

REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

Why Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams" is a perfect way to start the season

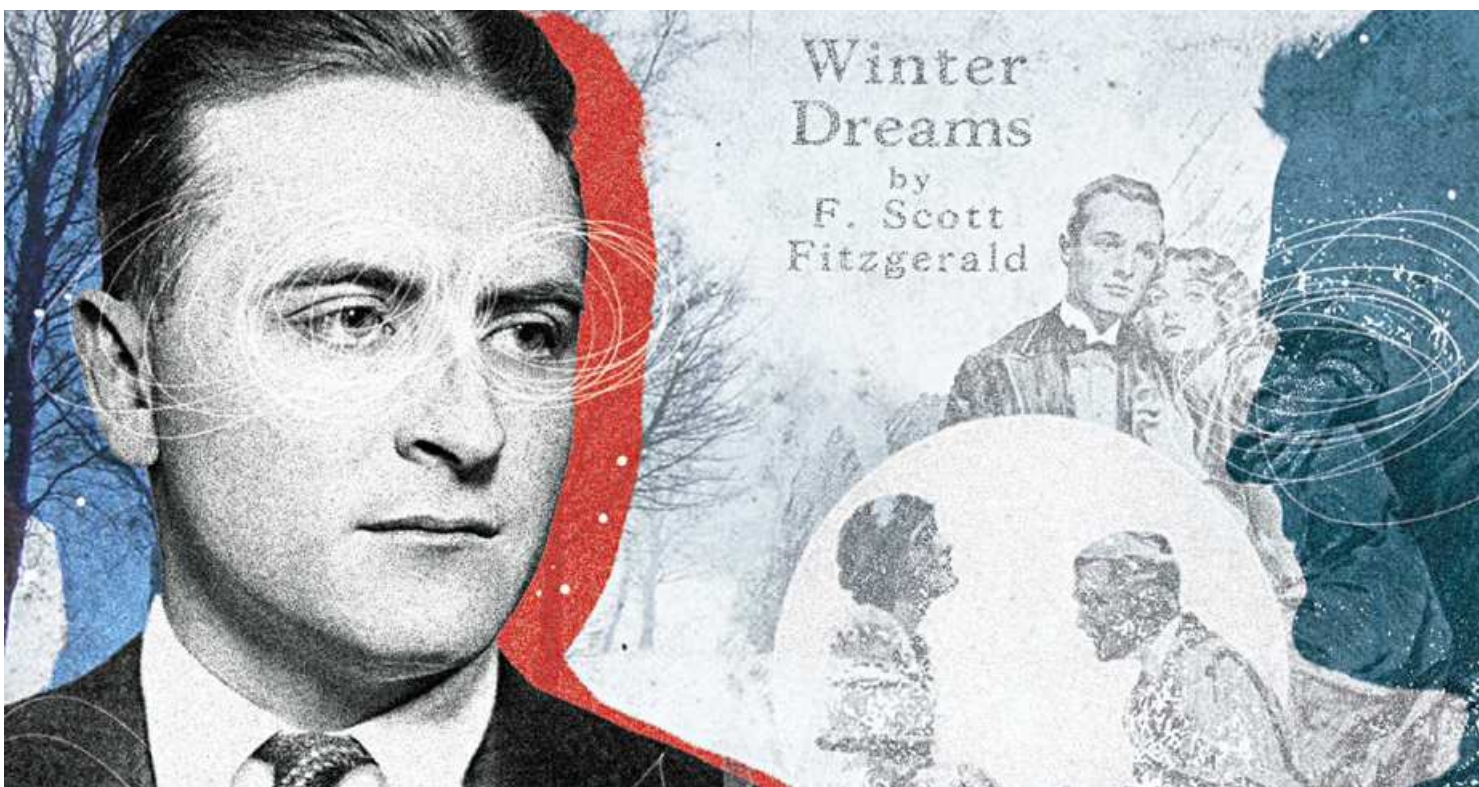
In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

MAISHA SYEDA

Three days ago when I woke up in the morning to get ready for work, I stood on my balcony and felt a slight, familiar nip in the air. The sky was grey, a light mist had enveloped the buildings standing before me, and I remember shuddering, thinking to myself—oh no, it's winter. Now don't come at me, I realise there are a few things about the season that are undoubtedly wonderful: a steaming mug of rich hot chocolate, or coffee, or a bowl of soup; or when you curl up under your blanket with a good book on a bright morning. For the weather that struck this past week, F Scott Fitzgerald's classic short story, "Winter Dreams" (Scribners, 1922), seemed like a perfect read to usher in the eponymous season. The story has melancholia and loss, folded in with hopes, dreams, and a person's desire to achieve happiness.

