

## *Bill Roorbach*

{ IN HIS WORDS }

**D**uring my college years I took time off to become a rock star. This was going to be a slow process, so in the meantime I had to support myself. Right away I landed a great job, which was to house-sit and maintain and generally prepare for sale a sprawling old mansion in Weston, Connecticut, a house so big that even after living there for months I found rooms I hadn't seen before. The place boasted a crumbling three-story carriage house over a seven-bay garage (a mansion in itself), a long-defunct double-Olympic swimming pool, several overgrown and ruined tennis courts, vines everywhere, mushrooms underfoot, a huge kitchen from the 1890s (coal-fired oven!), blown-out gardens, hidden statuary, gravestones. I had the feeling I was living in Gatsby's mansion in the decades after his death. Indeed, there were stories around the neighborhood about who-all had lived in the place and what had happened to them: a famed diva, for one, who'd fallen down one of the several back stairways.

On the hill across the way was another, even bigger, mansion, this one meticulously maintained, and at night my band's cacophony (we set up in the vast living room) would rival the louder music coming from over there. We thought it was all pretty funny until the postman told us who it was, pledging us to secrecy: "Something about a zeppelin."

Led Zeppelin?

That's what he'd been told.

They were working on an album, was the rumor, and we definitely heard Jimmy Page riffs at four and five in the morning.

This was in the early seventies. I was twenty, then twenty-one.

A couple of times I got up my nerve and went over there, bearing coal-fired cupcakes and my band's audition tape, shuffled up the long driveway (gorgeous cars parked all in a line: Jaguars, Lotuses, Ferraris, you name it), rang the bell.

The first time, no one answered. I peeked in the leaded windows: guitars and drums, miles of cable, recording equipment everywhere. The second time, at maybe three in the afternoon, a woman in a bathrobe squinted and glowered. She was Helen of Troy. She was Athena. She was Venus without the half-shell. She was the most alluring creature I'd ever seen. She told me to go away.

The mailman said she was a dancer.

The vision stuck in my mind for years.

Led Zeppelin (if that's who they really were) finished their album and moved on. A banker moved in. He called the police when we practiced. He even complained to the postman.

LATER, I worked in restaurants, mostly bartending. I lived in New York City a long time. Many of my friends were dancers. I took a ballet class once, but only because a special dancer friend needed at least one man in the picture when a magazine came to photograph the class she gave in her studio. Gym shorts and a T-shirt, bare feet, fifth position. That was me. I was in love with this friend, and she knew it. But dancers aren't like other people, she said when I pressed my case. And then she told me the plot of Bournonville's *La Sylphide*, which is that a mortal man named James falls in love with a sylph, a fairy-creature from another world. It didn't come out well for James, she told me, and it wouldn't come out well for me.

For a while, though, it was pretty nice.

WHEN I WENT BACK to college, I took a seminar called F. Scott Fitzgerald and the American Myth. Of course we read *The Great Gatsby*. I'd read it before, but this time something grew in me. I loved Fitzgerald's sentences, all the colors he invokes, the air in all the rooms, the offhand beauty of Daisy Buchanan, the outsize lives of all of his characters but one: Nick Carraway, who's just normal. Nick I never forgot, the way the everyday narrator of someone else's story slips into that story and, despite himself, takes center stage with more mythic figures.

ALL OF THESE elements tumbled around like socks in a dryer for decades, until one day a figure came into my head. She was a ballerina. She called

herself Sylphide. She lived in a mansion across the way. Across the way from what and whom, I didn't know. But, all in good time, that came to me too: she lived across the way from an athlete. Just a normal guy with great language skills. Though maybe his family was a mess.

Anyway, before long, I was writing a novel.

The year after I started, my mother died. This was expected, but I was caught off guard by how hard it was. And how it just got harder. For over a year I couldn't write. Writing didn't seem important. When I did start again, I could only write about death.

Eventually, though, I got back to the novel, this novel.

It's just that I found it had changed.