**Excerpt from *The Descendants* byKaui Hart Hemmings**

We’re here not only because we’re visiting and hoping Joanie has made some progress during the night, reacting to light and sound and painful jabs, but also because we have nowhere else to go. Scottie’s in school all day and then Esther picks her up, but this week I felt she should spend more time here and with me, so I took her out of school.

“What do you want to do now?” I ask.

She opens her scrapbook, a project that seems to occupy all of her time. “I don’t know. Eat.”

“What would you usually do now?”

“Be in school.”

“What if it were Saturday? What would you do then?”

“Beach.”

I try to think of the last time she was completely in my care and what we did together. I think it was when she was around one, one and a half. Joanie had to fly to Maui for a shoot and couldn’t find a babysitter, and her parents couldn’t do it, for some reason. I was in the middle of a trial and stayed home but absolutely had to get some work done, so I put Scottie in the bathtub with a bar of soap. I watched to see what happened. She splashed and tried to drink the bathwater, and then she found the soap and reached to grab it. It eluded her grasp and she tried again, a look of wonder on her small face, and I slipped out into the hall, where I had set up a workstation and a baby monitor. I could hear her laughing, so I knew she wasn’t drowning. I wonder if this would still work: putting her in a tub with a slippery bar of Irish Spring.

“We can go to the beach,” I say. “Would Mom take you to the club?”

“Well, duh. Where else would we go?”

“Then it’s a plan. After you talk and we see a nurse, we’ll check in at home, then go.”

Scottie takes a picture out of her album, crushes it in her hand, and throws it away. I wonder what the picture was, if it was the one of her mother on the bed, probably not the best family relic. “I wish,” Scottie says. “What do I wish?”

It’s one of our games. Every now and then she names a place she wishes we were besides this place, this time in our lives.

“I wish we were at the dentist,” she decides.

“Me, too. I wish we were getting our mouths x-rayed.”

“And Mom was getting her teeth whitened,” she says.

I really do wish we were at Dr. Branch’s office, the three of us getting high on laughing gas and feeling our numb lips. A root canal would be a blast compared to this. Or any medical procedure, really. Actually, I wish I could be home working. I have to make a decision on who should own the land that has been in my family since the 1840s. This sale will eliminate all of my family’s land holdings, and I desperately need to study up on the facts before the meeting I have with my cousins six days from now. That’s our deadline. Two o’clock at Cousin Six’s house six days from today. We’ll approve a buyer. It’s irresponsible of me to have put off thinking about this deal for so long, but I guess this is what our family has done for a while now. We’ve turned our backs to our legacy, waiting for someone else to come along and assume both our fortune and our debts.

I’m afraid Esther may have to take Scottie to the beach, and I’m about to tell her, but then I don’t because I feel ashamed. My wife is in the hospital, my daughter needs her parents, and I need to work. Once again I’m putting her in the tub.

I see Scottie staring at her mother. She has her back against the wall, and she’s fumbling with the hem of her shirt.

“Scottie,” I say. “If you’re not going to say anything, then we may as well leave.”

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t you want to tell your mother what’s going on in school?”

“She never cares about what’s going on in school.”

“What about your extracurricular activities? Your schedule’s fuller than the president’s. Your scrapbook, show her that. Or what did you make in glassblowing the other day?”

“A bong,” she says.

I look at her closely before responding. She doesn’t appear to have said anything remarkable. I never know if she knows what she’s talking about. “Interesting,” I say. “What is a bong?”

She shrugs. “Some high school guy taught me how to make it. He said it would go well with chips and salsa and any other food I could think of. It’s some kind of platter.”

“Do you still have this . . . bong?”

“Sort of,” she says. “But Mr. Larson told me to make it into a vase. I could put flowers in it and give it to her.” She points at her mother.

“That’s a great idea!”

She eyes me skeptically. “You don’t have to get all Girl Scout about it.”

“Sorry,” I say.

**Excerpt from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited”**

He remembered thousand-franc notes given to an orchestra for playing a single number, hundred-franc notes tossed to a doorman for calling a cab.

But it hadn't been given for nothing.

