



ZELIG
Woody Allen, 1983

TRANSCRIPT

The following documentary would like to give special thanks to Dr. Eudora Fletcher, Paul Deghuee and Mrs. Meryl Fletcher Varney.

0:00:28

Crowded street. A row of cars forms the entourage of a man who is acclaimed by the crowd that crammed the sidewalks.

SUSAN SONTAG

He was the phenomenon of the twenties. If you think that at that time he was as well-known as Lindbergh... it's really quite astonishing.

IRVING HOWE

His story reflected the nature of our civilization... the character of our times. Yet it was also one man's story and all the themes of our culture were there -heroism, will, things like that- but when you look back on it, it was very strange.

SAUL BELLOW

Well, it is ironic to see how quickly he has faded from memory considering what an astounding record he made. He was, of course, very amusing, but at the same time touched a nerve in people perhaps in a way in which they would prefer not to be touched. It certainly is a very bizarre story.

Some representative scenes of the twenties

NARRATOR

The year is 1928. America, enjoying a decade of unequalled prosperity, has gone wild. The Jazz Age, it is called. The rhythms are syncopated. The morals are looser. The liquor is cheaper, when you can get it. It is a time of diverse heroes and madcap stunts, of speak-easies and flamboyant parties. One typical party occurs at the Long Island estate of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Porter Sutton. Socialites, patrons of the arts, politicians and poets rub elbows with the cream of high society.

Present at the party is Scott Fitzgerald, who is to cast perspective on the twenties for all future generations. He writes in his notebook about a curious little man named Leon Selwyn, or Zelman, who seemed clearly to be an aristocrat and extolled the very rich as he chatted with socialites.

He spoke adoringly of Coolidge and the Republican Party all in an upper-class Boston accent. "An hour later", writes Fitzgerald, "I was stunned to see the same man speaking with the kitchen help. Now he claimed to be a Democrat and his accent

seemed coarse, as if he were one of the crowd." It's the first small notice taken of Leonard Zelig.

Florida, one year later. An odd incident occurs at the New York Yankees' training camp. Journalists, anxious as always to immortalize the exploits of the great home-run hitters notice a strange new player waiting his turn at bat after Babe Ruth. He's listed on the roster as Lou Zelig but no one on the team has heard of him. Security guards are called and he's escorted from the premises. It appears as a small item in the next day's newspaper. [*News: "Imposter chased from Yankee Camp"*]

0:03:37

Chicago, Illinois, that same year. There is a private party at a speak-easy on the South Side. People from the most respectable walks of life dance and drink bathtub gin. Present that evening was Calvin Turner, a waiter.

CALVIN TURNER

A lot of gangsters come in the place. Cause they're good tippers and take care of us. We take care of our customers. But on this particular night, here's a strange guy coming in. I'd never seen him before. So I asked the one or the other. I said, "John, you know this guy? You ever seen him?" So he looks. "No. I ain't never seen him before. I don't know who he is but I know one thing: he's a tough-looking hombre." So I looked over, and then the next thing, the guy had disappeared. I don't know where he went to. But about this time, the music starts and the band started playing. I looked. Here's a colored boy over there playing trumpet. Man, he was playing back, and I looked at the guy and I said, "He looks just like that gangster but the gangster was white, and this guy is black." So I don't know what's happening.

0:04:50

New York City. It is several months later. Police are investigating the disappearance of a clerk named Leonard Zelig. Both his landlady and his employer have reported him missing. They tell police he was an odd little man who kept to himself. Only two clues are found in Zelig's Greenwich Village flat. One, a photograph of Zelig with Eugene O'Neill and one of him as Pagliacci.

Acting on a tip, they trace his whereabouts to Chinatown where, in the rear of a Chinese establishment a strange-looking Oriental who fits the description of Leonard Zelig is discovered. Suspicious, the detectives try to pull off his disguise but it is not a disguise, and a fight breaks out. He is removed by force and taken to Manhattan Hospital. In the ambulance, he rants and curses in what sounds like authentic Chinese. He is restrained with a straitjacket.

0:05:55

When he emerges from the car twenty minutes later incredibly, he is no longer Chinese, but Caucasian. Bewildered interns place him in the emergency room for observation. At 7 a.m., Dr. Eudora Fletcher, a psychiatrist, makes her usual rounds.

