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# Zelda

A Biography

**Nancy Milford**

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**ZELDA**

A Biography

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*Nancy Milford*



HARPER  
PERENNIAL

# Dedication

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For Kenneth,  
with love and thanks.

For Matthew and Jessica Kate

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Biography is the falsest of the art

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F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

General notes to *The Last Tycoon*

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## Prologue

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WHEN I WAS YOUNG IN THE MIDWEST and had dreams of my own, it seemed to me a fine thing to live as the Fitzgeralds had, where every gesture had a special flair that marked it as one's own. Together they personified the immense lure of the East, of young fame, of dissolution and early death—the sepia-tinted photographs in rotogravure sections across the country: Scott, in an immaculate Norfolk jacket, gesturing nervously with a cigarette, Zelda brightly at his side, her clean wild hair brushed back from her face. But it was not her beauty that was arresting. It was her style, a sort of insolence toward life, her total lack of caution, her fearless and abundant pride. If the Fitzgeralds were ghostly figures out of an era that was gone, they had nevertheless made an impact on the American imagination that reverberated into my own generation. I wanted to know why.

In the spring of 1963, when I had just turned twenty-five, I began to gather reminiscences from people who had known the Fitzgeralds well, people who had shared a summer house, or a childhood. I remember Gerald Murphy turning to me once and saying suddenly, “Zelda was an American value.” He said it almost in fury, as if she had eluded him until that very moment. For she was an elusive woman. She was also vulnerable and willful and in deep hiding. Sara Murphy caught something of this in her letter to Scott written after Zelda's first breakdown, “I think of her face so often, & so wish it had been *drawn*.... It is rather like a young Indian's face, except for the smouldering eyes. At night, I remember, if she was excited, they turned black—& impenetrable—but always full of impatience—*something*, the world I think. She wasn't of it anyhow .... She had an inward life & feelings that I don't suppose anyone ever touched—not even you—She probably thought terribly dangerous secret thoughts....”

What was Zelda to Scott that she haunted his fiction? What was it like to come to New York City in the spring of 1920, fresh out of Alabama, before your twentieth birthday? And marry Scott Fitzgerald, who was going to name the new decade the Jazz Age and make you the first American Flapper? I remember talking to two old men in Montgomery, Alabama, at the fiftieth reunion of Zelda's high school graduation, about the time she had ridden down Dexter Avenue in the center of town in a one-piece flesh-colored knit bathing suit with her legs draped nonchalantly over the back of the rumbustious seat of somebody's electric. A group of boys, who were called Jelly Beans, hollered at her as she went by, and, seeing them, she stood up in the car, laughing, stretched out her arms wide and called, “*All n Jellys!*” One of the men said, “You see, you've got to remember, to us Zelda was a... a Kingmaker.”

Was it Zelda, then, shooting craps like Nancy Lamar in “The Jelly Bean,” tippling with the boys at Princeton and later at the Ritz Bar in Paris? How curious that the same woman who kissed men on fire escapes because she liked the shapes of their noses or the cut of their dinner jackets would also spend hours drawing Scott pictures of Gatsby, drawing him again and again until her fingers ached and until Scott could see him. Certainly we knew more about Gloria and Sally Carrol and Nicole Diver than we

did about Zelda Fitzgerald.

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In the summer of 1963 my husband and I traveled more than a thousand miles from New York to Baltimore and Washington, into the Smoky Mountains to Asheville, and then down deeper through the heat and pines of Georgia to Montgomery, Alabama, in search of Zelda. It was on that first trip into the Deep South that, piecemeal, I began to read the documents that are the backbone of this book. The hundreds of letters, the albums of clippings, scrapbooks, the dark-red Moroccan leather book with its wonderful array of addresses—from “Charlie McA’s bootlegger” in Manhattan and “trick corsets” on the rue d’Alger in Paris to the peripatetic “Ernest Hemminway, 113 Rue Notre Dame des Champs” and “Ernest Hemminway, Hotel Taube, Schruns, Vorarlberg, Austria,” until she finally corrects the spelling of his name and settles his address firmly: “c/o Guaranty Trust Co.”

Sitting up late at night in Henderson, North Carolina, in a small tourist home reading Zelda’s letters to her husband moved me in a way I had never been moved before, touched something in me that before those letters had been untouched. We were not pursuing a nostalgic past, nor did the Fitzgeralds represent it to us. Rather we read those letters out loud to each other as if they had just arrived, not knowing from what terrain of their lives they had been written or what the next one would say. They were hopelessly mixed up and undated, without, in most cases, envelopes to give them dates. All the clues were internal, and were to be pieced together on other days and nights during the ensuing year. A note from Gertrude Stein would fall out thanking the Fitzgeralds for their visit—but what visit, and where? A snapshot taken in North Africa of Scott and Zelda riding camels might come next or a gold lock of Zelda’s hair tied in a pink ribbon. I had somewhat innocently—if a passionate curiosity about another’s life is ever innocent—entered into something I neither could nor would put down for several years, and in that quest the direction of my life was changed. Ahead of me were encounters in the country, in London, Paris, and Switzerland I could never have dreamed of, never invented.

