

## A FUNNEL OF TIME

1. 2005

After Mari's first electroconvulsive treatment, the shadow-woman comes to her. The shadow-woman sits on the edge of Mari's bed, crosses her legs neatly at the ankle and leans back against the wooden foot board. Her slim water-blue skirt and jacket seem to glow against the sterile white bedspread. A matching blue pillbox hat perches on her hair. She lifts one hand, her fingers curled as if holding an invisible cigarette.

"What are you here for?" she asks.

She has a shadow-voice, clear and cool as water, with a taste of Southern air in it. Mari envies her smooth creamy skin. Her own arms look too brown, her hands chapped and worn. She washes them too much. "They have to fix my brain," she says.

She doesn't know how the shadow-woman got into the room. She didn't see the door open or hear a nurse tell her she had a visitor. Besides, only her brother would come to see her. He hasn't come back since he left her here three days ago.

The woman's clothes and hands look blurred around the edges, outlined in a haze of light. Maybe she is an angel. Mari thinks doesn't think angels wear hip-hugging skirts and tiny hats. The woman says, "Why do they have to fix your brain?"

Mari touches the bedspread. The texture of interwoven threads under her fingertips reminds her that the bed is firm and solid. The mattress is not, as she thought at first after the ECT, actually a cloud underneath her. It pushes up against her shoulders and hips. She says, "I have depression. Anxiety."

*Mari, you can't live like this anymore. Don't you see?* Jaime had told her that before he brought her here. After what happened with the shower. But he doesn't understand, Jaime, with his job, his wife, his baby. He hides behind those things as if the past never happened.

The shadow-woman says, "They brought me here too."

Mari picks at the edge of the spread. The mattress pushes up harder and now she notices that her hips ache, and her shoulders too. At first the pain feels distant, something she remembers instead of something in the here-and-now. Slowly it intensifies. When she opens her mouth, her jaw throbs. "Why did they bring you?" she asks.

The woman smiles. "I worked too hard. My husband didn't like it."

*Worked how?* Mari wants to ask. *Worked on what?* By now, though, the pain makes it hard to think. She wishes she could shower. Maybe the warm water would relax her muscles. Here at the hospital, they don't let her wash when she wants. She has to get permission from the nurse and they unlock the bathroom for her and wait outside until she finishes. Jaime insisted on that.

He explained it to the nurse at intake three days ago. *She tried to drown herself in the shower.* Saying it, he sounded as detached and cool as he did when he bought or sold shares of stock. He handed Mari over to the doctor as if she were a share that didn't yield enough return anymore. *Please be sure you supervise her at all times, especially when she bathes.*

He didn't understand. Mari closes her eyes and remembers the water sluicing down on her, that last day. He didn't understand that she had not tried to drown herself. She had tried to wash herself finally clean of what the past had done to her. If you scrubbed long enough, maybe you could do it. If you closed your eyes and sat under the stream of water. If you held your breath and let the water cover you and didn't breathe, didn't breathe, didn't come up for air no matter how much you wanted to, didn't...

Mari opens her eyes. The shadow-woman still sits at the foot of the bed. She looks so bright, lit from the inside, that Mari squints to shield her eyes. The woman's clothes are the color of water. If Mari could have stayed under that water, if she hadn't passed out. If Jaime hadn't found her.

She wants to ask the woman, *Who are you?* But her head hurts and exhaustion weighs her down like wet sand, and the water-blue skirt and jacket seem to diffuse into the sunshine that comes through the room's single window. The woman fades until Mari can barely make out the outline of her raised hand and a last glimpse of bright hazel eyes. Then she is gone, leaving the room blank and empty.

