

PRAISE FOR
ALWAYS CRASHING IN THE SAME CAR

"Matthew Specktor's *Always Crashing in the Same Car* is going on the shelf with *Play It as It Lays* and *The Big Sleep* and my other favorite books about LA. I'm not sure what it is. A memoir-essay grafted onto a psycho-geographic travelogue of the weirdest town to be from?

All I know is I couldn't stop reading it."

— **JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN**, author of *Pulphead*

"Haunting, powerful, riveting, unforgettable—I could go on (and on) about Matthew Specktor's astounding new book about failure, writing, Los Angeles, and the movies. With scholarly rigor and tenderhearted sympathy, Specktor excavates the lives of artists forgotten (Carole Eastman, Eleanor Perry), underappreciated (Thomas McGuane, Hal Ashby), and notorious (Warren Zevon, Michael Cimino), while always circling back to his own benighted Hollywood upbringing. This is an angry, sad, but always somehow joyful book about *not* hitting it big, and I've never read anything quite like it."

— **TOM BISSELL**, author of
Magic Hours: Essays on Creators and Creation

"In Hollywood, according to Brecht's famous formulation, there was no need of heaven and hell; the presence of heaven alone served the unsuccessful as hell. But Los Angeles has always been full of commuters on the congested freeway between both camps. They are the subject of Matthew Specktor's continuously absorbing and revealing book, itself nestling in the fruitful terrain between memoir and criticism."

— **GEOFF DYER**, author of
Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence

PRAISE FOR
AMERICAN DREAM MACHINE

"Sprawling, atmospheric . . . [*American Dream Machine* has] a feline watchfulness and a poetic sensibility that echoes Bellow's and Updike's prose rhythms along with their voracious, exuberant intelligence."

— **THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**

"Specktor's book deserves a special space in the LA canon, somewhere looking up at Pynchon and Chandler. Even as the narrator searches through his past to uncover the truth about his family, the author is searching, too."

— **LA WEEKLY**

"Specktor's prose alone is enough to lure you in: it's sharply observed and nimble, like a more mischievous cousin of John Cheever, and his characters are wonderfully and deeply complicated, wounded and secretive."

— **THE MILLIONS**

"Richly engaging . . . Specktor sees his Hollywood characters as three-dimensional and very human."

— **SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE**

"With coolness and precision, Specktor comes across as a West Coast Saul Bellow in this sweeping narrative, but his energetic, pop-infused prose is markedly his own."

— **BOOKLIST**

“Specktor does for LA what Hemingway did for Paris and what Hunter S. Thompson did for Las Vegas: create a character that lives and breathes a city. Like hotels in Vegas, we see characters rise, grow dusty, and collapse.”

— **THE DAILY BEAST**

“Specktor’s great achievement is to make familiar territory original, the Hollywood novel born anew. It’s bold, weird, and unforgettable, as startling as a poke in the eye.”

— ***THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH MAGAZINE***

**ALWAYS CRASHING
IN THE SAME CAR**

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ON ART,
CRISIS &

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

car

MATTHEW
SPECKTOR



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For K, whose life was beautiful anyway

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One life was never quite enough for what I had in mind.

—SEYMOUR KRIM, “For My Brothers
and Sisters in the Failure Business”

I

monkeybitch

introduction



*These are the picture people.
Do not blame them too much.*

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *Notebooks*

THERE'S A CERTAIN sort of person one sees all over Los Angeles, the kind you'd rather stare at, perhaps, than know. These people—you've seen them too—are elegant, compact, and possessed of a bland perfection, a vegetable grace. You barely notice them, not because they aren't visually striking—on the contrary—but because they seem to lack credible flaws. Their bone structure, their carefully tended hair and stubble, their laughter. If you were the type who was inclined to judge such things, a casting agent or just a garden-variety asshole, you'd probably be able to tell what was which and who was most likely to succeed on the basis of these attributes (for these people are almost all, in one sense or another, actors), but me? All my life I've viewed such specimens with confusion. Gliding past in their cars, hanging on the terraces and patios of outdoor cafés, hunched over laptops, scowling, in the back booths of restaurants or lolling—in pairs, in quartets—drinking green juice, drinking matcha tea or iced cortados, giving off the air, always, always, always, of ease, of success, of industry, of hope, of readiness, of the absence (see the yoga mat, the keys, the sunglasses, the well-thumbed copy

of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, or *Save the Cat!*) of all visible signs of difficulty.

