**The Crack-Up *Abridged Version***
by F. Scott Fitzgerald
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*This essay was written during Fitzgerald’s later years, when he was ill, drunk, in debt, and unable to write commercially. It first appeared in Esquire magazine in the 1930s.*

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work – the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside – the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within – that you don’t feel until it’s too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick – the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

Before I go on with this short history, let me make a general observation – the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the “impossible,” come true. Life was something you dominated if you were any good. Life yielded easily to intelligence and effort, or to what proportion could be mustered of both. It seemed a romantic business to be a successful literary man – you were not ever going to be as famous as a movie star but what note you had was probably longer-lived – you were never going to have the power of a man of strong political or religious convictions but you were certainly more independent. Of course within the practice of your trade you were forever unsatisfied-but I, for one, would not have chosen any other.

And then, ten years this side of forty-nine, I suddenly realized that I had prematurely cracked.

Now a man can crack in many ways – can crack in the head – in which case the power of decision is taken from you by others! Or in the body, when one can but submit to the white hospital world; or in the nerves. William Seabrook in an unsympathetic book tells, with some pride and a movie ending, of how he became public charge. What led to his alcoholism or was bound up with it, was a collapse of his nervous system. Though the present writer was not so entangled – having at the time not tasted so much as a glass of beer for six months – it was his nervous reflexes that were giving way – too much anger and too many tears.

Moreover, to go back to my thesis that life has a varying offensive, the realization of having cracked was not simultaneous with a blow, but with a reprieve.

But I had a strong sudden instinct that I must be alone. I didn’t want to see any people at all. I had seen so many people all my life – I was an average mixer, but more than average in a tendency to identify myself, my ideas, my destiny, with those of all classes that I came in contact with. I was always saving or being saved – in a single morning I would go through the emotions ascribable to Wellington at Waterloo. I lived in a world of inscrutable hostiles and inalienable friends and supporters.

I found I was good-and-tired. I could lie around and was glad to, sleeping or dozing sometimes twenty hours a day and in the intervals trying resolutely not to think – instead I made lists – made lists and tore them up, hundreds of lists: of cavalry leaders and football players and cities, and popular tunes and pitchers, and happy times, and hobbies and houses lived in a how many suits since I left the army and how many pairs of shoes. And lists of women I’d liked, and of the times I had let myself be snubbed by people who had not been my betters in character or ability.

- And I cracked like an old plate.

What was to be done about it will have to rest in what used to be called the “womb of time.” Suffice it to say that after about an hour of solitary pillow-hugging, I began to realize that for two years my life had been a drawing on resources that I did not possess, that I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt. What was the small gift of life given back in comparison to that? – when there had once been a pride of direction and a confidence in enduring independence.

I realized that in those two years, in order to preserve something – an inner hush maybe, maybe not-I had weaned myself from all the things I used to love – that every act of life from the morning tooth-brush to the friend at dinner had become an effort. I saw that for a long time I had not liked people and things, but only followed the rickety old pretense of liking, I saw that even my love for those closest to me was become only an attempt to love, that my casual relations – with an editor, a tobacco seller, the child of a friend, were only what I remembered I should do, from other days. All in the same month I became bitter about such things as the sound of the radio, the advertisements in the magazines, the screech tracks, the dead silence of the country – contemptuous at human softness, immediately (if secretively) quarrelsome toward hardness – hating the night when I couldn’t sleep and hating the day because it went toward night. I slept on the heart side now because I knew that the sooner I could tire that out, even a little, the sooner would come that blessed hour of nightmare which, like a catharsis, would enable me to better meet the new day.

It is not a pretty picture. Inevitably I was carted here and there and exposed to various [helpers]. One of them can only be described as a person whose life makes other people’s lives seem like death – even this time when she was cast in the usually unappealing role of Job’s comforter. Let me append our conversation as a sort of postscript:

“Instead of being so sorry for yourself, listen -” she said. (She always says “Listen,” because she thinks while she talks – really thinks.) So she said: Listen. Suppose this wasn’t a crack in you – suppose it was a crack in the Grand Canyon.”

“The crack’s in me,” I said heroically.

“Listen! The world only exists in your eyes – your conception of it. You can make it as big or as small as you want to. And you’re trying to be a little puny individual. By God, if I ever cracked, I’d try to make the world crack with me. Listen! The world only exists through your apprehension of it, and so it’s much better to say that it’s not you that’s cracked – it’s the Grand Canyon.”

I felt a certain reaction to what she said, but I am a slow-thinking man, and it occurred to me simultaneously that of all natural forces, vitality is the incommunicable one. In days when juice came into one as an article without duty, one tried to distribute it – but always without success; to further mix metaphors, vitality never “takes.” You have it or you haven’t it, like health or brown eyes or honor or a baritone voice. I might have asked some of it from her, neatly wrapped and ready for home cooking and digestion, but I could never have got it – not if I’d waited around for a thousand hours with the tin cup of self-pity.

I could walk from her door, holding myself carefully like cracked crockery, and go away into the world of bitterness, where I was making a home with such materials as are found there – and quote to myself after I left her door:

“Ye are the salt of the earth. But if the salt hath lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?” Matthew 5-13.