In Montgomery, at the end of her life, disfigured by years of fighting against a recurring mental illness, Zelda would often walk out to a large ante-bellum home when the sun was strong. She had been invited to paint in the gardens whenever she liked. It was a spacious house, encircled by a fine white portico and by lush and fragrant growths of flowers. There was a cutting garden, a formal garden, and a rambling one carefully cultivated to appear wild. In the summertime the grand pieces of richly carved dark furniture were draped in white cloth, and wooden-bladed fans gently stirred the heavy air. There, in the gardens by the house, Zelda would put up her easel and paint until the sun went down. The bold southern flowers now fascinated her more than the subtle violet or the complete rose; she liked the waxy, almost artificial-looking tropical flowers, the calla lily and the large blossoms of the japonica. Once Zelda asked the lady whose gardens they were, what a *datura* meant to her. The puzzled woman replied, “Well, it’s just a pretty flower, that’s all.” Zelda said nothing and continued to paint. The *datura* is also known as Angel’s Trumpet because of its shapely long white flaring blossom. It is not only beautiful but highly poisonous. Years later, sitting on the portico of the house as the summer light grew dim, the woman leaned toward me and asked quietly, “Where was she that she could not come back? Where did she go? Where?”

Writing about Montgomery, but calling it Jeffersonville, Zelda had said, “Every place has its hours. . . . So in Jeffersonville there existed then, and I suppose now, a time and quality that appertains



nowhere else.” The time is of our past. The landscape is by Rousseau and something savage lurks  
the extravagantly green gardens. Zelda would come full circle to her origin. She was the American girl  
living the American dream, and she became mad within it.

*New York City*  
*February, 1970*

NANCY MILFORD

Of Lovers ruine some sad Tragedie:

I am not I, pitie the tale of me.

---

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY, *Astrophel and Stella*, 45

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**ONE**

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**Southern Girl**

**I**F THERE WAS A CONFEDERATE ESTABLISHMENT in the Deep South, Zelda Sayre came from the heart of it. Willis B. Machen, Zelda's maternal grandfather, was an energetic entrepreneur tough enough to endure several careers and robust enough to outlive two of his three wives. He came to Kentucky from South Carolina as a boy when the new state was still a frontier. Young Machen began his career refining iron with a partner in Lyon County; soon he was successful enough to open his own business. It failed, and he was nearly ruined; but he managed to repay his debts and begin again. He built turnpikes until a severe injury forced him to turn in a completely fresh direction, the law. He never failed again. Soon he had built up a large clientele in the southwestern part of the state, and he became a member of the convention that framed the constitution of Kentucky.

He served as a state senator until the outbreak of the Civil War, at which time Kentucky, a border state, was violently embroiled in choosing sides. Although the state formally declared its allegiance to the Union, the secessionists, Machen prominent among them, set up a provisional state government. He was elected to the Confederate Congress by residents of his district and by the soldiers in the field. At the close of the war, fearing reprisals, he fled to Canada. His third wife and their young daughter Minnie joined him shortly afterward.

Machen was pardoned and returned to Kentucky. He was urged to accept the nomination for governor of the state but declined because of some confusion about his eligibility. In 1872 he was appointed to the United States Senate, in which he served for four months. At the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore in July of the same year his name was presented by the delegation from Kentucky for the Vice-Presidential nomination. It was a distinction he did not achieve.

By 1880 Machen was a powerful member of the Kentucky railroad commission and his patronage was eagerly sought. He chose to retire to his fine red-brick manor house, Mineral Mount, near Eddyville, Kentucky; it stood on three thousand acres in the fertile valley of the Cumberland River and there he raised tobacco. The pastoral elegance of Machen's splendid home must have been somewhat diminished by the running of the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad line past the foot of the hill upon which Mineral Mount was built. Still, Machen had achieved the pinnacle of Southern society, for as both planter and lawyer he belonged to the ruling class. And it was in that atmosphere of privilege that young Minnie grew up.

In a scrapbook which Zelda kept during her girlhood there is a photograph of her mother taken when Minnie Machen was nineteen. Her curling hair is caught up in a braided bun behind her pierced ears from which fall small jeweled earrings in the shape of flowers. It is a pretty face, which with maturity would become handsome, for it is wellboned and definite. Her nose is straight, her square chin determined-looking, and only the thinness of her lips mars a face that would otherwise have been called beautiful. Beneath the photograph is the inscription "The Wild Lily of the Cumberland."

Minnie was the artistic member of her family and her poems and short sketches were frequently published in local Kentucky newspapers. She was an ardent reader of fiction and poetry, and when she ran out of books to read she turned to the encyclopedia. But her dreams centered upon the stage. She

had a small clear soprano voice and she played the piano nicely. Her father sent her for "finishing" at ~~Miss Chilton's School in Montgomery, Alabama.~~ His good friend Senator John Tyler Morgan lived in Montgomery, and it was at a New Year's Eve ball given by the Morgans that Minnie met a nephew of Senator Morgan's, the quiet and courtly young lawyer Anthony Dickinson Sayre, whom she would eventually marry.

She was not, however, so smitten by Mr. Sayre that she would relinquish a trip to Philadelphia which she had persuaded her father to allow her. She spent the winter season in Philadelphia with friends of her family, and while there she pursued her secret ambition by studying elocution. When Georgia Drew, the head of the famous Drew-Barrymore theatrical family, held a tryout for one of his plays, Minnie read for her and was offered a role in the company. Machen learned of his daughter's adventure and was outraged. He ordered her home at once, telling her that he would rather see her dead than on the stage. Minnie returned to Kentucky immediately, but she had suffered such disappointment she never forgot. Years later, with her family grown and out of her home, she shifted the story slightly, remarking to a neighbor that if she hadn't married Judge Sayre she would have had a career in the opera or on the stage; she reconciled herself by singing in the choir of the Church of the Holy Comforter, which she attended without her husband.

