

Three Hours Between Planes, F. Scott Fitzgerald

It was a wild chance but Donald was in the mood, healthy and bored, with a sense of tiresome duty done. He was now rewarding himself. Maybe.

When the plane landed he stepped out into a mid-western summer night and headed for the isolated pueblo airport, conventionalized as an old red "railway depot." He did not know whether she was alive, or living in this town, or what was her present name. With mounting excitement he looked through the phone book for her father who might be dead too, somewhere in these twenty years.

No. Judge Harmon Holmes—Hillside 3194.

A woman's amused voice answered his inquiry for Miss Nancy Holmes.

"Nancy is Mrs Walter Gifford now. Who is this?"

But Donald hung up without answering. He had found out what he wanted to know and had only three hours. He did not remember any Walter Gifford and there was another suspended moment while he scanned the phone book. She might have married out of town.

No. Walter Gifford—Hillside 1191. Blood flowed back into his fingertips.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is Mrs Gifford there—this is an old friend of hers."

"This is Mrs Gifford."

He remembered, or thought he remembered, the funny magic in the voice.

"This is Donald Plant. I haven't seen you since I was twelve years old."

"Oh-h-h!" The note was utterly surprised, very polite, but he could distinguish in it neither joy nor certain recognition.

"—Donald!" added the voice. This time there was something more in it than struggling memory.

"... when did you come back to town?" Then cordially, "Where are you?"

"I'm out at the airport—for just a few hours."

"Well, come up and see me."

"Sure you're not just going to bed."

"Heavens, no!" she exclaimed. "I was sitting here—having a highball by myself. Just tell your taxi man..."

On his way Donald analysed the conversation. His words "at the airport" established that he had retained his position in the upper bourgeoisie. Nancy's aloneness might indicate that she had matured into an unattractive woman without friends. Her husband might be either away or in bed. And—because she was always ten years old in his dreams—the highball shocked him. But he adjusted himself with a smile—she was very close to thirty.

At the end of a curved drive he saw a dark-haired little beauty standing against the lighted door, a glass in her hand. Startled by her final materialization, Donald got out of the cab, saying:

"Mrs Gifford?"

She turned on the porch light and stared at him, wide-eyed and tentative. A smile broke through the puzzled expression.

"Donald—it is you—we all change so. Oh, this is remarkable!"

As they walked inside, their voices jingled the words "all these years," and Donald felt a sinking in his stomach. This derived in part from a vision of their last meeting—when she rode past him on a bicycle, cutting him dead—and in part from fear lest they have nothing to say. It was like a college reunion— but there the failure to find the past was disguised by the hurried boisterous occasion. Aghast, he realized that this might be a long and empty hour. He plunged in desperately.

"You always were a lovely person. But I'm a little shocked to find you as beautiful as you are."

It worked. The immediate recognition of their changed state, the bold compliment, made them interesting strangers instead of fumbling childhood friends.

"Have a highball?" she asked. "No? Please don't think I've become a secret drinker, but this was a blue night. I expected my husband but he wired he'd be two days longer. He's very nice, Donald, and very attractive. Rather your type and colouring." She hesitated, "—and I think he's interested in someone in New York—and I don't know."

"After seeing you it sounds impossible," he assured her. "I was married for six years, and there was a time I tortured myself that way. Then one day I just put jealousy out of my life forever. After my wife died I was very glad of that. It left a very rich memory—nothing marred or spoiled or hard to think over."

She looked at him attentively, then sympathetically as he spoke.

"I'm very sorry," she said. And after a proper moment, "You've changed a lot. Turn your head. I remember father saying, "That boy has a brain.""

"You probably argued against it."

"I was impressed. Up to then I thought everybody had a brain. That's why it sticks in my mind."

"What else sticks in your mind?" he asked smiling.

Suddenly Nancy got up and walked quickly a little away.

"Ah, now," she reproached him. "That isn't fair! I suppose I was a naughty girl."

"You were not," he said stoutly. "And I will have a drink now."

As she poured it, her face still turned from him, he continued:

"Do you think you were the only little girl who was ever kissed?"

"Do you like the subject?" she demanded. Her momentary irritation melted and she said: "What the hell! We did have fun. Like in the song."

"On the sleigh ride."

"Yes—and somebody's picnic—Trudy James's. And at Frontenac that—those summers."

It was the sleigh ride he remembered most and kissing her cool cheeks in the straw in one corner while she laughed up at the cold white stars. The couple next to them had their backs turned and he kissed her little neck and her ears and never her lips.

"And the Macks" party where they played post office and I couldn't go because I had the mumps," he said.

"I don't remember that."

"Oh, you were there. And you were kissed and I was crazy with jealousy like I never have been since."

"Funny I don't remember. Maybe I wanted to forget."