Such people once filled me with envy: the sad pangs of an ugly duckling sentenced to waddle among them. Later, the feelings they stirred were ones of resentment, and competition. But it is only recently, after a long struggle with my own ideas of "success" and what these people might be aiming toward, that I have begun to pity them. To look at them now feels like looking at a photograph of soldiers headed to war, or one of those spammy internet pages that purport to show images taken on the precipice of calamity: the instant before the shark bites or the bear lunges, or the foot slips fatally from the ledge. This morning, I slalomed through a crowd of them on my way to get coffee, my hips brushing up against their shoulders, glancing down at their sunstruck, symmetrical, self-enclosed faces, the narcissistic flowers of Beverly Boulevard, innocent, every last one, of what wind was coming to destroy them. By the time I made it back to my car? I was in tears.



Some time ago ("in my younger and more vulnerable years"), I suffered a kind of crash. "Suffered" may be a grand and heroic word for it, considering the quantities of a more profound misery in the world, but, nevertheless. I found myself loose, at large within the city where I'd grown up, from which I'd departed in a nervous panic at eighteen, and to which I'd only recently returned. *Hollywood*. Los Angeles contains so many sub-quadrants, most of them having nothing in particular to

do with the movies, but “Hollywood”—which is as much a notion as it is a neighborhood, one that permeates the actual city like a gas—is where I’m from. My childhood home may have sat in Santa Monica, a sleepy suburb by the sea, but my family resided in Hollywood as surely as anyone ever has. Which place is to many folks still a metonym, a symbol of all that is shiny and empty and attractive and awful in American life, all that is stupid and all that is—we can’t help it—irresistible to us, pulling as it does with the hopeful energy of sex. To me, growing up, this city had been the precise opposite: a glamourless desert, a hall of mirrors where I was unable to escape my own unfortunate reflection. All these roads and avenues running nowhere beneath the green palms, leading me back inexorably to my own perceived limitations. Surely there was something the matter with me. How could I dislike my own hometown so much? I’d ejected myself with all the force of a hairball, fled east to college in Massachusetts, west to San Francisco, then east again to New York City. I’d been elsewhere for a long, long time, and now that I was home, probing along the margins of my native place the way you would at an abscessed tooth, with tenderness and care and a gnawing fascination . . . I fell in love, though to this day I cannot quite say with what. Maybe it was just the thing about Los Angeles that claims everybody, eventually: weather, buildings, loveliness, light. Or maybe, I’d fooled myself again. Having expatriated myself from the city for so long, and having insulated myself for a while by marriage, one that had recently ended, I was coming to it now as an outsider, and for the same reason so many do: as a sucker, hoping against some very steep odds for “success.”

“I’ll take it.”

My voice echoed sharply off the walls of a small but empty room, the acoustics of which—wood floors, high ceiling—made it feel slightly larger: just big enough that I might not feel for a while the potential for confinement.

“OK, great.” The landlady, a gnomish, leathery-looking figure with the straw-blond hair of someone thirty years her junior, smiled. “I’ll draw up a lease.” She leaned over, conspiratorial, and whispered, “Y’know who used to live here? Cary Grant.”

“Really?”

“You know who else?” She beamed. “Al Pacino.”

I stared at her. There was no way of knowing if either of these things was true, if she was serving up local folklore or if (as she pulled a cell phone from her pocket and showed me a number she insisted was Pacino’s) this landlady was in fact a little bit nuts. But in a way it didn’t matter: Los Angeles is full of such apocrypha. This apartment was just a ghost crib, a launching pad toward a greater, more hopeful future.

“Cool,” I said, as I followed her outside. “I’ll try to honor them both.”

The place I’d landed was at the stone center of Hollywood’s mythological grid: the head of the Sunset Strip, the intersection at Crescent Heights that shears off into Laurel Canyon on one side and toward Beverly Hills and the beach if you gaze straight ahead, at the twisting road that winds past the Chateau Marmont and a million other landmarks—the Whisky a Go Go, the Roxy, the Polo Lounge, and the Beverly Hills Hotel. *Hollywood*. If you picture it, apart from its fabled

hillside sign *this* is what you see. If you're attuned to this place, its history and poetics, you think of all the things that have happened along this very street, or in the canyons that branch directly away from it: John Belushi OD'ing on a speedball in one of the rooms at the Chateau; Jim Morrison kicked out of the Whisky forever for unspooling the oedipal psychodrama of "The End" an obscenity too far; Arthur Lee of the great sixties band Love, himself stoned immaculate between Clark and Hillydale, his band collapsing in a fog of drugs and money problems; the Manson murders; farther west, the O. J. murder. If you wanted to, you could map the entirety of Sunset Boulevard, all twenty-one and three-quarter miles of it, exclusively in terms of mayhem and collapse, chart it as purely as the stations of the cross. For a place so synonymous with hedonism, this city sure seems to arrive at one bumper after the next. And for a place so gilded, so enamored—again, still—with stardom, it sure does seem to cradle more than its fair share of failure, of oblivions both natural and man-made.

