

the
great gatsby
party



1974

When the Secret Service agents climbed up into the large oak trees lining the perimeter of the yard, Alice Townley thought they looked like giant tarsiers. She had seen tarsiers in her picture book about wild animals called *Do You Know What's Out There?* According to the book, tarsiers looked like teddy bears, but they were mean and would eat you if you startled them. The fact that there were tarsiers in the trees meant there was a special guest coming to the party, one who needed protection. It had not occurred to Alice, five, and her sister, Queenie, seven, to ask why.

All day their mother had been threatening to rename the party “The Great Fish Fly Party” rather than “The Great Gatsby Party.” Even though everyone knew the annual hatch might be a problem in late June, it was the only time the vice president could

make it to Michigan. Now, their imposing redbrick colonial was blanketed from top to bottom with smelly, creepy-looking insects, even though Pete, the gardener, had hosed it down three times since morning.

As the guests arrived, Alice and Queenie watched from their attic fort, a crawlspace they entered through a small door cut into the sloped wall off the attic playroom. Men in striped suits and straw hats and ladies in fringed dresses with wide bands on their hair spilled out of the French doors into the backyard, talking and drinking and picking fish flies off their clothes by the wings.

The crawlspace continued clear around to the front of the house, so after a little while, Queenie and Alice headed over to the other side for a view of the front yard. A group of a dozen or more people with matted hair and torn clothing had gathered on a grassy slope across the street from their house. Queenie told Alice the dirty people were angry about something their father was doing at his automobile company, but she wasn't sure what. Earlier in the day when the angry people first showed up, Alice's mother had called them "hippies" and said something about drugs. Their father shook his head and said they were probably just young and confused. Alice thought they looked dirty. Some of their signs showed a man on a throne and some had drawings of guns billowing smoke and some included words in bright-red or black capital letters that Queenie said were what Sister Angela called "profanity."

The party had been going on for an hour when Queenie announced that she was *starving to death*. Normally their mother didn't allow treats because she was afraid of Alice and

especially Queenie, the beauty, “getting pudgy,” but since the caterers (who Queenie and Alice called penguins because of their black-and-white uniforms) had taken over the kitchen and their nanny, Mrs. Miller, was helping usher in the guests, the coast was clear. Stealing desserts from catering trays was an art their brother Ray had taught them before he’d left for boarding school and summer camp, before he’d started lifting cigarettes and liquor instead of food.

Queenie ordered Alice to go to the kitchen and bring back something good.

“I always have to do it,” Alice said. “Why don’t you go?”

“You heard me,” Queenie said in a menacing voice. She sat up straight to remind Alice who was bigger.

When Ray was home, Queenie and Alice stuck together, but now that Ray was away at camp, Queenie had turned into the Wicked Witch of the West. She was even worse than Ray because she sometimes locked Alice in the crawlspace when she was mad. One time she’d kept Alice prisoner for four hours, so long that Alice threw up into one of her mother’s Louis Vuitton suitcases. Ever since then Alice made sure she was the closest one to the door.

“Jerk face,” Alice muttered. *A real pain in my backside.* Their mother’s expression. Just thinking it made her feel better.

“Hurry,” Queenie said, handing her a large Hudson’s shopping bag from the pile in the corner of the crawlspace.

Alice almost stuck out her tongue, but then she realized that Queenie had told her to hurry because she was scared. Queenie hated being left alone in the fort.

Serves you right, Alice thought.

Alice started down the servants' staircase that led right into the kitchen, but she found the door at the bottom of the staircase bolted shut. Probably Mrs. Miller didn't want any of the penguins wandering up to her room. She turned and ran back up the stairs and down the long narrow hallway to the front staircase.

In the bar there was a long oak bar top, a card table, and a floor-to-ceiling mirror. In front of the mirror a row of fake peace lilies were planted in pots lined with white pebbles. Her father was standing behind the bar along with the waiter giving out drinks. No one in the bar was paying any attention to her, so Alice stopped in front of the mirror and growled softly, pretending to be a tiger. "Tigers" was Queenie and Alice's favorite game, far better than *The Brady Bunch* game or Barbies, because they got to hide in the woods and creep around in the yard. Tigers were dangerous; they snuck up on you and *wham!* Alice couldn't believe that an enormous saber-toothed tiger could surprise anybody, but Queenie had insisted no one sees a tiger coming "until it's too late."