EUDORA, *today*

When I first heard about this emergency case I didn't think anything peculiar and when I first laid eyes on him it was a bit strange because I mistook him for a doctor. He had a very professional demeanor about him.

NARRATOR

As a young psychiatrist Eudora Fletcher is fascinated by Leonard Zelig. She convinces the conservative staff at the hospital to allow her to pursue a study of the new admission.

As we hear the voices of Eudora and Zelig, we see some old pictures of them.

EUDORA

So, what do you do?

ZELIG

Oh, me? I'm a psychiatrist.

EUDORA

Oh, yes?

ZELIG

Yes. I work mostly with delusional paranoids.

EUDORA

Tell me about it.

ZELIG

There's not much to tell. I work mostly on the continent and I've written quite a few psychoanalytic papers. I studied and worked with Freud in Vienna. We broke over the concept of penis envy. Freud felt that it should be limited to women.

EUDORA, *recorded voice*

It's not that he was making any sense at all. It was a conglomeration of psychological double-talk that he had apparently heard or was familiar with through reading. The funny thing was his delivery was quite fluid and might have been convincing to someone who did not know any better.

0:07:25

NARRATOR, *some old pictures of Zelig*

Who was this Leonard Zelig that seemed to create such diverse impressions everywhere? All that was known of him was that he was the son of a Yiddish actor named Morris Zelig whose performance as Puck in the Orthodox version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was coolly received. The elder Zelig's second marriage is marked by constant violent quarreling, so much so that although the family lives over a bowling alley it's the bowling alley that complains of noise. As a boy, Leonard is frequently bullied by anti-Semites. His parents, who never take his part and blame him for everything, side with the anti-Semites. They punish him often by locking him in a dark closet. When they are really angry they get into the closet with him.

On his deathbed, Morris Zelig tells his son that life is a meaningless nightmare of suffering and the only advice he gives him is to save string.

Though brother Jack has a nervous breakdown and sister Ruth becomes a shoplifter and alcoholic Leonard Zelig appears to have adjusted to life. Somehow, he seems to have coped. And then, suddenly, increasingly strange behavior.

Fascinated by the Zelig phenomenon Dr. Fletcher arranges a series of experiments and invites the skeptical staff to observe. With the doctors watching, Zelig becomes a perfect psychiatrist. When two Frenchmen are brought in Zelig assumes their characters and speaks reasonable French. In the company of a Chinese person he begins to develop Oriental features. By now, word has gotten out to the press and the public, thirsting for thrills and novelty is immediately captivated. The clamor is so great that Dr. Allan Sindell is forced to issue a statement.

DR. SINDELL

We're just beginning to realize the dimensions of what could be the scientific medical phenomenon of the age and possibly of all time.

NARRATOR

Fresh stories roll off the press every day about Zelig and his puzzling condition. Although the doctors claim to have the situation in hand no two can agree on a diagnosis.

DOCTOR 1

I'm convinced it's glandular in nature and although there's no evidence of malfunction further tests will show a problem in the secretions.

DOCTOR 2

It's something he picked up from eating Mexican food.

DOCTOR BIRSKY

This manifestation is neurological in origin. Now, this patient is suffering from a brain tumor and I should not be surprised if within several weeks he died. We have not been able to locate the tumor but we're still looking.

NARRATOR

Ironically, within two weeks' time it is Dr. Birsky himself who dies of a brain tumor. Leonard Zelig is fine. Throughout the weeks of testing and speculation Eudora Fletcher begins to feel that the patient might be suffering not from a physiological disorder but from a psychological one. It is Zelig's unstable makeup, she suggests that accounts for his metamorphoses.

The governing board of doctors is hostile to her notion. They conclude that Zelig's malady can be traced to poor alignment of the vertebrae. Tests prove them wrong and cause a temporary problem for the patient. Now the press and public hang on every bit of news thoroughly absorbed in the real-life drama.

0:11:12, *radio*

The continuing saga at Manhattan Hospital goes on. This morning, doctors report, experiments were conducted. Several women were placed in proximity to the subject but no change occurred leading authorities to conclude that the phenomenon does not occur with women. Doctors will experiment with a midget and a chicken.