Perhaps I was simply obsessed. We've all seen the movies: Norma Desmond, beckoning for her close-up, in Billy Wilder's indelible portrait of a faded silent screen star, *Sunset Boulevard*; Jake Gittes and Philip Marlowe, the great PIs of, respectively, *Chinatown* and *The Long Goodbye*, both endlessly chastened and infinitely bruised, shivved up and knocked out for the simple sin of curiosity. (I picture Roman Polanski playing a small-time hood in his own *Chinatown*, sliding the tip of a switchblade inside Jack Nicholson's nostril. "You know what happens to nosy fellas, huh? No? Wanna guess?") Los Angeles might be a place for those who ask no questions to thrive. In this it is like every

other place. But for those who wonder, who voice even the most basic existential concerns—*What the fuck am I doing here? And why?*—this city is a sticky wicket.

What *was* I doing here? I'd left, I came to realize, for reasons having everything to do with failure (my mother's, as an unhappy screenwriter and an abusive alcoholic, whose career collapsed under the weight of her own disappointment and rage; my own, as a son trying to please a hypercritical talent-agent father, one of the early architects of Creative Artists Agency whose tall shadow fell across the film industry; LA's, maybe, in its inability to live up to what I once thought a city should be), and with my own hopeless desire to transcend it. I'd wanted to be a writer. Leaving aside that this was a dubious, romantic, at once trivial and ridiculous ambition—at least the way I wanted it then, it was—it seemed somehow out of true with what this city was about. Bret Easton Ellis, who grew up three years ahead and five miles away, told me once, "I associated literature with the East. My goal was to find a college, get through four years, then make the move to New York." Same here. LA was for idiots and movie producers, people who didn't even read. And if my interest in literature, as I understood that term at seventeen, marked me out also as a pretentious jerk, I nevertheless knew what I *didn't* want to be: a hack, a sellout, a (I can feel my adolescent self fairly cringing with disgust) *screenwriter* . . .

Flash forward (or "cut to," whichever cinematic crutch you prefer) twenty years. I've settled in now to this apartment in West Hollywood on Hayworth Avenue, next door to the Directors Guild of America, thirty yards maybe from the Strip. It's beautiful, this place (whether it was ever really

Cary Grant's or Al Pacino's or anyone else's), small but beautiful: a Spanish-style building with a courtyard and pink tiles, terra-cotta mosaic outside and hardwood floors within, french windows on either side so when I open the place up at mid-day my apartment is a sieve for light and wind, and even—no joke—the occasional hummingbird who trembles on the verge and then flits in, flits out. There is a fireplace, but who needs it? The apartment is a studio, just one rectangular upstairs room with an ell consisting of kitchen and then bath, but it'll do, for now. By day, it's an aerie, the live-work space of my dreams.

By night? A different story. The windows fold shut, the Murphy bed comes out of the wall, and the room becomes a prison, my riot cell, the roof beneath which my preschool-age daughter is not sleeping. A few miles away she rests inside the home I have vacated to my wife (a banker, she can afford the mortgage, as I suddenly cannot) and her boyfriend/coworker, of whom I try not to think too much. I pace, I swelter. I harbor my grudges. I labor, a little fruitlessly, on a novel, and I contemplate the looming Writers Guild of America strike that has slowed hiring around town—a (cough) mid-level screenwriter such as myself barely stands a chance—but which also absolves me of having to contemplate the crappiness of the last thing I've written, a script so lousy I wish I could bury it in a vault at the bottom of the sea. I drink. I surf Craigslist and, in these days before Tinder or Bumble, flirt and have occasional sex with strangers. I wake up in the middle of the night to pee and wade into the bathroom clutching a broom with both hands, preparing to smash the enormous palmetto bugs that will scurry the moment I hit the light. I flail blindly. More than once, I hit the

mirror above the sink. Which cracks and then eventually shatters, so I have to replace it on the cheap.