2. 1934

After Zelda's first convulsive treatment, a woman comes to see her. She sits on the foot of Zelda's bed, leans back against the iron railing and draws her feet up onto the ugly mustard-colored blanket. Her clothes look like nothing Zelda has ever worn or seen a woman wear. Frayed blue dungarees, a tight-fitting black top with a V-neck that dips down to her cleavage, clunky black round-toed shoes with thick heels. She hugs her knees to her chest and Zelda sees the strong lines of muscle in her brown arms, her close-bitten nails, her brown chapped fingers.

The woman says, "Why are you here?"

Her voice is rich and low, rose-colored, with an edge of roughness like the gravelly bed of a stream. Zelda envies her strong body and healthy brown skin. She herself looks tired and wasted, her body too scrawny under the blanket, her face too lined and haggard. Even her once-sleek blond hair has turned thin and lusterless.

She doesn't wonder where the woman came from or how she got into the room. Here at the hospital, doors clang shut behind Zelda wherever she goes, locking her in, trapping her behind iron

bars. No one gets in or out without a doctor's permission. No one came to let the strangely-dressed woman in, Zelda is almost sure of that, but after treatment she is never sure of anything and has no energy left to wonder. She says, "I'm sick. At least, they tell me so."

The shadow-woman regards her out of dark steady eyes. She looks young, younger than Zelda, so full of life it radiates from her. Her outline glows against the sterile white wall behind her. Zelda has never believed in angels, but wonders if this woman might be one. Angels don't wear frayed dungarees and clunky black shoes. The woman says, "Sick how?"

"They say I'm schizophrenic."

Zelda hates convulsive treatment. The doctors inject her with some sort of medicine, she doesn't know what, but it jars her brain and body so hard that they have to tie her down on the gurney with thick leather straps around her forehead, wrists, waist and ankles. They truss her up like a victim of the electric chair so that the drug-induced seizure won't break her spine. They shove a cloth in her mouth so she can't bite through her tongue. Afterward, she crawls up out of an empty gray space and struggles to remember her own name.

Now her head throbs, and the blanket, which felt weightless when the nurse brought her back to her room, seems to squeeze all the air out of her chest. The woman on the bed says, "Who says you're schizophrenic?"

Zelda tugs the top of the blanket aside and tries to breathe. Her fingers, still red and roughened from her last round of eczema, look straw-like and fragile. She says, "The doctors. My husband."

She worked too hard. Everyone told her so. She drove herself crazy trying to carve out her own place in the world. Scott had said she shouldn't. He doesn't understand, Scott, the golden boy with the world at his feet. He hides behind the accolades and alcohol, climbs up into his high place and acts as if no wife could want more than the crumbs she scoops up in his shadow. He doesn't

understand how hunger for more can turn into a white-hot whip and cut you until your soul bleeds out.

The woman on the bed says, “My brother said I was bipolar.”

Zelda doesn’t know what that means. She would like to ask, but her lips feel thick and rubbery. The woman says, “He brought me here too, for treatment. He wanted me to forget things.”

Forget things. After the injections, the seizures, Zelda forgets too many things. She finds it hard to remember how old her daughter is, whether the little girl prefers pink dresses or yellow, peach preserves or plum. Zelda used to know these things. She used to know the tastes of lemon fizz, chocolate-hazelnut bonbons, raspberry ganache. She used to know the texture of sun-warmed grass and the smell of the air after rain.

Everything blurs together now in her mind in a wash of gray. She doesn’t forget, though, the whip in her soul. She doesn’t forget the desperate need that drove her to practice ballet steps for endless hours until her muscles gave out and the strain of anxiety brought the eczema raging up on her hands and face. And she doesn’t forget Scott’s admonitions. His work. His life. His home. His wife. None of it belonged to her: not even herself.

The stranger-woman’s outline blurs still more, turning her shape into a varicolored haze of light. Her clunky shoes are vague stains on the ugly bedspread and her dark brown eyes watch Zelda. Zelda says, through a jaw almost too sore to move, “I would like to forget some things.”

The woman shakes her head. “No,” she says, in that rosy-gravelly voice. “We should remember.”