Leonard Zelig continues to astound scientists at New York's Manhattan Hospital where numerous tests have led nowhere in determining the nature of this astonishing manifestation. He is confronted by two overweight men at the request of the doctors. As the men discuss their obesity an initially reticent Zelig joins in swelling himself to a miraculous 250 pounds. Next, in the presence of two Negro men Zelig rapidly becomes one himself. What will they think of next?

Meanwhile, Americans all over have their own reactions: "I wish I could be Lenny Zelig, the changing man. I'd be different people. Someday my wishes will come true." "Leonard Zelig is one of the finest gentlemen in the United States of America. He is the cat's pajamas."

NARRATOR

Trying a new approach Dr. Fletcher places the subject under hypnosis.

Pictures about the experiment.

EUDORA

Tell me why you assume the characteristics of the person you're with.

ZELIG

t's safe.

EUDORA

What do you mean safe?

ZELIG

Safe to be like the others.

EUDORA

You want to be safe?

ZELIG

I want to be liked.

NARRATOR

Probing Zelig's unconscious Dr. Fletcher gradually puts together the pieces of Zelig's behavioral puzzle. Dividing her time between the hospital and the 42nd-Street Library, she writes her report. A closed meeting of doctors listens as Dr. Fletcher describes Zelig as a human chameleon. Like the lizard that is endowed by nature with a marvellous protective device that enables it to change color and blend in with its immediate surrounding Zelig, too, protects himself by becoming whoever he is around.

The doctors listen, and their reaction is skeptical. "Impossible," they claim. "Preposterous." "If he's a lizard," quips one doctor, "then we shouldn't spend hospital money feeding him but simply catch him some flies."

0:13:50

Some newspapers articles. "Human chameleon found according to woman doctor", "Zelig said to suffer unique mental disorder", "Is all in the head"... Mike Geibell and Ted Bierbauer, formerly of the New York Daily Mirror.

TED

Well, we knew we had a good story this time because it had everything in it. It had romance. It had suspense. This fellow Zelig, he grew up poor. My city editor said, "Ted, we want this story on page one every day."

MIKE

In those days, you'd do anything to sell papers. To get a story, you'd jazz it up, you'd exaggerate, play with the truth." Here was a story. It was a natural. You told the truth, and it sold papers. It never happened before.

NARRATOR

Overnight, Leonard Zelig has become the main topic of conversation everywhere and is discussed with amusement and wonder. No social gathering is without its Leonard Zelig joke and in a decade of popular dance crazes a new one sweeps the nation.

0:14:48

The Chameleon charleston. Zelig examined by doctors. Zelig transforms himself into a Scottish.

1ST-YEAR STUDENTS

[Question] What's brown, white, and yellow with four eyes?

[Answer] Leonard Zelig at the League of Nations.

NARRATOR

Not everyone, however was entranced by the human chameleon and amongst the fanatics he was a handy symbol of iniquity.

Workers meeting. "The International". Banner: "Zelig unfair to workers. Hold five jobs".

SPEECHER

This creature personifies capitalist man. A creature who takes many forms to achieve ends the exploitation of the workers by deception.

NARRATOR

To the Ku Klux Klan, Zelig a Jew who was able to transform himself into a Negro or Indian, was a triple threat.

0:16:40

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, Dr. Fletcher certain that her findings are correct begs for time with her patient to put her theories into operation.

Voices recorded.

EUDORA

You recall the first time you began behaving like the people you were around?

ZELIG

In school, some very bright people asked me if I read *Moby Dick*. I was ashamed to say I never read it.

EUDORA

And you pretended?

ZELIG

Yes.

EUDORA

When did the changes begin happening automatically?

ZELIG

Years ago. Saint Patrick's Day. I wandered into a bar. Wasn't wearing green. They made remarks. I turned Irish.

EUDORA

You told them you were Irish?

ZELIG

My hair turned red. My nose turned up. Spoke about the great potato famine and the little people.

DOCTOR

We do not agree with Dr. Fletcher's ideas. We believe those ideas are pipe dreams. We believe that any change in Zelig's condition is going to be brought about through certain experimental drugs which although risky, have been known to work wonders.