Anthony Sayre's family took pride in having been among the early settlers of Long Island, and they eventually came to Alabama, via New Jersey and Ohio, after the territory achieved statehood in 1811. By the time of the Civil War, some forty years later, their sentiments were entirely Southern.

Anthony's father founded and edited a newspaper in the rural town of Tuskegee and later moved to Montgomery, where he was editor of the *Post*. Sayre Street, which ran through the most fashionable section of Montgomery, was named in honor of Anthony's uncle, who had built the White House of the Confederacy for Jefferson Davis and who was a founder of the First Presbyterian Church. Anthony's mother, Musidora Morgan, was the sister of Senator John Tyler Morgan, who served in the United States Senate for thirty-one years.

Anthony Sayre was a brilliant student in mathematics at Roanoke College in Virginia; he graduated at nineteen and began teaching at Vanderbilt College. But he did not feel cut out to be a teacher and soon came back to Alabama, having decided to read law in Montgomery. It was two years later, in 1882, that he began to court Minnie Machen. It must have been an attraction of opposites, for Minnie was known for her gaiety and vivacious charm, while the grave A.D., as she called him, possessed an air of sober dignity that set him apart from other young men.

It was after Minnie's abortive trip to Philadelphia and her return to Kentucky that Sayre won her hand; they were married in January, 1884, at Mineral Mount. Minnie was twenty-three, and no longer considered young. The war had taken its toll of eligible men and there was a surfeit of women of marriageable age in the South. Anthony Sayre had no source of private income when he married, and although he may not have married above himself socially, economically he probably had. But there was a sureness about him, a sense of authority matched by his complete dedication to the law, which must have been attractive. Clearly, he was a man who would not be easily checked by the uncertainties of life, or in the pursuit of his career. At the time of their marriage he was clerk of the city court in Montgomery.

The first years of the Sayres' marriage were happy ones and they soon had a baby daughter, Marjorie. But the little girl was fretful and sickly from infancy. A beautiful, healthy son was born to them the following year, but when he was eighteen months old he died without warning of spinal

meningitis. Mrs. Sayre shut herself away in her room and refused to see anyone or to eat. For a while her family humored her, hoping that she would recover her equilibrium. But she did not until the family doctor forced his way into her room and, taking her by her shoulders, told her that she had a little girl downstairs who needed her; she had to live for the living. It was prophetic advice and Mrs. Sayre would have occasion to remember it often during her long and full life.

Two more daughters were born to them, Rosalind and Clothilde, and a son, Anthony D. Sayre, Jr. Minnie was frequently ill during her pregnancies and it was all she could do to manage her large family. At one time a Louisville publisher asked her to write a novel for him, but she found less and less time to devote to her literary ambitions. Her younger sister, Marjorie, had come to live with them as had Mr. Sayre's bachelor brother, Reid, and the elderly Mrs. Sayre. The young children remembered their grandmother as a peculiar and strong-willed old woman who wove endless stories about bloodthirsty Yankees with horns and constantly reminded them of their Morgan heritage. Some people in Montgomery still remember old Mrs. Sayre sitting on the front porch in her bonnet and garter wrapper, watching the people who passed by. She was known to have "a whipping tongue." There were two Mrs. Bells in Montgomery, and one day the wealthier of them was walking by the Sayres' house and greeted the old lady. Mrs. Sayre replied, "Are you the nice Mrs. Bell, or are you the wealthy ordinary, and very common Mrs. Bell?"

The family moved frequently as it grew in size. They usually rented homes, for Mr. Sayre refused to be in debt, even to the extent of taking on a mortgage. He worried constantly over their finances, for there were now nine members in his household, and he insisted that expenses be held to a minimum. He worked relentlessly and well, becoming in his thirties a member of the Alabama House of Representatives; after four years he was elected to the state Senate, governing it as president during his final year in office. By 1897 he was elected judge of the city court in Montgomery. He is remembered from this period as an increasingly remote and reserved figure in Montgomery and, on some occasions, within his own family. It was remarked that the only place one saw Judge Sayre (as he would thereafter be called by everyone, including his wife) was waiting at the streetcar either on his way to work or on his way home.

On July 24, 1900, the Sayres' sixth child, a daughter, was born at home on South Street. Minnie was nearly forty and Judge Sayre was forty-two. Minnie was still an avid reader and she named her baby after a gypsy queen in a novel: Zelda. Marjorie was fourteen at Zelda's birth, Rosalind not quite eleven, Clothilde nine, and Tony seven. From the beginning she was her mother's darling and her pet. She was the only one who took after the Machen side of the family, for Zelda was as fair, golden, and blue-eyed as the other children were dark. Treasuring the baby who would undoubtedly be her last, Mrs. Sayre nursed Zelda until she was four years old. She showered her with attention and praise; her faults were quickly excused.