It opens with an omniscient narrator distinguishing the protagonist, 14-year-old Dexter Green, from other caddies working at the golf club who are "poor as sin"; Dexter, in contrast, "only [caddies] for pocket-money". This sets the scene for the rest of a narrative in which Dexter tries to better his social standing and become part of the elite that are born into the wealth of Sherry Island, despite him coming from the backwoods of Minnesota. There, he meets nine-year-old Judy, who comes from the aristocracy into which Dexter aspires to integrate. He is immediately taken by Judy, although he is too proud to admit it to himself, and quits the job rather than work for her. But the resolute Dexter is reliant on the changing seasons: "October filled him with hope which November raised to sort of ecstatic triumph". The vivid descriptions of winter, in contrast with his dismay around spring, set a tone of magic and almost childlike excitement for readers.

"Winter Dreams" is told in fragments. Fitzgerald zeroes in on defining moments that,



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

in parts and section breaks, give us a snapshot of Dexter's character as it evolves—his dreams and ambition, and the events that propel him forward. After college, he joins a partnership for a laundry business, and begins his ascent up the social ladder; he is eventually invited to play golf with the people he once caddied for. "As so frequently would be the case in the future," the narrator prophesies, "Dexter was unconsciously dictated to by his winter dreams." Years later, when he meets Judy again, she is "arrestingly beautiful", and over the

years, he meets her on and off, gets engaged to a kind but unremarkable Irene Scheerer and breaks it off when Judy expresses her interest again. With all her privilege and class, Judy becomes the embodiment of the luxury, the fame, "the glittering things and glittering people" that Dexter is obsessed with. She becomes his winter dream.

Set in the Jazz Age of the 1920s, this narrative is characterised by hedonism, materialism, and unreserved opulence. The narrator tells us, in "[o]ne minute [Dexter]

had the sense of being a trespasser—in the next he was impressed by the tremendous superiority he felt..." and in this moment of fleeting introspection, the story presents to us a contradiction: it gives us a glimpse at Dexter's vulnerability, a sense of him feeling like an outsider even though he has been accepted into the lavish life he had always dreamt of conquering. The Roaring Twenties, however, held no room for even the smallest shred of doubt, and the larger-than-life politics of it extinguished the kind of borrowed ambition

Dexter nurtured. Like the changing seasons, even Dexter's blossoming determination will age and slow.

If this reminds you of *The Great Gatsby*, that's because it is. "There was a general ungodliness in the [...] almost passionate quality of her eyes", the narrator of "Winter Dreams" tells us of a young Judy. Yet, it reminds one of Daisy Buchanan when she is first revealed to us in the film and in the book: gently glancing towards the audience, coy yet bewitching, her surroundings ethereal in the beige of the flying curtains and soft sunlight, vulnerability in her "bright eyes". "Winter Dreams" was actually written as one of the earlier drafts to *Gatsby* and both are based on the same trope of Fitzgerald's unfortunate romance with a wealthy socialite by the name of Ginevra King. Unlike the Great American Novel, however, the short story reads more like a central character study, without much of a deep dive into the elaborate cast of characters and unrelated descriptions, and rationalises Dexter's intrinsic needs and actions, focalised through his point of view.

Fitzgerald's language, as always, flows seamlessly throughout the prose, regardless of its rather snap progression of events. He almost softens the blow for us readers, and to Dexter for letting his winter dreams shatter over and over. All at the same time, he shows us the mere emptiness in a person's existence and the reason for having outrageous ambitions to fill that space. We find ourselves questioning on behalf of the protagonist: is this kind of ambition justified? Is it reasonable? What happens when you jump to reach for the sky but land face first in the mud instead?

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a graduate of English Literature and Writing. She is an intern at Daily Star Books.

TRIBUTE

Syed Abul Fatah Sharfuddin Sharaf Al Hussaini: A forgotten poet

SYED FAIZANUL HUSSAINI

Syed Abul Fatah Sharfuddin Sharaf Al Hussaini, born in 1876, was among the elite of the city and a notable Urdu poet of British India. Born in Dhaka, he lived in Begum Bazar, situated in what is presently Old Dhaka, adjacent to the then Hakim Habibur Rahman Road. Notable historian of Urdu literature, Abul Ghafur Nasakh, called him Abul Fatah Sharfuddin, a name that later gained more popularity. In the locality, however, poet Sharful Hussain was known as "Suba Mian".

The first traceable progeny of the lineage, Syed Fida Hussain, had settled in Delhi during the reign of the fourth Mughal Emperor, Jahangir, with his son, Syed Golam Hussain and his grandsons, Syed Faizuddin Hussain and Syed Mozaffar Hussain; they eventually moved to Kolkata and finally settled down in Dhaka.

