “Is anything bothering *you*?”

I looked at my hands, mindful of keeping them still and folded over each other. My heart hammered so hard in my chest it threatened to betray me. Meyer knew nothing of my past. He was entirely professional and made no attempt to get to know his staff outside of the hospital. It was why I liked working for him.

“No, Dr. Meyer.”

“Very well. I’ll see you and Mrs. Fitzgerald at eleven o’clock for counseling.”

There is nothing that underlines an uncomfortable silence as much as a ticking clock.

We sat in Dr. Meyer’s study in the same formation as the day of Zelda’s admittance, with Mr. Fitzgerald traded for another. Zelda did not tremble or shake as Mr. Fitzgerald had done. She did not look pale or sweaty. Her features were relaxed. Only her fingers picking at her nails and occasionally reaching up to scratch a patch of red skin betrayed her facade.

“Mrs. Fitzgerald,” said Dr. Meyer.

“Zelda,” I interrupted. “She prefers to be called Zelda.”

Zelda flicked a smile at me, then turned her attention to the window just over Dr. Squires’s shoulder.

“Zelda,” Meyer said, looking slightly aggravated at the reminder, “Dr. Squires is a resident here and will be handling your case along with me and Nurse Howard.”

“I hope they’ll have tomato sandwiches at lunch,” said Zelda. “I adore tomato sandwiches and lemonade. It’s all I ate in Alabama.”

Dr. Meyer furrowed his brow, but Dr. Squires, a young, fresh-faced resident with a kindly countenance, picked up Zelda’s thread.

“And could you tell us a bit about your childhood in Alabama?” asked Dr. Squires, pencil poised, look of alert interest on her face.

Too soon, I thought.

Zelda ignored Dr. Squires’s question.

“I’m also keen on cucumbers,” Zelda said. “Cucumber sandwiches are a good, clean meal. I like clean foods. Clean people.”

“And did your mother keep a clean house?” asked Dr. Squires.

What a ridiculous question. I looked from her to Dr. Meyer and saw he thought the same.

“Zelda,” said Dr. Meyer, “if you’d prefer not to speak about your childhood, perhaps you can tell us about your thoughts on your diagnosis from Valmont.”

“You know very well what my diagnosis is.”

Dr. Meyer studied her for a moment. “Am I correct in assuming that you do not wish to speak of your illness at this time?”

Again, the ticking clock.

Dr. Squires sat up straighter in her chair and started to write something on her notepad, but reconsidered and placed her pencil on the desk. Dr. Meyer did not fidget. He stared directly at Zelda, waiting her out. It seemed that an eternity passed before she finally spoke.

“It’s been a pleasure sitting with you all this morning,” said Zelda, “but I’ll require a bit of rest before lunch. Do you think they’ll serve tomato sandwiches?”

Dr. Meyer’s face was unreadable, but the air felt as if Zelda had won some unspoken confrontation.

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” he said. “We want you to feel rested and comfortable while you are here.”

Zelda stood and walked out of the room, victorious.

When my shift ended, I went to Zelda’s room to wish her a good night. She sat in the dark, staring at the door with her papers on her lap.

“Zelda,” I said. “I have to go. I hope you have a nice evening.”

The light from the hallway cast a ghostly pallor across her face. Her eyes appeared as black as marbles. She could have been an actor in a haunted house, and I felt goose bumps rise on my arms.

“May I turn on the light for you?” I asked.

She did not respond at first, but blinked her eyes rapidly. When she finally made eye contact with me, her gaze looked somehow more normal. Perhaps it was just the light from the hallway contracting her pupils.

“My eyes hurt,” she said.

“Here,” I said, going to the small lamp on the table by the window. “I’ll turn on a low light. Then

you can read or write a little before dinner.”

I returned to the door. “Well, good night, Zelda.”

I moved to leave, but she called me back.

“Anna.” Her voice shook. “Will you stay with me tonight, at least until I go to bed?”

I was touched by her request. I had spent many nights with patients during my old days at Walter Reed General Hospital, long after my shift had ended. Grieving families had often kept me tethered to bedsides while their loved ones passed on. It had been a long time, however, since I had felt compelled or anyone had asked. I was sure Zelda’s night nurse wouldn’t mind the help.

“Yes, I think that would be fine,” I said. “Just until you go to bed.”

Her face relaxed and she smiled at me with gratitude.

I led her to dinner, helped her bathe, and read to her a bit before lights-out. Dr. Meyer was pleased that she trusted me so much, and Nurse Wilson was glad to have a lighter caseload. And I felt good to be needed by someone.