1448 North Hayworth Avenue was the address. Directly across the street, and visible when I leaned out the southward-facing windows, was 1443, the complex I knew had been occupied by the English-born gossip columnist Sheilah Graham, chronicler of Hollywood’s original “golden age” six and a half decades earlier; in fact, it was in her living room that F. Scott Fitzgerald dropped dead on December 21, 1940. That date, the twenty-first, happens to be my own birthday, and it happens to be the birthday attributed to actor William Holden’s character in *Sunset Boulevard*, the hack screenwriter Joe Gillis. (“I like Sagittarians,” Norma Desmond says, when Joe tells her when he was born. “You can trust them.”) It is also the date on which John Keats, a poet who may have mattered to F. Scott Fitzgerald more than any other, wrote a letter to his brother in which he coined the notion of “negative capability,” which he defined as “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”¹

1448. 1940. Arcane dates and numbers, fragments—as everything comes to seem in time, or at least everything seemed to me, then—of the vanished past. Was it fate that I’d become

1. The dating of this is in some places disputed. The internet dates it the twenty-second of 1818, but my Oxford edition of the letters dates it the twenty-first to twenty-seventh of the year before.

that thing I'd once upon a time most despised, or that I'd washed up on the margins, where these bits of trivia could collect and start to feel meaningful in all the most cryptic and uncomfortable ways? I scrubbed my face in the kitchen sink. I brushed my teeth and spat out the window. I developed questionable habits, in avoidance of the room that was full of smashed bugs, but also in observance of perverse superstitions. Failure is a pattern of mind, but it is also, when we are close to it, delicious. It pulls a lot harder than success, which is more like a surfboard or a set of skis: the object of a wobbly, always temporary, mastery. I leaned out those south-facing windows a lot in those days, farther than I should've, because it would've afforded me a bizarre and profound fascination to know I could see *in* to the room where Scott Fitzgerald died. Occasionally I crossed the street and crept over the lawn, always imagining I was going to get called out for—interloping, I guess, the mortal sin of casing someone else's apartment complex. The Hayworth Chateau, as it was once rather too grandly called, looks now much as it did then, much as it had in photographs taken several decades earlier: unprepossessing and gray, a boxy, vaguely Tudor-seeming structure with a mansard roof carved into eight apartments. If mine seemed cheerful from the outside, all sun-splashed courtyard and butter-colored walls, this one seemed not ominous but retiring, tucked back a bit from the street.

I couldn't see into the unit where he died from the lawn. The window was drawn with a thick white curtain.

I was obsessed with Fitzgerald, who'd once represented to me, as he had to so many, everything hopeful, everything gilded, bright, and beautiful. The publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, made him famous almost instantaneously. Its initial printing sold out in three days. Fitzgerald, celebrated progenitor of the so-called Jazz Age—the term he is said to have invented—whose own prosperous twenties corresponded with those of the century: the writer was twenty-four when that book appeared in 1920. On the wings of his success he spent the subsequent decade living in New York City, in Great Neck, and then, with his talented, gorgeous, schizophrenic wife Zelda in tow, in Paris, Rome, and Antibes. They “[looked] as though they had just stepped out of the sun,” Dorothy Parker recalled of her first meeting with Scott and Zelda. “Their youth was striking.”

To me too. At fifteen, I sat out on the terrace of my father's divorce pad in Malibu and read *Tender Is the Night* for the first time. I couldn't help but mistake my own view for the one Fitzgerald offered of the French Riviera: the same “bright tan prayer rug of a beach,” same “ripples and rings . . . through the clear shallows.” Not exactly, perhaps, but to my fevered, wishful adolescent mind it wanted to be, just as *I* wanted to be Dick Diver, and later Amory Blaine or Nick Carraway, those figures who, like Fitzgerald himself, begin in hope but end in disillusionment or worse. At the time, those disastrous ends served only to make the beginnings more attractive. On my father's patio, I basked in Sunday sunlight and read, gazing down at the dazzling Pacific at the bottom of the bluffs, following the cars as they shot off down the Coast Highway toward Zuma, the Malibu Colony,

Paradise Cove, warming my bare feet on the terrace's pink brick. *They looked as though they had just stepped out of the sun.* I stared at the author's jacket photo. His open, friendly, Irish-leaning face resembled my own. By the time I stood up and stretched, firing a clove cigarette to set the seal on this experience, my die was cast. I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

Much later, I'd hear there was another story: that of a gifted American novelist who blew his talent and then flew to Hollywood where, desperate for money, separated from his wife who was confined to a sanitarium back East, he descended into hackwork, into screenplays so crummy that (unlike those of his peer William Faulkner, whose alcoholism didn't prevent *him* from doing quality work for the movies) they were never even produced. This is the other story of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the one in which, no longer popular the way he'd once been, his fame evaporated as rapidly as it had come on, the writer came to LA and washed out, the way people, and writers in particular, so often do. He left behind a fragment, a partial novel some said might have offered redemption if he'd been able to finish it. But alas, or so I was told, he came up short, and died the sorry ruin Hollywood, even more than anything else, had made him.