In the kitchen, the penguins pitter-pattered in and out carrying large trays. Alice hid underneath the sunflower-yellow Formica table, and when the penguins rotated out of the room she lifted a tray of cream puffs and upended them into her paper bag.

On the way back to the fort, she ran into a man's large knee as she was hurrying through the living room. He backed away from her, one hand over his heart.

"It's a child!" he exclaimed. A skinny lady in an emerald-green gown with hair as black and shiny-looking as a crow's grabbed

hold of Alice. For a brief moment, the man and lady leaned in and looked at her. Their breath smelled like smoke and medicine.

“Who is she?” the woman said.

“Gerard and Michelle’s daughter.”

“They have children?”

“Two, maybe three. I think one’s at camp.”

“I never know what’s coming next!”

The man shook his head. He jangled his limbs as if he might collapse. Several people laughed at the idea that a tiny girl had thrown him off-balance, but when he raised his drink to his lips, his hand was shaking.

“They’re here!” Alice’s mother yelled from the foyer, and the small crowd examining Alice dissolved and congealed again in a semicircle around the front door.

Alice inched along the wall from the living room to the grand staircase and crawled up a few steps so that she could see the front door over the heads of the partygoers. Her mother opened the door a smidge and peeked out.

“What’s the password?” she said, looking back to wink at the people behind her. Everyone had been instructed to give a password on entering the party. Alice knew this because originally Queenie was the one who was supposed to stand at the door and ask each arrival for the password. Of course their mother had asked Queenie, because Queenie was her pet, the one that her mother called “Miss America.” Whenever her mother hosted her tennis team or her bridge club, she walked Queenie around like a show pony. But Alice had also heard her mother say that Queenie was going to be “trouble” and Alice

thought this was right. Queenie was giving her trouble every single day.

On the morning of The Great Gatsby Party, Queenie had said, no, she wouldn't wear the Nixon mask. "It smells!" she'd yelled, before flinging it on the ground and running off.

"Imogene Townley, get back here!" their mother had yelled. "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you!"

As Queenie fled up the stairs, their mother turned to Alice, and for a moment Alice thought she might be chosen as Queenie's replacement.

"Go upstairs and play," her mother said, with a dismissive wave. "I can't get anything done with you underfoot."

Now her mother picked up the mask and was putting it on herself.

"What's the password, dear?" Alice heard the man on the other side of the front door ask.

"Gordon, dear," a woman's voice answered.

"Gordon," the man repeated.

"Then I'll Liddy you right in!" her mother said, opening the door and flinging her arms out in welcome. The Nixon mask looked like Silly Putty and her mother had to hold it in place because it kept slipping down. Everyone clapped and laughed. The man in the doorway was tall. His face reminded Alice of vanilla pudding swirled with a spoon. The woman was holding a long cigarette holder out to one side. The glowing tip grazed the wall near the gilt mirror, but just as Alice was starting to worry about a fire, the woman stepped into the room.

“You are too much, Michelle!” The woman leaned into Alice’s mother and waited for her to remove the mask so she could give her a peck on the cheek.

“I couldn’t resist,” her mother said. “Don’t you look beautiful, Betty!” Then she turned back to the crowd behind them to announce their arrival.

“Vice President and Betty Ford!”

Everyone whooped and clapped and Alice watched the man and his wife parade into the room. She couldn’t understand why her mother, whose voice had sounded wobbly, had called the woman beautiful—she was old and skinny and she walked sideways like Queenie’s hermit crab.

Alice headed back up to the fort holding her goodies in the paper bag. Queenie had opened the window and was leaning out. Animal-like noises rose up from the street. Alice joined her to look at the people booing and shaking their fists at her house. When Queenie saw the bag, she grabbed it to rummage through.

“Cream puffs!” she squealed, popping one in her mouth.

That night Queenie had brought three books up to the crawl-space: *The Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Land of Oz*.

