

# Ferryslip

John Dos Passos

John Dos Passos (1896–1970) was one of the most famous writers of the “Lost Generation,” a group of writers—including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald—who wrote about modern life using modern, experimental literary forms. Dos Passos wrote poetry, drama, and non-fiction essay, but he is most well-known for his more than forty novels. The section below is the first chapter of his 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer*, an experimental novel that sought to capture the Jazz Age in New York City, a time of radical change and colliding forces. Over 130 short sections, or vignettes, make up this novel; and rather than writing about one or two characters, Dos Passos portrays dozens of characters who move into and out of the reader’s main focus at rapid speed.

Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage 1  
heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume  
under the round bow as the ferry, skidding on the tide, crashes, gulps the  
broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip. Handwinches whirl with  
jingle of chains. Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men  
and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-  
house, crushed and. Jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press.

The nurse, holding the basket at arm’s length as if it were a bedpan,  
opened the door to a big dry hot room with greenish distempered walls  
where in the air tintured with smells of alcohol and iodoform hung writh-  
ing a faint sourish squalling from other baskets along the wall. As she set  
her basket down she glanced into it with pursed-up lips. The newborn  
baby squirmed in the cottonwool feebly like a knot of earthworms.

On the ferry there was an old man playing the violin. He had a mon-  
key’s face puckered up in one corner and kept time with the toe of a cracked  
patent-leather shoe. Bud Korpenning sat on the rail watching him, his back  
to the river. The breeze made the hair stir round the tight line of his cap  
and dried the sweat on his temples. His feet were blistered, he was leaden-  
tired, but when the ferry moved out of the slip, bucking the little slapping  
scalloped waves of the river he felt something warm and tingling shoot  
suddenly through all his veins. “Say, friend, how fur is it into the city from

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where this ferry lands?" he asked a young man in a straw hat wearing a blue and white striped necktie who stood beside him.

The young man's glance moved up from Bud's roadswelled shoes to the red wrist that stuck out from the frayed sleeves of his coat, past the skinny turkey's throat and slid up cockily into the intent eyes under the brokenvisored cap.

"That depends where you want to get to."

"How do I get to Broadway? ... I want to get to the center of things." 5

"Walk east a block and turn down Broadway and you'll find the center of things if you walk far enough."

"Thank you sir. I'll do that."

The violinist was going through the crowd with his hat held out, the wind ruffling the wisps of gray hair on his shabby bald head. Bud found the face tilted up at him, the crushed eyes like two black pins looking into his. "Nothin," he said gruffly and turned away to look at the expanse of river bright as knifeblades. The plank walls of the slip closed in, cracked as the ferry lurched against them; there was rattling of chains, and Bud was pushed forward among the crowd through the ferryhouse. He walked between two coal wagons and out over a dusty expanse of street towards yellow streetcars.

A trembling took hold of his knees. He thrust his hands deep in his pockets. He sat on a lunchwagon halfway down the block. He slid stiffly onto a revolving stool and looked for a long while at the pricelist.

"Fried eggs and a cup o coffee." 10

"Want 'em turned over?" asked the redhaired man behind the counter who was wiping off his beefy freckled forearms with his apron. Bud Korpenning sat up with a start.

"What?"

"The eggs? Want em turned over or sunny side up?"

"Oh sure, turn 'em over." Bud slouched over the counter again with his head between his hands.

"You look all in, feller," the man said as he broke the eggs into the sizz- 15  
zling grease of the frying pan.

"Came down from upstate. I walked fifteen miles this mornin."

The man made a whistling sound through his eyeteeth. "Comin to the big city to look for a job, eh?"

Bud nodded. The man flopped the eggs sizzling and netted with brown out onto the plate and pushed it towards Bud with some bread and butter on the edge of it. "I'm goin to slip you a bit of advice, feller, and it won't cost you nutten. You go an git a shave and a haircut and brush the hayseeds out o yer suit a bit before you start lookin. You'll be more likely to git some-thing. It's looks that count in this city."

"I kin work all right. I'm a good worker," growled Bud with his mouth full.

"I'm tellin yez, that's all," said the redhaired man and turned back to his stove. 20

When Ed Thatcher climbed the marble steps of the wide hospital entry he was trembling. The smell of drugs caught at his throat. A woman with a starched face was looking at him over the top of a desk. He tried to steady his voice.

"Can you tell me how Mrs. Thatcher is?"

"Yes, you can go up."

"But please, miss, is everything all right?"

"The nurse on the floor will know anything about the case. Stairs to the left, third floor, maternity ward." 25

Ed Thatcher held a bunch of flowers wrapped in green waxed paper. The broad stairs swayed as he stumbled up, his toes kicking against the brass rods that held the fiber matting down. The closing of a door cut off a strangled shriek. He stopped a nurse.

