

GENIUS

by

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Based on
MAX PERKINS: EDITOR OF GENIUS
by A. Scott Berg

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EXT.FIFTH AVENUEDAY

The towers of Manhattan. 1929.

The corner of Fifth and 48th.

A brooding figure, a young man coiled in anxiety, stands smoking. He is staring up at an office building across the street. Painted on one huge wall of the building: CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS -- PUBLISHERS AND BOOKSELLERS.

He slowly raises up one foot and stomps it down again. A nervous tic of some kind?

We notice the sidewalk around his feet is littered with cigarette butts.

His unwavering gaze never leaves a corner window on the fifth floor of the office building across the street.

Meanwhile, in that corner office...

INT.MAX'S OFFICEDAY

We hear a sound...

Scritch ... scritch ... scritch ...

A pencil writing on paper...

And we see three words...

THE GREAT GATSBY.

We are looking at the spine of a book. We move along a shelf of books. After GATSBY...

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE...

THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED...

THE SUN ALSO RISES.

If you wanted to read the best of modern American literature you could do worse than start with these titles.

If you wanted to be at the epicenter of modern American literature you could do worse than this room.

MAX PERKINS sits at his desk in his cluttered office. Bookcases jammed with novels, piles of manuscripts, messy heaps of correspondence.

He is editing some galley proofs, going through them with a red pencil. Scritch ... scritch ... scritch...

Bent over his work, we do not see his face. We only see his hat. The Hat. A battered grey fedora. It's never off, like it is part of his head.

Max underlines a long section in red. Scriiiiiitch.

At the top of the page we see the title of the novel he is editing...

A FAREWELL TO ARMS.

Maxwell Perkins is Editor-in-Chief at Scribners, the famous New York publishing house.

Beyond Max's office door we can see editors, secretaries and clerks gliding silently past. The sacred Fifth Floor of Scribners is cathedral quiet. Low voices in conference and the rattle of typewriters in the distance.

Max turns a page. Continues reading the galleys. Makes a minute note in the margin.

Another EDITOR enters. Plops an enormous manuscript on Max's desk. Thud.

The manuscript is five inches high. 1,114 pages.

EDITOR

You might want to read this one.

Max looks up. We finally see his face past the rim of his hat. Handsome and civilized. An eccentric Yankee gentleman. Very kind eyes.

He takes in the massive tome. Quite dubious.

MAX

Please tell me it's double-spaced.

EDITOR

No such luck.

MAX

Where did you get it?

EDITOR

Friend of a friend, woman named Aline Bernstein. The stage designer. The author is her ... protege.

Max runs his thumb along the astounding five inches of pure text.

EDITOR

She said every other publisher in town has already turned it down, but I'd appreciate it if you could take a look and send a formal rejection. Only way I can get her off my back.

MAX

Is it any good?

EDITOR

Good? No ... But it's unique.

Max glances to him. The other Editor knew this response would intrigue Max.

MAX

A quick look.

EDITOR

Thanks, Max. I owe you.

The Editor goes.

Max glances at the title page of the monolithic manuscript.

O LOST by Thomas Wolfe.

INT.

GRAND CENTRAL STATION

EVENING

A CONDUCTOR stands at the passenger gate, allowing the last few commuters to hurry through and board a waiting train.

CONDUCTOR

(calls)

6:02 to New Canaan. Last call.

No one else seems to be coming, but the Conductor does not shut the gate. He glances at his pocket watch. 6:01.

Then he looks toward the terminal. Waits.

And Max appears, battered briefcase in hand. He hurries through the gate.

MAX

Good evening, Pete.

CONDUCTOR
All aboard, Mr. Perkins.

Max, a man of very regular habits, boards the 6:02 at precisely 6:02. Exactly as he does each and every night.

The Conductor closes the passenger gate and signals. He climbs onboard and the train immediately pulls out.

INT. TRAIN EVENING

The train chugs toward New Canaan.

Max sits, hat firmly planted, and pulls the first section of the huge manuscript from his briefcase. Prepares himself.

And he reads the opening. We hear Thomas Wolfe's voice:

TOM (V.O.)

"A stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces..."

"Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?"

Max stops reading. Glances up. Hmm. He returns to the manuscript, intrigued now.

TOM (V.O.)

"Remembering, speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?"

"O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."

Max stops reading. Glances out the window. Takes a breath. And returns to the manuscript.

EXT. NEW CANAAN EVENING

Max is lost in O LOST.

He walks through the charming village of New Canaan, making his way home from the train station. He reads a section of the manuscript, paying no attention whatsoever to where he is going, trusting that instinct or Divine Providence will lead him.

EXT.PERKINS HOMEEVENING

Max's home is a lovely affair with five white columns out front. It is a comfortable house that, like its owner, eschews ostentation.

still buried in the manuscript, Max enters...

INT.PERKINS HOMEEVENING

... And is immediately assaulted by his two youngest daughters, **NANCY**, 5, and **JANE**, 10. They spring out from hiding and sing in harmony:

NANCY and JANE
Hellllloooo, Daaaaaaaddy!

MAX

Hello, ducks.

He wanders past them, still buried in the manuscript.

NANCY

More rehearsal!

She and Jane scamper off to perfect their musical greeting.

Max wanders toward the living room, reading hungrily, in search of his evening drink.

In the living room, Max's wife **LOUISE** -- a capable and loving woman -- is rehearsing with her **DRAMA CLUB**, a collection of theatrically-inclined women:

LOUISE

(gesticulating)

"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages..."

Max, still buried in the manuscript, quickly changes course to avoid them and goes into his study...

INT.STUDYCONTINUOUS

Max's next oldest daughter, **PEGGY**, 14, is lounging on a sofa talking on the phone. She waves to him as:

PEGGY (on phone)

... I told you, Jimmy, I don't like the movies. I read books!

Max gives her an approving nod -- that's my girl -- and heads out again...

INT. HALLWAY CONTINUOUS

Still buried in the manuscript, he moves down a hallway to the kitchen...

INT. KITCHEN CONTINUOUS

Max enters the kitchen. The family's robust black maid, ELEANOR, is loudly chopping vegetables.

He instantly tries to escape. Too late.

ELEANOR
You gonna have that breast of guinea hen again?

MAX
Yes, thank you.

ELEANOR
(disapproving, chopping)
How one man can eat the same thing for five months
I do not know -- Nor why I have to cook two
different dinners every blessed night of the
week...!

Max beats a hasty retreat as Eleanor continues to complain happily...

INT. STAIRS/HALLWAY CONTINUOUS

Max, still buried in the manuscript, makes his way up the stairs. He enters the Master Bedroom...

INT. MASTER BEDROOM CONTINUOUS

His two oldest daughters (yes, there are five altogether) -- Elisabeth called ZIPPY, 16, and BERTHA, 18 -- are occupying the bedroom. Bertha poses before a full-length mirror in a prom gown. Zippy lies on the bed in jeans.

BERTHA
Hello, Daddy -- How do I look?

MAX
Just beautiful.

ZIPPY
It's the prom next week!

MAX

(to Bertha)

Already? You're so old, and not married yet. Hmm.

He escapes, finally, into his closet...

INT.

CLOSET

CONTINUOUS

Still buried in the manuscript, Max sits in a corner of his walk-in closet. Reading contentedly.

Then an idea:

MAX

(calls)

Bertha, honey. Would you fetch Daddy a martini?

BERTHA (V.O.)

May I have one?

MAX

Bring one for your sister too.

Max pushes his hat back a bit and reads.

INT.

DINING ROOM

NIGHT

God love him, Max is trying to concentrate.

Louise declaims:

LOUISE

I think we're making great progress with the Bard. The watchcry now is "naturalism." Make it true to life.

Eleanor is serving a beautiful dinner of roast beef to the rest of the family. She thuds down a plate of roast hen for Max with a disapproving snort.

PEGGY

How can it be true to life? It's a play.

LOUISE

Well, real life can be theatrical, can't it?

Max grumbles something inaudible.

LOUISE

Your father disapproves of my drama club.

JANE

Daddy, why don't you want Mama to be an actress again?

MAX

Because limelight isn't becoming to a woman of your mother's years.

BERTHA

You rat.

LOUISE

Oh yes, save the whirlwind life of glamour for himself, that's your father. Book parties and signings and the like while we suffer here in the wilderness, denied even the rudiments of culture...

The dinner continues to swirl around Max.

INT.

LIVING ROOM

NIGHT

Max sits silently in a corner, buried in the manuscript.

Louise and Zippy sit across the room, listening to a radio drama. Peggy lies on the floor, reading.

Bertha swirls in, dressed for a date, kisses Max. He never looks up from the manuscript.

BERTHA

Don't wait up.

MAX

Ten.

BERTHA

Eleven.

MAX

Ten.

BERTHA

Swine.

She swirls out.

INT.

MASTER BEDROOM

NIGHT

Max simply can't sleep.

He carefully rises so as not to disturb Louise. He is almost to the door when:

LOUISE
Don't forget your hat.

Max returns for his hat and leaves.

INT. STUDY NIGHT

Max sits, in hat and pajamas, and devours the manuscript.

Bertha sneaks past the open doorway, just coming in. Late.

MAX

Ten.

She enters. Kisses him. He doesn't look up from the manuscript.

BERTHA

Oh, Daddy, weren't you ever a girl in love?

MAX

Yes, but that was a long time ago.

She smiles. Glances down at the manuscript.

BERTHA

That's a very long paragraph.

MAX

It started four pages ago.

BERTHA

Poor Daddy.

She kisses him again and starts to go. He still doesn't look up from the manuscript.

MAX

You're too young to be in love.

BERTHA

How old do you have to be?

MAX

Forty.

She smiles and goes. He continues to read.

INT. TRAIN MORNING

Max sits as the 8:02 from New Canaan zooms to Manhattan. He is still buried in the manuscript.

At last he finishes the final page.

He sits for a moment.

Then slowly smiles.

INT. SCRIBNERS -- CONFERENCE ROOM DAY

CHARLES SCRIBNER, ancient and august, presides. He is a man born to preside. He has a tendency to peer coolly over his glasses. The "Scribner stare" has been known to wither the most steel-hearted of men.

His team of EDITORS sit around a long conference table.

MAX

... Well, frankly, he was pretty shaken up when GATSBY didn't sell. But he's working now. That's all that matters for him.

SCRIBNER

And have we any idea of when we might see this new book?

MAX

Not for a bit.

SCRIBNER

I must confess to some trepidation about granting another advance to your Mr. Fitzgerald. The phrase "throwing good money after bad" comes to mind.

MAX

A fair amount of that good money was from THIS SIDE OF PARADISE, sir.

Scribner stares at him evenly.

SCRIBNER

Nine years ago, Mr. Perkins.

MAX

I believe his best books are before him.

SCRIBNER

I can't say I share your faith in him ... Very well. But please inform your author that our patience grows thin. So too our fall list for fiction. Now, if there's nothing further--

MAX

As to the fall list, sir. I have one other item I would like to recommend. I think we should publish O LOST.

Groans and startled looks around the table.

EDITOR 1

You can't be serious, Max.

MAX

Never more so.

SCRIBNER

Which one is this?

EDITOR 2

The hillbilly book.

MAX

It's not a hillbilly book. It's a brilliant coming-of-age story about a restless young man in North Carolina. It's a universal story, sir.

SCRIBNER

I've not read it ... but it's very long isn't it?

MAX

Monstrously long.

SCRIBNER

And some of the language is, how to put it, bordering on the risque?

MAX

Oh, well over the border. But it's a mighty good read.

EDITOR 2

I couldn't make it through ten pages.

MAX

Well, I made it through eleven hundred and ten and I've never read anything quite like it in my life. It's exhilarating, sir.

SCRIBNER

I should like to table this discussion. Perhaps it is something we can consider for next year.

MAX

No, sir.

A tremor shoots around the table. No, sir?!

Scribner slowly turns "the stare" on Max.

SCRIBNER

Perkins?

MAX

This is a raw talent. He won't wait for a year.
He'll find another publisher.

EDITOR 2

In Paris maybe.

SCRIBNER

Have you met the author?

MAX

He's coming by today.

SCRIBNER

And you believe you can work the manuscript into a
form the general public will find acceptable?

MAX

I'm certain of it.

Scribner is unsure. Max presses:

MAX

In my fourteen years in the publishing business
I've never seen a book like this. It's an important
book, sir -- it's a new voice, a new spirit even.
Fierce and awkward and soaring all at once. It's
... Whitman.

SCRIBNER

I was afraid you were going to say Whitman. Nothing
but trouble, that one.

Scribner considers.

SCRIBNER

Mr. Perkins, you have yet to disappoint me --
you've terrified me, but never disappointed me ...
We'll publish your book if you can tame the beast.
Do not make me regret this decision ... And so if
there's nothing else, gentlemen, good day.

Scribner stands and the meeting breaks up.

EXT. FIFTH AVENUE DAY

The brooding figure we saw before, the young man coiled in anxiety, is back. Again staring at the Scribner Building across the street.

He finally tosses a cigarette away, raises his foot one last time and stomps it down, then hurries across the street.

He launches himself into the Scribner Building before he can change his mind.

INT. MAX'S OFFICE DAY

Scritch ... scritch ... scritch...

Max is hard at work when a voice echoes quietly through his office.

TOM (V.O.)
Mighty books...

Max looks up at the incredible person of THOMAS WOLFE.

Tom is coiled in the doorway like a predator. He has a mop of unruly black hair to match his unruly black spirit. He is a ferocious force of nature who devours everything he comes across: words, smells, liquor, food, images, people.

He gazes in awe at the many books in Max's office. He is 28 years old.

TOM
Mighty books...

MAX
May I help you?

Tom strides toward the books; like a Siren is calling him. He runs his hands over the books, getting to know them by touch. Tactile experience his only God.

TOM
Goddamn, look at all these books -- do you ever stop to consider the pure man-sweat that went into each and every line -- little testaments of faith screamed out in the dark night, in the cold night when the wind's blowing, in the vain hope that someone will read and hear and understand...

MAX

You must be Thomas Wolfe.

TOM

(still fondling the books)
Are these all your authors?

MAX

Not Tolstoy.

Tom somehow manages to tear himself from the books. Offers a hand to Max.

TOM

Mr. Perkins.