When Mrs. Miller wasn’t busy drinking tea with Mrs. Cooper, the housekeeper, she sometimes muttered through a page or two, and they had gathered the gist of each story, the pictures filling in where Mrs. Miller left off. Alice’s favorite was *The Little Princess* because of the secret gifts Sara receives from Ram Dass. Alice always dreamt about having her own Ram Dass, someone to save her from Mrs. Miller. This was Mrs. Miller’s sixth child-rearing position in thirty-four years, she told anyone who would listen,

and it would definitely be her last. Every time their parents left the house Mrs. Miller sat down to watch *Lawrence Welk* or *Coronation Street* with Mrs. Cooper and yelled at Alice and Queenie if they bothered her with nightmares or requests for food.

“Serves you right,” she’d reply, if Queenie or Alice said they were hungry. “I made you a good dinner and you didn’t touch it.” By a good dinner, she meant liver and onions or Irish stew—food that made Alice gag.

Alice took a seat opposite Queenie and opened *The Land of Oz*. Queenie handed her the cream puffs. The people across the street started singing.

“Look!” Queenie said, showing the cream between her teeth. Alice screwed her face up. They went back to reading until the singing grew louder.

“It sounds like they’re shouting more than singing,” Alice said, pointing to the window.

Queenie stood back up. Alice followed. They leaned out the window again. The sun looked like an orange lollipop between the pine trees. The people sang a song about hard times and repeated the words “hard times” over and over. They swayed back and forth with their arms linked.

“Let’s go outside,” Queenie said.

“We’re not allowed,” Alice said, stepping back from the window.

“Nobody will see us,” Queenie said, grabbing Alice’s hand.

“I don’t feel like it.” Alice wrenched her hand away, but Queenie reached out and grabbed her arm, pinching the soft skin on her upper arm until she squealed.

“Stop it!”

“Come on then, or I’m telling Mom you stole all this food.”

Alice wanted to call Queenie a jerk or a fatso, but Queenie was too scary. One time, Alice had called her a jerk and Queenie had pulled her pants down and spanked her with a hair brush.

Queenie started down the stairs and Alice followed, rubbing her arm. When they reached the French doors that opened onto the back yard, they had to weave their way through the crowd of partygoers. Queenie held fast to Alice’s hand, dragging her along. Alice felt the eyes of the tarsiers on them as Queenie led her around the house to the front gate.

Across the street, the people were sitting along the curb. Some had their arms around each other as they sang. Others had candles, which they were holding up, and still others held lighters.

“They look sick,” Alice said.

“I think they’re hungry,” Queenie said. “Get the cream puffs.”

Alice made a face.

“Sister Angela says we should share,” Queenie said.

Alice didn’t move.

“Go!” Queenie said.

When Alice returned with the bag, they stood on the front lawn directly across from the people. There were so many. More than Alice had originally thought.

“They look mad,” Alice whispered. “I want to go back.”

Queenie grabbed Alice’s hand and squeezed it.

“Ow!” Alice yelled.

“Serves you right,” Queenie said. She was just about to cross the street when one of the tarsiers clamped a hand down on her shoulder.

“Where are you going?” he said. He was a young man with black hair. He reminded Alice of Father Michael, the new pastor, especially around the mouth, which wrinkled like a peach pit when he frowned.

“To give these out,” Queenie said.

“Unhand them,” one of the people across the street shouted.

“Pig!”

“My mom said we should give them something to eat,” Queenie said to the tarsier.

“She did?”

“Yes,” Queenie said, holding up the bag. The tarsier reached in and grabbed a cream puff.

“Just be quick,” he said, before jamming a whole thumbprint cookie into his mouth and handing back the bag. “I’m watching you.”

Alice and Queenie crossed the street, the fish flies crackling under their sneakers. The smell of fish made Alice felt sick. The first person in the line was a girl with red hair. She looked like Renee, a college girl who sometimes babysat when Mrs. Miller was on vacation, and who spent all of her time in the kitchen on the phone laughing and twirling the cord into jumbled bunches around her finger.

Queenie held the bag up to her and the girl shut her eyes before reaching in. She pulled out a cream puff and kept her eyes squeezed tight as she popped it in her mouth.

“Groovy,” she said drawing the last vowel out, mouth open and full of white goo. She didn’t seem embarrassed. Alice glanced at the house to make sure her mother wasn’t watching.