By eight o’clock, however, my back ached and my skin longed to be free of the starched uniform. Mercifully, Zelda’s eyes grew heavy, and within minutes of starting her book, *Modern French Painters*, she was sound asleep. Her eyelashes rested on her cheeks like a girl’s, and I was overcome with pity for this child-woman who had broken down so far that she needed to live apart from her husband and daughter in a sanitarium. I hoped with all of my heart that we’d be able to restore her to some version of her better self so she could live normally.

I knew the pain of living without. I often thought grief was like madness—the lack of control, the overwhelming waves of emotion with unexpected triggers, breathlessness, night sweats, nightmares, and the feeling of utter aloneness, like that of standing on a ledge in a violent wind.

I shivered.

An orderly walked by, breaking the spell, and I set the book on the bedside table. When I stood, I placed my hand on Zelda’s hair and silently wished her good dreams.

Mercifully, when I got home and slept that night, there were no nightmares to plague me.

THREE



Zelda looped her arm through mine and pointed at the moldings and chandeliers as we walked to morning therapy. I was pleased about the suggestion of intimacy and trust she exhibited by initiating physical contact with me. She had also regained the light in her eyes, which helped me forget how like my own they were.

“This place is like the Biltmore Hotel, Anna, and we will go there together so I can show you.”

“I’ve never taken time to sightsee in New York City.”

She stopped and grabbed me on the shoulders. “Never?”

“Not once,” I said.

“Then I’d better hurry up and get well so I can show you around.”

She relooped her arm through mine as if we were two friends on a social outing. We stepped through the door to Dr. Meyer’s office, where he sat scribbling notes and Dr. Squires waited like an eager student. Dr. Meyer looked up, his face unreadable.

“You are utterly reliable, Dr. Meyer,” said Zelda. “A wise owl in a tree. A trusty bookend.”

I’d hoped to see a flicker of a smile cross Meyer’s face, but his expression remained inaccessible. That was disappointing. I thought he’d get further with a woman like Zelda by responding positively to her at least a bit.

As the meeting progressed, Zelda passed from topic to topic, dodging questions as a politician would, but with less concern for keeping up appearances. Her hands fluttered like skittish birds while she talked in her low Southern voice. She crossed and uncrossed her shapely, taut legs, allowing them to peek out of her skirt where she had missed several buttonholes. She leaned conspiratorially toward whomever she addressed in conversation.

“Don’t be afraid to smile, Dr. Meyer,” said Zelda. She rested her elbows on his desk and leaned into him as much as the furniture allowed. He looked at her with a mixture of superiority and tolerance, as one would a precocious child.

“It’s a pity you don’t have dances here,” she said. “The way the men love me, my card would be double-full for every song. I might even save a whole dance for you.” She winked at Meyer. As I looked away to suppress a smile, I saw Dr. Squires’s mouth pop open like a fish’s. She quickly clamped it shut.

I enjoyed watching the exchange and found myself silently rooting for Zelda, though I didn’t understand why. Dr. Meyer was a superb physician, widely respected by patients and colleagues alike. Perhaps the underlying sense of unease I felt now in the ward showed that Meyer’s facade was, in fact, penetrable and that a steady temper in any person at all times was impossible. This both comforted me and unsettled me, and watching their exchange play out was morbidly fascinating.

“Zelda,” said Dr. Meyer. “What are your personal goals?”

She slouched in her chair and wrapped the fingers of her right hand around her left, slowly bending her hand back along the wrist until it looked as if it would snap. She looked out the window. The ticking clock reminded us it was there.

“Not longevity,” she said. “Not peace. Not some chloroformed happiness. Not tranquillity. They are all such *common* goals, aren’t they, Dr. Meyer?”

“Convention does not suit you,” he said.

“No. I want audacity. High color. Total independence.”

~~“No one can exist in a totally independent state, Zelda,” said Dr. Meyer. “Nor would I suspect that they would ever really wish to.”~~

Zelda cleared her throat and sat up in her chair. “Do you know that I once called the fire department as a child and told them I saw a girl stranded on a roof, just before I climbed onto that roof and waited for them to come and get me?”

We all sat in various states of unrest waiting for her to continue.

“I could have climbed down from the roof at any time,” she said. “I enjoyed having them at my disposal.”

The skin rose on my arms, and for the first time since she’d arrived I felt suspicious of Zelda, and my allegiance slipped back to its proper alignment.

Zelda stood, scraping her chair against the floor and knocking her knee against the heavy wood of Dr. Meyer’s desk.

“I must get back to work,” she said.

“What work is that?” asked Dr. Meyer.

“My novel.”

“A writer,” said Dr. Squires. “Like your husband.”

“No. He’s more like me than I’m like him.”

I smiled at her confidence.

“It’s wonderful to have two talents in the family,” said Dr. Squires.

