

## THE SUN THAT IS YOUNG ONCE ONLY

July 2023

One of my favorite moments in Mel Brooks's movie *History of the World Part One* occurs on the streets of ancient Rome. Commenting on the brevity of reputation, somebody casually comments, "*Sic transit gloria.*" (Thus passes glory.) His friend turns to him and says, "I didn't know Gloria was sick." It was the one moment in the entire movie that made me laugh out loud—sublimely silly and with no point whatsoever except to amuse.

Maybe it's the change of seasons, the cinematic crossfade into summer, that's made me also reflect about time, and the swift passing of glory. I spent last week in Cape Cod reading a novel in which F. Scott Fitzgerald was a character—and I spent much of the week staring into space thinking about artists whose fame came early—and whose glory faded. Fitzgerald published *This Side of Paradise* when he was 24. It caught the spirit of youth at the time, became a surprise bestseller for Scribner's, and made Fitzgerald and his wife celebrities of the 1920s. Fitzgerald would never have quite that moment again—and by 1940 he was out in Hollywood: drunk, dissipated, ill—trying to finish the novel that would be posthumously titled *The Last Tycoon*. He will die this same year, age 44. He wrote to Zelda: *I don't suppose anyone will be much interested in what I say this time and it may be the last novel I'll ever write, but it must be done now because after fifty one is different. One can't remember emotionally, I think except about childhood but I have a few things left to say.*

I've also been reading John Updike's *Early Stories* while simultaneously skim-reading Adam Begley's biography *Updike*. From childhood, Updike had been lavishly encouraged and groomed by his mother to be a successful writer. He spends his years at Harvard working relentlessly to prove he's the Smartest Kid in the Class—which he probably is; he's certainly the Most Ambitious, and by age 22 he's getting poems and stories accepted by *The New Yorker*. These early *New Yorker* stories like "Friends from Philadelphia" (1954) are quiet, observant tales—almost weightless—but you see his eye for detail and gift for metaphor. By 1966, Updike is being profiled in *Life* magazine! (Lyndon Johnson is on the cover, in a gray short-sleeved shirt and brown tie, visiting soldiers in Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.) The profile is called "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" and the 34-year-old Updike holds court on nearly everything: "*There is,*" he thinks, "*a great deal to be said about almost anything. Everything can be interesting as every other thing. An old milk carton is worth a rose; a trolley car has as much right to be there, esthetically, as a tree.*"

Updike will spend the rest of his life, until his death by cancer at age 77, being the Smartest Kid in the Class. And yet, by the time I was in college, his books had all but disappeared from the English Department reading lists. Later on, Harold Bloom will call him "a minor novelist with a major style," and David Foster Wallace will nail Updike's coffin shut with: "Just a penis with a thesaurus."

Writing is a tough game. I remember, during my own college years, bombarding all sorts of inappropriate magazines with my fiction, mailing paper-clipped manuscripts in 10x13 clasp envelopes containing another (stamped, self-addressed) 10x13 envelope within. The best day of the week for me was Sunday because I couldn't possibly receive a rejection in the mail. Yet I stayed in the game for those rare rewards—the scribbled line of encouragement—the once-a-year *Please try again*. And then—the near-miraculous *Yes*.

Yesterday at 3:29 in the afternoon, the phone rang; it was a film director I know calling me as he headed to JFK airport. After a few opening sentences about the lousy air conditions in New York, he said, "Robert, I've been waiting ten years to make this phone call." He told me that the film of a script I had written a decade ago—and revised every year since—might actually be made. I'm always guarded about plans for the future—but this felt like the near-miraculous *Yes*—just at the moment when I'd begun to feel I no longer had the strength and will to battle anymore....

So here's to summer. Here's to all of us. Did you hear? Gloria's gotten a little better. Bless her heart.