MAX

Sit down, please.

Tom tosses himself in a chair. Thump. His distended limbs splay about awkwardly. Sees his manuscript on Max's desk.

TOM

I wasn't even gonna come. Prefer to get my rejections in the mail, there's something surgically antiseptic about those familiar words: "We regret to inform you..." -- But I wanted to meet the you -- the man who first read Mr. F. Scott Fitzgerald and said, "Yes, the world needs poets. By God publish this bastard because the world needs poets or why even live...?"

It is apparent that Tom's words flow out of him like mighty rivers, ebbing and flowing in great torrents, sometimes finding their way to magnificent deltas of poetry and meaning, and sometimes slipping off into little tributaries that lead to not much of anywhere.

His accent is thick and redolent of his native North Carolina.

Max is utterly amazed at this curious young man, in every way his polar opposite.

TOM

... So I'm looking at that man now. Well, congratulations on finding one genius -- two if you count Hemingway. As for this one, he'll persevere. You can't kill the deep roots by cutting off a few top branches! The roots GO DEEP, Mr. Perkins. And they are UNASSAILABLE!

Tom pauses long enough to take a breath -- Max jumps in:

MAX
Mr. Wolfe, we intend to publish your book.

A beat.

TOM
Publish?

MAX
If that's acceptable to you.

Tom is, for perhaps the first time in his life, speechless.

Max takes advantage of the respite:

MAX
Now, I'd like to do some work with you. In its current state O LOST is simply too long for one volume. And I think you could afford to shape it a bit. Cut off a few of the "top branches."

Tom's bluster and bravado are suddenly gone. He is an eager pup. He leaps up. Dives over the desk and pumps Max's hand violently.

TOM
Mr. Perkins -- I know you're not having me on -- you don't look the type -- but By God -- this is too much for me!

Max smiles and retrieves his wounded arm. Tom ranges around the office.

TOM
You don't know ... You don't know ... Every sonofabitch publisher in New York hates my book. Hell, they hate me, which I can understand, believe me --

MAX
Please, Mr. Wolfe, if you can sit down I have a few questions...

TOM
Tom, please.

Tom forces himself to sit, leaning forward eagerly. Max leans back to give himself a little room to breathe as Tom is pretty much sucking all the oxygen from the room.

MAX
Tom ... I take it your book is autobiographical in nature?

TOM
No other way to write, is there?! Eugene Gant is me! And my Momma is Eliza and my Papa is W.O. Gant. And my brother Ben is Ben in the book and my sister Mabel is Helen and--

MAX
We'll get into all that--

TOM
I did change some of the names.

MAX
Our attorneys will appreciate that.

TOM
I know it's too long! My Lord, you don't know how I struggled to cut the gorgon down. You don't know how I fought with her. She licked me, Mr. Perkins! SHE LICKED ME! But I'll cut anything you say! Just give me the word...!

MAX
Tom...

Tom stops, looks at him. Max leans forward.

MAX
The book belongs to you ... All I want to do is bring your work to the public in the best possible form. My job, my only job, is to put good books into the hands of readers.

A beat.

TOM
Thank you, Mr. Perkins.

MAX
Now Scribners has agreed to give you our standard advance against royalties ... (Max gives him a check) ... If this is satisfactory we can proceed at whatever pace is comfortable for you.

Tom looks at the check. Stunned.

TOM
Five hundred dollars...

His head drops. When he looks up, Max is utterly surprised to see he is crying. Openly. Unashamed.

TOM
No one ever thought my writing was worth a dime before...

He simply cannot go on, he is too overcome with raw emotion. Tom is always being overcome with some emotion or other. Never feigned, always sincere. But always operatic.

TOM
Can we start tomorrow? -- I need -- I need--

MAX
Of course.

Tom stands, weeping. Moves to the door. Stops. Turns back.

TOM
I promise to work hard ... All I ask is a little honest help.

He blunders out.

Max sits for a moment. Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?

He looks down to continue with some work -- when suddenly a **HUGE REBEL YELL SHATTERS** the industrious busyness of the Fifth Floor.

Max glances up.

He sees Tom leaping and cavorting away down the hallway.

EXT.

STREET

NIGHT

Tom is striding along, grunting to himself happily, his frenzied pace devouring the sidewalk in great chunks.

He swerves into a modest apartment building...

INT.

TOM'S APARTMENT

NIGHT

Tom's small apartment would be spartan but for the occasional and loving touches of another hand.

Homemade drapes on the dingy windows, a lovely shawl tossed perfectly over the decaying couch. And a sumptuous dinner on the battered kitchen table.

The loving touches are the work of ALINE BERNSTEIN, who stands at the stove, basting a fine leg of lamb.

A talented theatrical designer of note, Aline is a woman of extreme and volatile emotions that she cannot, for the life of her, conceal.

She is Tom's lover. She is also married. She is also 20 years older than he is.

Tom thunders in and covers her with kisses:

TOM

I'm sorry, honey, I'm a great thoughtless oaf -- I just got to ramblin' -- before I knew it I was up by Columbia -- wait until you hear--!

ALINE

Now sit down, I've been basting like a demon for two hours...

She prepares two plates as Tom, still standing, grabs a roll from the table, devours it in one bite, as:

TOM

Aline honey, you're not gonna believe this -- I went by Scribners today to pick up the manuscript -- (he plucks some butter from the counter, slathers it on another roll) -- met a fellow named Max Perkins. Editor-in-Chief. Which pretty much means he's the high muckety-muck over there--

Aline sweeps the lamb to the table:

ALINE

Slow down, you're going to choke--

TOM

This is the fellow who discovered Fitzgerald and Hemingway, honey! Strides with giants!

ALINE

Well, giants need to eat too. Sit down.

She prepares a plate for Tom, serving great heaps of peas and potatoes. He forces himself to sit. Instantly begins devouring everything in sight.

TOM

So I walk in there and start pontificating about books and such -- do you have any of that mint jelly? -- (she gets him some mint jelly, he slathers it on) -- I was DECLAIMING like a DAMN FOOL when he looks at me and says, real quiet ... "Mr. Wolfe, we intend to publish your book."

Aline stops. Looks at him.

ALINE

No...

Tom leaps up, laughing. He takes her in his arms and swings her around. Both laughing.

ALINE

Oh, Tom ... Congratulations...

He smothers her in kisses.

TOM

Our book, Aline ... Our book ...

He is weeping and laughing all at the same time. Then he is kissing her deeply, devouring her.

She responds hungrily. A passionate, erotic bond.

He pushes her against the fridge, she wraps herself around him and they are soon making love with joyous abandon.

INT.

MAX'S OFFICE

EVENING

Tom sits across from Max.

A copy of the mammoth manuscript before each of them.

Silence.

TOM

How much you figure we have to cut?

MAX

I'm guessing around 300 pages. But it's not page count that's important. It's telling the story.

Silence.

Tom looks at his manuscript. His baby.

TOM

There it is. Four years of my life ... My heart bleeds to see anything go, but I guess it's die dog or eat the hatchet.

MAX

You took the words right out of my mouth.

And we cut to:

EXT. WINDOW -- MAX'S OFFICE EVENING

Looking through the window, we see Max leaning over, turning to the first page of the manuscript.

He begins to discuss page one with Tom.

We slowly pull back until the illuminated window is just one of the many eyes into the working hive of 1929 Manhattan.

EXT. NEW CANAAN EVENING

Max is leading Tom through the quiet streets of New Canaan.

TOM.

... Is that the library? How many books do you figure it has? Ten thousand? More? Twenty thousand?! Think I could borrow a few...?

EXT. PERKINS HOME EVENING

They approach the house.

TOM

... God, it's a mansion, Max! Are those dormers original to the house...?

INT. DINING ROOM NIGHT

Young Nancy is, quite simply, terrified. She sits right next to Tom. His enormous energy, thundering voice and wild hands terrify her.

Max's newest author holds court over dinner as he hungrily devours everything in sight. He has no idea what to do with his hands -- they seem to have a life of their own -- flailing about.

He is, for him, on his best behavior.

TOM

... Well, that's why I need Max so much! I'm by nature a putter-inner, not a taker-outer. But O LOST still needs a bucket's worth of taking out.

MAX

He's being very brave about it.

LOUISE

(the hostess)

Max tells us you're working on a new book.

TOM

He even gave me the idea -- the central premise around which I can organize my lunatic ramblings--

MAX

I didn't give you anything.

PEGGY

How can you work on your second book when you're still editing your first?

TOM

I'm nothing if not a big old octopus. One arm still wrapped around O LOST while another sneaks over there through the briny deep to work on the new book. I guess you could say I'm tentacular.

ZIPPY

(loves the word)

Ooooo.

PEGGY

What's the new one about?

TOM

It's about AMERICA! ALL of it! I'm trying to capture everything -- every city and village and stone and leaf and man and child -- every farm and flower and river -- ALL the rivers -- the Allegheny-Mississippi-Columbia-Colorado-Ohio-Missouri-Platte-and-Potomac -- It's about the one acetylene-torch-white-bright truth that burns through every man in this country. And that is the search for a true FATHER...

Tom realizes one of his hands has escaped. He plants it firmly over the butter dish like a tarantula. Before long he is spinning the butter dish nervously.

TOM

I don't mean a BIOLOGICAL father. I'm not talking about SPERM -- (Louise chokes) -- I'm talking about our need to return to the FATHER OF OUR SPIRIT. To go home once more to the only arms that can bring us solace. It's about wandering forever and finding the earth again.

ZIPPY

Sounds tentacular.

Tom laughs, thunderously. Young Nancy recoils.

TOM

I'm not telling it right -- Tell 'em what I mean, Max.

MAX

Tom's new book takes up where O LOST leaves off. Follows the hero, Eugene Gant, through college and then to Europe--

TOM

And only by seeing the world can he come to know his true home. Isn't that right, Max? It's about every single thing that makes this country great.

NANCY

(meek)

Butter.

TOM

Butter? What do you mean by that?

NANCY

Would you please pass the butter, please?

Tom laughs and relinquishes his control of the butter dish.

TOM

Every moment I've not been working with Max on O LOST, I've been writing the new book. Pages and pages and pages.

Max stops, fork almost to mouth. Pages and pages and pages?
Oh dear.

LOUISE

It sounds breathtaking!

TOM

IT IS! IT'S MAMMOTH! But Max always says the only ideas worth writing about are the big ideas.

MAX

Big ideas, fewer words.

TOM

You see! I'm lost without him.

LOUISE

Aren't we all?

PEGGY

Do you have a title for the new book?

TOM

Max and I considered a bunch. Right now we're thinking about OF TIME AND THE RIVER. "Time" -- cause we're telling the whole story of Eugene Gant's life as he grows up. And "The River" -- cause that word just makes me think of my father. The river running away from his door and right back again. You don't think it's too much do you?

ZIPPY

(very Max)

It's a grand title for a grand book.

TOM

It's a genius title for sure. But if I'm not a genius then your Daddy's been wasting a hell of a lot of time -- Have you got any more yams, Louise?!

INT.STUDYNIGHT

Max makes up the sofa as a bed for Tom.

Tom is on the phone, tense:

TOM (on phone)

... I told you I missed the train, goddamn it! I'll be there in the morning -- No, no -- Max is putting me up -- No -- Cause we got to talking! -- Now don't say that, Aline ... I'll -- I'll see you tomorrow, my little wet love.

He hangs up. Max busies himself making up the sofa.

TOM

Thanks.

MAX

Mm. This should do you nicely. I'll see you in the morning.

He starts to go.

TOM

Max ... Thank you for tonight. I hope I didn't offend anyone ... I so want your family to like me.

MAX

Don't worry, of course they--

Tom strides across the room and hugs Max deeply. Max is crushed and exceedingly uncomfortable.

TOM

I am lost without you. You know that?

MAX

Mm. Sleep tight now.

Max pulls himself free, begins to go.

Tom stops him with:

TOM

I'm not a circus animal, Max.

Max looks at him, unsure.

TOM

I know I seem like a freak. Too loud, too grandiose, not quite real ... But that's who I am. That's how I made it out of Asheville. By making noise. I thrashed my way out.

Tom doesn't look at Max.

TOM

But I feel things like a real person. And when I say I would be lost without you. I truly mean it.

A beat.

Max moves to Tom. Offers his hand.

MAX

Thank you, Tom.

Tom shakes his hand.

TOM

You are my island. Everything else is ocean.

Max smiles, genuinely touched.

INT.

GRAND CENTRAL STATION

MORNING

A great hiss of steam as the train from New Canaan arrives.

Max and Tom climb out and proceed along the platform.

TOM

... if we can nail down Ben's death today I think
we're within hollering distance of the end--

He stops. Someone is waiting for them.

Aline Bernstein stands, formidable and alert.

TOM

Aline! -- (he drags Max to her) -- Max, let me
introduce you, this is Mrs. Bernstein.

MAX

(shaking hands)

How do you do?

ALINE

Mr. Perkins, Tom has told me so much.

TOM

(hugging her, but speaking to Max)
She's the first person who ever told me I could
write worth anything ... Hell, she's the whole
reason for our book.

Aline bristles visibly at "our book."

MAX

(to Aline)
I thank you for that.

ALINE

(to Tom)
We were expected last night.

TOM

I told you--

ALINE

It was embarrassing for me.

TOM

You know I can't stand those theatrical affairs--

ALINE

And you know I didn't want to go alone--

TOM

Then why didn't you take your damned husband!

MAX

(desperate to escape)

If you'll excuse me--

TOM

All those actors just make me feel ugly, I told you
I wasn't going to--

ALINE

We. Will. Continue. This. Alone.

TOM

(to Max)

I'll come by around two, that okay?

MAX

Two! Perfect. Thanks.

ALINE

(ice)

Good day, Mr. Perkins.

MAX

Mrs. Bernstein.

Aline grabs Tom and pulls him away. Max watches them go,
dumbfounded.

The idea of a public argument -- a lover's spat, no less --
is alien to Max's innate and granite-hard sense of decorum.

EXT.SCRIBNER BUILDINGNIGHT

We slowly move in on the only window still illuminated in the
great edifice. Max's office.

Through the window, we see Max and Tom sitting in Max's
office.