Zelda was like a rush of fresh air into the Sayre household, lively and irrepressibly gay and wayward. Her sisters and brother were too old to be true playmates and they remember her only motion: running with a dog, flying on a swing hung from a magnolia tree in their back yard, racing on roller skates as soon as she could stand well enough to navigate on them, swimming and diving fearlessly. And dancing. Showing off new steps and imitating dances she had seen.

When Zelda was asked later in her life to describe herself as a child, she said she was "independent—courageous—without thought for anyone else." But she also remembered herself as "dreamy—sensualist," who was bright and loved sports, especially imaginative, active, competitive games.

was a very active child and never tired, always running with no hat or coat even in the Negro district and far from my house. I liked houses under construction and often I walked on the open roofs; I liked to jump from high places.... I liked to dive and climb in the tops of trees—I liked taking long walks far from town, sometimes going to a country churchyard where I went very often all by myself.” In a summary she said: “When I was a little girl I had great confidence in myself, even to the extent of walking by myself against life as it was then. I did not have a single feeling of inferiority, or shyness or doubt, and no moral principles.”

People in Montgomery still remember Zelda as being “smart as a whip” and “quick as a steel trap” and recall seeing her pulling a red wagon with her rag doll Patsy in it and her little dog running behind. Once she arrived late at a birthday party carrying a big pot of pink geraniums. It seemed to be such an unusual gift that after the party the mother of the girl for whom the party had been given called Mrs. Sayre. After hearing the story, Mrs. Sayre said, “So that’s what became of my geranium!”

Mrs. Sayre indulged Zelda completely and was charmed by her. What direction or discipline Zelda (who was to be called Baby by both her mother and her father all her life) required was left to the Judge. There was a disarming vagueness and pleasant permissiveness about Mrs. Sayre. One of the Mrs. Sayre children has said, “We were all independent characters, especially for Montgomery. Mother didn’t supervise us very much—I don’t know why; it was just the way our family was.”

Minnie Sayre was not thought to be “socially minded” by her neighbors, and people weren’t quite sure how to take her. There is a story that Zelda’s sisters used to bathe on their back porch. One day a group of respectable ladies felt they had to tell Mrs. Sayre about the young men who were watching the girls. They suggested that the girls bathe elsewhere. Mrs. Sayre is reputed to have replied, “Why should they? God gave them beautiful bodies.” The women quickly retreated. Mrs. Sayre was undoubtedly aware that such advice would not be repeated if she met it head on. If her neighbors found her a little odd, or “artistic,” as some of them chose to express it, perhaps she found them dull and provincial. To the end of her long life, when she had become known by everyone as Mama Sayre, she would insist that there were certain things she did not know about Montgomery, because she was not a native (although she was to live there for seventy-five years).

In Zelda’s scrapbook there is a snapshot of her mother and father and herself when she was about five. Her father’s face is entirely in the shadow cast by the brim of his white straw hat, his dark suit shines as though it were made of black silk, and he is leaning gently upon a furled black umbrella. Minnie, with stray wisps of hair curling out from beneath her hat, stands looking full face into the camera, solid and matronly in a white blouse with a high, snug collar. Zelda stands close to her mother, holding Patsy’s face pressed next to her own; her fair hair, cut in a Dutch bob, is very straight. None of them are touching or smiling.

Zelda started school in 1906, but didn’t like it, came home, and refused to return. Her mother waited another year, until she was seven, and sent her again. This time she stuck. At about the same period in her life, the family moved from the house on South Street, which had become too small for them, to another on Morgan Avenue. They were to move twice again before settling at 6 Pleasant Avenue, where Zelda lived until she married.

The Pleasant Avenue house was a roomy white frame building with five bedrooms and a large brick front porch. Zelda’s room was upstairs at the front of the house, above the tin roof of the porch, and overlooked gardens which were all that remained of the old Wilson plantation. It was painted white with light cotton curtains and a plain white bed in the corner. A friend of hers said it looked like

hospital room in its spartan simplicity. All her life Zelda remembered the fragrance of the pear tree across the street that filled her room at night. She awoke in those soft, suffocatingly warm Southern mornings to the cries of black women taking their wares to market at the foot of Court Street.

The Sayres always lived in what was the silk-hat district of Montgomery, on "The Hill," but never in one of the more elegant residences of the area. About forty thousand people lived in Montgomery that time, and it retained all the charm as well as the many restrictions on privacy of a small town. Certainly most of the families in the Sayres' neighborhood knew each other. They tacitly considered themselves the "thoroughbreds" of the genteel South, although it would have been considered a breach of decorum to mention it. Behind their backs in the surrounding blocks the residents of The Hill were called "The Elite and Sanitary," with a measure of amusement and more of envy. For in Montgomery it was never simply wealth that counted socially, but family. There were very definite lines of social distinction; one was not invited to parties on The Hill if one was in trade, or Catholic, or Italian, or Shanty Irish. World War I would do a little to change the social rigidity, but for the time being it persisted. The young ladies of these families were expected to behave themselves, to be decorative and charming. One was taught to sit without letting one's back touch the chair, to cross one's ankles but not one's legs. White gloves were buttoned before one left the house and remained immaculate in the warmest weather. Zelda must have chafed under these restrictions. She was too full of life and devilry to follow the rules for long, or to be throttled by them.

