

DAISY

a novel

by Libby Sternberg
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CHAPTER ONE

Nick made a lot of money off my story. I penned the first words, and we exchanged more in letters back and forth after it was all over, a sort of game we played that helped us massage away the hurt of that wild summer and its consequences, as we compared memories, filling in what each of us didn't know or had forgotten. So if you've read his version of this tale, you'll find differences in mine, some small and some significant.

He'd been helping me, you see, with some difficulties after the tumult, and we started a long conversation in writing about it all, what happened, and then, before I knew it, the whole thing was published, first in magazines, and then as a book. He had my name on the story, too, but he was the one who got all the fame and most of the money, and eventually my name disappeared altogether from the tale, blown away as if written in sand. So this is my chance to right that wrong, to tell it just from my point of view, how I saw it, and to get credit for the telling.

The afternoon my cousin Nick Carraway came by our East Egg house, I felt as if I could fly on the gauzy breezes blowing our long white curtains in and out of open doors,

and I kept glancing out the window for some pure dove to come invite me on a journey across the Sound.

Nick intruded on this dream as he strode into the hall trying so hard to look confident, but he had this way of hesitating, sometimes in speech, sometimes in gait, just the tiniest of moments as he teetered on the edge of choosing between doing what he wanted or doing what he thought others expected of him.

I'd invited him after learning he lived just across Long Island Sound from us in the less fashionable West Egg area. It had been ages since I'd seen him last, and I was in need of good company. I thought of Nick that way—a good man who could see to the core of a matter. He was in bonds then, learning the trade.

Poor, dear Nick. He tried so hard to measure up to my husband, Tom, when in reality he was Tom's superior just by taking in breath.

A warm wind blew wildly that day, making the curtains dance in the vast parlor that fronted the Sound and my hair a fluttering halo. I thought we were in for one of those exciting storms that sometimes rushed up the coast, whipping the house with rain and making Tom worry about trees falling and the boat going out and not coming back.

When those storms hit, I wished I could be on the boat, just sailing smoothly between big waves and torrents of rain, not touched by them at all but finding the calm, true course in the center away from all this, especially Tom.

No tempests arrived, though, just a luxurious breeze. And Nick, ushered in by Tom in his riding pants, looking like some East Indian company leader about to punish an errant dark-skinned servant.

Jordan, who was staying with us at the time, caught a glimpse of him first and immediately turned her head up and away, a habit of hers when meeting a man for the first time. Makes them nervous, she'd confided to me. She also stayed quiet as a cat, another strategy of hers for setting a man ill at ease, wondering if he'd inadvertently offended and then setting him on a course of talking too much, as if trying to find the precise right thing that would make up for the deficiencies Jordan clearly saw in him with her silence. I could see that concern flicker across Nick's face.

Of course she knew I had designs on setting them up together, so she was playing a role, one I'd assigned to her and she'd accepted. I had the parts written in my head already, and I immediately stepped into the scene, smiling and offering a greeting, and then some light banter about the longest day of the year – don't you always wait for it and miss it – something I'd charmed new guests with several times already, and they all thought it so original and somehow bright.

“Nick! I've missed you! Come give me a kiss and make Tom jealous!”

He did as instructed, and I could see him eyeing Jordan, so I laughed and introduced them.

“Nick Carraway, dearest cousin, Jordan Baker, dearest friend,” I said, nodding to them both.

“The golfer,” he said with that hesitant timidity again.

“The scandalous one, yes,” Jordan said, finally bestowing on him her sweetest smile that made him think, I'm sure, they shared a secret. That was another skill of hers, to make men feel they knew something only the two of them acknowledged.

Small talk and drinks followed, light talk as light as the air, and soon I floated above everything in that same light air, borne on the wings of a good white wine as we went into dinner and drank and laughed more, Tom presiding at one end of the table like a grand pasha.

When Myrtle called—yes, I knew it was her—I cringed, and the bruise on my finger, where Tom had squeezed my hand so tightly he'd nearly broken a bone, began to throb.

It throbbed more when I heard his hushed tone, but part of me was amused, thinking of how hard Tom was having to work to keep from embarrassing himself in front of our guests. Having a mistress suited him. Having it revealed in front of his wife's guests did not.

When he didn't return to the table quickly, Jordan grimaced and said, "You'd think she'd have the good taste not to call during the dinner hour."

Nick's head quickly turned to her. "Who?"

But Jordan didn't answer. And I wasn't about to say Myrtle's name and who she was because I'd feel compelled to do it in a clever, amusing way to make my guests comfortable. Neither Tom nor the Wilson woman deserved such good treatment.

As his conversation dragged on, I had the impish desire to add to his suffering, so I wandered inside, pretending to be surprised he was still on the phone, and said,

"Darling, if it's business, it can wait. We have guests."

His face reddened, and I made the mistake of smiling, too direct an acknowledgment of the game he was playing. Red turned to purple fury, and he slammed down the phone and came over to me, crushing me to him, his hand behind my neck as he

forced a whiskey-flavored kiss on my lips, pushing so strong and hard I felt I couldn't breathe.