NARRATOR

Zelig is treated with the experimental drug somadril hydrate. He undergoes severe mood changes and for several days will not come off the wall. [*Zelig crawling up the walls*] Then suddenly as Dr. Fletcher is beginning to make some progress the question of Zelig's fate takes a new twist as his half sister Ruth shocks everyone by removing him from the hospital.

"He can be better cared for at home", she tells the doctors. "He'll be looked after", she explains, "by her and her lover Martin Geist, a businessman and ex-carnival promoter. There is very little resistance amongst the doctors who are relieved to be rid of the frustrating case. Only Dr. Fletcher cares about Zelig as a human being. She insists he desperately needs special care but it is to no avail.

TED BIERBAUER

No one was questioning her legal right to Zelig. She was his half sister and his guardian but she had a strange boyfriend called Geist. He'd been in jail for real-estate fraud. He was selling the same piece of property to a lot of the same people. A matter of fact, a Delaware Congressman bought it twice.

NARRATOR

The crowds that line the roads to glimpse the human chameleon tie up traffic for days. He's a sight to behold for tourists and children. People from all over the country fight for space to peek at this new wonderment. Selling mementos while her brother is allowed to be on exhibition is only the beginning for Ruth Zelig and Martin Geist. Admission is charged for twice-daily demonstrations of Leonard's stunning prowess. He does not disappoint changing appearance over and over upon demand. Overnight, he has become an attraction, a novelty, a freak.

Zelig, a fairground attraction, converts himself in an Indian.

NARRATOR

In this 1935 film based on the life of Zelig called *The changing man* the atmosphere is best summed up.

Extracts from the film "The changing man":

EUDORA

We can't give up custody of Leonard. I know, if given the chance, I can cure him.

DOCTOR

It's no use. Even our attorney says it's hopeless.

KOSLOW

Really, Dr. Fletcher... May I call you Eudora?

EUDORA

I told you somewhere behind that vacuous face that zombielike stare is a real human being, and I can bring it out.

DOCTOR

How?

EUDORA

I think of some new way, some technique. Whatever it is, it will have to be personal.

KOSLOW

There's not much I can do legally. I'll try.

EUDORA

They don't care him. They'll exploit him. All they see is a chance to make more money. Look at this. All they're selling this Leonard Zelig doll.

NARRATOR

The film did not exaggerate. There weren't only Leonard Zelig pens and lucky charms but clocks and toys. They were selling watches and books and a famous Leonard Zelig doll. There were aprons, chameleon-shaped earmuffs, and a popular Leonard Zelig game.

Some people show their purchases. Fox trot "Chameleon days".

There were many popular songs inspired by Leonard Zelig, tunes that swept the nation. ["You may be six people but I love you", "Leonard the Lizard", "Reptile eyes"] In addition to the products and endorsements there are the endless exhibitions. In Hollywood, he's a great favorite, and is offered a film contract. Clara Bow invites him for a private weekend and tells him to bring all his personalities. In Chicago, he meets heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey who clowns with Zelig at his training camp. In Washington, D.C., he is introduced to both Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. In France, he is hailed as Le Lezard. He is the toast of the Parisian music halls. His performance endears him to leading French intellectuals who see in him a symbol for everything. His transformation into a rabbi is so realistic. That certain Frenchmen suggest he be sent to Devil's Island. At the Folies Bergere, Josephine Baker does her version of the Chameleon Dance and later tells friends she finds Zelig amazing, but a little lost.

BRICKTOP

[Owner of Bricktop's, a Paris nightclub in the 1920's]

Everyone used to be at my place -everyone who was someone- and occasionally someone would bring Zelig in Leonard in. Cole Porter was fascinated by Leonard and he once wrote a line in a song "You're the tops. You're Leonard Zelig." But then he couldn't find anything to rhyme with Zelig.

0:23:40

Manhattan. Zeigfeld star Fanny Brice sings to Zelig:

*I'm flying high
'Cause I've got a feeling
I'm falling
Falling for nobody else but you
You caught my eye
Now I got a feeling I'm falling
Show me that ring,
and I'll jump right through
I used to travel single, oh
We chanced to mingle, oh
Now I'm a-tingle over you
Hey, Mr. Zelig, stand by
'Cause I've got a feeling
I'm falling
Falling for nobody else but you
Wow!*

NARRATOR

Though the shows and parties keep Zelig's sister and her lover rich and amused Zelig's own existence is a nonexistence. Devoid of personality his human qualities long since lost in the shuffle of life he sits alone, quietly staring into space a cipher, a nonperson, a performing freak. He who wanted only to fit in, to belong to go unseen by his enemies and be loved neither fits in nor belongs is supervised by enemies, and remains uncared for.

