

Chapter 1

After a long time weighing up whether to tell the world what actually happened – for reasons of honesty, loyalty and a sense of justice – it was the funeral that finally convinced me to sit down and write. But not the funeral you think. Not the one you imagine you know the sad details of, covered by the tabloids and inaccurately dramatised on Netflix.

Having been asked for my side of the story repeatedly, and advised by healthcare professionals that some sort of journalling might be a good way to make sense of that summer, I eventually found myself questioning what I was so afraid of that prevented me from doing the very thing that had first lured me to the East Coast in the warm months of 2019. In those more innocent days for all of us, before we learnt what regret, grief and reckoning really looked like on a global scale, I had harboured ambitions to dazzle with prose. As a girl, I hoped to manifest a book; as a teen, a following; as a newly graduated scholar, an audience. Now I hope for kinship. There were so many accounts of the ephemeral events in that hot, violent window of time before darker stories knocked this one from the top of the news cycles and

the ‘think piece’ industry. But they don’t even scratch at the skin of the truth. I may have only figured in the limited TV show as a composite character, but mine is a voice that truly bears witness – I was there. I am the smoking gun.

As with all things, it’s all about perspective. Take the Polaroid photo above my desk where I write. At first glance, it doesn’t seem to be anything special. Without context, some might look at the slate-grey channel of water cutting between the watercolour smudge of the shore in the distance – the suggestion of the jade tended lawn, the white of clapboard – and see tranquillity. Others may sense a foreboding in the darker depths closer to the lens where the water looks almost black. Perhaps the value of the real estate on display might be assessed; or maybe the vista simply evokes the taste of salt on the breeze and the delicious chill of the water on such a beautiful day. Those who know the eyes that looked through the viewfinder, always scanning the horizon, the spot just out of focus, might see an act of prayer.

This picture, taken repeatedly by its photographer, is infamous now. Though her feeds were wiped, nothing nowadays is ever truly deleted or really disappears. Images and comments are harvested the minute they appear; stored and saved to be served up later. This one was; the framing of this view given new meaning over the years. A shot that was repeated so many times on her platforms, and copied by others. That she never posted a caption seemed like an invitation to add individual interpretation; fill the empty heart with red. Like, validate, imprint a narrative. When I look up at it from my keyboard, I do the same thing. I start to believe I can decipher the message it’s sending out. The manifestation chant of its originator intertwined with the memories of my own misgivings. I cherish and hate it in equal measure because I recall the happiness, the giddiness, the bewilderment and the betrayal I felt being in that very spot

looking at the sound so many times that lurid, lush summer. And I wonder if I sensed the tumbling towards an inevitable end even then, felt it like the slip of the angle of repose on a pile of sand – the point at which the heaped grains begin to tremble and slide, no longer able to hold their critical shape.

Even if I did, I likely didn't care. Because Gatsby refracted light when she entered a room – it was often hard to see anything else. Buoyed on hope and romance, she floated, as though in orbit, into any party. Sometimes so brilliant that it felt as though protective glasses were required to view her. And like any beautiful, imperfect thing travelling through space and time, she came into contact with other celestial bodies – knocking her off her centrifugal path. All of that aspect of her life – the fatal collision course – has been written about, picked over with *schadenfreude*, shared, re-shared, held up as an example of inauthenticity and appropriation. But to me, she represented many other things; chief among them, promise.

The idea of Gatsby thrilled me – her fame, her leverage, her curated life – but I also felt an immediate affinity with her despite our very different existences. Even though her true intentions crystallised after our final meeting, I recognised the dreamer in her. We were both in pursuit of something we imagined would deliver pure happiness. She wanted to resurrect a life she had previously tasted, I wanted to replicate the career of online essayists whose content I devoured. I have since managed to write for money, but not anything personal, truthful, meaningful. I had wanted my name inked in the water-cooler conversation-starters of *Time*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *W*, *Vulture*, *Slate*, *Pajiba*, the *Cut*. Then, I didn't capitalise on my time adjacent to a cultural 'moment'. In reality, in the aftermath, I was an invisible copywriter embodying the voice of a famous bread manufacturer, the rallying cry of a

Wall Street broker, the friendly, non-threatening approach of a meds distributor. It has not been what I aspired to.