A younger friend of hers, Sara Mayfield, who was also the daughter of a judge, remembered one of Zelda's shows of spirit. The Mayfields had invited her for a ride in their new brougham, which was their mother's pride. It was equipped with the latest fixtures, glass windows, and tufted red leather seats. As soon as Zelda laid eyes on it she said, "If I had a pumpkin, I'll bet I could make me one." And then quickly, before anyone realized what she was up to, she climbed into the driver's seat and gave the matched bays a hard slap. The carriage shot forward, careering wildly toward the street. Within seconds, just as the horses cleared the gate, the hub of a rear wheel caught and brought the carriage to an abrupt stop. The family ran up to it, and Zelda calmly stepped out of the brougham and ran to play with her friend. It was that special combination of nerve and defiance which thrilled Miss Mayfield. She said that from that moment she adored Zelda.

For her part, even as a child Zelda was not unaware of the effect she created. She possessed early on a certain command over others, making them do what she wanted them to. She also had a knack for drawing attention to herself. Stories about her escapades abound in Montgomery. There is one about when Zelda, having nothing better to do on a fine summery day, called up the fire department and told them that a child was caught on a roof and couldn't get down. Then Zelda got a ladder, climbed up to the roof of her own house, pushed the ladder away and waited. The fire engine came clanging its bells and the neighbors rushed out to see where the fire was. There Zelda sat marooned, and delighted by the commotion. The Judge had no sympathy whatsoever for such pranks.

In 1909 Zelda's father was appointed an associate justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. His salary was \$5,000. Her oldest sister, Marjorie, who had been teaching in the public schools, married that year, and Zelda began ballet lessons. As it later turned out they were to make a lasting impression upon her.

With sisters so much older than she and a brother to whom she apparently never felt close, Zelda was left to her own devices. Later in her life she said that she had no memories of a youth shared with any of them. She thought her sisters rather pretty (Clothilde was by reputation the prettiest after Zelda) and it was Clothilde with whom she quarreled most, but they were largely indifferent to each other. Rosalind would one day comment that Zelda was the most vigorous and healthy of all the Sayres.



children and that her one great attachment was for their mother.

~~There were summers spent in the cool mountains of North Carolina during the adjournment of the Supreme Court; from the time Zelda was ten she usually went with her parents while a relative from Kentucky stayed with the older Sayre children in Montgomery. They stayed at a hilltop inn in Saluda where it was quiet and the food was delicious. There was nothing to do but sit on the veranda and look at the mountains or take walks to the post office in the tiny village below, or perhaps pick blackberries before the sun got hot. Sometimes the whole family would go to Mountain Creek in Alabama for the summer, with the Judge coming up on weekends. When he arrived his pockets would be filled with penny candies and he would take Zelda for walks by the railroad tracks to get handfuls of beautiful colored clay and would mold tiny animals for her. One of Zelda's sisters remembers, "When we were children he was wonderful to us, but once we were grown I guess he just figured we were on our own. I know he must have loved us, though."~~

In 1914 Zelda entered the new Sidney Lanier High School. Her teachers found her mischievous, but a apt pupil. In her first year she maintained a high B average, was rarely absent, and consistently did well in English and mathematics.

Her schoolmates noticed that Zelda had much more freedom after school than they did, and often instead of going directly home Zelda could be found at the local icecream parlor having a double banana split or a dope, which was a concoction of Coca-Cola spiked with aromatic spirits of ammonia to give it a slight kick. Some of the girls envied her for not having to call home first to report where she was going. She rarely did her homework at home but instead raced through it during class.

Once the class had been told to write a poem as homework. Zelda jotted hers down in class the next day, then waved her hand to be called first. The poem was not quite what her teacher had in mind, but it delighted her classmates:

*I do love my Charlie so.  
It nearly drives me wild.  
I'm so glad that he's my beau  
And I'm his baby child!*

It was a typical prank of Zelda's. She did not quite risk becoming a troublemaker but she was quick in establishing a reputation for cheekiness. To her teachers Zelda seemed increasingly impatient, restless, and undisciplined. They had the impression that she could have done much better had she cared enough to work—and had she been more closely supervised at home. Zelda was to offer a similar explanation later in her life. She said her studies simply had no value for her. She read whatever she found at home, "popular tales for boys, novels that my sisters had left on a table, books chosen by accident in my father's library: a life of John Paul Jones, lives written by Plutarch, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Gibbons, and fairy tales a lot." She read Wilde and Galsworthy and Kipling, "and all I found about the civil war .... The fairy tales were my favorite."

It was becoming clear that Zelda was just marking time at school. Her lack of interest was evident even in small details like her clothing. She wore the ordinary middie blouses and pleated skirts of the day, but hers were always worn carelessly. Her skirts, which were rolled at the waist to shorten them, were uneven, and her slip usually showed. There was a puzzling drabness, even dowdiness, about all of Zelda's daytime garb. Her sister Rosalind, as well as several of her school chums, have said repeatedly that Zelda had no sense of style. But that lack of style must have been something she shared with her

mother, for Mrs. Sayre rather than a seamstress made all her clothes. Whether she was stylish or not at night Zelda shone in her mother's creations. Eleanor Browder, one of Zelda's friends from school remembers that "Mrs. Sayre had an unerring sense of what would make her beautiful daughter glamorous and could turn out dresses of tulle and organdy that turned Zelda into a fairy princess."