Cut inside--

INT.MAX'S OFFICENIGHT

A copy of the edited manuscript of O LOST sits before each of them. It is a considerably shorter stack of pages, though still imposing.

Silence as they look at the pages. Then:

MAX

There is one final thing I think we should discuss
... The title.

TOM

It's always been O LOST.

MAX

I know, but I wonder if that might be a bit ... hm
... vague?

TOM

Don't you think it has poetry to it?

MAX

Oh, plenty of that, surely. But I don't know that it truly captures the meat of your book. Here, imagine you're a reader and you're wandering through a bookstore. There are lots of books. You see one titled TRIMALCHIO IN WEST EGG and you see one titled THE GREAT GATSBY. Which are you going to pick up?

TOM

GATSBY.

MAX

That's why Scott changed his original title. He knew it needed a bit more meat. I just ask you to think about it.

TOM

I will.

A silent beat. They consider the manuscripts before them.

TOM

But is it any good?

MAX

No one can predict the tastes of the reading public but ... I think it's damn good.

TOM
Max, you ... you ... cussed!

Cut to:

EXT. SCRIBNERS BOOKSTORE DAY

LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL by Thomas Wolfe.

The new title shines forth proudly.

We pull back. We find we are looking through the windows of the Scribner Bookstore, which flanks the entrance to the building.

A mountainous display of copies of LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL.

Customers are snatching it up. Clerks restock the display. It's a hit.

INT. STORK CLUB NIGHT

Max and Louise are having a celebratory dinner with Tom and Aline at the swankiest nightclub in New York. A dance band plays a bouncy Gershwin tune.

Tom is on top of the world and a bit drunk. Aline is glowering and taciturn.

LOUISE
... Oh Tom, I've wanted to come to this place for months, but Max wouldn't dream of it until you insisted.

TOM
Well, now that I'm a Scribner bestseller, I figured I deserved a little of the high life. Say it again, Max.

MAX
(smiles)
15,000 copies this month.

TOM
Aline, you hear that? Not even the economy of the entire country crumbling around our ankles is hurting my book!

Louise tries gamely to draw Aline into the conversation:

LOUISE
Have you read Tom's book, Mrs. Bernstein?

ALINE

Yes, Mrs. Perkins. It's dedicated to me.

Tom hugs Aline, a bit awkwardly.

TOM

I couldn't have done it without my sweet Jewess.
She bought me the paper and the pencils and paid
for the typist--

ALINE

That's enough, Tom.

TOM

I ask you, would another Jew in the world have put
a roof over my head and food in my prodigious belly
for all these years? Hell, you all know how I eat!

Max and Louise are taken aback. Max jumps in:

MAX

(to Aline)

You must be very proud of the book. See all your
faith rewarded.

ALINE

Our faith. It's our faith now, isn't it, Mr.
Perkins? Tom couldn't have done it without you.

MAX

That's not true.

ALINE

Oh, you needn't play at humble pie with me. Tom
speaks of your contribution with such passion. He
just can't seem to stop talking about you. "Max
says this" and "Max says that"--

TOM

Easy, girl.

Aline proceeds with a desperate venom she hates herself for:

ALINE

No, we should give Mr. Perkins all the credit.
After all, he's the one who made all your dreams
come true. He's the one who shaped that massive
collection of words into a marketable "best seller"
-- into a "hot property" -- putting it into the
eager hands of readers everywhere, that's quite a
triumph for Mr. Perkins.

Tom takes a drink. Louise stares, angry. Max gazes at Aline. He chooses each word with great care.

MAX

The work is Tom's. He deserves to enjoy it.

ALINE

Is that what Tom "deserves?"

TOM

Leave Max alone--

ALINE

I was not speaking to you. I was speaking to your elder. You should always trust your elders. They know what's best.

LOUISE

They should also behave in a manner appropriate to their advanced years.

A second before the dinner descends into a free-for-all, a woman's voice purrs:

PURRING WOMAN (V.O.)

You're Thomas Wolfe...

Tom turns. A gorgeous WOMAN stands before him. Clearly wealthy, clearly on the prowl.

PURRING WOMAN

I'm reading your book. It's a masterpiece.

TOM

(Southern charm)

Is it now?

PURRING WOMAN

Oooo, very much. I have some friends who are dying to meet you -- (to Aline) -- You don't mind if I steal this young man for a tick or two. Of course you don't...

She pulls Tom up and drags him away, he offers no resistance. She insinuates her arm into his as they cross the room, flattering words purring.

Max watches as Tom is enveloped by the woman's friends at another table.

He glances to Aline. Surprised to see tears in her eyes.

She catches him looking at her. To her credit, she is not ashamed of the tears.

EXT.

STREET

NIGHT

That night. Max and Louise are walking back toward Grand Central. A crisp November evening.

LOUISE

... Think if it, Max. Out of the wilderness at last and close to the theaters and the museums. Close to everything in life that matters.

MAX

Mmm.

LOUISE

Think how nice it would be to just get up in the morning, pop on your hat and walk to work. Sounds terribly efficient to me. No more commuting and more time with the girls...

MAX

True...

LOUISE

(the coup de grace)
Close to Tom.

MAX

You think you're very clever, don't you?

LOUISE

I do. Shall I start looking for a place? Somewhere on the East side perhaps? Near the office?

MAX

I'm not going to win this one, am I?

LOUISE

No, dear.

MAX

All right, go to it.

She smiles. He enjoys her pleasure.

A moment of silence as they walk. Then:

LOUISE

I just can't understand it.

MAX

What?

LOUISE

That detestable woman. To behave so badly to you, of all people, who's done so much for Tom. I know she thinks she's losing him. But really.

MAX

I daresay there's a lot we don't know.

A beat as they walk.

MAX

If we move to town, there's one condition ... No more nightclubs.

LOUISE

Yes, dear.

She smiles and puts her arm through his as they continue away.

Music begins and takes us to...

INT.

PERKINS TOWNHOUSE

DAY

Max and the family move into a lovely townhouse on East 49th street.

Bertha supervises the movers as Max and Louise walk from room to room. She describes the elaborate decorating work she has in mind. He is skeptical.

Beyond them Tom carries Nancy on his shoulders through the new place.

Music continues...

EXT.

CENTRAL PARK

DAY

Tom strides through the park. Writing furiously in a note pad as he roams.

Music continues...

INT.

TOWNHOUSE -- DINING ROOM

NIGHT

Tom has dinner with the Perkins family. Louise's decorating work is in progress in the dining room: paint cans and rolls of wallpaper.

The family is very much at ease with Tom now. He tells an amusing story. Eleanor stands in the doorway to the kitchen, laughing along with the family.

Music continues...

INT. THEATER DAY

Rehearsal for a play. Aline is on the stage, supervising the set design.

Tom sits in the house, hunched, in his own world, writing.

Music continues...

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- NANCY'S BEDROOM NIGHT

Tom sits on the edge of Nancy's bed, telling her an enchanting bedtime story. Tom is a great favorite of hers.

Max and Louise stand in the doorway and watch.

Music continues...

INT. TOM'S APARTMENT DAY

Tom writes feverishly. Pages and pages and pages.

Music finally ends at...

INT. OUTSIDE MAX'S OFFICE DAY

The door to Max's office, usually open, is closed.

An Editor arrives with some papers for Max. Max's Secretary shakes her head. Come back later.

We cut inside the office:

INT. MAX'S OFFICE DAY

We can tell that the face before us used to be beautiful. It used to glimmer with the incarnadine poetry of youth and hope and worlds to conquer.

Now the fragile beauty just escapes being haggard. The eyes are red and mournful. Alcoholism and failure and personal tragedy have eaten away at this face like a cancer.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD.

He is only 37 years old.

Scott sits across from Max. Max is yearning to help, to give solace to his friend.

SCOTT

... you don't know what they're like. The state asylums ... Grotesque ... I don't have the words. There are no words in my lexicon. One word, no flourishes ... Grotesque.

MAX

Scott...

SCOTT

The screaming is ... constant and so desolate. And they don't have enough toilets...

A difficult beat.

SCOTT

I can't let Zelda stay in such a place.

MAX

I know.

SCOTT

But private asylums are expensive ... (he looks at Max) ... I know TENDER IS THE NIGHT didn't make any money ... Or GATSBY ... But I'm up against it, Max.

MAX

(gently) Scribners can't give you any more advances.

A beat.

SCOTT

THE POST won't even take any more of my stories ... I guess I could go back to Hollywood. Give that another try.

MAX

I hope you don't do that.

SCOTT

Why?

MAX

You're a novelist.

Scott looks out the window.

SCOTT

Not anymore ... I should have died when I was 24.
Right after THIS SIDE OF PARADISE ... Before the
leaves began to fade.

A beat.

Max searches through his desk drawers for something as:

MAX

Did you get the book I sent you?

SCOTT

Which?

MAX

General Grant's memoirs. Do you know how he came to write them? This is interesting ... He was dying of throat cancer and he wanted to leave something behind for his family, so they would be all right after he was gone. So he started writing his autobiography...

He pulls his checkbook out of the desk and starts writing a check:

MAX

... He worked every day for hours and hours. He was in great pain ... anguish ... but he just kept on writing. And, in the end, he produced the most astounding book. So very beautiful ... Isn't that a grand story?

He hands the check to Scott.

MAX

Just a little velvet to see you through.

Scott rises and shakes his hand, moved.

SCOTT

I'll write you a great book.

MAX

I know.

Scott goes.

A silent beat.

Max sits, his face betraying the pain he feels at his friend's sad situation.

Then he finally opens some galleys. Pushes his hat back a bit, takes up a red pencil and settles in. Not for long.

A knock at the door.

MAX

Yes?

Tom peeks in.

MAX

Tom, come in. Did you see Scott? He was just...

Tom doesn't move. He just stands in the doorway.

MAX

Tom...?

TOM

I have it.

MAX

You have it?

TOM

The new book.

A beat. A momentous moment.

MAX

With you?

TOM

Yes.

Max slowly stands. Tingling with anticipation.

MAX

Well, let's have it.

But Tom does not enter. Instead he turns to someone beyond the door.

TOM

Bring it in, guys.

Two workmen enter. Carrying a crate the size of a small coffin. It is entirely filled with manuscript pages -- some typed, some still handwritten.

Max stares, utterly dumbfounded.

TOM
Put it down there -- thanks.

The workmen deposit their burden in the middle of Max's office. Tom gives them some money. They go.

A pause as Max stares at the thousands and thousands of pages.

He finally looks up at Tom.

MAX
This is OF TIME AND THE RIVER?

Tom clears his throat nervously.

TOM
No ... this is the first part.

Max blinks.

MAX
How many parts are there?

TOM
Um ... three.

Max slowly moves to the crate. Leans over and touches the pages. Lifts a batch out. Feels the heft.

Looks at Tom.

MAX
Well done.

Tom slowly smiles.

INT. MAX'S OFFICE NIGHT

The Fifth Floor is empty but for Max and Tom.

Max reads the manuscript carefully. Tom watches nervously.

Dissolve to...

LATER THAT NIGHT:

Max is still reading. Tom smokes, paces, worries and drinks from a flask, all at the same time.

Dissolve to...

MORNING:

Two more crates have arrived. Filled with pages.

Max is still reading. Tom is slumped in a chair. We see Max's secretary arriving for work. She peeks into the office, disapproving.

Dissolve to...

NIGHT AGAIN:

Max is still reading. Tom sleeps, sprawled on a couch. Max finishes reading. He puts the last page down. He looks at Tom sleeping.

He rises and moves to Tom. Takes off his jacket and puts it over Tom's shoulders. Paternal.

INT.

MAX'S OFFICE

NIGHT

Max and Tom, both exhausted, sit across from each other.

MAX

... if we work every day, in the evening, when we won't be disturbed, we can do it.

TOM

How long?

MAX

Nine months, if you work hard ... And if you resist the temptation to add much more.

TOM

But I have to be able to add more! If I can't--!

MAX

Tom ... The book is five thousand pages long.

A beat.

TOM

Point taken.

Max flips to the first page of the manuscript before him.

MAX

Now, to begin, on page one--

TOM

Oh Lord, page one!?

MAX

Look here, you've given eighty pages to Eugene on the platform before the train arrives. That is, perhaps, gilding the lily a bit as to suspense? I mean, I'll only wait so long for a train.

TOM

Show me the words.

Max leans over the manuscript, red pencil ready as we go to a sequence of the editing of OF TIME AND THE RIVER.

Swing music explodes as these two great men fight to tame the beast...

INT./EXT.

MONTAGE

DAY/NIGHT

They argue, they reconcile, they create, they destroy, they celebrate, they mourn, they slowly work through the three crates of mad prose.

It takes two years.

Tom ranges around the office, howling in pain, as Max tries to make a point...

Max and Tom at a restaurant, debating happily. Max makes a strong point. Tom laughs and surrenders...

In the office, Tom watches in horror as Max slowly crosses out an entire page with his red pencil. Then another page. Tom slides from his chair to the floor in anguish. His feet appear, propped up on the edge of Max's desk. He just lies on the floor, arguing...

Max gets home from an evening with Tom. Exhausted. Louise goes to him, comforting, she has a martini ready...

Max glances up as Tom thunders into his office, a new batch of pages in his hand. He presents them with a flourish. Max sighs...

We return to MAX'S OFFICE for a moment:

MAX

... Tom, I thought we discussed a transition line. One line to bridge the cut. You've given me fifty new pages on the doctor! You've given me his whole life story and his father's whole life story!

TOM

I like the doctor!

MAX

Well so do I! I adore the doctor! But, By God, fifty pages?! Do we really need to know that his grandfather lost an eye at Shiloh?!

TOM

Yes -- we need to know that! You have to understand, these are great people! REAL people with REAL lives!

MAX

To be a novelist you have to select. You have to shape and sculpt--

TOM

Who says?! Marcel Proust bites into a cookie and he gets to prattle on for a thousand pages and everyone calls him a genius. Why can't I?

MAX

Because we've been working for six months and the book's only eight pages shorter!

TOM

Some books are supposed to be long, you know!

MAX

Do you suggest we sell it by the crate? Perhaps a reduced price for buying all three crates at once?

TOM

What the hell do you want?! You want "The doctor smiled"?

MAX

Yes, that would be lovely.