The board at the hospital has all but forgotten Zelig. Only Dr. Fletcher continues to fight for his custody. The court turns her final appeal down. Throughout her valiant legal battle she is frequently in the company of her attorney Charles Koslow. He falls in love with her and presses for her hand in marriage. She is ambivalent. Reluctantly, she is beginning to abandon all hope of recovering Leonard Zelig.

0:25:30, Zelig in Spain. Martin Geist kills Ruth Zelig. Leonard Zelig disappears.

That summer, Geist has booked them in Spain. It is the last leg of a European tour that has been wildly successful. Relations between Martin Geist and Ruth Zelig have grown strained. They have become bored with one another and quarrel frequently. The situation grows worse when she meets Luis Martinez, a mediocre and cowardly bullfighter, with whom she falls in love.

Though he wishes to impress Ruth Zelig, Martinez displays his usual panic in the arena. Good fortune is with him, however, as the bull gives himself a brain concussion. Martinez takes credit for the kill and cutting off the bull's ear presents it to his lover with great bravado.

That evening, in a jealous rage, Martin Geist returns to his hotel room and confronts Ruth Zelig. He demands that she give him the ear. She refuses. Geist insists upon possession of the ear. They quarrel furiously, and Martinez is discovered hiding in the closet. Geist pulls a revolver and shoots him. He turns the gun on Zelig's half sister and kills her. Then he takes his own life. In an orgy of jealous violence Leonard Zelig's life is turned upside down.

NARRATOR

At first, the news reverberates around the world. Then, just as quickly the thrill-hungry public becomes apathetic. Fresh scandals appear and make headlines. Events in the Jazz Age move too rapidly like Red Grange. A population glutted with distractions is quick to forget. The twenties come to a crashing climax and still, Leonard Zelig is nowhere to be found.

Dr. Eudora Fletcher searches in vain to locate him. When several leads prove disappointing she gives up, discouraged.

EUDORA, *today*

I felt it was a shame. Here was this unique case that I could make my reputation on. Not that I knew how to cure him but if I could have him alone and feel my way and be innovative and creative I felt that I could change his life if I only had the chance.

0:28:15, *Pope Pius XI in Saint Peter's*

ANNOUNCER

300,000 of the faithful are waiting before St. Peter's for the appearance of Pope Pius XI. Borne on the shoulders of twelve attendants the seat of the Adjustortoria carrying the Holy Father is drawn out to the central balcony where he bestows his blessings on all the world. This is the first time this ritual has been performed in 63 years and brings to a climax on Easter Sunday the religious ceremonies of Holy Week... Oh, what's this? A commotion next to the Papal Father? Somebody doesn't belong up there. The guards are summoned amidst chaos as His Holiness Pope Pius XI tries to swat the intruder with his sacred decree. The faithful can't believe it.

NARRATOR

It is, of course, Zelig. He's returned to the United States by Italian authorities and readmitted to Manhattan Hospital.

EUDORA

I welcome this opportunity to treat Leonard Zelig now that he is back as a ward of the hospital. I'm grateful that the board has given me this chance. I sincerely hope to return him to society a useful, self-possessed citizen, no longer a curiosity with no life of his own.

NARRATOR

Dr. Fletcher has no time now to think of marriage. All her attention must be devoted to Leonard Zelig. Her plan is to bring him to her country home. She will set up a neutral environment away from society. She will begin searching for some new way to treat him in the hopes of penetrating his unique malady.

Aware of the significance of her work Eudora Fletcher arranges to keep a filmed record of the proceedings. For this, she contacts her first cousin Paul Deghuee, an inventor and part-time photographer.

PAUL DEGHUEE, *today*

She said, "I want to make a record of this case for future generations and the world of science. And I want you to keep the camera very quiet." And I said, "Why not just take notes and write it up?" She said, "Paul, when a man changes his physical appearance, you want to see it. You can't read about it. Besides which, I am planning to make history."