At fifteen Zelda was striking, her skin flawless and creamy and her hair as golden as a child's. Other girls began secretly to use blondine on their hair, but Zelda didn't need to. She borrowed rouge and lipstick from her older sisters to heighten her coloring and her powder was the whitest she could find. Eleanor remembers that Zelda wore mascara before any of the others did. Zelda was on the verge of becoming the most spectacular belle Montgomery would ever know; Mrs. Sayre's party dresses were the first tributes paid to her daughter's beauty.

High in a white palace the king's daughter,  
the golden girl ....

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F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*

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**T**HE SPRING OF 1916 A BALLET recital was held in the old City Auditorium in Montgomery. It was an exceptionally hot night and somewhat surprisingly the auditorium was filled. There was to be ballroom dancing afterward and perhaps that was why so many young men had come. Zelda Sayre, who was not yet sixteen, danced a solo. She wore a stiff pink organdy dress made by her mother, with fresh flowers at her waist, and as she began to dance the audience grew quiet. Her hair was long like a child's, and she wore it in ringlets with lovelocks at her temples. She moved gracefully and seemed completely self-assured. After her dance the young men swarmed about her. Everyone wanted to know who she was. Zelda accepted the surge of admirers as if they were her due, and that night marked her transformation into a belle. It was as complete as the happy ending of a fairy tale.

Mrs. Sayre watched her daughter with pride. Before the program began she hadn't been sure how Zelda, who was still considered a tomboy at home, would react to the ballroom dancing. To make sure that all went smoothly she'd requested a friend of Zelda's, Leon Ruth, to ask her for the first dance. Then, in an odd gesture of complicity, Mrs. Sayre took the young man aside and showed him a large, chunky bracelet she'd bought for Zelda. She wanted him to offer it to her when he asked her to dance. He was puzzled and said he could get his own presents, but Mrs. Sayre insisted, and not wanting to be impolite he did give it to Zelda. He remembered: "We danced for no more than a few turns and then all the other boys came around and I didn't have a chance to take Zelda's hand again all evening. But we did walk home together down Monroe Street to Pleasant Avenue. It was dark walking there and I felt happy to be next to such a pretty girl in her pink ballet skirt who all the boys would now be after."

That summer a story appeared on the society page of the *Advertiser* beneath the silhouette of Zelda wearing a tam.

You may keep an eye open for the possessor of this classic profile about a year from now when she advances just a little further beyond the sweet-sixteen stage. Already she is in the crowd at the Country Club every Saturday night and at the script dances every other night of the week.

She has the straightest nose, the most determined little chin and the bluest eyes in Montgomery. She might dance like Pavlova if her nimble feet were not so busy keeping up with the pace a string of young but ardent admirers set for her.

The "script" (short for subscription) dances were held out of doors at Oak Park, where there was a large old dance pavilion with a hardwood floor. A group of young men, usually college boys, hired a dance band and then they posted a list of girls' names on the door at Harry's. Harry's was an ice cream parlor where the boys, who were called "Jelly Beans," or "Jellies," loafed and hung out with their girls. A young man then signed his name next to the name of the girl he wanted to take; it was

first come first served, with the prettiest, most popular girls signed for first. The only hitch from the girls' point of view was that they had almost no say about who signed for them, and their only out was refusing to go.

There were chaperones at the dances, but Zelda completely ignored them. She danced cheek to cheek, which was considered improper, and it took very little persuasion to get her to sneak out during intermission to the cars which were parked just out of sight. She "boodled" (which was local slang for necking in cars at a place called Boodler's Bend), she smoked, and she drank gin, if there was any, or corn liquor cut with Coke, if there wasn't.

Zelda did not have the knack for forming close friendships with girls her own age; she didn't belong to any of their clubs, and she was not invited to their overnight parties. She didn't indulge in the trading of confidences and gossip; she neither asked for advice nor gave it. It was the attention of the boys that she clearly preferred and got. She stopped taking ballet lessons because she was too busy going out; she had dates every night of the week. One of her beaux remembers her as "a restless person with lots of energy. She was in for anything. Let's do something for the hell of it. I remember once at a dance that summer it got hot and Zelda slipped out of her petticoat and asked me to put it in my pocket for her until we got home. And I did. She was like none of the others." He would pick her up for a dance and on the way she'd ask him to stop the car so she could go wading, and he'd join her. Both of them all dressed up, splashing in the water, laughing. Maybe they wouldn't make the dance all and it didn't seem to make a bit of difference to Zelda. "She lived on the cream at the top of the bottle."

She looked fragile and fresh, but there was nothing demure in her appetite for life. Perhaps it was her *brio* and lack of inhibition that many of the girls found unmanageable. Zelda was equally impatient with their more conventional behavior. One evening, while double-dating at an outdoor play being given at Miss Margaret Booth's School for Girls, Zelda suggested to her date and the other couple that they leave. It was a dull performance, but the other girl attended the school and could have been expelled if she had been caught walking out. She hesitated. Zelda watched her for a moment and drawled sharply, "Oh, get some guts about you!" and left. Miserably the other girl followed.