TOM

FINE! Put it in -- slash me all up -- open an artery and bleed me dry -- put the leeches on and suck out every great idea I ever had -- DISEMBOWEL ME, MAX!

Max just gazes at him, bemused.

TOM

How about "The doctor smiled enigmatically."

MAX

Genius.

The sequence continues:

Max and Tom work in Max's study. Nancy enters in her pj's and hops on Tom's lap. He laughs and joshes with her...

Max's Secretary arrives for work. Peeks into the office. Tom sleeps on the sofa. Max sleeps at his desk, hat over his face. One of the crates has now been emptied...

Max arrives home from work. Louise is no longer so comforting now, even resentful, no martini waiting...

Tom comes to the office with more pages. He is drunk. Max is not pleased...

Max at home, working on the manuscript. Nancy comes in. He ignores her. She tries to talk to him. He snaps at her. She goes...

The sequence ends at...

INT.

THEATER

DAY

Aline is everywhere at once, bustling across a stage, rearranging the set dressings, checking costumes and bringing her keen aesthetic eye to every detail.

Tom follows. The cast and crew are used to their frequent spats. She is controlling her temper.

TOM

... You knew this was going to happen. Why are you playing all dewy-eyed ingenue?

ALINE

Because I did not, even taking you at your absolute worst, imagine you could be so selfish.

TOM

I can't turn my back on the work, Aline! It's what I do -- it's my JOB!

ALINE

Every now and then I have what we in the theater call an opening -- (she quickly appraises an actress in a costume, making minute adjustments) -- You look lovely, keep the scarf on your left shoulder, yes? -- (the actress goes, Aline

ALINE (CONT.)
continues to Tom) -- It's an important night for me
and I need you here.

TOM
I have to work tonight--

Aline rearranges some pillows on a sofa on the set:

ALINE
And why is your work always more important than
mine? Do you have any idea how difficult it is for
a woman in my profession? -- (she plucks one of the
pillows away, calls to an assistant) -- Kenny,
where's that striped pillow? The aubergine one?

ASSISTANT
I'll find it.

TOM
I'm not saying your work's not important--

ALINE
Of course you are! I ask for one night -- one night
of your precious time to be at my side and support
me--

TOM
You don't understand -- we're at a moment of
RADICAL CRISIS with the book--

ALINE
Oh stop it. I've never known you when you weren't
at a moment of "radical crisis" about something.
You really ought to be on the stage.

TOM
Max says that if we--

ALINE
There we go -- Max says -- Max suggests -- Max
instructs--

Her assistant arrives with an aubergine pillow. She grabs it
and tosses it on the sofa--

ALINE
He can have you every other day of the week. I need
you tonight. Now please get off my set, go home and
put on your blue suit. I'll pick you up at seven.

TOM
I won't be there.

Aline stops. Her flurry of activity concentrating to an intense, controlled glare. All eyes.

ALINE
Make your choice, Tom. Right now.

TOM
There's no call for this, honey.

ALINE
Right now.

A tense beat.

Then she suddenly slaps him -- hard -- the sharp sound echoes around the theater -- everyone stops. Looks.

Tom is stunned.

Aline tries to breathe.

ALINE
Look what you've done to me.

She turns and strides away, not wanting him to see her cry.

Tom stands. Aline's colleagues glaring at him.

INT.

CAB

NIGHT

Tom sits, his unruly bulk restrained in the backseat of a cab with Max. Max is not happy.

MAX
... I did not give up my one family vacation of the year to go nightclubbing with you!

TOM
Sure you did! This'll do you a world of good. Shake you up a bit. Tear away the Yankee shackles of propriety and liberate you to the joys of unfettered Southern licentiousness--

MAX
We're supposed to be working.

TOM

This is work! How can you appreciate the MUSIC of my book -- the TONALITY and CADENCES without experiencing the dark rhythms that INSPIRE ME?!

Tom begins to loudly slap a jazz riff on his leg, bouncing along to his beat.

The cabbie gives them a look in the rearview mirror.

Max sighs.

EXT. JAZZ CLUB -- HARLEM NIGHT

The cab pulls up outside a hopping jazz joint in Harlem. Tom and Max climb out.

The explosive energy of the Harlem Renaissance envelops them. Well-heeled white couples stroll the streets and mingle with the black residents. Jazz music permeates the air from a dozen clubs.

Tom pays the cabbie as Max stands for a moment, taking in this swirling world of musicians, hookers, poets, thugs, painters, addicts and tourists.

Tom grabs his arm and pulls him toward a club:

TOM

Don't worry, Maxwell, they don't bite...

INT. JAZZ CLUB NIGHT

To call Max Perkins a fish out of water in this place would be a bit of an understatement.

He sits, erect and proper, at a small table in a loud, smoky club. A jazz band plays a scorching tune. The clientele, almost entirely black, enjoys the music and dances.

Tom's eyes are eating up everything, his senses tingling to new experiences as he rattles on, a little edgy:

TOM

... She didn't like it, of course, but she'll do fine. Go back to her husband, I suppose. Aline's too good for me anyway. Glad it's over for her sake, she was getting truly neurotic--

A black waiter appears.

TOM
Bourbon! In a big old tumbler.

MAX
Martini, please. Very dry.

The waiter looks at him.

TOM
He'll have a bourbon ... (the waiter goes) ... You hear it, Max, this is my music. This is the music Eugene Gant heard from the shanties and that haunts him still.

MAX
Mm.

TOM
You know you could take off your hat. Try to blend a little ... Now don't tell me you don't like the music?

MAX
Not really my sort of thing.

TOM
Well, what song do you like? They'll play anything that pleases you.

MAX
I don't care much for music.

TOM
Now there's a savage indictment of your grim New England soul! Come on, there's gotta be one song you like!

Max thinks.

MAX
"Loch Lomond." I'm partial to "Loch Lomond." On bagpipes.

Tom smiles and springs up. Goes to the band and whispers to the pianist. Slips him some money.

He returns to the table as the waiter plops down two huge glasses of bourbon. Tom drains his almost instantly.

TOM

The whole thing about jazz is that those fellas are artists. They interpret the song -- letting the music pour out unchecked, riff upon riff -- just like I do with words. To hell with standard forms. To hell with Flaubert and Henry James. Be original, blaze new trails. That's the whole ugly gorilla, you know what I mean?

MAX

(sipping his bourbon)
Ugly gorilla, of course.

The band segues into "Loch Lomond." At first it is a surprisingly standard version of the song. The crowd is a bit confused.

Max smiles.

TOM

There ... That's Henry James for you. It's comfortable and familiar, isn't it?

MAX

Mmm.

Now the band swings with the song a bit. Still "Loch Lomond" but transforming into something new. Max is unsure.

TOM

Uh-oh, what's that? ... Sounds like an ugly gorilla's coming our way...

Now the band is spinning off into glorious jazz riffs on "Loch Lomond." It is magnificent and exciting.

TOM

Now that ... that's Tom Wolfe.

Tom notes that Max is tapping his foot along to the music.

Then Max smiles.

He gets it.

Max's face transforms, the jazz working its magic on him. He leans back a little.

Tom looks at him. Delighted.

Later...

The club is packed now, wall-to-wall with dancers and patrons. The jazz music refracts off the walls and is filled with electricity.

Max and Tom, many bourbons later, are thoroughly enjoying it all.

Max is leaning back, relaxed. It is as if he has been somehow liberated. He sways along to the music a bit, drumming his fingers on the table.

Tom just watches him, sublimely happy. Huck and Tom on the Mississippi, civilization left behind.

Then Tom's attention is drawn to two black women at the bar. They exchange a few looks. Flirting.

TOM

Hey, Max, you see those two fine ladies over there?
... (Max turns and looks) ... Subtle! Try to be a bit subtle, Max!

MAX

At the bar?

TOM

Yeah ... (straightens his tie) ... Let's go say hello.

MAX

Oh ... No, Tom, really.

TOM

Come on, we'll have some fun.

MAX

No, I can't.

TOM

They're colored, Max, it doesn't count.

Max looks at him.

MAX

Yes, Tom. It does.

TOM

Well, you don't mind if I...?

MAX

(smiles)

Go on.

TOM

(standing)

Hell, never know when to stop, do I?

MAX

Good night.

Tom moves, a little unsteady, toward the two women.

Max watches him go. Smiles gently.

INT.

BEDROOM

NIGHT

Tom is with both women, total sexual abandon. They writhe and pound together, covered with sweat, limbs snaking.

Jazz music pounds relentlessly through the floor...

INT.

TOWNHOUSE

NIGHT

... The jazz music continues as we see Max, back at the townhouse.

He stands for a moment in the empty kitchen. Looks at some crayon drawings stuck to the fridge.

Finally he moves into the living room and sits in a chair in a corner. Switches on a light.

Picks up some galley proofs and begins to work.

The jazz music fades.

Max sits in silence, trying to concentrate on his work.

EXT.

SCRIBNER BUILDING -- FIFTH FLOOR

NIGHT

The Fifth Floor is dark and empty but for Max's office.

We see Max and Tom in the office, at the end of the long hallway.

Tom is raging, almost apoplectic. Words pouring out of him in great torrents as he brandishes new pages wildly.

Max sits calmly, trying to interject.

We move down the long hallway and finally enter...

INT.MAX'S OFFICENIGHT

TOM

... You wouldn't say that to HEMINGWAY! You wouldn't say that to FITZGERALD! Not to your two goddamn sacred cows! Every word they write is GOLDEN GENIUS--!

MAX

Stop it--

TOM

I bring you stuff wrenched right from my guts and you tell me it doesn't fit! By what right do you tell me what fits in my book?!

MAX

That's enough. Go home.

TOM

What?

Max stands, gathers his things.

MAX

Go home. Go to sleep.

TOM

(desperate)

No -- I'm sorry -- please don't make me go home! Let me come home with you -- see the girls--

MAX

You're exhausted and you're drunk. We'll pick up tomorrow.

Then a voice, surprising them from the doorway:

ALINE

You heard him, Tom ... Come home.

They turn to see Aline, standing in the doorway. She is at an extreme emotional pitch, her nerves shot.

ALINE

I'll pay for the taxi.

TOM

What the hell are you doing here?!

ALINE

I can make you dinner -- I'll pay for that too.

TOM
Get out of here. I'm working.

ALINE
Mr. Perkins has informed you you're not working
anymore tonight. Come with me.

Max steps toward her:

MAX
Mrs. Bernstein, the building is closed--

Aline reacts with a startling burst of violent emotion:

ALINE
Don't touch me!

MAX
For Heaven's sake--

TOM
(stepping toward her)
Jesus, Aline--!

She backs away:

ALINE
Stay there! -- You don't want to see me? -- Fine --
You'll never have to see me again!

She backs away -- furiously searching through her purse --
Tom follows--

TOM
Aline...

She pulls a bottle of pills from her purse, turns and sprints
toward the elevator--

Tom and Max follow--

TOM
What the hell are you doing--?!

She slams into the elevator door -- tries to swallow the
pills -- Tom bats them from her lips -- the bottle falls,
pills clatter everywhere--

She collapses -- Tom kneels, holds her. She sobs.

Max stands.

Tom whispers to her as he strokes her hair. We can't hear what he is saying, though it appears to calm her.

He helps her stand, still whispering to her.

Max discreetly tries to return to his office, giving them their privacy.

ALINE

Mr. Perkins...

Max stops, turns to her. She is desperately trying to retain some sense of dignity.

ALINE

I know such things just don't happen here. On the fifth floor. I apologize.

MAX

That's not necessary. If you'll excuse me.

TOM

No, wait up. I'll be right there.

MAX

Oh, no, Tom, really--

TOM

Just give me a second.

Max returns to his office. Disturbed. He sees Tom talking quietly with Aline. Then Tom leaves her and heads back toward the office.

Aline just waits for the elevator.

Tom returns to the office:

TOM

You're right about the new pages. Sorry for being such a bear.

MAX

Don't you think you should go with Mrs. Bernstein?

TOM

Hell, she was just being theatrical. She's "show folk" remember? All right, so we forget the new pages. Let's go on to Eugene in London...

Tom continues, quiet calmly. Max glances down the hallway again. Aline just stands, waiting for the elevator.

The lonely image haunts Max.

By this time, Tom has forgotten Aline even exists.

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- DINING ROOM EVENING

Tom has dinner with the Perkins family. All are uncomfortable.

Tom is jittery, drinking steadily. He is sweating and his mind roils feverishly.

TOM

... MOST editors would be happy with that! Hell, MOST editors would be doing backflips down the street!

MAX

I'm not unhappy, Tom, but we need to--

TOM

I wrote ten thousand words today! Ten thousand words -- you know how many that is, Louise? -- 40 pages! I bring them to YOUR HUSBAND and what does he do? He sighs! That New England sigh of high disapproval! You know what he is -- YOUR HUSBAND -- he's a snob!

LOUISE

Stop it, Tom.

Tom sputters to silence as he gloomily devours his dinner.

JANE

My class is going to the Met tomorrow. We're seeing RIGOLETTO.

LOUISE

Oh, that's a fine one! At the end of the first act there's a--

Tom suddenly flares up again, pointing to Max's plate:

TOM

And what is that?! Here we are, all eating this nice meatloaf that Eleanor made for us -- but you're having that same goddamn breast of guinea hen--!

LOUISE

(a warning)

Tom...

TOM

I've never seen you eat anything else for dinner in five years! Is that another one of your Yankee affectionations -- like the hat and the--

Young Nancy suddenly speaks up:

NANCY

Stop yelling at my daddy! -- You shouldn't be so mean -- Why are you so mean?

She dissolves into tears, Tom instantly goes to her. Holds her.

TOM

Oh Nancy, honey ... Honey ... I'm a great, big, stupid gorilla ... Child.

He holds her, utterly ashamed. She sobs into him.

Tom glances to Max. Please, forgive me.

Max does.

Louise does not.

INT.

MASTER BEDROOM

NIGHT

Later that night.

Max lies on the bed, full dressed, turning his hat in his hands. Louise is moving in and out of the bathroom, taking off her makeup and getting ready for bed.

Silence.

MAX

He's under a lot of pressure.

Louise doesn't respond.

MAX

You have to think what it's like for him. His first book comes out before he's thirty and everyone calls him as a genius. The expectations for the second book are mighty big. He's scared. That's why he won't stop writing.