NARRATOR

The white room is carefully arranged for maximum serenity. It is a small study in Dr. Fletcher's house sparsely furnished. Clumsy photographic lights are nailed to the wall to provide sufficient illumination. Microphones are hidden in specially selected places. The camera shoots through a pane of glass which renders it relatively unobtrusive. Only the noise of the motor is a problem, but this is muffled with a blanket and anything else handy. From this cramped vantage point photographer Paul Deghuee will record the famous *White Room Sessions*, a remarkable document in the history of psychotherapy.

BRUNO BETTELHEIM, *today*

By today's standards the *White Room Sessions* would seem very primitive and yet they were really quite effective in developing a very strong personal relation between

doctor and patient. The question whether Zelig was a psychotic or merely extremely neurotic was a question that was endlessly discussed among us doctors. I myself felt that his feelings were really not all that different from the normal maybe what one would call the well-adjusted normal person only carried to an extreme degree, to an extreme extent. I myself felt that one could really think of him as the ultimate conformist.

The White Room Sessions.

EUDORA

Leonard, do you know why you're here?

ZELIG

To discuss psychiatry, right?

EUDORA

You're a doctor?

ZELIG

Yes, I am. Perhaps you've read my latest paper on delusional paranoia. Turns out the entire thing is mental.

EUDORA

Suppose I tell you you're not a doctor.

ZELIG

I would say that you're making a joke. Incidentally, is it always so bright in here?

EUDORA

I'm recording these sessions on film, if you don't mind.

ZELIG

There's somebody behind there, right?

EUDORA

That's right.

ZELIG

That's a camera.

EUDORA

Leonard, why don't we start with simple reality? Leonard, you're not a doctor.

ZELIG

No?

EUDORA

No. You're a patient, and I'm the doctor.

ZELIG

I wouldn't tell it to too many people if I were you.

EUDORA

Leonard, you're not a doctor.

ZELIG

Is she going to be all right? I've got to get back to town. Really. I have an interesting case treating two sets of siamese twins with split personalities. I'm getting paid by eight people.

NARRATOR

"The first week's sessions did not go too well -writes Dr. Fletcher in her diary-. Leonard identifies with me and is convinced that he is a doctor. He is guarded and suspicious. There is something very appealing about him, too. He's quick-witted and energetic. Perhaps it is his very helplessness that moves me. I must keep flexible and play the situation by ear."

EUDORA

How are you today, Leonard?

ZELIG

Fine. I got to get back to town soon. I teach a course at the Psychiatric Institute on masturbation.

EUDORA

I see, I see.

ZELIG

I'm a doctor, and I...

EUDORA

Guilt-related masturbation.

ZELIG

Not guilt-related. I teach advanced. I'm quite a respected doctor there.

EUDORA

I'd like your eyes follow this pen. Just let yourself breathe deeply.

ZELIG

Why?

EUDORA

Relax.

ZELIG

You're trying to hypnotize me.

EUDORA

Do you mind?

ZELIG

Yes, I mind. I'm a doctor.

EUDORA

You're not a doctor.

ZELIG

I am a doctor.

EUDORA

Just relax.

ZELIG

I can't. I'm due back in town. I have this masturbation class, you know? If I'm not there, they start without me.

NARRATOR

As the weeks go by Dr. Fletcher grows more and more frustrated: "Leonard continues to insist he is a doctor and even refuses to let me hypnotize him," she writes. "I believe his experiences of the past year have made him more defensive than ever. It is discouraging."

PAUL DEGHUEE

She was under great pressure. You could tell. She was moody and nervous. He was fine, napping, sitting in his chair reading. He referred to himself as Dr. Zelig. He was reading books on psychiatry. I told her to get away for a day and relax. The strain was becoming too much.

0:35:05

NARRATOR

Leaving Zelig alone, Dr. Fletcher takes Paul Deghueue's advice and she and her fiancé spend some hours off, relaxing. They go to Broadway, then to a well-known nightclub where, despite a lively stage show, Dr. Fletcher is distracted and uneasy. She is unable to think of anything but her patient. The atmosphere with her fiancé Koslow is awkward and strange. He is put off by her total obsession with Zelig. Ironically, it is in the noisy, smoke-filled atmosphere of the nightclub, that Eudora Fletcher is struck by a brilliant and innovative plan that will create a major breakthrough in the case.