Zelda said of herself that she cared for two things: boys and swimming. There is a snapshot of her standing next to a boy beside a swimming pool, their arms draped jauntily around each other's waists. Zelda is standing straight as a grenadier, her other hand on her hip, and she is laughing into the camera. Beneath the snapshot is the inscription "What the Hell—Zelda Sayre!" The man who was with her then says: "Zelda just wasn't afraid of anything, of boys, of being talked about; she was absolutely fearless. There was this board rigged up at the swimming pool and, well, almost nobody ever dived from the top. But Zelda did, and I was hard put to match her. I really didn't want to. She swam and dived as well as any of the boys and better than most of us. She had no more worries than a puppy would have, or a kitten .... But she did have a bad reputation .... There were two kinds of girls, those who would ride with you in your automobile at night and the nice girls who wouldn't. But Zelda didn't seem to give a damn."

She wore a one-piece flesh-colored silk jersey swimming suit that summer. There were stories that she swam in the nude, which she laughed at but did not deny. She was sharply aware of the criticism that was being leveled against her. Later in her life she wrote about Alabama Beggs, the heroine of her intensely autobiographical novel *Save Me the Waltz*: "'She's the wildest one of the Beggs, but she's a thoroughbred,' people said.

"Alabama knew everything they said about her—there were so many boys who wanted to 'protect' her that she couldn't escape knowing.... 'Thoroughbred!' she thought, 'meaning that I never let the

down on the dramatic possibilities of a scene—I give a damned good show.’”

Rumors about her behavior flew around Montgomery that summer; it was said that when Judge Sayre forbade her to go out at night she climbed out her bedroom window and went anyway—sometimes with the help of her mother. Outwardly Zelda flouted the Judge’s standards. She called him “old Dick” behind his back, and her waywardness was an open challenge to his authority.

Judge Sayre was a model of respectability and conservatism. His full head of hair had turned completely white; he wore striped diplomatic trousers with a black jacket, which were made for him by a tailor in Atlanta who came once a year for fittings; and he carried a walking stick. Colleagues called him “The Brains of the Bench,” and his conservative opinions were articulately written. His life seemed perfectly ordered. He kept a chessboard permanently set up in his office, at which he and Judge Mayfield played daily, resuming their game where they had left off the day before. When he came home in the evening he ate a sandwich and retired for the night promptly at eight o’clock. Entirely devoted to his work, he had very little time for Minnie and the children. He was not thought to be unkind, only remote. Minnie, on the other hand, loved to have people about, and the Judge called the odd collection of people who assembled at their house “Minnie’s Menagerie.” There was an old poet who smelled bad, and a Mormon who tried to convert Minnie. (One member of the family commented that Mrs. Sayre “loved to listen, but she never, never changed her mind.” She did, however, toy with the idea of becoming a theosophist.) She had more time now that her family was nearly grown; she gardened, and wrote occasional poems which were printed in the *Advertiser*.

With the gentility of the Sayres behind her Zelda was in an important sense immune to criticism. Her stunts and escapades would be commented upon in private to be sure, but as the daughter of Judge Sayre she was granted a sort of social deference. She could rely upon the knowledge that her father’s position and reputation would protect her. That immunity had, however, another and potentially damaging aspect, one which Zelda did not grasp fully at seventeen, but understood all too clearly later in her life. For even as her father’s position protected her, it also “absolved his children from the early social efforts necessary in life to construct strongholds for themselves.” In this respect they were “crippled” (Zelda’s word for it) by that insulation of family position. It was not only Zelda who was affected. Tony Sayre had a reputation for being dissolute, and he left Auburn after a mixed career without earning his degree. A fraternity brother of his remembers his spending more of his time playing cards than books, and said that Tony was fonder of hazing the freshmen than his 2AE brothers thought acceptable. He told his family that he would like to paint more than anything else in the world, but he never did.

As for the other Sayre children, Rosalind was intelligent, energetic, and perhaps most like Zelda in her spunk. She was one of the first young ladies from a good family to go to work in Montgomery. She wrote a column for the society page on her uncle’s newspaper, and she loved it. Clothilde and Marjorie were temperamentally alike, quiet and serious. Clothilde was dark-haired with flawless skin, dead white like the magnolia. Marjorie was never well. She taught school (which prior to Rosalind’s adventure was *the* only acceptable form of work for maiden ladies), married, and had one daughter who was also named Marjorie. The Sayres were close-mouthed about her illnesses, and when Marjorie’s little daughter came to live with them she was told her mother was away on a “visit.” There was hushed talk of a nervous breakdown. The Sayres’ Victorian refusal to name her illness for what it was, not unusual in Montgomery or elsewhere at that time, was part of the essential make-up of the family. When Mrs. Sayre’s own mother died a suicide the children were never told directly about it, but were left to overhear what they could from more talkative relatives. Everyone *knew*, but covertly for it was never openly discussed.

Zelda chafed against the emotional restraint of her family and she felt herself being suffocated in the small arena that both her family and Montgomery offered her. Zelda's release from that world was suddenly within reach, for with the United States entry into World War I in the summer of 1917, Montgomery altered profoundly. Thousands of soldiers and aviators poured into the city to train at Camps Sheridan and Taylor, which were just outside of town. New shops, restaurants, and hotels opened to accommodate them; the country club became almost an auxiliary officers' club, and unfamiliar faces from Ohio and New York and Pennsylvania were seen in the streets. There was token resistance to the quartering of Yankee soldiers just outside Montgomery, and one recalcitrant Confederate even tried to form a club to rekindle the local youngsters' hatred of Sherman and his dread troops. But it was no good; the young didn't want to remember the past, and besides, as one lady remembers, the Yankees were such good dancers. Jolted from its somnolence, Montgomery became more festive, more alive, than it had been since the days when it was the headquarters to the Confederacy. Mrs. Sayre remembered, "There was a lot of excitement in the air, a lot of people here in Montgomery that we had never seen before, and I had three very good-looking daughters." The men came from every imaginable economic and social level of American life, "men who were better dressed in their uniforms than ever before in their lives," as Zelda wrote later, "and men from Princeton and Yale who smelled of Russian Leather and seemed very used to being alive...." The larger world that Zelda dreamed of was at her doorstep and accessible.

