

ALI SMITH

*The Universal Story*

There was a man dwelt by a churchyard.

Well, no, okay, it wasn't always a man; in this particular case it was a woman. There was a woman dwelt by a churchyard.

Though, to be honest, nobody really uses that word nowadays. Everybody says cemetery. And nobody says dwelt any more. In other words:

There was once a woman who lived by a cemetery. Every morning when she woke up she looked out of her back window and saw –

Actually, no. There was once a woman who lived by – no, in – a second-hand bookshop. She lived in the flat on the first floor and ran the shop which took up the whole of downstairs. There she sat, day after day, among the skulls and the bones of second-hand books, the stacks and shelves of them spanning the lengths and breadths of the long and narrow rooms, the piles of them swaying up, precarious like rootless towers, towards the cracked plaster of the ceiling. Though their bent or riffled or still chaste spines had been bleached by years of anonymous long-gone light, each of them had been new once, bought in a bookshop full of the shine of other new books. Now each was here, with too many possible reasons to guess at when it came to the question of how it had ended up sunk in the bookdust which specked the air in which the woman, on this winter's day, sat by herself, sensing all round her the weight of it, the covers shut on so many millions of pages that might never be opened to light again.

The shop was down a side street off the centre of a small rural village which few tourists visited in the summer and in which business had slowed considerably since 1982, the year the Queen Mother, looking frail and holding her hat on her head with one hand because of the wind, had

cut the ribbon on the bypass which made getting to the city much quicker and stopping in the village quite difficult. Then the bank had closed and eventually the post office. There was a grocer's but most people drove to the supermarket six miles away. The supermarket also stocked books, though hardly any.

Occasionally someone would come into the second-hand bookshop looking for something he or she had heard about on the radio or read about in the papers. Usually the woman in the shop would have to apologize for not having it. For instance, it was February now. Nobody had been into the shop for four days. Occasionally a bookish teenage girl or boy, getting off the half-past four school bus which went between the village and the town, used to push, shy, at the door of the shop and look up with the kind of delight you can see even from behind in the shoulders and back and the angle of head of a person looking up at the endless promise of books. But this hadn't happened for a while.

The woman sat in the empty shop. It was late afternoon. It would be dark soon. She watched a fly in the window. It was early in the year for flies. It flew in veering triangles then settled on *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald to bask in what late winter sun there was.

Or – no. Wait:

There was once a fly resting briefly on an old paperback book in a second-hand bookshop window. It had paused there in a moment of warmth before launching back into the air, which it would do any second now. It wasn't any special or unusual kind of fly or a fly with an interesting species name – for instance, a robber fly or an assassin fly, a bee fly or a thick-headed fly, a dance fly, a dagger fly, a snipe fly or a down-looker fly. It wasn't even a stout or a cleg or a midge. It was a common house fly, a *musca domestica linnaeus*, of the diptera family, which means it had two wings. It stood on the cover of the book and breathed air through its spiracles.

It had been laid as an egg less than a millimetre long in a wad of manure in a farmyard a mile and a half away and had become a legless maggot feeding off the manure it had been laid in. Then, because winter was coming, it had wriggled by sheer muscle contraction nearly a hundred and twenty feet. It had lain dormant for almost four months in the grit round the base of a wall under several feet of stacked hay in the barn. In

a spell of mild weather over the last weekend it had broken the top off the pupa and pulled itself out, a fly now, six millimetres long. Under an eave of the barn it had spread and dried its wings and waited for its body to harden in the unexpectedly springlike air coming up from the Balearics. It had entered the rest of the world through a fly-sized crack in the roof of the barn that morning then zigzagged for over a mile looking for light, warmth and food. When the woman who owned the shop had opened her kitchen window to let the condensation out as she cooked her lunch, it had flown in. Now it was excreting and regurgitating, which is what flies do when they rest on the surfaces of things.

To be exact, it wasn't an it, it was a female fly, with a longer body and red slitted eyes set wider apart than if she had been a male fly. Her wings were each a thin, perfect, delicately veined membrane. She had a grey body and six legs, each with five supple joints, and she was furred all over her legs and her body with minuscule bristles. Her face was striped velvet-silver. Her long mouth had a sponging end for sucking up liquid and for liquefying solids like sugar or flour or pollen.

She was sponging with her proboscis the picture of the actors Robert Redford and Mia Farrow on the cover of the Penguin 1974 edition of *The Great Gatsby*. But there was little there really of interest, as you might imagine, to a house fly which needs urgently to feed and to breed, which is capable of carrying over one million bacteria and transmitting everything from common diarrhoea to dysentery, salmonella, typhoid fever, cholera, poliomyelitis, anthrax, leprosy and tuberculosis; and which senses that at any moment a predator will catch her in its web or crush her to death with a fly-swat or, if she survives these, that it will still any moment now simply be cold enough to snuff out herself and all ten of the generations she is capable of setting in motion this year, all nine hundred of the eggs she will be capable of laying given the chance, the average twenty days of life of an average common house fly.