"I want to see Mrs. Thatcher, please."

"Go right ahead if you know where she is."

"But they've moved her."

"You'll have to ask at the desk at the end of the hall." 30

He gnawed his cold lips. At the end of the hall a redfaced woman looked at him, smiling.

"Everything's fine. You're the happy father of a bouncing baby girl."

"You see it's our first and Susie's so delicate," he stammered with blinking eyes.

"Oh yes, I understand, naturally you worried. .... you can go in and talk to her when she wakes up. The baby was born two hours ago. Be sure not to tire her."

Ed Thatcher was a little man with two blond wisps of mustache and washedout gray eyes. He seized the nurse's hand and shook it showing all his uneven yellow teeth in a smile. 35

"You see it's our first."

"Congratulations," said the nurse.

Rows of beds under bilious gaslight, a sick smell of restlessly stirring bedclothes, faces fat, lean, yellow, white; that's her. Susie's yellow hair lay in a loose coil round her little white face that looked shriveled and twisted. He unwrapped the roses and put them on the night table. Looking out the window was like looking down into water. The trees in the square were tangled in blue cobwebs. Down the avenue lamps were coming on marking off with green shimmer brickpurple blocks of houses, chimney pots and water tanks cut sharp into a sky flushed like flesh. The blue lids slipped back off her eyes.

That you Ed? . . . Why Ed they are Jacks. How extravagant of you?

"I couldn't help it dearest. I knew you liked them."

40

A nurse was hovering near the end of the bed.

"Couldn't you let us see the baby, miss?"

The nurse nodded. She was a lanternjawed grayfaced woman with tight lips.

"I hate her," whispered Susie. "She gives me the fidgets that woman does; she's nothing but a mean old maid."

"Never mind dear, it's just for a day or two." Susie closed her eyes.

45

"Do you still want to call her Ellen?"

The nurse brought back a basket and set it on the bed beside Susie.

"Oh isn't she wonderful!" said Ed. "Look she's breathing.... And they've oiled her." He helped his wife to raise herself on her elbow; the yellow coil of her hair unrolled, fell over his hand and arm. "How can you tell them apart nurse?"

"Sometimes we cant," said the nurse, stretching her mouth in a smile. Susie was looking querulously into the minute purple face.

"You're sure this is mine."

50

"Of course."

"But it hasn't any label on it."

"I'll label it right away."

"But mine was dark." Susie lay back on the pillow, gasping for breath.

"She has lovely little light fuzz just the color of your hair."

55

Susie stretched her arms out above her head and shrieked: "It's not mine. It's not mine. Take it away .....That woman's stolen my baby."

"Dear, for Heaven's sake! Dear, for Heaven's sake!" He tried to tuck the covers about her.

"Too bad," said the nurse, calmly, picking up the basket. "I'll have to give her a sedative."

Susie sat up stiff in bed. "Take it away," she yelled and fell back in hysterics, letting out continuous frail moaning shrieks.

"O my God!" cried Ed Thatcher, clasping his hands.

60

"You'd better go away for this evening, Mr. Thatcher. . . . She'll quiet down, once you've gone..... I'll put the roses in water."

On the last flight he caught up with a chubby man who was strolling down slowly, rubbing his hands as he went. Their eyes met.

"Everything all right, sir?" asked the chubby man.

"Oh yes, I guess so," said Thatcher faintly.

The chubby man turned on him, delight bubbling through his thick voice. "Congradulade me, congradolade me; mein vife has giben birth to a poy."

65

Thatcher shook a fat little hand. "Mine's a girl," he admitted, sheepishly.

"It is fif years yet and every year a girl, and now dink of it, a poy."

"Yes," said Ed Thatcher as they stepped out on the pavement, "it's a great moment."

"Vill yous allow me sir to invite you to drink a congradulation drink mit me?"

"Why with pleasure."

70

The latticed halfdoors were swinging in the saloon at the corner of Third Avenue. Shuffling their feet politely they went through into the back room.

"Ach," said the German as they sat down at a scarred brown table, "family life is full of vorries."

"That it is sir; this is my first."

"Vill you haf beer?"

"All right anything suits me."

75

"Two pottles Culmbacher imported to drink to our little folk." The bottles popped and the sepia-tinged foam rose in the glasses. "Here's success. Prosit," said the German, and raised his glass. He rubbed the foam out of his mustache and pounded on the table with a pink fist "Vould it be indiscreet meester....?"

"Thatcher's my name."

"Vould it be indiscreet, Mr. Thatcher, to inquivire vat might your profession be?"

"Accountant. I hope before long to be a certified accountant."

"I am a printer and my name is Zucher—Marcus Antonius Zucher."

80

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Zucher."

They shook hands across the table between the bottles.

"A certified accountant makes big money," said Mr. Zucher.