In September, 1917, Zelda began her senior year in a flurry of dances and parties. The Sayres' front porch looked like a barracks, and in a glove box she began to collect the colorful insignia officers gave her from their uniforms, as tokens of their affection. Soon the little box was filled with gold and silver bars, castles and flags and curled serpents. The Judge disapproved of Zelda's behavior and the house she kept, but Mrs. Sayre came to her defense and was amused by Zelda's pretty trinkets.

Zelda's girlish imagination was fired by the idea that the droves of young soldiers who courted her were being trained to fight the Hun in Europe, and faced death in the trenches. In a burst of patriotic sentiment she wrote a poem about them for the school paper which won a prize and was published in the newspaper as well. (Mrs. Sayre probably had a hand in its composition, for when Zelda pasted it in her scrapbook she wrote across the face of the poem, "Not only is 'Necessity the Mother of Invention' but a 'Mother of Invention' is a necessity!!") She called it "Over the Top with Pershing."

*The night was dark, the rain came down,  
The boys stepped off with never a frown.  
Into the trench all mud and slime,  
And thousands of miles from their native clime,  
They took their places in face of death,  
And waited their turn with bated breath,  
'Til the order came to open fire,  
They screwed their courage higher and higher.*

.....

*Over the top they go to fight  
For suffering friends and human right,  
Over the top they see their way  
To a clearer aim and a freer day,  
Over the top, O God of Might,  
Help our laddies to win the fight.*

But it was not only the soldiers who pursued Zelda; during the Christmas holidays she attended balls and dances and fraternity parties in Anniston, Marion, Auburn, and Birmingham, all college towns in Alabama. She led the grand march at the Alpha Tau Omega ball at the Exchange Hotel in Montgomery and the newspapers reported that she looked exquisite in her gown of rose velvet, a bouquet of pink roses in her arms. During the intermission of that dance Zelda and a group of her friends left the hotel for refreshments at a nearby café. On their way they passed a photographer's shop with a large framed picture of one of Zelda's beaux in the display case and paused to admire it. One of the crowd teased Zelda about the boy's being in the shop window rather than with her. In an instant Zelda kicked in the glass and took the photograph. Her friends were frightened by what she had done and tried to hurry her away, but Zelda laughed at them and gaily walked into the café with the photograph openly clasped under her arm.

One of Zelda's attractions was that she was utterly herself; she did what she pleased when she pleased. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that she was unaware of the traditional attitudes toward Southern women even when she ran contrary to it. In January, 1918, for example, she was invited to the house party and dance given by the Key-Ice Club at the University of Alabama. At the dance the boys sported hip flasks of whiskey, which they tried to persuade their brightly painted girlfriends to share after they strutted to the new ragtime. Key-Ice had as its central ritual a ceremony which its young men performed during the intermission of their dances. The lights were lowered in the ballroom and the men marched in solemnly, carrying flaming torches, while at the rear of the procession four of them walked beside a long cake of ice drawn on a cart. One lifted a glass of water to his lips and began a toast: "To woman, lovely woman of the Southland, as pure and chaste as this sparkling water, as cool as this gleaming ice, we lift this cup, and we pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of her virtue and chastity."

This extravagant and somewhat sinister homage to Southern womanhood has the social context in which Zelda grew up, and against which she was reacting. Her family was firmly fixed in it, and many of its tenets were more literary than practical it made little difference, for their acceptance in the Deep South was almost complete. Women were expected to be submissive, if not passive. The Southern belle had certain prerogatives that her more ordinary sisters were not granted, but she had won these by her beauty, her spirited veneer, and her ability to manage men without seeming to do so. The art of dissembling perforce became a valuable social asset for a girl. (In this respect the white Southern woman's position was remarkably similar to the Negro's.) The tensions inherent in the charade of Southern womanhood were to drive Zelda one day to write: "... it's very difficult to be two simple people at once, one who wants to have a law to itself and the other who wants to keep all the nice old things and be loved and safe and protected." It was not only difficult; it called upon contradictory definitions of herself. The ideal was perverse, but she had not yet realized its ability to do damage.

School wasn't going well and Zelda, who always started out at the top of her class, nearly flunked history and second-year French. She was absent frequently and her conduct report sank to "unsatisfactory" in the marking period before graduation. She remarked later: "I did not study a lot before then. I left my studies in school and as there were a lot of soldiers in town I passed my time going to dances—always in love with somebody, dancing all night, and carrying on my school work just with [the] idea of finishing." Every Friday night she was at the vaudeville show, where she would take careful note of the dance routines in order to imitate them herself at the Saturday-night dances at the country club.

On April Fool's Day the entire senior class played hookey and Zelda was one of the ringleaders.



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