It had been given, even the most wildly squandered sum, as an offering to destiny that he might not remember the things most worth remembering, the things that now he would always remember--his child taken from his control, his wife escaped to a grave in Vermont.

In the glare of a *brasserie* a woman spoke to him. He bought her some eggs and coffee, and then, eluding her encouraging stare, gave her a twenty-franc note and took a taxi to his hotel.

II

He woke upon a fine fall day--football weather. The depression of yesterday was gone and he liked the people on the streets. At noon he sat opposite Honoria at Le Grand Vatel, the only restaurant he could think of not reminiscent of champagne dinners and long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred and vague twilight.

"Now, how about vegetables? Oughtn't you to have some vegetables?"

"Well, yes."

"Here's *épinards* and *chou-fleur* and carrots and *haricots*."

"I'd like *chou-fleur*."

"Wouldn't you like to have two vegetables?"

"I usually only have one at lunch."

The waiter was pretending to be inordinately fond of children. *"Qu'elle est mignonne la petite? Elle parle exactement comme une Française."*

"How about dessert? Shall we wait and see?"

The waiter disappeared. Honoria looked at her father expectantly.

"What are we going to do?"

"First, we're going to that toy store in the Rue Saint-Honoré and buy you anything you like. And then we're going to the vaudeville at the Empire."

She hesitated. "I like it about the vaudeville, but not the toy store."

"Why not?"

"Well, you brought me this doll." She had it with her. "And I've got lots of things. And we're not rich any more, are we?"

"We never were. But today you are to have anything you want."

"All right," she agreed resignedly.

When there had been her mother and a French nurse he had been inclined to be strict; now he extended himself, reached out for a new tolerance; he must be both parents to her and not shut any of her out of communication.

"I want to get to know you," he said gravely. "First let me introduce myself. My name is Charles J. Wales, of Prague."

"Oh, daddy!" her voice cracked with laughter.

"And who are you, please?" he persisted, and she accepted a role immediately: "Honoria Wales, Rue Palatine, Paris."

"Married or single?"

"No, not married. Single."

He indicated the doll. "But I see you have a child, madame."

Unwilling to disinherit it, she took it to her heart and thought quickly: "Yes, I've been married, but I'm not married now. My husband is dead."

He went on quickly, "And the child's name?"

"Simone. That's after my best friend at school."

"I'm very pleased that you're doing so well at school."

"I'm third this month," she boasted. "Elsie"--that was her cousin--"is only about eighteenth, and Richard is about at the bottom."

"You like Richard and Elsie, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I like Richard quite well and I like her all right."

Cautiously and casually he asked: "And Aunt Marion and Uncle Lincoln--which do you like best?"

"Oh, Uncle Lincoln, I guess."

He was increasingly aware of her presence. As they came in, a murmur of ". . . adorable" followed them, and now the people at the next table bent all their silences upon her, staring as if she were something no more conscious than a flower.

"Why don't I live with you?" she asked suddenly. "Because mamma's dead?"

"You must stay here and learn more French. It would have been hard for daddy to take care of you so well."

"I don't really need much taking care of any more. I do everything for myself."

Going out of the restaurant, a man and a woman unexpectedly hailed him.

"Well, the old Wales!"

"Hello there, Lorraine. . . . Dunc."

Sudden ghosts out of the past: Duncan Schaeffer, a friend from college. Lorraine Quarrles, a lovely, pale blonde of thirty; one of a crowd who had helped them make months into days in the lavish times of three years ago.

"My husband couldn't come this year," she said, in answer to his question. "We're poor as hell. So he gave me two hundred a month and told me I could do my worst on that. . . . This your little girl?"

"What about coming back and sitting down?" Duncan asked.

"Can't do it." He was glad for an excuse. As always, he felt Lorraine's passionate, provocative attraction, but his own rhythm was different now.

"Well, how about dinner?" she asked.

"I'm not free. Give me your address and let me call you."

"Charlie, I believe you're sober," she said judicially. "I honestly believe he's sober, Dunc. Pinch him and see if he's sober."

Charlie indicated Honoria with his head. They both laughed.

Write about a “missed connection”—two people’s attempt to connect with little success. The circumstances could be funny, frustrating, or tragic. The characters could be a parent and child, spouses, or two people on a blind date.