No. Hang on. Because:

There was once a 1974 Penguin edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic American novel *The Great Gatsby* in the window of a quiet second-hand bookshop in a village that very few people visited any more. It had a hundred and eighty-eight numbered pages and was the twentieth Penguin edition of this particular novel – it had been reprinted three times in 1974

alone; this popularity was partly due to the film of the novel which came out that year, directed by Jack Clayton. Its cover, once bright yellow, had already lost most of its colour before it arrived at the shop. Since the book had been in the window it had whitened even more. In the film-still on it, ornate in a twenties-style frame, Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, the stars of the film, were also quite faded, though Redford was still dapper in his golf cap and Farrow, in a very becoming floppy hat, suited the sepia effect that the movement of sun and light on the glass had brought to her quite by chance.

The novel had first been bought for 30p (6/-) in 1974 in a Devon bookshop by Rosemary Child who was twenty-two and who had felt the urge to read the book before she saw the film. She married her fiancé Roger two years later. They mixed their books and gave their doubles to a Cornwall hospital. This one had been picked off the hospital library trolley in Ward 14 one long hot July afternoon in 1977 by Sharon Patten, a fourteen-year-old girl with a broken hip who was stuck in bed in traction and bored because Wimbledon was over. Her father had seemed pleased at visiting hour when he saw it on her locker and though she'd given up reading it halfway through she kept it there by the water jug for her whole stay and smuggled it home with her when she was discharged. Three years later, when she didn't care any more what her father thought of what she did, she gave it to her schoolfriend David Connor who was going to university to do English, telling him it was the most boring book in the world. David read it. It was perfect. It was just like life is. Everything is beautiful, everything is hopeless. He walked to school quoting bits of it to himself under his breath. By the time he went up north to university in Edinburgh two years later, now a mature eighteen-year-old, he admired it, as he said several times in the seminar, though he found it a little adolescent and believed the underrated *Tender Is the Night* to be Fitzgerald's real masterpiece. The tutor, who every year had to mark around a hundred and fifty abysmal first-year essays on *The Great Gatsby*, nodded sagely and gave him a high pass in his exam. In 1985, having landed a starred first and a job in personnel management, David sold all his old literature course books to a girl called Mairead for thirty pounds. Mairead didn't like English – it had no proper answers – and decided to do economics instead. She sold them all again, making a lot more money than David had. The

*Great Gatsby* went for £2.00, six times its original price, to a first-year student called Gillian Edgbaston. She managed never to read it and left it on the shelves of the rented house she'd been living in when she moved out in 1990. Brian Jackson, who owned the rented house, packed it in a box which sat behind the freezer in his garage for five years. In 1995 his mother, Rita, came to visit and while he was tidying out his garage she found it in the open box, just lying there on the gravel in his driveway. *The Great Gatsby!* she said. She hadn't read it for years. He remembers her reading it that summer, it was two summers before she died, and her feet were up on the sofa and her head was deep in the book. She had a whole roomful of books at home. When she died in 1997 he boxed them all up and gave them to a registered charity. The registered charity checked through them for what was valuable and sold the rest on in auctioned boxes of thirty miscellaneous paperbacks, a fiver per box, to second-hand shops all over the country.

The woman in the quiet second-hand bookshop had opened the box she bought at auction and had raised her eyebrows, tired. Another *Great Gatsby*.

*The Great Gatsby*. F. Scott Fitzgerald. Now a Major Picture. The book was in the window. Its pages and their edges were dingy yellow because of the kind of paper used in old Penguin Modern Classics; by nature these books won't last. A fly was resting on the book now in the weak sun in the window.

But the fly suddenly swerved away into the air because a man had put his hand in among the books in the window display in the second-hand bookshop and was picking the book up.

Now:

There was once a man who reached his hand in and picked a second-hand copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* out of the window of a quiet second-hand bookshop in a small village. He turned the book over as he went to the counter.

How much is this one, please? he asked the grey-looking woman.

She took it from him and checked the inside cover.

That one's £1, she said.

It says thirty pence here on it, he said, pointing to the back.

That's the 1974 price, the woman said.

The man looked at her. He smiled a beautiful smile. The woman's face lit up.

But, well, since it's very faded, she said, you can have it for fifty.

Done, he said.

Would you like a bag for it? she asked.

No, it's okay, he said. Have you any more?

Any more Fitzgerald? the woman said. Yes, under F. I'll just — .

No, the man said. I mean, any more copies of *The Great Gatsby*.