EUDORA

Dr. Zelig.

ZELIG

Yes?

EUDORA

I wonder if you could help me with a problem.

ZELIG

I could certainly try. Of course, we can't promise anything.

EUDORA

Last week, I was with a group of fairly erudite people who were discussing the novel *Moby Dick*. I was afraid to admit I hadn't read it, so I lied. I want so badly to be liked... to be like other people so I don't stand out.

ZELIG

That's natural.

EUDORA

I go to such extreme lengths to blend in.

ZELIG

You're a doctor, aren't you? You should know how to handle that.

EUDORA

But the truth of the matter is I'm not an actual doctor.

ZELIG

You're not?

EUDORA

No doctor. I've been pretending to be a doctor to fit in with my friends. You see, they're doctors.

ZELIG

That's something.

EUDORA

But you're a doctor, and you can help me. You have to help me.

ZELIG

I don't feel that well, actually.

EUDORA

My whole life's just been a lie. I've been posing as one thing after another.

ZELIG

You need help, lady.

EUDORA

Last night, I dreamt I was falling into fire. What does that mean?

ZELIG

That's terrible. I don't know.

EUDORA

Doctor, I know I'm a complicated patient.

ZELIG

I don't feel that well.

EUDORA
What am I suffering from?

ZELIG
How should I know? I'm not a doctor.

EUDORA
You're not?

ZELIG
No. Am I?

EUDORA
Who are you?

ZELIG
What do you mean who am I? These are tough questions.

EUDORA
Leonard Zelig?

ZELIG
Yes, definitely. Who is he?

EUDORA
You.

ZELIG
No, I'm nobody. I'm nothing. I... catch me. I'm falling.

NARRATOR
Playing on Zelig's identity disorder Dr. Fletcher has manipulated him into momentary disorientation. With his guard lowered, she quickly puts him under hypnosis. Using posthypnotic suggestion she will now be able to induce a trance at will.

ZELIG
My brother beat me. My sister beat my brother. My father beat my sister and my brother and me. My mother beat my father and my sister and me and my brother. The neighbors beat our family. People down the block beat the neighbors and our family. I'm twelve years old. I run into a synagogue. I ask the rabbi the meaning of life. He tells me the meaning of life... but he tells it to me in Hebrew. I don't understand Hebrew. Then he wants to charge me \$600 for Hebrew lessons.

NARRATOR
Dr. Fletcher's therapy consists of a two-pronged attack. In the trance state, the personality will be deeply probed and then restructured. In the conscious state she will provide love and affection unconditional positive regard.

EUDORA
You will be completely honest. You're in a deep trance. You will become not who you think I want you to be but you will be yourself. Now, how do you feel about it here?

ZELIG

It's the worst. I hate the country. I hate the grass and the mosquitos. And cooking... your cooking is terrible. Your pancakes... I dump them in the garbage when you're not looking. And the jokes you try and tell when you think you're amusing are long and pointless. There's no end to them.

EUDORA

I see. And what else?

ZELIG

I want to go to bed with you.

EUDORA

Well, that surprises me. I didn't think you liked me very much.

ZELIG

I love you.

EUDORA

You do?

ZELIG

You're very sweet because you're not as clever as you think you are. You're all mixed up and nervous, and you're the worst cook. Those pancakes... I love you. I want to take care of you. No more pancakes.

EUDORA, *today in off*

I started out by trying to use Leonard to make my reputation. And then I found I had very strong feelings for him. I never thought I was attractive. I never had a real romance. Charles Koslow was the type of man my mother felt I should marry.

0:41:50

NARRATOR

Feeling more confident every day with her patient, Dr. Fletcher takes him for a cautious outing an afternoon at her sister's house in nearby Teaneck. Meryl Fletcher is an aviatrix, a fine professional pilot. Eudora Fletcher is an amateur pilot and the afternoon is spent relaxing and retelling old flying experiences.

As the weeks pass Zelig is encouraged to open up more and more to give his own opinions. What was guarded at first soon becomes expansive.