Zelda would like to ask, *Who are you?* She is too sore now, too tired, and the words won’t come. She lies back on her pillow in silence and watches as the woman’s outline fades. Finally Zelda can only make out the shape of strong brown arms and a last hint of dark liquid eyes. Then the woman is gone, leaving the room bare and empty.

3. 2005

The doctors wait three days and then give Mari another ECT. As they prep her for treatment, injecting her first with anesthetic, she decides the process is worse the second time. She knows she will wake up with the taste of rubber in her mouth, from the block of it they put in there after she falls asleep to stop her from cracking her teeth together. She will have sticky jelly smeared on her temples and lines on her forehead and cheeks from the oxygen mask they will put over her face. And every part of her body will ache, her head worst of all.

Jaime didn't come to see her between treatments. After the second one, Mari lies back in her sterile bed and waits for the pain to come for her. Another three days and she will do this again. Jaime probably won't come before the next round either, she thinks, as much as she can think anything. He'll probably wait until she has finished them all, and then he can come and pick up the finished product. Fixed, cured, squeaky-clean.

She doesn't know how long she manages to sleep before the headache wakes her up. The room is dark. They didn't give her a bedside clock and she wouldn't feel like turning her head to see it anyway, but the hall outside is so quiet that she thinks it must be sometime in the middle of the night. The only light in the room comes from the thin line of pale green under the bathroom door, from the night light by the sink. If Mari wanted to use the bathroom, she would have to press the call button beside her bed. Somebody would have to come help her.

Somebody is already here. Without surprise or fear, Mari notices the shadow-woman standing by the door. The dark doesn't matter. Mari can make her out perfectly clearly: the same slender white hands and golden hair, the same water-blue skirt and jacket. The shadow-woman leans back against the wall and folds her arms across her chest. Her bright shape in the dim room makes Mari think of stained glass. A stained-glass woman, with her own lamp inside her.

The woman says, in that cool-water voice, “Did you forget yet?”

Mari blinks. She feels more awake than she did after the first ECT, though the treatment still left her head full of fog. She isn’t dreaming, and it’s the middle of the night. Nobody let this woman in to visit her. Mari doesn’t understand who she is or where she came from, but somehow that doesn’t worry her. She answers, “Did I forget what?”

The woman moves toward the bed. Mari can’t hear her footsteps on the linoleum floor. She sits down in the plastic-upholstered chair, leans back in it – the stiff cushions don’t creak – and crosses her legs neatly, one over the other. She has a dancer’s body, Mari thinks. Long and slender, fragile-looking but strong.

The woman says, “Someone wants you to forget something. Did you?”

Mari tries to think. She knows that if she could cut through the clouds in her head or blow them away, she would find the truth still squatting there in the dark. On top of the bedspread her fingers curl reflexively into her palm. “No,” she says. Her voice grates in her ears, like the drone of a trapped insect. “I didn’t.”

The woman nods. “What do they want you to forget?”

Mari tries to shake her head. When it hurts, she stops. “I shouldn’t,” she says. “My brother doesn’t want me to talk about it.”

*It’s all over now, Mari. What’s past is past.* Jaime told her those things again and again, not just after the last job fell through and she went to live with him. After she started high school, after Dad had finally gone away for good, Jaime told her it was time to shake off the things their father had done to them both. *It doesn’t matter anymore. Forget about it. You have to get on with your life.*

The woman says, “Why doesn’t he want you to talk about it?”

Because for Jaime the past doesn’t exist anymore. Because he erased it out of his own life so he could build something perfect instead, a world where fathers don’t use their own children’s

bodies whenever and however they want, and then throw those children away like empty tubes of toothpaste. Mari says, “He has this plan, Jaime, for the way things should be. I don’t fit in.”

The shadow-woman says, “My husband had a plan too.”