"Make them go away," he whispered, still holding on to my hair. It hurt.

I murmured something conciliatory to make him let go. But as he walked away and then poured himself another drink, I knew I'd do no such thing. They'd stay until the stars crept into the black void. They'd stay until Thomas Buchanan of the white man's swagger was too tired to do anything but sleep after they'd left, or, in Jordan's case, gone up to bed.

I think it was at that moment that the dream began to blow into my heart and mind just like that wild breeze, at first just a thread, joined by another, not knitting together into a full picture yet, just vague outline.

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I remember that summer as one glorious day after another, most of them sunny and hot, but out there on our water-bordered piece of land, you could always escape the heat by sitting in the shade and waiting for the winds to scour it from sun-baked land.

On one of those fine mornings, I was the only one in the house besides the servants. Even little Pammy was off on a walk with her nanny and would nap soon after. Tom went into town, probably to see that wretched Wilson woman, and he'd taken poor Nick with him. I heard him on the phone make the arrangement. Jordan, too, left the roost, to practice, she said, at a nearby course. She came and went as she pleased, sometimes staying with other friends in town or closer to courses where she played.

I didn't often have time alone like this, with no one to tend to, no directions to give to the cook, no questions to answer about Pamela, no querulous husband to avoid, so

it took me a few minutes to think of how to spend those precious hours before life intruded on my peace.

The day was once again warm, but I hungered for entertainment. I wished I could scurry into town myself to go to the cinema. We'd not been often, but I loved losing myself in those flickering stories.

I changed into linen sailor pants and blue striped top, grabbed my straw hat and set out on my own walk, following an almost invisible path along the water's edge where I could enjoy the cooler salt air and see across the Sound to the mansion where nightly parties lit up the sky.

I paused at a promontory and gazed toward the jut of land where the mansion stood, hidden somewhat by towering pines and shorter maples. Nick, in his remembrances, seems to think I knew who lived there, but I didn't. It never occurred to me to ask because one didn't envy things in our circle; we created envy, so why should I be curious about parties across the Sound.

Still, it intrigued me, that house. It shouted gaiety, abandon, and unfiltered joy. With a sigh, I realized I'd not felt those things since I was a girl on the cusp of womanhood, when summer presented only effervescent happiness, filled with potential for unbounded pleasure.

The wind shoved at the brim of my hat, and I removed it as I sat on the grass, hands around my knees, staring, wanting something, not knowing what it was, feeling girlish.

I knew I'd been a lucky child with doting parents who'd have given me the world if I'd wanted it. As it was, I'd never lacked for comforts or extravagances. Mother

decorated my room in whites and golds, and Father treated me like a princess. My debutante ball had been an exquisite spring evening on the grounds of the country club, with nearly two hundred in attendance, and I wore a dress of the purest white silk embroidered with gold thread that had been ordered from Paris.

I'd never wanted for beaux that summer. A parade of them sought me out at dances and teas, croquet parties, polo matches, strolls along the Ohio River where some stole kisses while others were too cowed by me to even hold my hand.

I didn't realize it then, but my mother had taken an egalitarian approach to my socializing, something different for the age. She allowed me to be courted by both wealthy heirs and lowly soldiers. With war imminent, she declared that one never knew who would be the best match. By that I took it she meant who would survive and who would flourish was out of our hands, and planning was a fool's task. I think she worried there'd simply be fewer men to choose from.

That said, she was happy when I abandoned all others and chose Tom, one of our class, maybe even above us in wealth and social status.

Truth be told, I chose him because I became deathly afraid of everything that year, and he offered a safe harbor. Afraid not just of the war, the reports of which I read with horror, but of loss more personal.

Father fell ill, was pale and distant, sometimes sitting alone in his study for hours on end, and forgetting things, appearing confused and distracted, so it was no surprise when she telegraphed to beckon me home shortly after I'd married, because Father had suffered a grievous accident.

He'd fallen, she told me, not looking me in the eye, after tripping on the steps, broken his neck and died instantly.

Mother had once observed, of a woman she knew who'd just lost her husband, that it was good she'd married, even though it had been a bad marriage, and now that she was free of her bad husband, she could perhaps have a good life. She'd been married to a good man, though, and they'd been happy, as far as I could tell. I think she intended that message for me, since rumors had already started about Tom's wandering eye.

I later learned Tom ended up helping Mother out considerably after she was forced to sell our beautiful sprawling home above the river, the one with the white-and-gold bedroom for me, and move to a more modest abode with just a cook and day maid. Family finances had apparently dwindled, unbeknownst to her, and that had accounted for my father's decline.

