

# **The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg**

**BETSY ROBINSON**



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

## Praise for *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg*

I couldn't put it down... I was amazed at the originality... I enjoyed how Zelda made it through the world. She is a person I've never, in my wildest imagination, ever known before.

—Jonathan Storm, former critic for *Philadelphia Inquirer*

In the deft, witty, highly conscious hands of novelist (and theatre veteran) Betsy Robinson, the excruciatingly wild ride of *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* becomes an act of seduction. (And Zelda thought she was writing a memoir!) Never staying in one place too long, which is more than can be said of its anti-heroine, Zelda, the novel's tone is as reliably unreliable as all of its scarred characters. If there is really nothing to hang on to, it must be a little like life, or death, or trying to create something. Betsy Robinson is alive, and kicking.

—Estha Weiner, poet and professor

I *loved* this novel! The writing is glorious, the vocabulary a delight to follow. I laughed—I rooted, I could not put it down. It's unique and funny and odd and beautiful. Two writers have made me laugh out loud: Martin Amis and David Sedaris. Now Betsy Robinson!

—Maureen Phillips, TV producer

*The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* is an entertaining novel about a woman who spends her life trying to find herself. With no role model other than a down-and-out poet, she goes off into the world to seek out survival methods. Along the way, she meets numerous obstacles to success and memorable characters. She is often her own worst enemy, yet she perseveres. Her self-portrait

is real, down to the blemishes, and despite everything, the reader is rooting for her. Betsy Robinson has written a story that rings true when life does not go according to plan and she has given us wonderful three dimensional characters who will be remembered long after the last page is read.

—Devin McKay, M.L.S., M.A., deputy chief librarian,  
Queensborough Community College

As a veteran of 36 years as a high school library media teacher and a member of a number of book clubs, I found *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* to be a rollicking romp. The development of the characters seems true to life in a demented sort of way, and involves more than one ironic twist. In an off-the-wall style reminiscent of Vonnegut and Brautigan, Robinson interjects many “where-did-that-come-from moments” into her book. You scratch your head, and then you smile.

—John Volkman, librarian, Fresno schools

**The  
Last Will &  
Testament  
of Zelda McFigg**

We are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile and that ability to turn your face toward home is one of the great human endeavors and great human stories.

—David Whyte

Little book, you will go without me—and I grudge it not—to the city. Alas that your master is not allowed to go! Go, but go unadorned, as becomes the book of an exile; in your misfortune wear the garb that befits these days of mine. You shall have no cover dyed with the juice of purple berries—no fit colour is that for mourning; your title shall not be tinged with vermilion nor your paper with oil of cedar; and you shall wear no white bosses upon your dark edges. Books of good omen should be decked with such things as these; 'tis my fate that you should bear in mind. Let no brittle pumice polish your two edges; I would have you appear with locks all rough and disordered. Be not ashamed of blots; he who sees them will feel that they were caused by my tears.

—Ovid's *Tristia, Book I: The Poet to His Book*

(Arthur Leslie Wheeler, trans.)

...my meditation would become truly stable only when I concentrated on the black light. I felt peaceful, but at the same time I was so eager to know what I was going to see next that my mind was not as quiet as it might have been. During this period I would see in meditation a deep and terrifying darkness such as I had never seen in the outside world. This darkness made me frightened of meditating, but even so, I would remain in it for long periods at a time.

—Swami Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness*

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish it but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.

With my very best wishes,

sincerely yours,

Albert Einstein

—Letter to Robert S. Marcus (February 12, 1950)

I’m in a place where I don’t know where I am! . . . D’oh!

—Homer Simpson, *The Simpsons*

# Prologue

Dearest Reader:

My name is Zelda McFigg, and, until recently, I weighed approximately two hundred thirty-seven pounds. I am four foot eleven inches in stature, and I have not had sex. Ever. Also, I have never been anybody's favorite, and this last fact, in my opinion, is an injustice of the highest order perpetrated by all persons I have ever met.

Before I begin the tale of the unforgivable and thoughtless actions of everyone from my neglectful parents to the lunch delivery lady who, yesterday, mumbled insouciantly at my request for lightly salted snacks and then sneered at her twenty-five cent tip, which, believe me, for a forty-nine and one-quarter-year-old in my circumstances, is generous—before I begin, there are a few things you must know about me:

Although I have found legitimate fault with most humans, I have been a contributing member of society. As a teacher of seventh grade English, to be precise. For nearly three decades I instructed ungrateful provincial juvenile delinquents in the art of self-expression and proper punctuation until I was forced to retire almost two years ago during the depth of the recession. Yes, I was a dedicated

educator, a profession deemed one of the most important in the universe by the most popular television hostess in the world—an African American lady with a weight problem similar to my own, whom I will call Miss Olga. But I will get to her later.