Which of these stories was true? At fifteen, too, I'd read Fitzgerald's famous 1936 essay "The Crack-Up," in which he'd offered his maxim that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." He'd painted himself as

someone who failed that test: as a fragile, alcoholic mess whose best days—whose *only* days, really—were behind him.

Were mine? Sitting in my apartment, staring over at that place in which my first literary inspiration had died, I couldn't help but wonder, and I couldn't help but start sifting my own history for clues. "Hollywood" offers not just promises but distortions: one person's grab at immortality is another one's pulverizing defeat; the promise of a limitless, impregnable success seemed just as useless as that of an irremediable failure. Life is lived in the wide gap between these things. And yet . . .

All my life I have been fascinated by those figures whose status—not their work, which frequently has as much claim to greatness as that of those better known, but their status—is faintly marginal: artists whose careers carry an aura of what might, also, have been. Those who failed, those who faltered, those whose triumphs are punctuated by flops or by periods, often lasting years, of obscurity. "Marginal" is a misleading word, insofar as these artists, the ones who swam upstream through the silver age of Hollywood, many of whom I discovered in adolescence, were too often white, and framed within a context, that of the industry's long-standing racism and exclusion, that is itself distorting. Those great figures who bucked the system or were shut out of it entirely, filmmakers like Billy Woodberry and Charles Burnett, Kathleen Collins and Gordon Parks, were unknown to me until later, and put the lie to the industry's definitions of "success." But that summer, as I sought to find my balance, as I sifted through the ashes of my marriage and the origins of my ambition, I began a process of returning to those artists (writers, directors, an occasional outlier in the form of an

actor or musician) whose work had formed me, or would: a series of felicitous encounters with people who, no matter how idiosyncratically they arrived at my door, all seemed to have something to say about these questions of failure and achievement, and how Hollywood—by which I really mean America—treats its artists. Together they make a strange, and decidedly limited, constellation, but those limits—of gender, of race, of class and identity—make up themselves a part of the lesson I would spend the next few years learning. Eleanor Perry and Carole Eastman were never exactly household names; Tuesday Weld and Warren Zevon were largely so, while Tom McGuane, Hal Ashby, Michael Cimino, and Renata Adler were famous, at least in the capitals and on the coasts. All of them represented, one way or another, creative ideals I held when I was younger: romantic (although in some cases also practical) images of what an artistic triumph, and what a capitalist or a characterological disaster, might look like. To re-encounter them in midlife was bracing, but it offered a necessary, and useful, clutch of information. Once upon a time the very notion of a “great American novel” was defined, contentiously and inadequately, by Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, but while we’re only just getting around to dismantling the structures that would have allowed such a narrow definition in the first place, the book itself remains, shot through with problems—reflective of the racism and antisemitism that are inseparable from the nation’s history too—but worthy all the same of our attention. I might say as much for the writers and artists here: their flaws are obvious (even when they are not, as in most of these cases, those same flaws), but their rewards are substantial. All of them deserve a bit more sustained appreciation

than they've received. And each of them might illuminate, in different ways, what it means to be a person: how to square one's desires, one's dreams and disappointments, with the act of being a citizen of the world.



I bought a copy of *The Last Tycoon*. It remained, for some reason—perhaps just the obvious one of reckoning with that corner of Fitzgerald's experience I had been unwilling thus far to reckon with inside my own—the only book of his I hadn't read. It was unfinished, left incomplete at the time of his death, and so he had written portions of it, I imagined, on this very block where I now lived. It occupied his mind as he shuffled from his own apartment, on Laurel Avenue, to Sheilah's place these few streets away. As he walked along Sunset Boulevard, past Schwab's Pharmacy and the Garden of Allah, that fabled apartment complex he'd lived in himself when he first came to Hollywood in the thirties, his mind was humming with it. All those portraits and self-portraits of him as a "cracked plate," a washed-up and feeble alcoholic who'd "[mortgaged himself] physically and spiritually up to the hilt," turned out to be inaccurate, or half-accurate: the book is as vital as anything he ever wrote.

