

BRIGHT  
YOUNG  
THINGS

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# PROLOGUE

IT IS EASY TO FORGET NOW, HOW EFFERVESCENT AND free we all felt that summer. Everything fades: the shimmer of gold over White Cove; the laughter in the night air; the lavender early morning light on the faces of skyscrapers, which had suddenly become so heroically tall. Every dawn seemed to promise fresh miracles, among other joys that are in short supply these days. And so I will try to tell you, while I still remember, how it was then, before everything changed—that final season of an era that roared.

By the summer of 1929, when the weather was just getting warm enough that girls could exhibit exactly how high hemlines had risen, Prohibition had been in effect for so long

it had ceased to bother anyone much. The city had a speakeasy per every fifty souls, or so the preachers liked to exclaim on Sundays, and sweet-faced girls from the hinterlands were no longer blinded by wood alcohol, for the real stuff had become plenty easy to get. The Eighteenth Amendment had converted us all to grateful outlaws.

We did whatever we liked and dressed in whatever we thought smart and broke rules for the sport of it—diving into public fountains, mixing social classes as casually as we mixed cocktails. There were no longer exclusive balls given for a few people with old money and good names, and even if there were, no one would have cared to go. Nice girls wore the kind of makeup that thirty years before would only have been seen on actresses, and actresses were escorted publicly by the scions of shipping fortunes, and some of them did not even bother to disguise their Bronx accents. Girls took to dressing like boys, and though women had obtained the vote, we had swiftly moved on to pursuing flashier freedoms: necking in cars and smoking cigarettes and walking down city streets in flesh-colored stockings.

New York was the capitol of commerce and joy, and young people sought us from every direction. They came in droves, to join the kind of party only a great metropolis can host. They came from wealthy families and farming families, from the north and south and west. They came to avoid kitchens and

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marriages, to a place where they could reasonably claim to be eighteen forever. Or for the foreseeable future, anyway, which seemed to us the same thing. They came, mostly, for the fun—especially the young things, especially the girls.

I can't remember very many now—although there are three, from that last incandescent summer, whom I resist forgetting. They were all marching toward their own secret fates, and long before the next decade rolled around, each would escape in her own way—one would be famous, one would be married, and one would be dead.

That is what I want to tell you about: the girls with their short skirts and bright eyes and big-city dreams.

The girls of 1929.

Bright Young Things

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