I am writing this memoir not only to set the record straight, but to make a confession: due to the dearth of respect as well as the larceny I have experienced at the hands of everyone in a position to showcase my unique talents, I was forced to pursue alternate routes to survival. I lived under what another self-educated artiste, Mr. Jack London, called “the law of club and fang,” creatively adjusting to changing conditions in the ruthless struggle that is required of feral animals and humans working in capitalist systems where worth and status are assigned in correlation to pleasing or less-than-pleasing appearances. As a master of invention, I have done things that some of you may judge harshly. Therefore, I have one request: please suspend those judgments until you have considered my entire story.

# Chapter 1

My mother, who was a morning person, never understood my waking fear. As far back as I can remember I've had it: At the buzz of the alarm clock, I'd be electrocuted into consciousness, my heart in my mouth, my room inundated by my stink. (A genetically determined bad body odor which erupts much like a skunk's when I feel threatened or humiliated; it is a sour, pungent smell that cuts through deodorants, antiperspirants, and every perfume and toilet water known to womankind. I have learned to accept myself with this condition and negotiate it via quick trips to ladies rooms for sink rinses with a special antibacterial soap that, to this day, I order in purse-size bars from a catalog, which name I will not divulge for reasons that will eventually become apparent.) Heavy with dread, I'd make my way to our wretched mouse hole of a kitchen for a morsel to calm my nerves . . . only to face my mother.

"Zelda, Zelda, Zelda," she'd chide as she inhaled caffeine laced with scotch, lit another Marlboro, and disappeared down the hall into her paint studio. "The sun is out. The birds are singing," she'd holler. "If you miss the school bus, I am not, I repeat, *not* driving you. You'll just have to stay home."

As I knew this to be true, I simply retired to my bedroom with a bowl of milk-drenched Raisin Bran where I read my favorite depressed Beat poet-turned-folksinger while eating a box of milk-dunked Saltines and planning my life as a famous person so as to ensure that the entire eighth grade would rue the day they called me Stinky Pinky. (The stinky part I have already explained; “pinky” referred to my tendency to turn various shades of puce when I am fearful or humiliated.)

For the next few hours I alternately read and sang a song/poem called “Dusty Rose.” I also ate a box of butter cookies, two bananas, a can of cashews, and a bag of potato chips. I felt so sick and disgusted that after I finished the chips, I swore I would never eat again. I thought about throwing up, but the idea turned my stomach. I thought about swallowing a bottle of my mother’s antidepressant pills, but that seemed extreme. I thought about asking for help, but I wasn’t sure who to ask.

“Zelda!” shrieked my mother from her studio. “Can you bring my cigarettes?”

I ignored her and thought about crying. I hadn’t cried since I don’t know when. The Beat poets talked a lot about wailing and howling, so I thought I’d give that a try.

“Zelda!” bellowed my mother. “What in God’s name is that noise? I need my cigarettes!”

Since howling felt forced and it didn’t make me happy, I walked into my mother’s room, picked up a carton of Marlboros, and took it to her studio.

“It’s about time,” she said, flinging red paint at a canvas on the floor.

“Isn’t it dangerous to smoke around all this paint stuff?” I asked from the doorway.

She snapped her fingers for the smokes. I handed them over, then I stood back, waiting for her to look at me. She didn’t.

I suppose I should have gone back to my room, but something held me there. “Mom?” I asked.

But she didn’t answer. She ripped open the carton, grabbed a pack of Marlboros, sliced off the top with her putty knife, and pulled out a cigarette, which she lit from the stub of the butt in her teeth. Then she poured half a can of yellow paint into a can of blue. I knew she was drunk, and I knew she’d probably already forgotten that I was there, but something kept me hanging at her door.

“Mom,” I repeated. “I’m very fat and I want to die. I can’t stop eating, Mom. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I eat till I feel sick, and I want to die and never eat again, but then I do. I’m sick in my soul, Mom. I want to throw up or cry or die, but instead I keep eating. Maybe if we could put locks on the kitchen . . . but I can pick locks, so that wouldn’t work. I’m the fattest kid in my class, Mom, and I don’t want to go to school anymore. I think I could be an actress though because I can make things up and believe them. Mom, could I take acting lessons so I could become famous instead of going to school?”

My mother pounded the top onto the can of yellow and blue paint and began to shake it. She shook it violently with the cigarette clenched in her teeth. She shook it so hard her face turned red. Then—crash, splat—she passed out on the floor.