But if there's one thing I think I know about Gatsby, it's that had she been with me now, she would have championed me to be merciless in my determination, to exploit all the avenues available to me in pursuing the endgame, just as she did. She would have wanted me to use what I have, bow to the insatiable first-person industrial complex, even if it exposed her. She would have wanted the beauty to be revealed as well as the rot. I have long been quiet, respectful, protective, discreet, and nothing good has come from it. My personal growth has only come from psychoanalysis, pressing guilt and the flaying sting of public opinion. Maybe now is the time for some letting go, some public catharsis, some tarnished truths. To write about all the febrile, filthy things my private, respectable parents abhor.

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As the child of educated liberals who were comfortable enough to send me to a college of note without my needing a job or two during my studies, I had been taught all my life to never judge people. 'Be kind', they told me, 'think of others', 'never assume', 'ask questions'. This was a privilege of my economic status; I never had to operate from a position of danger or threat, had no hunger or desperation driving a need to read people fast. I grew up trying to find context in anyone I met, striving to understand their circumstance, applying the benefit of doubt – whether that was a stranger growling obscenities on the subway, the security guard who manned our lobby in a cloud of pungent body odour, the girl with a mean mouth in junior high who bullied me over my flat chest. That's hard to do as a kid when you stand in the

shower clawing at uncooperative breasts; harder still, I found, at college in New Haven, where I provoked dorm queen bees' ire as a freshman, for never taking sides. I asked questions and I waited for the answers – and consequently I knew secrets. But I never used them for gain, never felt I needed to, which I suppose is entitled in itself.

My ability to listen and watch was noted by a college professor who suggested that a role in journalism might suit my nascent talents. Having immersed myself in the works of Joan Didion, Gloria Steinem, Barbara Ehrenreich and Susan Sontag, I threw myself into the school paper, reporting on sports fixtures, stage shows and a long-running cafeteria outrage over the relative lack of vegan options. This, I was sure, was the gateway to my brilliant future, and as I amassed college credit and hours in the press room, my scholastic years slid by unremarkably. My experiences were sweet, like the boys I dated. Nothing bad had ever happened to me, and in my final year, I grandly informed my parents when I flew home for the holidays that I intended to move to New York when I had finished my exams. I was going to be a writer.

I know. It sounds pretentious. But the Carraway family were not a people who let logistics or a lack of discernable talent stand in the way of personal glory. They didn't hesitate in supporting me, agreeing to fund a summer on the East Coast to allow me to blog, write and network unrestricted from the end of May until the cooling days of September, in the hope of parsing my content into the actual salary of a paid position. Then, my dad warned me, I would need to stand on my own two feet. It's what Grandpa had done with him, and Great-gramps before that – and look at how well they had done. Sitting around our dining table when he rolled out this plan again to our assembled family as though repetition ensured success, my aunt nodded

sagely and assured me that such an enterprise would be ‘the making’ of me. I liked the sound of this despite rolling my eyes at the cliché. I felt formless and wanted the chafe of something new to reveal the bright edges surely hidden within me.

My dad thought talking about money in numerical terms was vulgar, so I never knew during the last semester of school just what kind of summer I should anticipate. I had saved precisely nothing in the college checking account my parents transferred funds into each semester, yet spent most evenings scrolling through Manhattan apartment rental sites and Instagram accounts detailing cheese plants on sun-dappled windowsills with the curve of a water tower in the background, feet in skates on baking Central Park asphalt, food that looked like art, art that looked like food . . . Though I’d always had Teddy Roosevelt’s quote about comparison levelled at me by my parents (‘the thief of joy, Nic’), I couldn’t help but covet the lives I scrolled through. I wanted the hot noise and vibrations of New York City. I expected that life would happen to me there, experiences sticking to my skin – changing me, moulding me. I would be inspired and create. I would write stirring pieces on culture, fame, the arts, that would be re-shared across platforms and quoted in classes. As it turned out, the rents in Manhattan were alarming when written on the spreadsheet of my father’s laptop, the figure in his head not aligned with the cost of a Greenwich Village studio or a Brooklyn loft. I was told to be creative with the cash he offered, to prove my resourcefulness.

When I think back to the girl at that dining room table, I realise that my aunt was right: in the end, that summer did make me. Just not in the way any of us might have imagined. In ways that still prickle me with penitence when I lie awake at night watching the clock instead of my dreams.