LOUISE

That does not excuse his berating you in front of our children. How do you think that makes the girls feel?

MAX

They love Tom--

LOUISE

I mean about you. Sitting there and letting him yell at you like that.

MAX

It doesn't mean anything, Louise.

LOUISE

You ought to stand up to him for once in your life! You ought to lose your temper and shake your fist!

MAX

That's hardly necessary--

LOUISE

Someone needs to tell him that he ... (she stops)
... Why aren't you changing?

A beat. She understands.

LOUISE

You're working.

MAX

Just a few hours. Tom's in the study.

She looks at him.

LOUISE

This Friday Nancy is having her recital. She's been working very hard...

MAX

Louise...

LOUISE

She expects you to be there.

MAX

I'll explain.

LOUISE

Explain it to me.

MAX

(sharp)

It's my job. It's what I do.

LOUISE

Every night?

MAX

Yes, every night. And every day. And if it takes years, it takes years. That's what I do.

LOUISE

You're never going to get this time back--

MAX

For Christ sake, it's one dance recital!

LOUISE

It's not dance, it's piano. She stopped dancing two years ago.

A beat.

LOUISE

Do you know how much they miss you?

MAX

I'm here. They know that.

LOUISE

Even when you're here, you're not with us. You're with all those damn books.

MAX

My authors need me--

LOUISE

You mean Tom needs you. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway never take over your life like this.

MAX

All right, then Tom needs me.

She sits and looks at him deeply.

LOUISE

Would it be so awful if you took a day or two away from that blessed manuscript? What's the difference if the book comes out in the summer or the fall? In a summer or two Zippy will be gone. And then Peggy.

A long beat.

LOUISE

We have five daughters, Max.

She turns and goes into the bathroom. Quietly closes the door.

Max remains on the bed for a moment and then rises, puts on his hat and leaves the room.

INT. NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM DAY

Louise, a woman of leisure ever in search of a new hobby, has discovered the joys of anthropology. She slowly moves past the dusty and magnificent dioramas of the great museum.

She stops before a large display featuring Stone Age Man: thick-browed, hulking early humans in animal-skin clothes.

A voice:

ALINE
Mrs. Perkins...?

Louise turns to see Aline, standing behind her, sketch pad in hand.

LOUISE
Mrs. Bernstein... What are you doing here?

ALINE
I'm designing the new PETER PAN for Eva Le Gallienne. Thought some of these costumes might do for the lesser Lost Boys.

LOUISE
Oh, the Lost Boys, yes.

ALINE
Not the leads ... Just some of the chorus.

They look at the Early Humans for a moment: one of the shaggy primitive men bears a striking resemblance to Tom.

LOUISE
Remind you of anyone we know?

Aline smiles.

INT. NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM -- RESTAURANT DAY

They sit over lunch.

ALINE

... you didn't know him when he was young. Fresh from Harvard and all ready to carve up the world. He was ... unlike anyone I had ever met. He was 24 and I was past forty.

LOUISE

I understand.

ALINE

I don't know that you do. My husband is a very kind man. But he is a man without passion. He is a man of Wall Street and numbers ... I do not understand numbers.

LOUISE

You have children, Mrs. Bernstein.

ALINE

I do. A son and a daughter.

A beat.

ALINE

I did a foolish thing when I fell in love with Tom. But I can't help how I feel.

LOUISE

I can't say I approve. I can't say I even understand truly ... But I do know what it is for a woman to look forward at a certain age.

ALINE

At the very time in my life when everything beautiful was falling away, when no one needed me anymore, I met Tom ... He made me feel beautiful again.

A beat.

ALINE

But I know I've lost him to your husband.

LOUISE

Mrs. Bernstein ... My husband always wanted a son more than anything in the world. We reached a point when we realized that was never going to happen ... And then he met Tom.

Louise takes Aline's hand.

LOUISE

I know my husband will come back to us. Tom will eventually see to that ... But I don't know if Tom will ever be able to make you feel quite so beautiful anymore.

ALINE

I can't let him go.

LOUISE

Go home to your children, Mrs. Bernstein. They need you. Tom doesn't.

A quiet beat.

EXT. STREET DAY

Max is moving briskly down the street.

It is late 1934. We see Depression era homeless people sleeping on grates. Max gives some money to an impoverished man as he passes.

INT. TOM'S APARTMENT DAY

A strange symphony as we slowly move across the floor of the darkened apartment...

We hear a peculiar grunting and groaning as we float over a chaos of paper. The entire floor is a Sargasso Sea of pages. Great oceans of them in no order whatsoever...

We take in the boxes of half-eaten take-out food; the filthy cups of coffee with cigarette butts floating; the towers of books threatening to spill over...

We finally arrive at Tom's feet. Standing.

One foot rises up and stomps down again. The strange grunting continues.

Thomas Wolfe at work.

He stands, writing on top of the refrigerator, his pencil cutting across a sheet of paper. You can feel the impact of the pencil pounding into the paper. He writes in a frenzy -- amazingly quickly -- emotional and violent -- sometimes only twenty-five words to a page.

When he is done with the page he throws it blindly to the floor behind him and continues immediately on the next sheet.

Tom grunts and groans as he writes. Anguish and joy simultaneously. He occasionally raises a foot and stomps it down. He is completely unaware he is doing any of this.

We realize he is not alone.

Max stands in the doorway, gazing at the lunatic wasteland of Tom's life.

MAX

Tom... Tom.

Tom spins to the door. His eyes filled with something like panic.

A beat.

MAX

It's done.

TOM

Done?

MAX

It's been two years.

A beat.

MAX

Stop writing. Gather all the pages and bring them in tomorrow. Can you do that? ... Can you do that?

TOM

Yes.

MAX

We finish editing this month. We go to press in January. We publish in March.

TOM

Yes.

Max looks at him. Slowly crosses the room and takes the pencil from Tom's hand. Then he takes all the pencils from a cup on top of the fridge.

He leaves with the pencils.

Tom stands. Lost.

INT. MAX' OFFICE NIGHT

Max and Tom sit in silence.

All three crates are now empty. A completed copy of the manuscript of OF TIME AND THE RIVER rests before each them.

They look at the imposing stacks of pages.

TOM

Shoot.

MAX

Mm.

A beat.

TOM

I think I'll go rambling. Maybe to Germany. Don't want to be around when the reviews come out.

MAX

Not a bad idea.

Tom is clearly thinking about something.

MAX

What?

TOM

Now don't get apoplectic but ... there's one paragraph I have to add to the book.

MAX

By God, if you start adding paragraphs we're sunk!
One paragraph will lead to two and we'll be here for another year--!

TOM

It's only one paragraph ... Shall I read it to you?

Max sits sourly as Tom pulls a piece of paper from his pocket. He reads with quiet emotion:

TOM

It goes at the very front ... "This book is dedicated to Maxwell Evarts Perkins, a brave and honest man, who stuck to the writer of this book through times of bitter hopelessness. The author hopes this book will prove worthy of him."

Max looks at him, moved.

MAX

I wish you wouldn't.

TOM

Why?

MAX

Editors should be anonymous. And more than that...

Max stops.

He rises and slowly pours himself a drink. Tom senses Max is thinking deeply about something and respects his silence.

Max finally turns back to Tom:

MAX

More than that, I deformed your book. I will forever be proud of the work we've done here. But part of me will never forgive myself ... Who's to say it wasn't the way it was meant to be when you first brought it in.

TOM

Max--

MAX

That's what we editors lose sleep over, you know. Are we really making books better, or just making them different?

A beat.

TOM

Without you I would still be in my apartment with three crates of illegible scrawl. Now I have a book, Max. A book. That is a sacred and mighty thing.

Tom proceeds, very simply:

TOM

In all my life, until I met you, I never had a friend.

EXT.

NEW YORK TIMES BUILDING

MORNING

March, 1935. Max is waiting, tense, outside the Times.

News vans speed out of the loading bay.

One passes and tosses a pile of papers to the newsstand right outside the building. Max waits impatiently as the news vendor slices open the papers. Max buys the first one.

Flips through it and reads.

A beat.

Max sighs. Thank God.

EXT. GERMANY -- STREET DAY

Tom strides away from an American Express office and tears open a cable. Reads.

MAX (V.O.)
Magnificent reviews full of praise. Max.

Tom stops. Raises one leg. Stomps it down. And returns to the American Express office.

INT. MAX'S OFFICE DAY

A copy of OF TIME AND THE RIVER sits on Max's desk as he reads a cable from Tom.

TOM (V.O.)
You are the only damn friend I have. Stop. I can face blunt fact better than damnable incertitude. Stop. Give me the damn straight plain truth right now damn you. Tom.

Max smiles.

EXT. GERMANY -- CAFE DAY

Tom devours a new cable and breakfast:

MAX (V.O.)
Grand excited reception in reviews. Stop. Talked of everywhere as truly great book. All comparisons with greatest writers. Stop. Even James Joyce! Exclamation point. Max.

INT. MAX'S OFFICE AFTERNOON

Max reads a new cable:

TOM (V.O.)
Hell, Joyce wishes he was so good. Tom.

Max laughs.

EXT.GERMANY -- HILLSDAY

Tom rambles through some hills, reading a cable from Max for the hundredth time:

MAX (V.O.)

Had to rush out five editions of the book. 30,000 copies. Stop. Never seen a book so talked about. They're calling you a genius again. God help you. Stop. Come home soon. Max.

Tom raises his arms and roars in triumph.

INT.SCRIBNERS -- FIFTH FLOORDAY

Max is returning from lunch, whistling the jazzy version of "Loch Lomond." Unusually jaunty for our Max.

Max's Secretary stands at her desk and nods towards his office. Someone's waiting inside.

Max enters...

INT.MAX'S OFFICEDAY

Aline is standing, gazing over a row of copies of *OF TIME AND THE RIVER* on a shelf.

MAX

Mrs. Bernstein...

ALINE

Mr. Perkins.

MAX

Sit down, please ... What can I do for you?

ALINE

(sits)

It's rather what I can do you for you, Mr. Perkins. I couldn't help noticing that Tom dedicated his new book to you -- don't worry, I'm not angry -- I completely understand ... I wonder if you do, though.

MAX

If you would come to the point?

ALINE

He dedicated his first book to me. It was a lovely sentiment, you remember? But what he was actually saying was: "Thank you and goodbye."

MAX gares at her.

ALINE

I had served my purpose. And now you have served yours. Thank you and goodbye, Mr. Perkins.

MAX

What do you want from me?

ALINE

(calm)

I want to see you suffer, like I do. I want to know someone else on the planet feels as betrayed and alone as I do.

MAX

With respect, Mrs. Bernstein, you haven't the slightest notion of my relationship with Tom. In view of that--

ALINE

He makes you feel alive. He makes you feel young. He makes you do things you never thought you'd do . . . He liberates you.

MAX looks at her.

ALINE

And just when you have come to depend upon that, he will leave you. And you will never feel so alive again.

A beat.

MAX

I'm sorry, Mrs. Bernstein, I know it's been hard on you. Whatever pain he's caused you . . . I can only hope he didn't mean it.

ALINE

(smiles)

of course he did . . . Can you give me his address in Europe?

MAX

He asked me not to.

ALINE

Can you tell me when he's coming home?

MAX

I'm sorry, I don't think so.

ALINE

(smiles)

So I don't exist anymore. I have been ... edited.

Aline calmly reaches into her purse and removes a small, silver revolver. She sets it on the desk.

ALINE

I haven't quite decided who to shoot yet. Tom, myself, or you. Have you a suggestion?

MAX

Suicide seems a bit extreme. And killing Tom won't help much ... So I suppose that leaves me.

ALINE

I suppose it does.

He clucks his tongue. Tsk tsk.

MAX

You're overwriting the scene, Mrs. Bernstein.

She holds his gaze for a moment. Then smiles and puts the revolver back into her purse.

ALINE

We shall see, Mr. Perkins.

She stands and begins to go. Stops and turns back to him.

ALINE

I'm very sorry for what's going to happen to you. I truly am ... Enjoy the time with Tom while you have it. Because after him ... there is a great hush.

She goes.

Max sits, disturbed by her words.

EXT.

NEW YORK HARBOR

DAY

Fourth of July, 1935.

We hear a sound we have almost lost in our day of pressurized airplanes: the mournful-joyous howl of a great ocean liner's funnel.

The liner Bremen is at port, returning voyagers moving down the gangplank, greeting loved ones.

Max waits, oddly nervous, in the crowd. He scans the crowd like a Secret Service agent protecting the President. And he stranges to see his own returning voyager.

Tom sees Max and hurries down the gangplank:

TOM

MAX!

He devours Max into a huge bear hug. After the embrace, Max checks for any broken ribs as:

MAX

Wonderful to see you, Tom. Now listen, we have to talk. I have a taxi--

Tom throws an around Max and strides with him, pulling him along:

TOM

Hell no! No taxis or buses or trains or automation -- I have to WALK -- I have to FEEL my country again! You don't know how much I've missed you--

MAX

I've missed you too -- but this is important--

TOM

It's the Fourth of July! We gotta celebrate! Hellfire, son, I wanna light some fireworks and get roaring drunk and--!

Max stops him.

MAX

Aline has a gun ... She came into my office last week and pulled an actual gun out of her purse--

TOM

(amused)

Right there on the fifth floor!

MAX

I'm serious, Tom. She's in quite a state.

Tom continues walking. Max follows.

TOM

Aline's just being "theatrical." It was probably a prop from HEDDA GABLER.

MAX

My point is, I think you need to be careful.

TOM

Then you better stay with me. You'd take a bullet for me wouldn't you?

He claps an arm around Max happily and hauls him off.

TOM

Let's AMBULATE! Let's wander the whole city and dodge bullets and eat wieners and find us some fireworks!

EXT. BROOKLYN BRIDGE -- FOURTH OF JULY DAY

The most beautiful bridge in America towers before us.

We move down to Max and Tom, talking happily as they ramble toward Brooklyn.

MAX

... Now my mother had a somewhat different reaction. She just sat there for a week, like a wooden Indian, reading your book. Finally she finished it, dropped the book in her lap, lifted her face and declared, "I've never read such language in my life! Maxwell, fetch me a volume of Jane Austen so I can purge my mind!"