"Big money's what I'll have to have, for my little girl."

"Kids, they eat money," continued Mr. Zucher, in a deep voice.

85

"Won't you let me set you up to a bottle?" said Thatcher, figuring up how much he had in his pocket. Poor Susie wouldn't like me to be drinking in a saloon like this. But just this once, and I'm learning, learning about fatherhood.

"The more the merrier," said Mr. Zucher. ". . . But kids, they eat money. . . . Dont do nutten but eat and vear out clothes. Vonce I get my business on its feet. Ach! Now vot mit hypothecations and the difficult borrowing of money and vot mit vages going up und these here crazy tra-deunion socialists and bomsters ..."

"Well here's how, Mr. Zucher." Mr. Zucher squeezed the foam out of his mustache with the thumb and forefinger of each hand. "It aint every day ve pring into the voirdl a papy poy, Mr. Thatcher."

"Or a baby girl, Mr. Zucher."

The barkeep wiped the spillings off the table when he brought the new bottles, and stood near listening, the rag dangling from his red hands.

90

"And I have the hope in mein heart that ven my poy drinks to his poy, it will be in champagne vine. Ach, that is how things go in this great city."

"I'd like my girl to be a quiet homey girl, not like these young women nowadays, all frills and furbelows and tight lacings. And I'll have retired by that time and have a little place up the Hudson, work in the garden evenings. I know fellers downtown who have retired with three thousand a year. It's saving that does it."

"Aint no good in savin," said the barkeep. "I saved for ten years and the savings bank went broke and left me nutten but a bankbook for my trouble. Get a close tip and take a chance, that's the only system."

"That's nothing but gambling" snapped Thatcher.

"Well sir it's a gamblin game," said the barkeep as he walked back to the bar swinging the two empty bottles. 95

"A gamblin game. He aint so far out," said Mr. Zucher, looking down into his beer with a glassy meditative eye. "A man vat is ambeetious must take chances. Ambeetions is vat I came here from Frankfort mit at the age of tvelf years, and now that I haf a son to vork for Ach, his name shall be Vilhelm after the mighty Kaiser."

"My little girl's name will be Ellen after my mother." Ed Thatcher's eyes filled with tears.

Mr. Zucher got to his feet. "Veil goodpy Mr. Thatcher. Happy to have met you. I must go home to my little girls."

Thatcher shook the chubby hand again, and thinking warm soft thoughts of motherhood and fatherhood and birthday cakes and Christmas watched through a sepia-tinged foamy haze Mr. Zucher waddle out through the swinging doors. After a while he stretched out his arms. Well poor little Susie wouldn't like me to be here. Everything for her and the bonny wee bairn.

"Hey there yous how about settlin?" bawled the barkeep after him when he reached the door. 100

"Didnt the other feller pay?"

"Like hell he did."

"But he was t-t-treating me....."

The barkeep laughed as he covered the money with a red lipper. "I guess that bloat believes in savin."

A small bearded bandy-legged man in a derby walked up Allen Street, up the sunstriped tunnel hung with skyblue and smoked-salmon and mustardyellow quilts, littered with second hand ginger bread-colored furniture. He walked with his cold hands clasped over the tails of his frockcoat, picking his way among packing boxes and scuttling children. He kept gnawing his lips and clasping and unclasping his hands. He walked without 105

hearing the yells of the children or the annihilating clatter of the L trains overhead or smelling the rancid sweet huddled smell of packed tenements.

At a yellowpainted drugstore at the corner of Canal, he stopped and stared abstractedly at a face on a green advertising card. It was a high-browed cleanshaven distinguished face with arched eyebrows and a bushy neatly trimmed mustache, the face of a man who had money in the bank, poised prosperously above a crisp wing collar and an ample dark cravat. Under it in copybook writing was the signature King C. Gillette. Above his head hovered the motto NO STROPPING NO HONING. The little bearded man pushed his derby back off his sweating brow and looked for a long time into the dollarproud eyes of King C. Gillette. Then he clenched his fists, threw back his shoulders and walked into the drugstore.

His wife and daughters were out. He heated up a pitcher of water on the gasburner. Then with the scissors he found on the mantel he dipped the long brown locks of his beard. Then he started shaving very carefully with the new nickelbright safety razor. He stood trembling running his fingers down his smooth white cheeks in front of the stained mirror. He was trimming his mustache when he heard a noise behind him. He turned towards them a face smooth as the face of King C. Gillette, a face with a dollarbland smile. The two little girls' eyes were popping out of their heads. "Mommer it's popper," the biggest one yelled. His wife dropped like a laundrybag into the rocker and threw the apron over her head.

"Oyoy! Oyoy!" she moaned rocking back and forth.

"Vat's a matter? Dontye like it?" He walked back and forth with the safety razor shining in his hand now and then gently fingering his smooth chin.