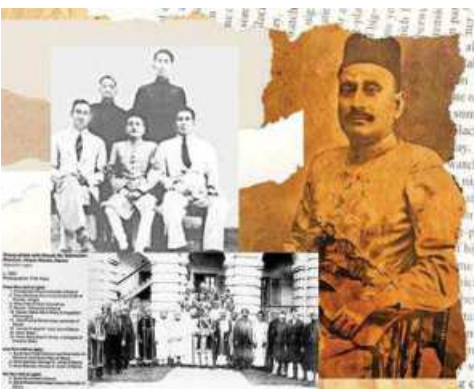
One of the grandsons, Faizuddin, worked in Dhaka as a Kotwal (head of a fort, or "Kot" in medieval India) and poet Sharaf's grandfather maintained such cordial connections with the Nawabs that they considered him a member of the family.

Fatima Khanam, Sharaf's mother, and the granddaughter of Mir Ashraf Ali (Golam Pir), paid special care to his upbringing, while his father, Faqihuddin Hussain, taught him the fundamentals of language. The young poet's command of Arabic and Persian as a child showed remarkable potential. However, when his father died, he went to live with his mother's cousin in Patna, Nawab Syed Muhammad Khan Bahadur (alias Nanhe Syed), for further studies. He was a well-known correspondent for Lucknow's *Awadh Panchnam*, a weekly satirical newspaper. Sharaf at the time was seized with inspiration owing to the companionship of Urdu writer and dramatist, Syed Muhammad Azad.

Azimabad, (now Patna) in those days, was the core of literary prosperity. In the company of celebrated poets and scholars like Shad Azimabadi, Nawab Hussain "Khiyal", "Asar" Azimabadi, and Syed Abul Ghafur "Shahbaz", the poet in Sharaf drew inspiration. He had initially started by writing short shayaris, which usually consisted of four lines. However, he gradually ascended to fully composed poems and ghazals. In

the early stages, he consulted his friend and confidante, Syed Muhammad Azad, on his verses; he was the disciple of poet "Shahbaz" and the author of *Life of Nazeer* (n.d.). Abul Fatah Sharfuddin often went to Delhi, Agra and Lucknow and as a result, developed a deep friendship with notable personalities like Altaf Hussain Hali, Nawab Sail Dehlavi, Arzoo Lucknavi, Safi Lucknavi, Bekhub Dehlavi, and such.

I grew up hearing from my father, late Syed Faizul Hussaini, that Sharaf's poetry was characterized by brevity and the application of metaphors. Sharf tried to express the interconnection of life till death. His devotion to Islam and belonging to the Shia sect led him to dedicate numerous *Salams* (salutation), *Nauhas* (eulogy on the martyrs of Karbala), and *Musaddas* and *Rubai* (four

PHOTOS: SYED FAIZANUL HUSSAINI
COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

lined poetry) to Allah, Prophet Muhammad, the Panjatan and the Imams.

The writer's first collection of poems was published by Sitar-e-Hind Press in Beniapukur, Kolkata: *Gulistan-e-Sharaf* (1937), his Persian poem "*Sair-e-Kolkata*" included in it.

"The anthology shows that the poet has the ability of expressing himself in all forms of poetry", Allama Arzoo Lucknavi wrote of the book. "Study of the entire anthology reveals [...] Sharaf's taste and temperament continued to change to fit in with the revolutions taking place in the country. [...] His poems manifest the gradual evolution of

his poetic genius from preliminary stages to the stages of perfection and consummation."

The anthology was published during his lifetime and the compilation of his second anthology, *Dabistan-e-Sharaf*, had also been completed. He put it together himself and had it penned by a calligrapher; its Foreword was written by the late Sher-e-Bangla Maulvi A.K Fazlul Huq.

Gulistan-e-Sharif has been the mirror in which his poetry's progress has been thoroughly reflected from the beginning.

When my father told me stories about his grandfather, I could see a look of pride on his face, "Great men are not born, but shaped by their fathers and fathers before them" they say, and I've always known my magnificent grandfather as not only a great poet, but also as a great father, brother, and grandfather. As early as I can remember, I've seen my father singing a specific *Nauha* penned by his grandpa throughout the day. It is called "*Shaha Boley*". In the piece, poet Sharaf imagines the grandson of Muhammad, Hussain, having a conversation with his sister, Zainab, in the plains of Karbala.