You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes.

Fitzgerald gives these words, on the novel's first page, to the young Cecelia Brady, the improbable avatar—a college student, the pampered daughter of a film studio executive—who serves as narrator, but the book's real object isn't Cecelia at all but rather Monroe Stahr, the dynamic man with whom she (and perhaps Fitzgerald too, after a fashion) is in love. Stahr is based, transparently—unmistakably—on Irving Thalberg, the legendary head of MGM Studios who'd steered that company through its golden age in the 1930s. Thalberg was, if anything, a more romantic figure than any even Fitzgerald himself had managed to dream up: a “boy wonder” who ascended to power at an impossibly young age and then died, of congenital heart failure, at thirty-seven. Handsome, dashing, above all decisive, it was Thalberg who furnished the words Fitzgerald put into Stahr's mouth, who spoke them to the writer when he'd first come out to visit Los Angeles in 1927.

“Suppose you were a railroad man,” he said. “You have to send a train through there somewhere. Well, you get your surveyors' reports, and you find there's three or four or half a dozen gaps, and not one is better than the other. You've got to decide—on what basis? You can't test the best way—except by doing it. So you just do it.”

These words, spoken by Irving Thalberg to Scott Fitzgerald in the MGM commissary during a brief chance encounter and then repurposed, a dozen years later, into dialogue for *The Last Tycoon's* protagonist, must have hit Fitzgerald hard. Writers are vacillators, living and dying—and, y'know, *both*, often enough,

at the same time—on the strength of their capacity for indecision. The executive power of a man like Thalberg was the power required to write a novel. It was also the power that had bedeviled him during his recent years in Hollywood as Fitzgerald had labored under unsympathetic or backstabbing producers to write botched drafts of films like *Winter Carnival* and *Three Comrades*, films that, while not terrible, bore little of his own stylistic imprint in the end. His morale had suffered. His sobriety, tenuously achieved when he'd arrived in LA to stay in 1937, had buckled. And it was men like Thalberg (not Thalberg himself but savvy, sharp figures like Walter Wanger and Joseph Mankiewicz, industry veterans who knew better than to let a writer's feelings get in the way of making a movie) who'd bedeviled him. *Mankiewicz*. Or, to use Fitzgerald's own nickname for his nemesis—the producer who'd fired him from a movie immediately after reassuring him, via telegram, that he would do no such thing—"Monkeybitch." This was the root of his misery, the person who obstructed his creative impulses and decided, instead, to take things another way. You couldn't blame Fitzgerald for hating the people who kept him, in his view, from succeeding in Hollywood. But you might be a little surprised to find he had decided, in the end, to make this same type of man the sympathetic center of his final novel.



Monkeybitch. Was this what had bedeviled me too? I hadn't experienced much success in Hollywood, or anywhere else for that matter—I'd written things, none of them published or

produced—but I didn't blame anyone else for it. I blamed myself, restless memory, restless mind, whatever it was in me that couldn't get comfortable where I was, that insisted, against both common sense and evidence, that I'd be happier somewhere else, once the future (what future?) had conferred recognition upon me. Never mind that this feeling has another name, entitlement, or that my own willful obliviousness to it constituted a further crime. I was restless. I was unhappy. My wife—soon to be an ex-wife, as we prepared to file our divorce papers—had responded to it in a practical way: by having an affair. I didn't exactly blame her for that (how could I? I'd been insufferable), but when I thought back over our demise, lying there in the dark at 1448, I couldn't help but find myself filled with rage, and regret. *Monkeybitch*. The word rang in my head, its very unsettling nature, too ridiculous to be an epithet, too furious to be anything else, inflaming me further, until I couldn't sleep. For Fitzgerald, just a nickname, a tag hung on a person he resented. For me, a mantra, concentrating my self-loathing into a pinpoint of perfect disgust.

Outside, the fronds rattled. The moon hung over the courtyard, weirdly bruised, huge and ugly like a thumb. I could hear the palmetto bugs scurrying, or thought I could, in the kitchen and in the bath. The jilted lover's condition: that paranoia that turns the world sickly. Perhaps it is the Angeleno's condition too: all those jilted husbands looking to retain the services of the great film PIs—Mr. Marlowe, Mr. Gittes—in order only to prove what they already know.