They explode in laughter.

EXT. PARK -- BROOKLYN -- FOURTH OF JULY DAY

They ramble past an impromptu baseball game, men and boys with rolled sleeves. Utterly American.

They both munch hotdogs.

TOM

... and she always carried a dachshund. Scrappy little thing it was. Every time I got within two feet the little bastard would start snarling and snapping--

MAX

(munching)

Terrifying.

TOM

You don't know! I have never seen so many teeth in my life. It was like a miniature Hemingway.

Max laughs. Then calls from the baseball players alert them -- they turn -- a high pop-fly is sailing toward them.

Tom runs for the ball -- makes a high leap -- impossibly high -- the sun catching him for a moment like Icarus soaring --

He snags the ball. The baseball players are delighted. They call and wave for Tom and Max to join them.

EXT. PARK -- FOURTH OF JULY AFTERNOON

Maxwell Perkins, Editor-in-Chief of Scribners, mans first base. Tom towers at second base.

They exchange a steely glance. Let's finish these bastards.

The pitch -- a solid hit -- the ball bounces to the short stop -- he flings it to Tom at second -- the runner racing to second is out -- Tom whips it to Max at first -- Max makes the out. A perfect double play! Victory!

The opposing team collapses in paroxysms of pain.

Tom bounds over in great leaps and congratulates Max wildly along with the rest of the team.

EXT. STREET -- FOURTH OF JULY AFTERNOON

Max and Tom ramble through Brooklyn. They share drinks from Tom's flask.

Max has actually loosened his tie. Unheard of.

TOM

... I mean can one man do it? Write his whole life story fairly? Honestly? Like Proust without all the upholstery.

MAX

Well, sure.

TOM

Now TIME AND THE RIVER stopped when I met Aline. I'll have to write about that next.

MAX

She won't like it.

TOM

She'll love it. It'll make her immortal. Hey, before you know it I'll be writing about you!

MAX

I'm sure you can find more interesting things to write about...

They round a corner. An all too familiar and sobering Depression era sight awaits them.

A bread line. Men and women and children stand in a grimly ordered line. Soup dispensed at the end.

They stop.

TOM

I'll say this for the Nazis, no bread lines.

MAX

High price for a loaf of bread.

TOM

God, the things I saw ... I never knew people could get so ugly. And I don't put a lot of stock in people's goodness in the first place.

A beat as Tom watches the eyes of the poor people on the bread line.

TOM

It's so frivolous...

MAX

What?

TOM

What I do. I'm frivolous. Writing books that these folks'll never read. Telling my life story like it's important to them. These people are starving.

A beat.

Tom glances around, gets a sense of where he is.

TOM

Hey ... Come with me...

He leads Max off...

EXT.

BUILDING -- FOURTH OF JULY

LATE AFTERNOON

Tom carries a bottle wrapped in a paper bag. Both are a bit tipsy by now.

70

Tom tries the front door of a squalid apartment building. The door is locked.

TOM

Damn.

He steps back, looks at the building. Takes a deep drink from the bottle.

TOM

I know...

He pulls Max away...

EXT. ALLEY -- FOURTH OF JULY LATE AFTERNOON

They move into the alley next to the squalid building. A rickety fire escape hangs above them.

Tom leaps up and pulls it down.

MAX

You've got to be kidding.

TOM

It'll be worth it, I promise! Have I ever lied to you?

MAX

This would fall under the general category of breaking and entering.

TOM

Oh, let's have an adventure, come on.

Tom hands him the bottle. Max takes a swig.

And they proceed up the fire escape...

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE -- FOURTH OF JULY LATE AFTERNOON

They move up the treacherous fire escape, nearing the top.

Tom arrives at a window. The top floor. Tries the window. It's locked.

TOM

Oh goddamn it! I can't believe it...

He peers into the apartment. Dark. Deserted. No one living there.

Max calmly leans back and kicks the window. It breaks.

Tom looks at him, shocked.

Then they climb into the apartment...

INT. APARTMENT -- FOURTH OF JULY LATE AFTERNOON

It is dingy, cramped. A tiny, depressing garret.

Tom moves into the room, remembering.

Max glances around, singularly unimpressed.

MAX

Why, on earth, are we here?

TOM

This is where I wrote LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL.

Max is almost instantly sober. He looks around. This is a sacred place.

Tom feels the walls. Deeply moved.

TOM

Do you have a pencil?

MAX

A red one, always.

Max hands him a red pencil.

Tom pulls over a chair, climbs up and reaches to the ceiling.

He writes on the ceiling: Thomas Wolfe lived here.

They stand for a moment.

TOM

There's one other thing you gotta see...

EXT. ROOF -- FOURTH OF JULY SUNSET

Across the river, the sun is just setting crimson over the towers of Manhattan.

The view is breathtaking.

Tom and Max stand on the roof, gazing over the city.

They speak quietly.

TOM

I would come here every twilight and look at the city and dream of what my life might be ... until the stars came out. The stars in the sky. The lights in the buildings. All those lights. All the power of life.

A Beat.

Max gazes over the city as he speaks simply:

MAX

You're not frivolous, Tom ... I think back in the Cave Man days our ancestors would huddle around the fire at night. And wolves would be howling in the dark just beyond the light ... Then one person would start talking. And he would tell a story. So we wouldn't be so scared in the dark.

Then we see them from behind, their silhouettes illuminated by the majestic red sunset.

Tom puts an arm around Max's shoulders and rests his head on Max's.

They stand together, looking over the city.

They will never be this happy again.

SLOW FADE TO...

EXT.

BOAT -- OCEAN

DAY

The blazing sunlight sparkles on the waves like stars in the night sky.

Max sits, perched comfortably in a chair bolted to the aft of a scurvy fishing boat.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY sits next to him.

Banish now every mental image you have of the old man in the white beard. This is Hemingway at 36. Powerful, sexy, disciplined. Not as tall as you might expect but a giant in every other way.

Ernest sits in the other aft chair beside Max. They both have deep-sea fishing rods, their lines trailing lazily in the water.

This is big game fishing Perkins-style. He wears his usual three piece suit and tie. And the hat. Yet he somehow manages to look perfectly at ease.

He as relaxed as we have ever seen him.

ERNEST

...I guess I'll have to look at the proofs when I get back, is that all right?

MAX

How long?

ERNEST

If I don't get shot, a couple months. I'm telling you, this is where the real action is gonna be. Spain!

MAX

You've already done a bullfighting book.

ERNEST

Not bullfighting! War! Real men killing other real men. No metaphors! -- I need to feel that old lucha por la vida. The struggle of life -- the fight for survival. That's what it's all about, you understand?

MAX

(smiles)

You betcha.

A quiet, contented beat.

ERNEST

So how's the muse from greater Asheville doing?

MAX

He's writing a new book, God help me. Did you read OF TIME AND THE RIVER?

ERNEST

Crap ... (Max smiles) ... Boy's got serious delusions of "importance." And he's been mouthing off too much in the press. Tell him to shut the hell up and stick to his pencil.

MAX

You know Tom, he's exuberant.

ERNEST

Bullshit, he's starting to believe what they say about him. Same thing that happened to Fitzgerald. He hears he's the great man of letters so many times he starts to believe it ... Then he's gotta live up to it ... Then he stops writing.

MAX

Tom has to write, it's in his blood.

ERNEST

I woulda said the same thing about Scott five years ago. Most elegant writer I ever knew, aside from me. Now he can't put five words together to save his life, poor sonofabitch ... You know Tom'll leave you soon.

MAX

I don't think so.

ERNEST

You don't think those bastards at Harpers and MacMillan aren't already pouring poison in his ear?

MAX

Tom won't listen. You saw the dedication in TIME AND THE RIVER.

ERNEST

Yeah I did ... Read like something from a tombstone.

Max looks at him.

Suddenly -- Max's fishing rod jerks violently -- he grabs it. Ernest leaps to his side--

ERNEST

Pull him back! -- Hands higher on the rod!

MAX

Take it!

ERNEST

He's yours, Max! Stand up -- brace yourself!

Max stands -- bracing a foot on the rail of the boat -- fighting with the fish--

ERNEST

Now pull him back, don't jerk him -- That's it.
He'll try to dive deep -- lock the reel -- You feel
him?

MAX

Yes.

ERNEST

Now give him a tug, show him who's boss -- (Max
does so) -- Okay, he'll come up and give you the
eye -- Look right back at him! Right into his eye!

MAX

What sort of expression?

ERNEST

Christ, Max! PREDATOR! Great White Hunter! King of
the Goddamn Jungle! -- HERE HE COMES!

A magnificent marlin crests the surface in an enormous arc --
time is suspended -- it is glorious--

The marlin dives--

ERNEST

Now nail him! Bring him to Papa!

Max reels in the marlin -- fighting every inch of the way.

Finally the marlin crests the surface again -- Max struggles
and tames the fish.

Ernest celebrates wildly. Max laughs, triumphant and amazed.

EXT.

DOCK -- KEY WEST

DAY

Max and Ernest pose next to the marlin as it hangs, a perfect
trophy. A perfect day.

A series of quick photos as they assume various poses.
Laughing. Faux serious. Ernest in his tattered shorts and
shirt. Max in his three piece suit and hat.

After the barrage of photos:

ERNEST

I'll get him mounted and send him to you.

MAX

Oh, really, no. You keep him.

Funeast punches him in the chest. Max coughs.

ERNEST

Well, you tamed him, Max! He's your prize! Your symbol of life, don't ya see? Some days you're gonna lose. And some days you're gonna lose bad. This day ... you won.

Max looks at the marlin. Smiles.

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- MASTER BEDROOM DAY

Max, dressed in an elegant gray morning coat, is trying to get his formal tie into shape. Louise is sitting at her dressing table behind him, putting on makeup.

LOUISE

... oh, I know all that, he's a wonderful man. No doubt he'll make a fine living one day. And she's only going across town after all..

Max finishes his tie. Seems satisfied with it.

He notices Louise has stopped putting on her makeup. She is crying gently.

He goes to her.

MAY

Nothing to cry about, dear ... we have three more.

She smiles. He kisses her and goes...

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- CORRIDOR DAY

Max moves down a corridor. We can see caterers setting up flowers, decorations and tables in the living room.

He moves to another door and knocks.

BERTHA (V.O.)

Come in...

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- ZIPPY'S ROOM DAY

The five Perkins girls are in a flutter.

Zippy stands in a classic wedding dress, the others are dressed as bridesmaids.

Young Zippy flings herself on Max.



NANCY
Doesn't she look ravishing?!

MAX
Very grown up.

He carries Nancy to Zippy. Gives Zippy a kiss.

MAX
Hello, darling.

ZIPPY
(tears)
Daddy...

She hugs him.

MAX
Now watch your hair, mustn't get all mussed before
the pictures. I paid a fortune for that blessed
photographer of yours...

Bertha, meanwhile, straightens Max's tie:

BERTHA
You're so handsome when you try.

ZIPPY
You are happy today, aren't you, daddy?

MAX
Busting my buttons ... Bertha, why don't you go
help your mother?

BERTHA
She's hopeless, isn't she? She was just like this
at my wedding...

She goes.

MAX
Girls, would you give us a moment?

NANCY
I have to put on my shoes!

MAX
I won't steal them, give us a minute.

Nancy, Peggy and Jane clatter out.

Max stands with Zippy for a moment. He wipes some tears from her face.

MAX

Now you probably don't remember this, but the first time I took you bird watching up at Windsor you were desperate to see a red-headed woodpecker. But we didn't see a thing...

ZIPPY

(smiles)

I remember...

MAX

I thought you were going to be so disappointed. But you weren't. You looked at me, terribly serious, and you said ... "Oh, Daddy, seeing a woodpecker would have been grand, but wasn't the sun beautiful through the birch trees?" ... From that moment, I knew you were going to have a joyous life.

She hugs him. He kisses her.

MAX

I love you, daughter.

INT.

CHURCH

DAY

Zippy stands at the altar with her new husband, the handsome painter Doug Gorsline.

Zippy is flanked by the other four Perkins daughters.

Max and Louise sit in a front pew. Scott Fitzgerald sits next to them.

The minister is quietly intoning a prayer.

When...

Tom enters with a bang.

He wears a rumpled suit and is a little drunk. He grimaces when the church doors slam behind him. He finds his way to a pew and plops down.

Max and Louise, and most of the guests, glance back.

Louise shoots Max a look.

The service goes on for a moment in hushed tones.

Then a voice, from the back of the church:

TOM

Jesus Christ! My hatband stinks -- I'm sweating like a brood sow!

Max sighs.

Zippy, at the altar, exchanges a look with Bertha. They stifle a giggle. Soon all the Perkins girls are trying not to laugh.

INT.

TOWNHOUSE

DAY

The wedding reception is a lovely affair.

The guests mingle as music plays. Zippy and Doug receive the guests and chat.

We follow Nancy as she swerves through the guests, looking for something. She goes up to Scott Fitzgerald.

NANCY

Mr. Fitzgerald, have you seen my shoes?

Scott looks down at her, tries to focus through a gentle haze of good liquor.

SCOTT

What do they look like?

NANCY

They're pink, with a buckle.

SCOTT

Pink shoes ... no ... Where did you last see them?

NANCY

On my feet, of course.

SCOTT

Now that makes sense. Shall I help you look?

NANCY

Yes, please. And then you can tell me a story.

SCOTT

Ahh ... her father's daughter ... Come along then.

He leads her away as we find Max and Louise talking with Bertha:

BERTHA

Disaster with the caterers. They claim they can't find the last case of champagne.

LOUISE

(to Max)

I'll take care of it ... You keep an eye on Tom. Make sure he doesn't eat anyone.

She goes off with Bertha.

Max stands alone for a moment and looks over the party.

He sees Tom flirting with the pretty woman...

He sees Scott nestled in a corner with Nancy, telling her a gentle story...

He sees Jane and Peggy, talking to two of Doug's groomsmen, looking very grown up...

He finally turns to look at Zippy and her husband.

She looks so beautiful. And happy.

A quiet look settles over his face.

Another daughter gone.

INT.

TOWNHOUSE

LATE NIGHT

Max sits alone in the remnants of the party, an unread manuscript in his lap.

Louise enters in her robe, looks at him for a moment.