Poet Syed Abul Fatah Sharfuddin Sharaf Al Hussaini died on March 30, 1960, at the age of 84. His grave resides at the Begum Bazar family cemetery, in the backyard of his home. I was never able to meet my great grandfather as he had passed away before I was born. But, in my lifetime, I have met his son, Syed Manzur Hussain, and his grandson—my father—Syed Faizul Hussaini, and I wonder how magnificent Sharf himself could have been, since these two people are the best human beings I had ever known.

Syed Zafrul Hussaini, one of his grandchildren, and Syed Faizatul Hussaini, one of his great grandsons, are currently attempting to assemble and reprint his works in order to replace the absence of Urdu poetry in Bangladesh. To connect with the present world, Sharf's work, *Gulistan-e-Sharaf*, needs tighter editing, as well as translation and transliteration in English.

Syed Faizatul Hussaini is the great grandson of poet Syed Sharfuddin Sharf Al Hussaini. He is completing his Bachelor's degree at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

It's seldom fair.

MIFTAHUL ZANNAT

Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (Riverhead Books, 2020) begins with the protagonist, Wallace, contemplating his father's death and feeling lonely amongst his friends because they do not understand the experiences he has had. The novel's exploration of "real life" over the course of a weekend is also one that unpacks identity, race, sexuality, and the sheer boredom and frustration of postgraduate life.

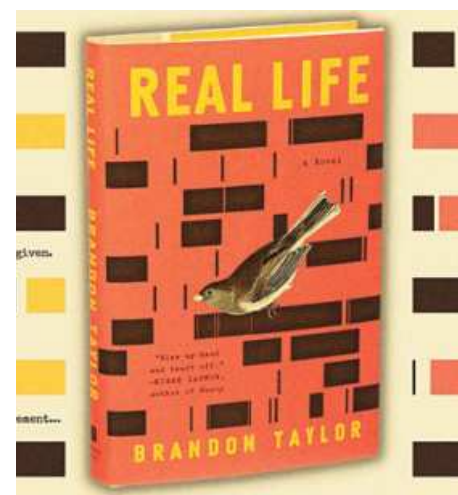
Wallace, somewhat like Taylor himself, is pursuing his postgraduate studies in the STEM field at a Midwestern college town. The ennui of his long days at the lab followed by the cold hostility displayed by his postgraduate peers seem only to amplify the melancholy of his experiences as an introverted queer Black man. Commentary on campus life in this book takes the form of characters like Dana, who makes Wallace feel like an impostor, and his advisor, Simone, who undermines him.

His friends, also postgrad students, also discuss their college lives and act as forces which propel Wallace to confront his opinions and demons. Miller, for instance, causes Wallace to think about his encounter with abuse and to examine what he wants out of life.

Taylor's writing flows—he weaves one into his story and hardly allows its heavy themes to render the book boring or stagnant. Instead, the smoothness of his prose mirrors the flow of the life he is trying to emulate. The indifference of Wallace's tone is reminiscent of the disconnect with which we treat ourselves when we are letting our lives wash over us, when we let life happen to us without actively participating in it because we are too weary.

And on that note, the novel's perspective on life, or rather, real life, is a pessimistic one. I could feel it build—Wallace's unhappiness catching up to him, forcing him to reckon with it, but even in heightened moments of emotion, he refrains from confronting them. We feel the desolation at dinner parties where he is the victim of casual racist jabs from his friends, most of whom are white. Even the lab serves as a place of alienation—his coworker, Dana, constantly trying to belittle him, Wallace feeling "insecure" and "uncertain."

Wallace's feelings of alienation are further exacerbated by an event much more acutely tragic. Flashbacks from his



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

past suggest sexual abuse and trauma. Yet, although Wallace's past trauma serves as one of the major elements of the plot, *Real Life* is hardly defined by it. Instead, at its core, the novel is a thorough examination of how the many identities that conflate and converge in Wallace succeed or fail in defining him. No part of his character is left unexamined—Taylor examines and re-examines Wallace's traumas, his hurts, his disappointments, his ability to blend in, and his inability to do so when everything is too much, everything is laid out intricately for one to see as starkly as he sees it himself.

It is this intricate and often meandering study that allows Taylor to present to us how Wallace's experiences as a poor, millennial, queer Black man intersect. Wallace's character is true—not from a lens of moral virtue but instead from an absence of it. Although *Real Life* could have comfortably occupied the niche of the millennial novel with a flawed or wronged protagonist who is unflawed and un-wronged at the end of the novel, it refrains from doing so. What we get, instead, is a man trying to grapple with the death of his hopes and expectations about the place he has fled to. It goes on even when the characters are not granted the moral closure they might deserve.

Miftahul Zannat is fascinated with the human ability to analyse words with more words. When she is not busy reading or watching films, she likes writing about the things she reads and watches.