I stamped out her burning butt before it could start a fire on the canvas. I checked my mother’s pulse. She was fine, just drunk. She’d come to in a little while and continue as she always did. I grabbed a rag and mopped up the pool of paint from where the yellow and blue can had fallen. I stepped over my mother’s body, walked back to her bedroom, took all the money out of her wallet, grabbed my Beat poets book, walked two miles to the train station, and boarded the first locomotive to Manhattan.

My father lived and worked somewhere on the Upper East Side and, upon arriving at Grand Central Station, I briefly considered giv-

ing him a call. But I knew he would not appreciate the intrusion, so instead I stepped into a taxicab parked on Vanderbilt Avenue. “Vere do you vant to go?” asked the driver in a heavy East Indian accent.

That’s when I realized I had neglected to decide. “How about the hotel where all the famous poets and folksingers live?” I suggested, searching for an address in my depressed poets book. Drat, nothing. “The Chelsea Hotel!” I barked, suddenly remembering the new Leonard Cohen song. It was 1975, and, according to Mr. Cohen, everybody with soul lived at the Chelsea. The driver floored the gas, and in no time he was pulling over in front of 222 West 23rd Street.

My favorite poet went by the name of Mike (not his real name, but close enough). He was famous for the aforementioned song/poem “Dusty Rose.” He wrote it in the mid-sixties, and in case you’re not up on sixties poetry, I’ll remind you that it is the one about a girl with buttocks-length auburn hair who longed to be a ballerina but didn’t have the body because she was too Rubinesque, so in disappointment she kills herself. You might recall that Mike sang the song in the voice of the mourning lover on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, and that this had led to many interviews and stories that he was writing a great American epic poem. Even though a decade later he had published nothing, photographs of him with his famous baseball cap pulled down over his sunglasses and his shoulders hunched to his ears to maintain anonymity made it into the tabloids. He was known as a reclusive genius, and I was certain he would recognize my inner beauty and star quality.

I paid the taxi driver generously from my mother’s stash and I went inside the hotel.

“I would like to see Mike the poet,” I announced to the bald man at the reception desk. He chewed on the end of an unlit cigar and turned the page of his *Daily News*. “Excuse me,” I repeated, “I am here to see Mike the poet.” I had withstood far worse effronteries

than this during six years of elementary school and I would not be intimidated. “He’s expecting me. Can you tell me his room number?”

The bald man spat cigar bits and scowled. “He ain’t here.”

“Oh,” said I, considering my options. “Well, do you mind if I wait?”

The bald man shrugged and pointed to a circle of flea-bitten red and black armchairs on the other side of this lobby that looked like a crazy art gallery.

I hadn’t gone to the bathroom since before my food binge and my bladder was bursting. “Excuse me,” I said as politely as I could. “Where is the ladies room?”

“Zat what you are?” said the bald man, looking me up and down in a way that made me feel even sicker. “Down the hall to the left.”

Trust me, I’m doing you a favor by sparing you the details of the Chelsea Hotel’s public bathroom. The only good part was that it was so awful that I believed simply conjuring it when I felt compelled to eat might be an effective diet plan.

After I was done relieving myself as best I could, given the circumstances of the toilet, I went back to the lobby where I waited for two hours and forty-seven minutes until an old woman with matted grey hair, wearing a purple gown that exposed nearly all of her cleavageless pancake breasts sat down.

“Do you have a joint?” she inquired.

I responded that I did not use drugs, but did she happen to know Mike the poet’s suite number?

“Mike doesn’t live here,” she cooed, licking what was left of her front teeth. “Didn’t pay his rent. I think he’s uptown at the Embassy.”

I didn’t know which was more upsetting—Mike’s absence or the feeling of her fingers twiddling up my thigh. “What embassy?” I demanded, lurching out of the chair.

The woman grinned. She was in dire need of a dental hygienist. “You’re making a joke, right?” Then she laughed like a six-pack-a-day alcoholic, hoisted herself out of the chair, and staggered to the elevator.

I was about to give up and return to Grand Central when I heard a voice behind the *Daily News* at the reception desk: “Embassy Hotel. Broadway and Seventieth Street. If you hurry, you can probably catch him before—”

I was out the door and into another taxi speeding to the Upper West Side before he could finish his sentence.



The Embassy Hotel was far worse than the Chelsea. It smelled of stale puke and the man at reception grinned like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.”

“I’m here to see Mike the poet,” I announced. “He’s expecting me.”

“My name ees José,” said the clerk. “I like beeg legs.”

“I have an appointment with Mike the poet,” I repeated, displaying my paperback with his picture on the cover. “Can you tell me his room number?” And as I said it, something that looked like a pile of old blankets on the seedy lobby sofa in the corner heaved and groaned.

“Meester Mike,” announced José, making a grand gesture to the pile, “your appointment ees here.”