LOUISE

Come to bed, dear.

MAX

I've a little more work.

She sits next to him. She puts an arm around him.

LOUISE

We have three more, you know.

MAX

They'll leave me too.

A Bell.

LOUISE

You've still got your boys.

He holds her.

INT.

TOWNHOUSE -- LIVING ROOM

NIGHT

Scott and ZELDA FITZGERALD sit with Max and Louise. Drinks before dinner. Only Scott drinks Coca-Cola and Zelda drinks nothing.

Scott sits protectively on the arm of Zelda's chair. One hand always on her shoulder, as if trying to sense the seismic tremors rumbling within her.

Zelda is a woman in almost catatonic torment. Her once famous beauty is gone. The sparkling eyes leaden. The Riviera-bronze skin is now an ashen mask pulled too tightly over her skull.

She has been in and out of asylums for several years now.

SCOTT

... Scottie's going gangbusters at Vassar. She seems to have developed an affection for drama, might even be an actress. She wants to talk to you about it, Louise.

LOUISE

I would love to. I hope you're not discouraging her.

SCOTT

Not the path we would have chosen, but she's an artist anyhow. That's something.

The doorbell rings.

LOUISE

That must be Tom...

MAX

I'll get it...

Max rises and leaves the room as Scott turns gently to Zelda:

SCOTT

It's Tom, honey. Come to see you.

Zelda does not respond.

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- ENTRY HALL NIGHT

Max opens the front door. Tom lurches in unsteadily. He is, as ever when very drunk, sweating and roiling.

MAX

Easy...

TOM

Where's Scott?

MAX

(stops him, irritated)
You might have waited to start drinking--

TOM

I have to see Scott--

MAX

Tom -- look at me -- (Tom somewhat focuses on him) -- Zelda's just out of the hospital. She's not well. For God's sake, don't start in.

TOM

Listen to you -- I'm not some crude mechanical --
SCOTT, YOU OLD BASTARD...!

He thunders into the living room. Max follows, concerned.

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- DINING ROOM NIGHT

They sit around the table. Eleanor clears the salad plates before serving the next course. She shoots a disapproving glance to Tom as she passes.

TOM

... I tried to tell that to Max! I mean does he -- tell me, Scott -- does he make you take a lot out?

SCOTT

He doesn't make me do anything.

Zelda sits, head down. Staring at her plate. She has not eaten a thing. Eleanor glances to Louise. Louise nods. Eleanor removes Zelda's plate. As:

TOM

Well does he advise you take a lot out?

SCOTT

That depends.

TOM

On your last book -- TENDER IS THE NIGHT -- great book -- I mean not my style, all those screaming harpies in padded cells ain't exactly my turf -- did he make you take a lot out?

SCOTT

We're different writers, Tom.

TOM

How's that?

SCOTT

I don't write such long books.

TOM

You mean can't write such long books.

LOUISE

(exhausted with him)

Tom...

TOM

Just say it, Scotty! There's no SHAME to writing short. Though I think you've taken it a bit too far -- I mean are you ever going to write another novel?

SCOTT

(changing the subject)

Max, I hear you finally went hunting with Ernest--

MAX

yes, in the wilds of darkest Arkansas, it was quite an--

TOM

Don't ignore me, Scotty--

MAX

(sharp)

That's enough.

TOM

(ignoring him, to Scott)

Don't pretend I'm not here -- Jesus Christ -- I know you haven't written a goddamn thing in years -- (he shoots a cruel glance to Zelda) -- but don't blame me for that!

ZELDA begins to cry.

Max instantly stands and grabs Tom firmly. Drags him up. Hauls him out.

Scott comforts Zelda. Louise glares after Tom.

EXT. FIFTH AVENUE NIGHT

Max strides up Fifth Avenue, furious.

Tom follows.

TOM

... you know goddamn well it's her fault. I thought you were supposed to care about him! You should tell him to locked her up and throw away the key and get back to work...!

Max turns into Central Park, Tom follows...

EXT. CENTRAL PARK -- ZOO NIGHT

Max strides past the darkened Central Park Zoo, Tom following.

The wrought-iron bars and cages of the Zoo lurk beyond them.

TOM

... He's probably past it now, couldn't make a whole book. But he's still got some talent around the edges. Faded grandeur, I suppose you'd have to call it. But that's still better than--

Max stops, spins--

MAX

Would you shut up!

Tom blinks. Stops talking.

Max tries to restrain his temper. It isn't easy.

MAX

It amazes me, still, after all these years, how cruel you can be.

TOM

I'm only being honest--

MAX

Did you ever -- once -- try to imagine what he did for Scott?

TOM

Why would I--?

MAX

How many words did you write today?

TOM

What?

MAX

How many words did you write today?

TOM

Maybe 3,000.

MAX

Scott wrote maybe a hundred. If today was a good day. If today was a great day. And he needs to write as much as you do. He fights over every word.

TOM

Then he should fight more.

Their argument is now disturbing the sleeping animals in the zoo beside them. A lion's roar echoes.

MAX

His wife is going mad and he's trying to keep her in private asylums and put his daughter through college and trying not to drink. No one cares about what he writes or even remembers him anymore. Can you imagine what that's like?

TOM

Don't blame me for his weakness--

MAX

But can you imagine it?! -- You can't, that's what astounds me! You're a writer but you seem to have no empathy, no caring for other people--

TOM

What did all that caring get Scott?

MAX

I'm not talking about Scott ... It hurts me to see you so cruel.

TOM

(miles)

So I've disappointed you yet again?

MAX

Yes, very much.

TOM

Well, I'm sorry I'm not decent enough for your fine dinner parties and your fine friends. But before you drag me out to the woodshed, I think you oughta consider who's giving the lesson! Am I supposed to grow up like you?!

MAX

No, Tom, but you're supposed to grow up!

By now the animals in the zoo are restless -- an eerie nocturnal symphony of roars and screeches and howls.

TOM

How dare you?! You -- of all goddamn people -- You're nothing but a coward. Trapped in that sterile little office, every beautiful thing in you stunted by those constipated New England manners! You don't have the first idea what it is to be alive. You don't know what it is to wake up and grab hold of life every day and fight with it -- you're just so goddamn scared to live--!

MAX

There are other ways to live.

And, with that, Max Perkins loses his temper.

This explosion has been building for years. And when it comes it is with the force of a clipped, controlled hurricane:

MAX

There's loving your children and seeing them grow up right. There's doing work that's important. There's giving to other people. People like you--

TOM

That's enough--!

MAX

I've taken your abuse because I told myself you were worth it. The work was worth it. I allowed you to degrade me in front of my children because I told myself that you cared for me, down deep. But God help anyone who loves you, Tom, because for all your talk -- all those millions of beatiful words -- you don't have the slightest idea of what it means to be alive. To look into another person's eyes and ache for them.

A beat.

MAX

I hope someday you will ... Then maybe all your words will be worth five of Scott's.

He turns and goes.

Tom stands, stunned. But most of all, angry. As the animals in the zoo continue their eerie howling.

INT.

PENTHOUSE

NIGHT

Later that night.

A very tastefully-appointed penthouse apartment. The design is luxurius and very 1937 modern. Beyond the windows there is a panoramic view of the lights of Manhattan.

Tom is slumped gloomily in a chair, talking to someone we don't initially see:

TOM

... Max thinks he created me, you know that? Like Pygmalion -- he thinks he found this ugly lump of Carolina clay and molded it into me.

ALINE

I'm sure he doesn't.

We now see Aline standing across the room, slowly fixing a drink. Wakened by Tom's arrival, she is wearing a lovely robe.

Aline looks good. Being apart from Tom clearly agrees with her. She is composed and nicely mature.

TOM

Sure he does. You don't know how he talks to me. It's so patronizing: "Put this in. Take this out. You're losing the verbs. Where's the plot? Why can't you write like Fitzgerald? He's a poet. Why can't you write like Hemingway? He's a craftsman. You gotta be disciplined, you dumb fucking hick!" - " And I'm the one who's supposed to lack empathy!"

Aline just stands across the room, slowly fixing her drink. She is a disturbed by Tom's venom.

TCM

Jesus Christ, he's not even a writer. He's a damn fine editor, but he is not an artist! He doesn't actually create anything.

ALINE

He created you.

TOM

Oh, stop it.

ALINE

What were you before you met him if not a dumb fucking hick? An unpublished dumb fucking hick.

TCM

You know they say I don't even write my own books. They say I can't write my own books. It's all Max and his brilliant editing! I hear it everywhere I go. Wouldn't I be LOST without Max? What would I DO without the great Maxwell Perkins?! Jesus, it's demoralizing -- it's humiliating -- it's criminal!

Tom's fury momentarily abates.

ALINE just stands, sipping her drink. She makes no effort to cross to him.

ALINE

so he finally stood up to you. Good for him.

TOM

Oh, you're a big help, thanks.

ALINE

Why are you here, Tom?

Tom doesn't reply.

ALINE

You have no where else to go ... That would break my heart if I let it.

Tom sinks deeper into his chair.

A beat.

TCM

I couldn't believe how much the folks at Randoms liked me for my next book.

ALINE

Ah, there it is.

TOM

I told them no.

ALINE

You told them maybe. You tell everyone maybe ...
Now you're going to tell them yes.

A beat.

Tom changes the subject.

TOM

Hey, I been thinking about taking a trip, vacation-like. Buying an old car and just driving off. Maybe see California and all those sun-kissed locales ... Why don't you come?

Aline smiles.

TOM

(seductive)

I mean it. Let's hit the road and have some fun again, you and me. Like it used to be. You and me and no one else in the world even exists. We're in our own private cathedral. Doesn't that sound like a momentous journey?

ALINE

Tom, you need to spend some time alone.

TOM

I'm a writer, Aline. All I do is spend time alone.

ALINE

No. You spend time with your characters ... You've never been alone. First you had your family, then you had me, then you had Max.

She slowly, slowly, crosses to him.

ALINE

You need to spend some time alone. And you need to think about your life. About how you move through that life ... You hurt me. You're going to hurt Max. You shouldn't hurt anyone else.

She stands over him.

ALINE

Human beings are not fiction.

She beats.

ALINE

Now, I'm going back to bed . . . You know the way out.

She turns and begins to go:

ALINE

This chapter of my life is closed.

She's gone.

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- ENTRY HALL DAY

Nancy, now a young lady of eleven, watches curiously as several workmen tear open a huge crate that fills the entry hall. Eleanor stands with her.

The workmen finally tear open the crate. Inside is Marlin. Mounted.

Eleanor stares at it. Dumbfounded. Nancy is delighted.

ELEANOR

Um, Mrs. Perkins . . .

Louise comes, looks at the enormous fish.

LOUISE

(calls)

Max . . .

Max, getting ready for work, appears. Sees the marlin. Smiles.

LOUISE

What is this?

MAX

My old lucha por la vida.

LOUISE

And just where are we meant to put it?

MAX

How about the dining room?

ELEANOR

I don't want that thing staring at me.

Nancy reads the note that accompanied the marlin:

NANCY

"To dear Max, From Ernest and all the drunks of Key West."

LOUISE

(taking note quickly)
How about we send it back?

NANCY

We can't!

LOUISE

It'll be happy with Uncle Ernest, dear ... (to Max)
... It doesn't really ... go here. Does it?

Max looks at the marlin wistfully.

MAX

No. I suppose not ... (an idea) ... How about the office?!

LOUISE

Good! Let Mr. Scribner deal with it.

MAX

(to the workmen)
Pack it up. We're off to Fifth and 48th!

NANCY

(to marlin)
Goodbye, fish.

Max smiles and tousles her hair.

INT.

MAX'S OFFICE

NIGHT

The marlin leans against a bookcase, yet to be hung.

Tom comes. Max sits at his desk, utterly drained.

TOM

... You don't understand what it's like for me! You don't know the sheer terror of all those thoughts, all those words, racing to get out -- and trying to capture them all with your pencil before it's too late and they're gone forever -- I wonder if you even care--

MAX

Oh, for Pete's sake--

TOM

You know what's coming up next? You are. And everybody at Scribners -- Now don't look all innocent. You knew it was coming.

MAX

You can write anything you want about me ... but I assumed our conversations about my colleagues were private.

TOM

Oh, I understand. It's fine so long as I'm writing about my family and all those chinless, in-bred hayseeds back in Asheville but not about the sacred House of Scribner. Not about your highhat pals. Is that about the size of it?

MAX

(exhausted)

Write whatever the hell you want--

TOM

(not even hearing)

If Scribners won't give me the freedom to write what I want then I have to find another publisher!

MAX

Then find another publisher, just stop talking about it.

TOM

Is that what you want me to do? You want me to go?

MAX

We've been through this a thousand times--

TOM

You want me to go.

MAX

No. You want you to go.

Tom finally stops raving. Staring out a window, Max remains sitting at his desk, his back to Tom.

TOM

I done prove I can do it by myself.

MAX

Then prove it.

Tom stares out the window. Pensive. Not really wanting to face the inevitable truth.

Max is deep in thought.

He finally speaks with quiet emotion.

MAX

And you're wrong ... I do know what it is to try to capture all those thoughts, all those words, before they're gone ... because I tried when I was 25 ... You think I started out wanting to be an editor?

A beat.

MAX

When I was 25 I realized I had plenty of words at my disposal, an endless supply ... I just didn't have anything much to say.

Tom takes in Max's words, tears coming to his eyes as he gazes out the window.

TOM

The last time I saw my father ... I was standing at a train window when I went north to college. He just got smaller and smaller as we pulled away. Until I couldn't see him anymore ...

He turns, looks at Max's back.

TOM

That train carried me to my life. Beyond the hills, and over the rivers. And always the rivers run. Sometimes they flow away from our father and sometimes they flow back to his door.

MAX

Can anyone really go home again?

Tom moves to Max. Gently lifts off his hat and kisses Max's head. Max doesn't move.

Tom returns the hat to Max's head and leaves.

Max sits.

We slowly fade to...

INT. APARTMENT -- HOLLYWOOD DAY

Incongruously, a Spanish-style apartment building in Hollywood. Palm trees and sun.

INT. APARTMENT -- HOLLYWOOD DAY

A bottle opener flips off a cap and Coca-Cola fizzes. Scott Fitzgerald pours his Coke into a glass.