Nights like this: too many of them. Nights I woke and poured myself a drink, or prowled down the Strip to the Chateau, there to stare at the soldiers, diamond-bright martini

glasses lined up atop the bar. How many people had murdered themselves in this room? How many glasses, soldiers, would I knock down, myself? Enough to remember I was nothing like my mother? Or enough, alas, to forget?



Who did I want to become? The question stuck to me, too, in the daylight hours, when I wasn't plodding along Sunset Boulevard tracking down Fitzgerald's old haunts like the Garden of Allah (now a McDonald's) or Schwab's Pharmacy (then a Virgin Megastore, itself in the process of closing). The last script I'd written, an assignment offered in the waning days of my marriage, I'd leapt at the way a starving dog leaps at a chicken nugget held aloft, but now I couldn't even think of it without cringing. Who did I want to be now? I drove to Encino, to the ghost shell of the place Fitzgerald had occupied over there for a while on Amestoy Avenue, now paved over by the 101 Freeway. As if this would tell me.

"What do you do, Dad?"

My daughter's voice rang out sometimes, in the hollow bucket of my apartment, now that she was old enough to be curious.

"What do you do when I'm not here?"

Afternoons, I had her in those days. There was no place for her to sleep, and so my ex would pick her up after dinner. We'd play and read, or sometimes watch cartoons; take walks down to Santa Monica Boulevard, where we'd get frozen yogurt. Sometimes we'd wind up back here and while I took a moment

to catch up on an email, she'd ask me again: "What do you do?" I never quite understood whether this little chant of hers was a professional question—like, she understood her mother went to work in an office where I did not—or an existential one. It sounded like a song.

"I make things up."

"Yeah?"

"Like—for TV, or the movies."

It sounded so flimsy, said out loud, but she seemed to accept it. I knelt down next to her now: my V! She had my ex's fairness, and, I hoped, her practicality, although it was too soon to know about that.

"Oh."

I placed my palms on her shoulders. The sound of her breathing was enough to make me happy. But I felt, too, such pulverizing shame. *I make things up?* It's a weird thing, maybe, to wish one's child—a child that young—to be proud, but I did; selfishly, I did. She appeared mildly crestfallen.

"Come on. I'll make you dinner."

She followed me over to that L-shaped kitchen. "I make things up," I heard her whisper: testing it out for herself. It sounded better when she said it: she was three years old.



In those days I couldn't even pull it together to do that much. Instead, I studied Fitzgerald's final testament, and tried to figure out where it all went wrong. In *The Pat Hobby Stories*, those pieces he wrote grubbing for pocket money between

assignments in Hollywood—fees that couldn't touch what he'd made at the height of his popularity a decade earlier, when he was making four grand for a single story in the *Saturday Evening Post*—the protagonist in each is a hack screenwriter, a man whose hapless efforts to restore his own dignity (by stealing a younger writer's ideas; by blackmailing a studio executive; by sneaking a pretty actress into a premiere) all seem to end in disaster. But in *The Last Tycoon*, these efforts are gone, replaced, instead, by a stoic resignation, what might be called wisdom if it were not, too, so anguished and so sad.

He wanted the pattern of his life broken. If he was going to die soon, like the two doctors said, he wanted to stop being Stahr for a while and hunt for love like men who had no gifts to give, like young nameless men who looked along the streets in the dark.

Hear the urgency in those lines, the assertion? That must have been him, Fitzgerald, begging to become not just the somebody he once was—the popular author whose novels were everywhere, instead of the forgotten man who used to duck into bookstores on Hollywood Boulevard and astonish the shopkeepers who'd thought he was dead—but the nobody he'd been before that, the nameless young man from Minnesota who was too poor, once, even to win Zelda's heart. *He wanted the pattern of his life broken.* Don't we all, at one time or another? And don't we all wish we could achieve this, even for a moment, without having to grapple with death? Fitzgerald described Stahr, in a letter to the magazine editor Kenneth Littauer, as “over-worked and deathly

tired, ruling with a radiance that is almost moribund in its phosphorescence.” He’d given his protagonist the same congenital heart problems Irving Thalberg had, the ones that had indeed killed him a few years earlier, and he’d given Stahr too some of his own exhaustion. But the core of that character remained his desire, the wish to become someone else.

Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person.