Mari looks at the lovely face. The shadow-woman has smooth creamy cheeks and bright, pert lips, and those clear compelling eyes. Any man would be proud to marry her. Mari says, “Did you do what he wanted?”

The woman shakes her head, smiling. “Oh, no. He wanted to keep me quiet.”

Quiet. Yes. Mari says, “My brother thinks he can erase things. From out of my head. And then they won’t have happened.”

She is only half-aware she said it aloud. The woman leans forward. “Don’t erase them. They’re yours.”

Mari tries to shake her head again. “But they hurt.”

“Yes, they do. But they are your own.”

The woman’s hand rests on the chair’s wooden armrest. Mari looks at those slender fingers and wants to reach her own hand out to touch them. She wonders what they will feel like – warm flesh? Soft vapor? Nothing at all? – but her hand is so heavy, the muscles in her arms so weak and sore, that she can barely move.

And now the shadow-woman fades again, even as Mari tries to reach out to her. *Wait*, Mari wants to say, *don’t go, please!* She can’t speak; she is working too hard, trying to get her hand across that tiny distance. Long before her fingers find the cool hard armrest, the woman has disappeared, dissolving into the dark.



4. 1934

The second shock treatment feels worse. Zelda drags up out of it, alone in her cell of a room. For an endless while she can't remember anything at all. She has never been anywhere else, never known anything besides these cold white walls, this ugly blanket, the dead numbness in her mind and the pain in her body. She is not even really a person. Her body holds together like a sculpture made of sand. Soon, maybe, it will crumble away.

She doesn't know how long she lies there, looking up at the blank white ceiling, before she realizes she isn't alone after all. Somebody is standing in the corner, beside the door with the metal grille at the top. Zelda wonders why the hospital bothered with that grille. The tiny window inset in the door is too small to let someone crawl out, even if they managed to break the thick glass with a shoe or a fist.

Without fear or surprise, without any feeling at all, Zelda turns her head to face the person in the corner. It's the young woman in the strange clothes. Zelda recognizes her dungarees, the tight black shirt with the deeply scooped collar. She remembers the woman's strong brown arms and dark eyes. As she thinks this, it occurs to her: she *remembers*.

The woman leans against the door. She is tall: the top of her head reaches the middle of the grille. Zelda wonders if her hard chapped hands, bunched into fists, could smash the glass, or maybe the heavy heel of one of those thick black shoes.

The woman says, "My name is Mari."

Zelda remembers wanting to ask her that, last time. The woman's voice has a lilt in it. It doesn't sound like the South, where Zelda grew up, but somehow it brings back a dizzyingly blue summer sky, so infinitely wide that a much-smaller Zelda, tilting her head all the way back to see, wanted to fall into it and let it swallow her whole. She remembers that afternoon: the slow drone of honeybees, the sweet heavy scent of her mother's roses, the tickle of the grass under her bare feet.

She says, "I'm Zelda."

Her head feels clearer now, and she is sure that no one let the woman in to see her. She might be dreaming, but she doesn't think so. Her head wouldn't ache like this in a dream. It doesn't worry her: in some small clear part of her mind, she thinks she knows this woman – Mari – from somewhere else, though she can't imagine when or where. If she tries, she might think of it, though so many memories have gone.

Mari comes closer to the bed. Her footsteps make no noise in the quiet room. Zelda is sorry she has no chair to offer; no one designed this room with comfort in mind. Mari sits down on the edge of the bed. She doesn't pull her feet up this time, but leans one hand on the mattress. She says, "Why are they doing this to you?"

Zelda tries to think. Scott and the doctors, a legion of words. She is sick, unbalanced. Schizophrenic. Insane. They are going to fix it, but to do that, they have to wipe her slate clean. She says, "I'm not supposed to want."

"Want what?"

Through the fog of forgetting, Zelda knows the whip in her soul has not gone. It lies there, coiled in the dark, white-hot. Scott and the doctors try everything they know, but it does not disappear.

She says, "I want something of my own."