“Yes,” said Zelda. “But I don’t know how Scott will write with me locked up.”

“Why is that?” asked Dr. Meyer.

She spun toward him, piercing him with her glare, at once fierce, vulnerable, proud, and angry. Her emotions were like a jewel whose facets caught the light in succession.

“I am his words.”

As if to punctuate her declaration, the clock struck the hour and she stormed out of the room.

Her pen did not leave the page for two hours after her therapy session. Every time I checked in on her she was scribbling, the stack of papers accumulating like winter snow on top of her bedside table. After my morning rounds I was able to sit with her while she wrote, trying to pick up some of her mumblings, but none of it made any sense to me. She told me, however, that I was a comfort to her, so I was glad to sit with her and catch the intermittent smiles and offhand comments she’d throw at me. In truth, her attention felt like the sun coming out from behind the clouds, for it revealed in brief flashes the woman she was before all of the hurt and pain and illness blotted her out.

Lunchtime was approaching, and I wanted to warn her to give her some time to transition from the state she was in. I cleared my throat and reminded her of the schedule, anticipating that she would ignore me as she had during the last hour whenever I asked whether she needed anything. I was surprised when she dropped her pen and stretched her hands.

“A good stopping place,” she said.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glassy, as if her writing had induced a creative fever.

“You look well,” I said. “Your memories become you.”

Her smile was luminous.

“That night at the Champs-Élysées theater,” she said, “Josephine Baker arrived onstage wearing nothing but a skirt, breasts bare like ripe, caramel-covered apples, and we all were mesmerized by the beautiful grotesquerie of it.”

“I’m afraid it would’ve caused me to blush,” I said, feeling heat in my cheeks at the mere thought

of it.

~~“We were too tight from the champagne cocktails to feel the burn of the blush,” she said. “That time in Paris in the twenties was the edge of when it all turned.”~~

I felt suddenly alert. She was beginning her remembrances. I didn't want to lead her at all, so I remained quiet and attempted to mute my expression. Perhaps if I could just blend into the walls she speak as if she were alone.

“Those were the days we ran with the Murphys, the Hemingways, Dos Passos, Duff Twysden. The damnable Stein, who always banished the wives to tea with her *wife* while the artists and writers got high on each other's bold ideas.” Her voice became brittle.

“There were too many parties, too many salons, too many nights watching half-naked Negroes, half-sober painters, half-mad homosexuals....” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “Waking up mornings was the worst part. It was like the sickly, bitter flavor on the tongue after drinking coffee. I was so good going down, but the aftertaste made you damn near hate it.”

My eyes moved over the pages and it occurred to me that her writing allowed her to open up. I considered this for a moment, then made my thoughts known.

“How would you feel about writing to Dr. Meyer instead of talking to him?” I asked.

Her gaze met mine straight on and I understood that being direct was the only way to get through to her. She was no fool. Tricks would not get her to reveal anything.

“About what?” she said.

“Your illness. Your past. What you think precipitated your collapses,” I said. “It's all he wants, you know. It's all any of us want: to help you reach in and determine the source of the problem to help you avoid it in the future. To heal. To prepare you for living outside of a clinic.”

She did not recoil from my words as I anticipated she would. After a few moments, she nodded her head.

“I'll do it,” she said. “What shall I write?”

“Start at the beginning, wherever that is to you.”

“Can it be like a story?” she asked.

“It can be anything you want. Whatever feels natural.”

“Could I only write for you?”

This presented a problem. Anything my patient shared I was obligated to tell the entire team caring for her. I didn't want to lie to her, but I also didn't want to betray her. I decided to put her at ease for now, and later decide what to do if she wrote anything.

“Yes, you may write just for me,” I said.

“And you promise not to show Scott.”

“Of course I won't show him,” I said.

“He thinks expression ruins me,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because he thinks he should be enough for me. He needs me to orbit him. He wishes to pluck me from orbit when he needs me and then send me back once he's used me up.”

Herein lies the problem, I thought. But it was a common enough problem in marriages. Didn't we all want devotion? Undivided attention? Why did it break the Fitzgeralds so badly?

“You clearly crave creative expression,” I said. “I know about your dancing. Do you play an instrument? Paint? I feel that more outlets would nurture your physical and mental health.”

“I do love to paint. I studied with the best in France. I love to make things with my hands, too. You should have seen the dollhouse I made for Scottie at our home in Delaware.”

Her words fell flat and her face contorted. A sob rose in her throat and she collapsed on the bed. I had been too much. I needed to back off, but I wanted to calm her. I approached her carefully and

reached to touch her back. She flinched but did not push me off. I sat next to her and rubbed her back in wide, slow circles. She turned her body and wrapped her arms around me, crying until she fell asleep.

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