This observation is offered by the novel’s Cecelia Brady, but it’s clear enough Fitzgerald was talking, equally, about himself. (To Stahr, the author donated a more hard-boiled assessment: “You writers . . . get all mixed up and somebody has to come in and straighten you out,” he lets the studio boss say. “You seem to take things so personally, hating people and worshipping them—always thinking people are so important—especially yourselves. You just ask to be kicked around. I like people and I like them to like me but I wear my heart where God put it—on the inside.”) That’s me too. The people in this book are all those I would like to be, might prefer (in some cases) not to be, cannot help (in all cases) but to be, or at least to understand. They have brushed up against the hem of the motion picture business, or, like Fitzgerald, passed through it to another side, found a way to embrace a machinery that was the engine, too, of their own destruction. This machinery spreads through the tangible city of Los Angeles. There is no way to live here without being, in some way, touched by it. Even if that “touch” is only the coldness with which it—America—ignores you.

Staring out the window at 1443, I pictured him moving across the lawn, on his way to see his lover, Sheila Graham. I pictured him inside the apartment, eating a chocolate bar and listening to the radio, Beethoven's *Eroica* playing on the morning his own alcohol-saturated heart simply—stopped. I pictured him before that, moving through the great, arial systems of his last unfinished novel, the ones that showed the workings of a movie studio so tenderly and with such loving particularity, the minutiae of the very thing that had eaten him alive.

He was a flawed man. "Flawed," perhaps, does not begin to cover it, given that in his alcoholism he surely—I knew a thing or two about this—had generated suffering in those who stood close to him, inflicted pain and humiliation. But he was a kind man, a generous man, sending money he barely had back to the sanitarium in Asheville, North Carolina, to support his wife, writing letters, thoughtful and affectionate ones, to his daughter, and to Ernest Hemingway, whose talent he had endorsed from the beginning. There was something of the ghost to him even when he arrived in Los Angeles for the first time. Budd Schulberg, who would immortalize a certain version of Fitzgerald in his portrait of "Manley Halliday," the alcoholic protagonist of his book *The Disenchanted*, described him thus: "There seemed to be no colors in him. The proud, somewhat too handsome profile of his early dust-jackets was crumpled. . . . The fine forehead, the leading man's nose, the matinee-idol set of the gentle, quick-to-smile eyes . . . he had lost none of these. But there seemed to be something physically or psychologically broken in him that had pitched him forward from scintillating youth to shaken old age." So he was,

and I looked for him everywhere, for a while. I looked for him in West Hollywood, in those early days of exile that followed my separation. I looked for him in Malibu, where he'd lived for a period, and in Encino. I searched the glittering air, hovering over the Pacific. I searched the desert scrub, the blasted tan practicalities of the Valley, and the collapsed dreams, the vanished palaces of the Sunset Strip. I looked, the way I must have once looked for my own mother, who was very much on my mind those days, and everywhere I did, I came up empty.

Would it have consoled him to know, after these years of obscurity—like the booksellers he visited, even the studio heads who hired him sometimes needed to be reminded, first, he was still alive—that his work would outlive him? Probably not. What is the point of being loved in absentia? And what is the point of loving someone else who is missing? What is the point of loving the air?

He was alone when he died. His friends had betrayed him. Hemingway, who'd repaid Fitz's practically slavish worship of his gifts by condescending to his "wasted" talent, depicted him in *A Moveable Feast* as an anxious, simpering toady to the rich. Dorothy Parker, his friend for twenty years, with whom he'd gossiped in New York and holidayed on the Riviera, squinted down into Fitz's casket and pronounced him a "poor son of a bitch." These people, as gifted as they were, were not Fitzgerald's betters. They were his peers. And if they viewed him, after the fact, with pity or disdain, imagining the world that had claimed him—*Hollywood*—was somehow beneath their station, or that they'd survived it themselves out of some moral or intellectual superiority, they were mistaken. To Hemingway,

three weeks before he died, Fitzgerald wrote to congratulate his friend on the success of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, saying he was going to read it again and throwing in some warm words for *To Have and Have Not* for good measure. He was kind, and these people, his “friends,” well, they fucked him. Because that’s how they do it: they stab you in the front and then a few times more in the back for good measure. “Poor bastard.” Shaking their heads as they walk away, zip up their flies, whatever defilements they may have added while Fitzgerald lay bleeding out on the floor. “Wanna go to Musso’s, wanna go to Spago?” Turning to one another, their future fellow victims. “Let’s go grab a drink.”

First-rate, Scott. There was no more first-rate intelligence than yours. Because what two ideas are more opposed than the impulse to save yourself and the one that makes you want to grind yourself to dust, to drown yourself in gin and set your house on fire? And if this town could do that to *you*, friend, then imagine, just imagine—holy shit!—imagine what it might do to me.