"But why?" he asked in amusement. "We were two perfectly innocent kids. Nancy, whenever I talked to my wife about the past, I told her you were the girl I loved almost as much as I loved her. But I think I really loved you just as much. When we moved out of town I carried you like a cannon ball in my insides."

"Were you that much—stirred up?"

"My God, yes! I—" He suddenly realized that they were standing just two feet from each other, that he was talking as if he loved her in the present, that she was looking up at him with her lips half-parted and a clouded look in her eyes.

"Go on," she said, "I'm ashamed to say—I like it. I didn't know you were so upset then. I thought it was me who was upset."

"You!" he exclaimed. "Don't you remember throwing me over at the drugstore." He laughed. "You stuck out your tongue at me."

"I don't remember at all. It seemed to me you did the throwing over." Her hand fell lightly, almost consolingly on his arm. "I've got a photograph book upstairs I haven't looked at for years. I'll dig it out."

Donald sat for five minutes with two thoughts—first the hopeless impossibility of reconciling what different people remembered about the same event—and secondly that in a frightening way Nancy moved him as a woman as she had moved him as a child. Half an hour had developed an emotion that he had not known since the death of his wife—that he had never hoped to know again.

Side by side on a couch they opened the book between them. Nancy looked at him, smiling and very happy.

"Oh, this is such fun," she said. "Such fun that you're so nice, that you remember me so-beautifully. Let me tell you-I wish I'd known it then! After you'd gone I hated you."

"What a pity," he said gently.

"But not now," she reassured him, and then impulsively, "Kiss and make up-

"... that isn't being a good wife," she said after a minute. "I really don't think I've kissed two men since I was married."

He was excited-but most of all confused. Had he kissed Nancy? or a memory? or this lovely trembly stranger who looked away from him quickly and turned a page of the book?

"Wait!" he said. "I don't think I could see a picture for a few seconds."

"We won't do it again. I don't feel so very calm myself."

Donald said one of those trival things that cover so much ground.

"Wouldn't it be awful if we fell in love again?"

"Stop it!" She laughed, but very breathlessly. "It's all over. It was a moment. A moment I'll have to forget."

"Don't tell your husband."

"Why not? Usually I tell him everything."

"It'll hurt him. Don't ever tell a man such things."

"All right I won't."

"Kiss me once more," he said inconsistently, but Nancy had turned a page and was pointing eagerly at a picture.

"Here's you," she cried. "Right away!"

He looked. It was a little boy in shorts standing on a pier with a sailboat in the background.

"I remember -" she laughed triumphantly, "-the very day it was taken. Kitty took it and I stole it from her."

For a moment Donald failed to recognize himself in the photo-then, bending closer-he failed utterly to recognize himself.

"That's not me," he said.

"Oh yes. It was at Frontenac-the summer we-we used to go to the cave."

"What cave? I was only three days in Frontenac." Again he strained his eyes at the slightly yellowed picture. "And that isn't me. That's Donald Bowers. We did look rather alike."

Now she was staring at him-leaning back, seeming to lift away from him.

"But you're Donald Bowers!" she exclaimed; her voice rose a little. "No, you're not. You're Donald Plant."

"I told you on the phone."

She was on her feet—her face faintly horrified.

"Plant! Bowers! I must be crazy. Or it was that drink? I was mixed up a little when I first saw you. Look here! What have I told you?"

He tried for a monkish calm as he turned a page of the book.

"Nothing at all," he said. Pictures that did not include him formed and re-formed before his eyes—Frontenac— a cave—Donald Bowers —'You threw me over!'"

Nancy spoke from the other side of the room.

"You'll never tell this story," she said. "Stories have a way of getting around."

"There isn't any story," he hesitated. But he thought: So she was a bad little girl.

And now suddenly he was filled with wild raging jealousy of little Donald Bowers—he who had banished jealousy from his life forever. In the five steps he took across the room he crushed out twenty years and the existence of Walter Gifford with his stride.

"Kiss me again, Nancy," he said, sinking to one knee beside her chair, putting his hand upon her shoulder. But Nancy strained away.

"You said you had to catch a plane."

"It's nothing. I can miss it. It's of no importance."

"Please go," she said in a cool voice. "And please try to imagine how I feel."

"But you act as if you don't remember me," he cried, "—as if you don't remember Donald Plant!"

"I do. I remember you too... But it was all so long ago." Her voice grew hard again. "The taxi number is Crestwood 8484."

On his way to the airport Donald shook his head from side to side. He was completely himself now but he could not digest the experience. Only as the plane roared up into the dark sky and its passengers became a different entity from the corporate world below did he draw a parallel from the fact of its flight. For five blinding minutes he had lived like a madman in two worlds at once. He had been a boy of twelve and a man of thirty-two, indissolubly and helplessly commingled.

Donald had lost a good deal, too, in those hours between the planes—but since the second half of life is a long process of getting rid of things, that part of the experience probably didn't matter.