You want another copy of *The Great Gatsby*? the woman said.

I want all your copies of it, the man said, smiling.

The woman went to the shelves and found him four more copies of *The Great Gatsby*. Then she went through to the storeroom at the back of the shop and checked for more.

Never mind, the man said. Five'll do. Two pounds for the lot, what do you say?

His car was an old Mini Metro. The back seat of it was under a sea of different editions of *The Great Gatsby*. He cleared some stray copies from beneath the driver's seat so they wouldn't slide under his feet or the pedals while he was driving and threw the books he'd just bought over his shoulder on to the heap without even looking. He started the engine. The next second-hand bookshop was six miles away, in the city. His sister had called him from her bath two Fridays ago. James, I'm in the bath, she'd said. I need F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

F what's the what? he'd said.

She told him again. I need as many as possible, she said.

Okay, he'd said.

He worked for her because she paid well; she had a grant.

Have you ever read it? she asked.

No, he'd said. Do I have to?

So we beat on, she'd said. Boats against the current. Borne back ceaselessly into the past. Get it?

What about petrol money, if I'm supposed to drive all over the place looking for books? he'd said.

You've got five hundred quid to buy five hundred books. You get them for less, you can keep the change. And I'll pay you two hundred on top for your trouble. Boats against the current. It's perfect, isn't it?

And petrol money? he'd said.

I'll pay it, she'd sighed.

Because:

There was once a woman in the bath who had just phoned her brother and asked him to find her as many copies of *The Great Gatsby* as possible. She shook the drips off the phone, dropped it over the side on to the bathroom carpet and put her arm back into the water quick because it was cold.

She was collecting the books because she made full-sized boats out of things boats aren't usually made out of. Three years ago she had made a three-foot long boat out of daffodils which she and her brother had stolen at night from people's front gardens all over town. She had launched it, climbing into it, in the local canal. Water had come up round her feet almost immediately, then up round her knees, her thighs, till she was midriff-deep in icy water and daffodils floating all round her, unravelled.

But a small crowd had gathered to watch it sink and the story had attracted a lot of local and even some national media attention. Sponsored by Interflora, which paid enough for her to come off unemployment benefit, she made another boat, five feet long and out of mixed flowers, everything from lilies to snowdrops. It also sank, but this time was filmed for an arts project, with her in it, sinking. This had won her a huge arts commission to make more unexpected boats. Over the last two years she had made ten-and twelve-footers out of sweets, leaves, clocks and photographs and had launched each one with great ceremony at a different UK port. None of them had lasted more than eighty feet out to sea.

*The Great Gatsby*, she thought in the bath. It was a book she remembered from her adolescence and as she'd been lying in the water fretting about what to do next so her grant wouldn't be taken away from her it had suddenly come into her head.

It was perfect, she thought, nodding to herself. So we beat on. The last line of the book. She ducked her shoulders under the water to keep them warm.

And so, since we've come to the end already:

The seven-foot boat made of copies of *The Great Gatsby* stuck together with waterproof sealant was launched in the spring in the port of Felixstowe.



The artist's brother collected over three hundred copies of *The Great Gatsby* and drove between Wales and Scotland doing so. It is still quite hard to buy a copy of *The Great Gatsby* second-hand in some of the places he visited. It cost him a hundred and eighty three pounds fifty exactly. He kept the change. He was also a man apt to wash his hands before he ate, so was unharmed by any residue left by the fly earlier in the story on the cover of the copy he bought in the quiet second-hand bookshop.

This particular copy of *The Great Gatsby*, with the names of some of the people who had owned it inked under each other in their different handwritings on its inside first page – Rosemary Child, Sharon Patten, David Connor, Rita Jackson – was glued into the prow of the boat, which stayed afloat for three hundred yards before it finally took in water and sank.

The fly which had paused on the book that day spent that evening resting on the light fitting and hovering more than five feet above ground level. This is what flies tend to do in the evenings. This fly was no exception.

The woman who ran the second-hand bookshop had been delighted to sell all her copies of *The Great Gatsby* at once, and to such a smiling young man. She replaced the one which had been in the window with a copy of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and as she was doing so she fanned open the pages of the book. Dust flew off. She blew more dust off the top of the pages then wiped it off her counter. She looked at the book dust smudged on her hand. It was time to dust all the books, shake them all open. It would take her well into the spring. Fiction, then non-fiction, then all the sub-categories. Her heart was light. That evening she began, at the letter A.

The woman who lived by a cemetery, remember, back at the very beginning? She looked out of her window and she saw – ah, but that's another story.

And lastly, what about the first, the man we began with, the man dwelt by a churchyard?

He lived a long and happy and sad and very eventful life, for years and years and years, before he died.