She can't explain it. No one understands. It isn't enough for her to stand at Scott's elbow and watch him bend words to his will. She wants to catch the minutes of her life as they slip past. She wants to shape them into something real, something that belongs to no one else. Does that mean she deserves these beatings?

Mari says, "You know what? I didn't forget."

Yes, they had wanted to make Mari forget something too. She told Zelda so. Mari says, “They shocked me a lot. I was here a long time.”

Zelda can imagine that. She can imagine being here until the outside world ceases to exist, until the only reality left is the cloth in her mouth, the straps on her body, the hard pressure of the gurney underneath her and then the needle in her arm. She can believe someone could exist indefinitely in that gray space between oblivion and *almost*-remembering, *almost* but never quite. With every treatment, more memories disappear.

She says, “How did you keep from forgetting?”

Mari smiles. “I wrote everything down. Every time, before they took me in, I wrote it down. Afterward, I remembered.”

Wrote it where? How did she hide it? The doctors will not let Zelda work. Dancing has gone, and they don’t let her have canvas or paints either to draw the memories of the ballet studio, the strain of effort, the exhaustion and elation. A piece of paper and a pencil are small things. Would they give her that much?

She should not want it. Maybe the doctors are right, and she would be happier if the whip’s scoring heat disappeared. She says, “I shouldn’t try. It hurts.”

Mari leans closer. “Yes, you should. It’s yours.”

Her hand rests on the bedspread. Zelda looks at those strong, brown, chapped fingers and wants to reach out and touch them. She can’t imagine that she will feel anything but warm living flesh. She tries to lift one hand out from under the covers, but her arm is so weak and sore that she can barely move.

The bedspread is too heavy. Now Mari begins to fade, as Zelda struggles to free herself, begging in her mind, *No, please don’t leave!* She can’t speak out loud. Moving her hand takes too much effort. At last it comes free of the covers, but now Mari is only an outline, a diffuse wash of color.

By the time Zelda's worn hand reaches the air above the bedspread, the other woman's shape has disappeared.

5. 2005

Mari was right. Jaime doesn't come to visit her after the second ECT. The doctors wait three more days and then prep her for another treatment.

During the first two, she didn't much care what they did to her. This time, though, as the nurse wheels her down the long white hall for anesthesia, panic wakes up in her stomach and twitches along her nerves. Could she make a break for it? Maybe she could jump off the gurney and barrel her way out of here. If she can find the doors, make it outside...

She pictures herself tearing away down the street in her hospital gown. *Escapee from the loony bin*. She doesn't have any money on her; she isn't wearing proper clothes or shoes. The police would swarm the hospital and catch her before she got two blocks. Where would she try to go, anyway? Jaime doesn't want her back until they scrub her brain clean.

She can't help the way her stomach clenches when the nurse pushes the gurney into the treatment room. The doctor is waiting for her, tall and faceless. "Good morning, Mari. You know how this goes. It'll all be over soon."

They want to take her past away. Mari hopes the doctor can't see into her brain. If he could, he would probably want to fry it into oblivion. She is supposed to want to forget.

The doctor preps the anesthetic. The nurse stretches Mari's arm out and swabs the inside of her elbow with alcohol. The smell makes Mari's nostrils sting and the cold brings up goosebumps on her skin.

Someone says, "Don't let go."

Mari turns her head. Standing next to the doctor, right there in the sterile white room, is the shadow-woman. *Zelda*. Mari realizes she knows her name, but how? When did she learn it?

She – Zelda – is slim and elegant in the blue suit, as relaxed as if she has come to this room every day of her life. Neither the doctor nor the nurse seem to see her. Her golden hair glows as if she is standing in sunlight.

Mari wants to say, *How? How can I not let go?* They are going to force her. They will jar her brain to shake all the memories out. She doesn't dare speak out loud.

The nurse steps back from the gurney. The doctor comes over with the syringe. "Now, count back from ten," he reminds Mari, and reaches for her arm with the needle.