Here, so near the end, Scott is rallying. He has gained some weight and the terrible sadness that hung over him has lifted a bit. He now sports a tan.

And a quiet sort of grace.

He sits with a pencil and a pad, notes spread around him. Working.

The doorbell rings. Scott is surprised. His doorbell, and his telephone, don't ring much these days. He moves across the small apartment and opens the door.

Tom turns outside.

TOM

(quickly)

Scott, I'm sorry. I was a damn brute and I wouldn't blame you if you slammed the door in my face -- You don't know how sorry I am for talking to you and Zelda like that. Please say you forgive me.

A beat.

SCOTT

Believe it or not, I've been drunk myself once or twice.

He smiles dryly. Then he offers his hand. They shake.

Later...

Scott sits. Tom roams around the apartment.

SCOTT

... I'm still a bit of a washout as a screenwriter. Just can't make the grade as a hack, even that requires a certain practiced excellence.... But Zelda's in one of her dormant periods. And I'm writing again.

TOM

I'm mighty glad to see you, Scott. I've been rambling around for months now and I haven't had anyone to talk to. About work.

SCOTT

Oh, work.

TOM

And who better to talk to? I mean, God, the man who wrote GATSBY ... (Scott smiles) ... The man who created something immortal. More and more I trouble myself with that. "The Legacy." Will anyone care about Thomas Wolfe in a hundred years? Or ten years? Will anyone remember a word I've written?

SCOTT

When I was young I asked myself that question every day ... Now I ask myself if I can write one good sentence.

TOM

How can you say that? Don't you want to be remembered?

SCOTT

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE just went out of print. For the first time in eighteen years. GATSBY will go next--

TOM

That'll never happen.

SCOTT

You know how much I made in royalties on GATSBY last year? Two dollars and thirteen cents ... (he smiles) ... But it doesn't matter. I'm working now.

Suddenly -- a scream echoes through the thin walls. Blood-chilling.

SCOTT

My next door neighbor is a radio actress. Periodically rehearses her screams and laughter.

TOM

Well that's a little disquieting.

SCOTT

The laughing's worse, trust me ... Have you talked to Max lately?

TOM

Don't talk about Max.

SCOTT

(evenly)

Why not, Tom?

Tom ranges again. Another scream echoes from next door.

TOM

I know he's your friend, but you have no idea --
He tried to cripple me -- He deformed my work --
and then tried to take all the credit for my
success--!

SCOTT

Do you know how much you hurt him?

TOM

We hurt each other.

SCOTT

Don't be glib with me, Young Tom.

TOM

You just don't know what he did to me--!

SCOTT

What he did to you? What did he do? He made all
your dreams come true. He gave you a career, a
life--

TOM

There -- the Scribner party line! I expected more
from you.

SCOTT

(calm)

That decent man believed in you when no one else
would. He poured every bit of his hopes and dreams
into you. All the things he would never do. All the
books he would never write ... And now you repay
him with ugly accusations and belligerency ... You
ought to be ashamed of yourself.

A beat.

Scott looks at him deeply.

SCOTT

The day will come when you're not the success you are now. It's a long road then. Believe me. Why hurt the one man who will walk on that road with you?

INT. TOWNHOUSE -- LIVING ROOM NIGHT

Snow falls outside the window.

Max sits in a corner, a large martini at his side. Unread manuscript on his lap. He looks sad and drained, gazing out the window.

Nancy stands in the doorway, looking at him.

NANCY

Daddy...?

MAX

Hello, puppet.

She moves to him.

NANCY

Why doesn't Tom come around anymore?

MAX

Oh, Nancy ... (she sits next to him, he holds her) ... Tom needs some time for himself.

NANCY

Is he coming back?

MAX

I don't think so. You see Tom's the kind of fellow who has to make his own way through life.

NANCY

Is he mad at us?

MAX

No, honey ... Sometimes people just go away. They have to grow up and leave home ... It'll happen to you too.

She holds him.

NANCY

Poor Daddy ... (a beat) ... I miss him too.

MAX

Tell you what ... get me his book.

Nancy gets a copy of LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL. Hands it to Max. She snuggles in next to him.

Max flips to Chapter One.

MAX

(reads)

"A destiny that leads the English to the Dutch is strange enough; but one that leads from Epsom into Pennsylvania, and thence into the hills that shut in Altamont over the proud coral cry of the cock, and the soft smile of an angel..."

Max continues as we fade to...

EXT.

DESERT

NIGHT

A black night.

Tom stands. A field of perfect stars framing him.

MAX (V.O.)

"... is touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world ... Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a window on time."

A long, unbending dirt road through the Mojave desert.

Tom stands outside a paltry diner, smoking a cigarette. Inside the diner, quiet people and their quiet lives.

But Tom is looking at something else.

Down the road a piece is a campfire. Next to it is an old truck, piled high with the thousand dreams of one family. A vagabond family. "Okies" fleeing the Dust Bowl for the promised riches of fecund California.

The family huddles around the campfire.

Tom wanders toward them.

Two sisters sit side-by-side. One of them strums a guitar and they quietly sing a bit of Woody Guthrie's plaintive "Rantin' Round."

SISTER 1

"Ramble round your city,
 Ramble round the town,
 I never see a friend I know,
 As I ramblin' round, boys,
 As I go ramblin' round."

SISTER 2

"My sweetheart and my parents,
 I left my old home town,
 I'm out to do the best I can,
 As I go ramblin' round,
 As I go ramblin' round..."

They stop singing as Tom approaches, coming into the pool of light cast by the campfire. Silence. Suspicion. A stranger appearing from the darkness.

Tom smiles and hands his flask to the father. The father drinks. Still wary.

Tom looks at them. Into their eyes. They're hungry. They're scared.

A coyote howls in the distance.

Everywhere beyond the circle of light from the campfire is the impenetrable darkness of the desert.

TOM

You know, that song makes me think of my brother Grover. We grew up in Carolina, in a place called Asheville. A town completely surrounded by mountains. And Grover always dreamed about what was beyond the hills. Out there in the world...

And Tom is as he was always meant to be. At his best. At his heart. A storyteller.

TOM

... Well, when he was about eight he found out. We went to the St. Louis World's Fair. And there was so much magic for him there and it wasn't long before all his dreams came true...

He continues as we slowly fade back to...

INT.

MAX'S STUDY

NIGHT

Max concludes reading to Nancy. Louise now stands in the door watching.

MAX

.... And like a man who is perishing in the polar night, he thought of the rich meadows of his youth: the corn, the plum tree, and ripe grain. Why here? O Lost."

He shuts the book.

MAX

More tomorrow?

NANCY

Please.

MAX

Good night, puppet.

He kisses her and she starts to go off to bed. Stops and turns back to Max:

NANCY

You know, some of Tom's book goes over my head. I don't know what it all means ... But I know it means something.

Max smiles, at this moment quite proud of his daughter. Nancy leaves.

Louise goes to Max. He takes her hand.

MAX

You've raised five wonderful girls, Louise.

He kisses her hand.

INT.

SEATTLE HOTEL

DAY

Tom strides through a hotel lobby with a Reporter. The Reporter scribbles madly.

TOM

... I think Fitzgerald has a great book ahead of him. I can't wait to read it. You tell your readers that--

He suddenly stops. Dizzy.

TOM

Shaa ... (laughs) ... Too much booze last night --
Shaa, don't write that! You think I want --

Then -- with no warning whatsoever -- Tom collapses. Falling hard. Unconscious.

INT.

MAX'S OFFICE

DAY

Max is at work, flipping through some galleys.

His secretary's voice sounds on the intercom.

SECRETARY (V.O.)

Mr. Perkins, you have call ... from Tom's mother.

Max is surprised. And immediately concerned. He picks up the phone on his desk.

MAX

Mrs. Wolfe...?

INT.

JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL -- WAITING ROOM

DAY

Max sits with Tom's family.

They are all big, country people but for Tom's diminutive mother. Max comforts her.

TOM'S MOTHER

... Tuberculosis of the brain? Who even heard of such a thing? Doesn't even seem real. To be brought low by such a thing...

MAX

They're doing everything they can...

TOM'S MOTHER

Who would credit it? Who would credit it now?

MAX

What's that?

TOM'S MOTHER

That it would happen here. Of all places. Here.

Max doesn't understand.

TOM'S MOTHER

Tom's father died in this hospital, just down the hall ... It's like Tom's whole life is leading him, like a river, back to his father.

INT.

OPERATING THEATER

DAY

The surgeon stands over Tom. Medical staff in attendance.

Tom is unconscious, hooked into IV's. His head has been shaved.

The surgeon prepares and then trephines Tom's skull -- cranial fluid spurts across the operating theater from the built-up procedure.

The surgeon turns his face to the side, a nurse swabs him clean. He returns to surgery.

MAX. PHONE BOOTH -- HOSPITAL CORRIDOR NIGHT

Max is very thankful for the quiet privacy of a phone booth.

The door of the booth is shut. The Wolfe family and others are still waiting down the corridor.

Max talks to Louise, his granite resolve almost crumbling.

MAX

(on phone)

... the surgeon said his brain was ... filled with tumors. Myriads of tumors. That's the word he used "myriads" ... I think Tom would like that.

LOUISE

(V.O. on phone)

Max, dear, let me come down...

MAX

(on phone)

No, you stay with Nancy. You should -- ah -- you know -- prepare her. She always loved Tom most ... There's nothing they can do, you see. It's a matter of weeks. He might regain consciousness, he might not. Most likely not. It's so goddamn awful ...

He refuses to give into tears.

MAX

(on phone)

You remember that dinner -- that first dinner at our house? I can't stop thinking about it. That night he said to me ... "You are my island. Everything else is ocean." ... I can't stop thinking that he's out there on that ocean now. Lost and all alone.

He can't speak no more. He is hunched in the phone booth.

MR. HOSPITAL ROOM DAY

Tom lies in bed. Barely alive. His breath is a whisper.
His head has been bandaged.

He opens his eyes.

A long moment as he watches a nurse writing on his chart. He struggles to speak. He can't. The nurse finishes writing on the chart. Tom tries to speak. The nurse begins to leave. Tom wills himself to speak:

TOM

No...

She stops. Goes to him.

NURSE

Mr. Wolfe, don't try to speak...

TOM

Pen... cil...

NURSE

I'm sorry?

TOM

Pen-cil.

NURSE

Oh no, I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfe. You just lie still.
I'll get the doctor.

Tom looks at her with desperation.

TOM

Pen-cil.

Something in his profound need convinces her. The Nurse gets a pencil and a hospital note pad. Hands them to Tom.

NURSE

Please don't exert yourself...

She no longer exists for him. Everything important in the world is in his hands now. He slowly begins to write, with real difficulty, every word a struggle, his hand unsteady.

As we hear:

TOM (V.O.)

Dear Max ... I've got a hunch ... And I wanted to write these words to you...

We slowly fade as the spiritual "Goin' Home" begins...

INT. RIVERSIDE CEMETERY - ASHEVILLE DAY

"Goin' Home" continues...

The hills really do surround Asheville, North Carolina. It is a town in a bowl of mountains.

Tom's funeral.

His family is gathered around the grave.

Max stands with Louise at a distance. Then he moves away from her, wanting to be alone.

Exactly as he had during Tom's lifetime, Max stays in the background.

INT. TRAIN NIGHT

"Goin' Home" continues...

Max sits next to Louise. He stares out the window as the train back to New York sweeps through the night.

INT. PERKINS TOWNHOUSE DAY

"Goin' Home" continues...

Max and Louise enter, carrying suitcases.

Nancy is waiting.

As are the other four Perkins daughters. Some of their husbands, and now children, as well.

Max is surprised, and deeply touched, to see them.

They move to him, welcoming him, embracing him, bringing him comfort. His family.

He is home.

The great spiritual comes to a close as we return to...

INT. MAX'S OFFICE DAY

Scratch ... scratch ... scratch ...

The sound of a pencil writing on paper...

THE GREAT GATSBY.

As at the beginning of the story, we are looking at the spine of a book. We move along a shelf of books. Even more impressive now.

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE ... THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED ...
TENDER IS THE NIGHT ... THE SUN ALSO RISES ... A FAREWELL TO ARMS ... GREEN HILLS OF AFRICA ... FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS ... THE YEARLING ... LOOK HOMeward, ANGEL ... OF TIME AND THE RIVER...

Scratch ... scratch ... scratch ...

Max is at his desk. Editing. Hard at work. Content.

A clerk from the mailroom enters with a stack of mail.

MAILROOM CLERK
Afternoon, Mr. Perkins.

MAX
Afternoon, James.

Max leans back and flips through his mail. Something catches his eye.

A letter.

He stares at the envelope, absolutely stunned.

He recognizes the handwriting on the envelope. It's from Tom. The return address is Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Max carefully sets the letter in the center of his desk. He just looks at it.

Then he rises, shuts his office door, and returns to his desk. He sits and stares at the letter. He pushes his hat a little further back on his head.

He gazes at the letter, preparing himself. He finally reaches to open it. He notices his hands are shaking.

He opens the envelope and pulls out the letter: pages from the hospital note pad.

He begins to read.

We watch his face.

TOM (V.O.)

Dear Max ... I've got a hunch ... And I wanted to write these words to you...

I've made a long voyage and been to a strange country, and I've seen the dark man very close; and I don't think I was too much afraid of him...

But I want most desperately to live. I want to see you again, for there is such impossible anguish and regret for all I can never say to you, for all the work I have to do...

Then Max Perkins ... removes his hat.

sets it on the desk.

and begins to cry.

TOM (V.O.)

I feel as if a great window has been opened on my life. And if I come through this, I hope to God I'll be a better man and can live up to you...

Tom's voice continues as we go to...

EXT.

ROOF -- FOURTH OF JULY

SUNSET

An image we have seen before.

We see them from behind, their silhouettes illuminated by the majestic red sunset, standing on the roof. Looking over the city.

Tom with an arm around Max's shoulders, resting his head on Max's.

TOM (V.O.)

... But most of all I wanted to tell you, no matter what happens, I shall always feel about you the way I did that Fourth of July when you met me at the boat, and we went on top of the building, and all the strangeness and the glory and the power of life were below.

Always, Tom.

Max and Lew stand together,
And watch the coming night.

The End.