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THE DREAMER

BY JESSE MATLACK

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, opens with this quotation from a French poet, Thomas Parks D'Invilliers:

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry, "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!"

Such a quotation invariably sets my imagination roaring. Before me I see a dashing, comical young man in a tuxedo, with top hat and cane, leaping in an artificial, cockeyed manner, clicking his heels together in glee. He is flanked by a gorgeous, equally convivial and double-jointed young woman, and the pair stand glistening amid a shower of purple and silver champagne bubbles. They look much like the illustrations frequently found upon napkins or menus in fashionable restaurants, and as I try to comprehend the racing, screaming romance that is passing between them, I get a glimpse of their lives:

Soft words spoken in intimate booths of iridescent cocktail lounges; angry taxi-cabs, colorful friends, hors d'oeuvres, midnight floor shows, slight hangovers and breakfast in continental hotels, gold and blue.

Golf, tennis. A mixed odor of perfume, perspiration and lipstick. A swim, a breathless footrace to a zig-zag, glassy bungalow. A walk by the soothing sea, under the star-freckled sky.

Clandestine meetings, soot-puddled streets, faint kisses in breezy alleyways, singing hoof beats.

Moments of total understanding and compassion, inexplicable moods of lonely indifference. A rushed, strained phone call—and all is well again!

An occasional serious thought (about death, maybe) but soon the universe is baby-faced again, unbiased as a puppy dog and twice as safe.

Eternal laughter and tingling, movie-sensuous music are essential backgrounds for my lovers, and as for drudgery, detail or tediousness, there is none. No constant subways, no shopping, no bothering with strangers, no reality. It never rains in my dreams, and cars are always freshly polished beside impeccable front lawns. There is only beauty, gentle youth and slumber; and the lovers whisper to the hovering moon, "Who goes there?"—and the moon darts sheepishly behind a drifting cloud.

Inevitably I am jolted from my vision by the chiming of a clock or the voice of an irate truck driver who wants to turn left. I then wake to find myself humming "It Was Just One of Those Things" or "Lullaby of Broadway" and I have smoked my Kingsized Cigarette down to its healthful, T.B.-preventing filter. Soon my dreams become faint and grey, like cigarette ashes, for I am thinking of buying a birthday card for Aunt Eva, or washing the car before meeting Mr. Swackhammer, and I curse the terrible humidity.

I have other dreams too. Of the romance of being a farmer on the lonely prairie, a professional athlete wildly in the public eye, an airline pilot, or even an heir and world traveler, selflessly paying my way heavenward with gigantic quarter-annual donations to the church I never attend.

But alas, I have been brought up with enough practicality to realize that when a dream is attained it is always abused. It becomes faint and fragile, and, in the end, ceases to be a dream. It looms as real as the chiming, ubiquitous clock, eternally present to remind us of something unpleasant—something as real as time itself.

Between dreams this summer, I have been spending my time selling cemetery grave space from door to door. People sometimes snicker when I tell them this, but though it is strange work and I am a poor salesman, I earn excellent wages. People have developed, through the years, a strict sales resistance towards kitchen gadgets, lingerie and vacuum cleaners, but when faced with the problem of where to put their deceased bodies, they are absolutely lost. Then my work becomes interesting, for I often hear unique ideas about death. Sometimes, however, what I hear is most depressing.

One day, for instance, I was canvassing in the slums of Philadelphia. (I have found that it is usually easier to sell things to poor people—one reason, perhaps, why they are poor.) On Corson Avenue, a particularly dingy street, I came upon a couple sitting on their

doorstep smoking what appeared to be a before-dinner cigarette. I concluded that they were married, for they showed little interest in one another.

I was a full twenty yards away when the man, sensing that I was a salesman, growled: "Just laid off, mister, can't buy nothing now. Sorry." He was a gigantic, muscular man with a gravel-rough face. I conjured up a vision of him in a steel factory lifting red hot ingots with his bare hands.

"Yeah, got no dough. Can'tcha see?" echoed the plump woman beside him, gesturing at the shabby house. She was missing a front tooth, and her hair drifted and waved in all directions, like the tentacles of a giant sea anemone.

For some reason the situation amused me—for I like working people. Nodding my head that I understood, I approached, stopped before them, and introduced myself. Soon my hand was engulfed in the man's limp paw.

"I'm Harry Handley. This is my wife, Myrtle." He pointed at her accusingly. I shook her hand; it was damp and rough. There was an embarrassing silence.

"If you're selling insurance," said Myrtle, "we've got too much of it already!"

"Yump. She's right," said Harry, stoically.

I told them glibly that I was selling resting places for those the Lord had called, and Harry suddenly came alive.

"Haw, haw, hee," he guffawed, "we ain't ready to die yet, are we, Myrt?" He nudged her roughly with his elbow. "Do we look that old, mister?"

"No sir. No you don't, neither of you," I said. Then I told them the advantages of our "Buying Before Need" system and the luxuries of our easy installment plan. Next I opened my display kit and showed them some colored photographs of the cemetery. They were awed at its beauty. At their request I quoted some prices.

"Cris'sake, it costs a lot to die," mused Mrs. Handley.

"Yump," agreed her spouse.

It was that easy, and it took no skill. I sold them four graves—enough for the whole family. There were two children, and I would have sold them a fifth lot but little Harry had been cremated the year before after he was crushed in the street by a steamroller.

They chose to pay five dollars down and three dollars a month. "Good thing I worked overtime last week", said Harry, signing the contract quickly. He never bothered to read the fine print that said they would owe six per cent interest after the first year, and if they

fell only two months behind in their payments, the company would confiscate their lots and keep the money.

I shook hands soberly with the Handleys and turned anxiously away, up the street. I didn't turn to look back, but I was certain that they were waving goodbye, smiling and grateful.

As I drove homeward the tires of the car slithered over the seething sunbaked streets. It was dinner time when I arrived, and I peeled off my sweaty shirt, removed my shoes and read the paper. I learned with no surprise that tension was mounting in the East, and that Robin Roberts was pitching against the Giants in a televised night game. The clock in the hall struck six times.

After some toast, marmalade and tea, I settled before the T.V. set, sipping a can of beer and eating pistachio nuts until my finger tips, tongue and lips were dark red. Roberts lost his sixteenth game of the season and Willie Mays hit his fourteenth home run. It was a dull game.

I lay in bed, reading into the night until I finished *The Great Gatsby*. I then turned again to the D'Invilliers quotation and thought of the lovers, racing up dazzling streets, subduing the city and its millions. Then I thought of myself, and finally of Mr. and Mrs. Handley, who looked neither before nor after the pressing moment, and I felt very sad.

But then I had another thought. I saw an enormous, ageless man, strutting through dingy streets, his beard blowing in the time-less wind. He was feeding peaches and red currants to the hungry children, and soothing sad lovers. He hummed a high tune, harmonizing with the singing birds; and joy followed, prancing in his foot steps.

Calmly, I fell asleep and dreamed of the lovers. But this time it was I who was scintillating and gay, and who carried a top hat and cane. And I danced toward a ghost-like young woman who, upon my approach, turned out to be Myrtle Handley dressed in an evening gown. She smiled at me, holding out her beefy, bare arms, and cried, "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover; I must have you!"