Zelda moves. Mari doesn't see her do it, but now she is beside the gurney too. She and the doctor stand face-to-face with Mari between them. "You'll write it," Zelda says. "That's what I did. Write it down and never forget."

She reaches out. Mari feels the needle slip into her arm, but at the same time, a warm, strong hand closes around her own.

She grips those fingers with all her strength. *Ten...nine...eight...* The dark comes, swirling up to swallow her, but Mari holds onto Zelda's hand and thinks of gold and water-blue.

6. 1934

The nurses come to strap Zelda to the gurney for her third treatment. "Good morning, Mrs. Fitzgerald. Is that comfortable? Too tight?" As if the word *comfortable* means anything to Zelda, when nothing will prevent the leather straps from digging into her body during the seizure and leaving deep red marks in her skin. She still has the marks from the last treatment. Perhaps they will never fade.

They wheel her into the treatment room, trussed up helplessly. The doctor, whom she hates, greets her. “Good morning, Mrs. Fitzgerald.” What, she wants to ask, is *good* about any of this? They will put the cloth in her mouth last, right before the injection, so that she has the dignity of speech as long as possible. She doesn’t care to return the doctor’s greeting.

He prepares the injection. “Now, you know the process,” he tells her, tapping the syringe with a plastic-gloved finger. “It’ll be over soon.”

His eyes are cold behind his glasses. Zelda tries not to be afraid, but here, in this white room, she can’t help it. The cold settles into her body. She cannot stop what they are about to do to her. Afterward, she will have to try to crawl up again out of that empty gray place. Sometime, maybe today, maybe another day in this endless string of them, she won’t make it back to herself.

Someone says, “Yes, you will.”

Zelda can’t turn her head. She doesn’t need to. The person who spoke steps into view, right beside the doctor at the foot of the gurney.

Mari. Dungarees, black shirt, strong brown arms. The doctor brushes past her, unseeing, holding the syringe and an alcohol swab. Zelda’s arm is strapped in position on the gurney. The doctor doesn’t have to touch her skin to swab down the inside of her elbow.

Zelda’s eyes burn with tears. She wants to say to Mari, *How do you know I’ll make it back?* She doesn’t dare speak out loud. These people have already condemned her as crazy. She wants to say, *Soon I won’t exist anymore.*

The nurse comes over to the head of the gurney, holding the cloth. Zelda smells the laundry detergent on the nurse’s uniform. “Now, ma’am, let me just put this in for you.”

Zelda wonders what would happen if she refused to open her mouth. They would inject her anyway, let her break her jaw if she wanted to be foolish, or else they would force her mouth open like you do a dog’s when it grabs something it shouldn’t.

Mari says, “You’ll make it.” She has moved, though Zelda didn’t see her do it. Now she stands at the other side of the gurney, face-to-face with the doctor with Zelda between them. She says, “You’ll write it. That’s what I did. Write it down and never forget.”

Zelda opens her mouth. The cloth slides in, pressing down on her tongue and up against the roof of her mouth. The laundry-detergent taste of it makes her want to spit, but she can’t speak or swallow.

The doctor reaches out with the needle. Zelda feels it slip into her arm, but at the same time, on her other side, a warm, strong hand closes around her own.

She grips those fingers with all her strength. The dark comes, swirling up to swallow her, but Zelda holds onto Mari’s hand and thinks of a blue sky and the scent of roses.

7.

In the dark, two hands hold each other tight. *Hold your truth.*

Bodies take beatings. Through a funnel of time, two women hold each other up. The truths they carry are as elusive as water, as resilient as the tough thorn-shielded vines of roses.

One woman says to the other, *Don’t let go.*

The other answers, *Never.*

*Note: the character Mari in this story is a fictional person. The representations of Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald are based on biographical material (particularly Cline, *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise*, c. 2002).*