Movement at the mansion across the way caught my eye. A man of indeterminate age and coloring strode to his dock where a new two-masted cutter rhythmically kissed its moorings in the gentle waves. He unslipped the knots and jumped onboard with the agility of a ballet dancer. Then he hoisted the sail in smooth, muscled motions, one arm over the other, until, with a startling flap, the wind caught it before he was ready. With a quick shake of his head, he corrected the error in judgment and guided the boat away from the pier. Warming with blush, I noticed he looked my way, and his gaze was so long and intense that I swore he was staring only at me and nothing else.

For one breathless moment, I wondered if he'd sail over to me, and I shivered, both tempted and repulsed by that possibility. Ultimately, good sense won out, and I started to rise, to walk away, but just as I unfurled myself, he let the wind pull him on a

northerly course, and in moments was gliding over the pulsing waves with a grace and speed I envied.

It was then I realized I wanted to be invited to a party at the house across the way. I wanted to get uproariously drunk and dance until dawn. I wanted to sail as he was doing now, with nothing holding him back and only the wind leading him. I wanted to feel young again.

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“Teach me how to sail,” I said to Tom a few days later at breakfast. He’d not returned the night before, and looked hollow-eyed and in pain this morning. “You promised when we moved here you would.”

He grimaced, but I knew his aching head from too much whiskey the night before would make him pliable, and sure enough, he muttered a short, “All right.”

“Wonderful!” I continued, moving on. “The cutter is so beautiful, it’s a shame to not use it more, and I love how graceful it looks with the sheets up.”

“It’s a sloop,” he corrected, as I knew he would. “And those are sails, Daisy, not sheets. Good god, don’t you know even that?”

Of course I knew, more than he did. I was an excellent swimmer and diver and longed to be on the water, but I was laying the groundwork for my request to be fulfilled, and I knew if he thought me an absolute dunderhead, he’d have to school me. Tom enjoyed feeling intellectually superior. It was one of his few pleasures these days. Like many young men, something had been cut off in him after the war. He hadn’t served—that’s how we were able to marry—and as the years went on, I think he regretted it,

knowing so many others had had their manhood tested while his had been spent on polo fields and in smoke-filled clubs.

“That’s why I count on good instruction,” I cooed. “If you’re too busy, I’m sure we can find someone.”

“No, no. I’ll do it. Let’s go out this afternoon.”

He looked up and squinted as the maid entered the room. “Get me some bicarb, would you? I thought I’d asked for that already.”

Before she skittered away, I asked for more coffee which I knew she’d entered the room to serve, so I made Tom wait while she filled my cup.

The rest of our miserable breakfast was spent in silence.

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True to his word, Tom met me at the dock at three that afternoon, the hottest time of day, and on this day the breezes off the Sound were strangely calm. It felt as if we were holding our breath before imminent disaster.

I knew it would be a difficult lesson, so I’d prepared myself to be patient, to jolly him when he was snappish, to follow instructions and keep my mouth shut when I disagreed. I’d learned how to do that early in our marriage.

It didn’t take long for me to lose that resolve, though. He’d explained all the names of things, how to tack, how to choose the right sails, and with delight, I realized I instinctually knew how to go with the feel of the boat and not the science of it.

At one point, when we were dead in the water waiting for some errant wind to fill the sails, I pointed at other boats skimming by, and said, “Why don’t we do what they’re

doing?” I’d seen Tom surreptitiously glancing at them, evaluating what they were doing right that we were doing wrong, so I knew this thought had crossed his mind, as well.

“Because I’m trying to teach you how to keep the damn boat from sinking!” He muttered a curse then and mopped sweat from his brow before fixing the sails to the positions on those other sloops, and we were soon gliding as smoothly as they were.

“No one likes a pushy woman, you know,” he said after we’d straightened our course.

I bit my tongue to keep from pointing out he’d done what I suggested. Men didn’t like women who were right. I’d learned that early in our marriage, too. It was why my finger had been bruised, during a similar discussion a week or so ago where he squeezed my hand excruciatingly tight to make his point that I was being too “aggressive” by suggesting after dinner that maybe the white man wasn’t oppressed.

Though the first lesson contained this irritation, it didn’t dim my joy, and after that afternoon, we sailed together just three more times before I felt confident piloting the *Virginia Marie*, named after his mother, on my own, something I did when Tom went into town, so he wouldn’t know.

I sailed around the Sound, never venturing out into the wider sea, though once I was caught in a strong southerly wind I had to fight mightily to get back to our safe harbor. That incident both scared and thrilled me, so I set small challenges for myself after that, deliberately going out in gusty blows, even once when rain threatened. Little by little fear gave way to confidence, and these small escapes made me feel my carefree youth returning. Even Nick, on one of his regular dinner visits, commented on how happy I was looking.

Yes, I found happiness on those afternoon excursions. I found both hard work and time to think. I loved sailing back toward our safe harbor and looking up at the promontory I walked on and wondering how it would feel to dive from there into the sea. Another challenge I set for myself, perhaps on a blistering day.

The movement of the boat made me feel as if I were moving through time, and as I bounced over each wave, a resolution hammered its way into my soul, lit by the dream that had vaguely started to form earlier.

Tom had to go. And so did that Wilson woman.