A girl with blue and gold beads in her hair said Queenie was cute and a boy with shaggy jean shorts mussed up Queenie's hair. Queenie smiled. She let go of Alice's hand and held the bag out to each person. Everyone waited for Queenie to come to them. She made her way down the line saying she only had enough for one each.

A boy with a yellow bandanna tied around his forehead yelled, "One for all and all for one!" and they all laughed.

Queenie was near the end of the row when the front door opened. All around Alice, people rose to their feet. The vice president and his wife appeared, followed by Alice and Queenie's parents. The wife was still holding her long cigarette holder. From across the street, Alice's house looked like a house in a picture book. The floodlights ran up the pillars like spikes.

The crowd booed and hissed, but the vice president and his wife never looked up. They studied the ground, his hand on her elbow as they continued down the front steps to a waiting limousine.

A man in a black cap emerged from the driver's side of the car and helped them both in. The crowd surged forward. Alice and Queenie were caught in the middle. Alice could feel hot, smelly bodies pressing in on her. She grabbed hold of Queenie's hand but then lost it when someone pushed between them.

"Alice!" Queenie yelled. "Alice!"

Alice froze and the people rushed past her.

The windows on the limousine were dark and no one could see inside but the crowd banged on the car anyway. The man with the yellow bandanna gave a rebel yell and leapt up onto the hood. He rose, standing on top of the car,

and beat his chest; then he leaned in and peered through the blackened glass.

“Get lost!” he yelled.

“Go back to Grand Rapids where you belong!” someone else cried.

The tarsiers who were on the ground came running and others descended from the trees. They grabbed the man’s hands, wrestling him off the car. Several other people leapt up onto the hood. They had to be pulled off one by one.

Queenie took Alice’s hand, and they retreated to the grassy slope across the street from the house. The crowd rocked the car back and forth. Alice wondered whether it might tip over.

“We have to get back to the fort,” Queenie said.

“No, Queenie!” Alice dropped down on the grass and crossed her legs, hiding her face in her hands.

“Come on. We’ll pretend we’re tigers.”

“I’m scared,” Alice said.

“You’re stupid,” Queenie said, getting down on her hands and knees. After a second, Alice did too.

Queenie growled and Alice growled back. Across the street some of the people, including the redheaded girl, continued to rock the car, while others fended off the tarsiers.

“Go on,” Queenie said.

“I don’t want to go first,” Alice said.

“I said go!” Queenie said.

Chicken! Alice thought.

Alice crawled toward the house with Queenie behind. They were tigers. They were stealthy and powerful and sleek. The street was clear. Alice looked both ways. She inched out onto

the gravel, which hurt her knees. Fish flies squished between her fingers.

Once they got back upstairs she would tell Queenie that she was going to bed. She wouldn't listen to her anymore. She'd lock herself in her room with her books and pretend that Queenie didn't exist. If Queenie didn't stop, she would tell Ray when he got home and maybe Ray would beat Queenie up or pull the heads off all of her Barbies or put real spiders in her bed. Real spiders were the best idea. She could just see Queenie's face.

Alice reached the other side of the road and sat down on the grass next to the driveway. Queenie wasn't far behind. The man in the yellow bandanna was standing on the edge of the driveway a few feet away, yelling at a tarsier. Other protesters were being pushed out of the driveway and into the yard, where a line of the tarsiers held them back. A large tarsier with black curly hair clapped a hand on the hood of the limousine.

"Move, move!" he yelled.

The car screeched as it turned out onto the street. Queenie was almost to the curb. She raised a hand against the glare of the headlights. Alice squeezed her eyes and clapped her hands over her ears. She heard the thud anyway.

Serves her right, Alice thought.

Then, there was no sound at all. Not when her mother ran down the driveway and flung herself on Queenie and then had to be pulled off by several of the hippies. Not when Dr. Mitchell, her father's best friend, pushed through the crowd to put his ear to Queenie's chest. And not even later, when the ambulance driver and his assistant placed Queenie gently on the gurney. Not when Mrs. Miller scooped Alice up and

kelly fordon

carried her into the house past her father, who was sitting on the front step with his face in his hands. No sound for a long time afterward. Just people moving their mouths, hurrying this way and that.