ZELIG

I hated my stepmother. I don't care who knows it. I love baseball. It doesn't have to mean anything. It's just very beautiful to watch. I'm a Democrat. I always was a Democrat. Is it OK if I don't agree with you about that recording?

EUDORA

Of course.

ZELIG

Brahms is just always too melodramatic for me. You have to be your own person and make your own moral choices even when they do require real courage. Otherwise, you're like a robot or a lizard. Are you really going to marry that lawyer? I would much rather you didn't. I don't agree. I think this guy Mussolini is a loser. Are we ever going to make love?

NARRATOR

It has been three months and the board wishes to examine the patient. Dr. Fletcher says Zelig is not ready to leave the premises. The doctors agree to visit him there. The date is set four days hence. If progress is insufficient she will be removed from the case.

EUDORA, *today*

I was very nervous because in his waking state he never remembered anything from his trance state and I wondered if there could be some way of locking these two things together. And then I also was worried that if he was with strong personalities he might lose his personality.

NARRATOR

Sunday at noon, the doctors arrive. They are greeted by Eudora Fletcher and Leonard Zelig and are shown around the grounds. Though Dr. Fletcher is tense and alert Leonard Zelig seems calm and at ease. Despite the fact that he is surrounded by physicians he does not turn into one. The encounter appears to be a resounding success when Dr. Henry Mayerson comments innocently about the weather, saying that it is a nice day. Zelig tells Dr. Mayerson that he does not agree that it is a nice day. Dr. Mayerson is taken aback at the firmness of Zelig's conviction. He points out that the sun is shining and that it is mild. Zelig, trained to voice his own personal opinions fearlessly is too aggressive. He has been molded too far in the other direction. He has become over-opinionated and cannot brook any disagreement with his own views.

EUDORA, *today*

I'd taken him too far in the other direction. He struck Dr. Mayerson and several board members with a rake. This wasn't what we wanted yet I felt I'd accomplished something. If I could have him two more weeks I could do some fine-tuning and turn Leonard Zelig back into his own man.

ANNOUNCER

Dr. Eudora Nesbit Fletcher, the hero -or should we say, heroine- of the hour. The beautiful and brilliant young psychiatrist never lost faith in her conviction that Leonard Zelig, the human chameleon, was suffering from a mental disorder. Working with her cousin cameraman Paul Deghuee, the doctor managed to keep a vital record of the proceedings including rare footage of Zelig hypnotized.

The patient and healer have become fast friends and enjoy one another's company even when she's not working on him. The result of maintaining a minority opinion is a resounding success for psychiatry. Who says women are just good for sewing? Now it's on to City Hall where the town's newest celebrities are given the key to the city.

CITY HALL SPEAKER

We're honored to present this key to New York City to you. And Jimmy Walker did want to be here and sing *Leonard the Lizard*, but he was just too busy.

ANNOUNCER

After city hall, Eudora Fletcher, the beautiful genius who cured Zelig of his science-defying condition, is honored by fellow scientists at New York's Waldorf-Astoria. Present are luminaries from all over the world not just in the field of psychiatry but physics, biology, mathematics, and you name it. Here she is exchanging theories with Nils Andersen, the father of modern blood disease. Later in the week, Dr. Fletcher is again honoured as she gets to christen her first ship. Quite a success story for a little girl from the backwoods.

INTERVIEWER

I'm speaking to you from the home of Mrs. Catherine Fletcher. She's the mother of Dr. Eudora Fletcher, the famous psychiatrist in the news these days. I'll be asking Mrs. Fletcher: To begin with... to tell us something about what it's like to raise a medical genius. I might ask you about the many sacrifices you've made to put your daughter through medical school. Speak right into the microphones, please.

MRS. FLETCHER

Sacrifices, we had none. John was a stockbroker. We had plenty of money and I came from a wealthy Philadelphia family.

INTERVIEWER

I'm sure that your daughter always wanted to be a doctor ever since she could remember.

MRS. FLETCHER

I don't think so. I always thought she wanted to be a flier like her sister Meryl, and raise a family but she was a very moody child.

INTERVIEWER

But still a mother always dreams for her child to have the success your daughter has.

MRS. FLETCHER

She was a very difficult girl.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about your husband. I understand that he is a simple businessman. He must be so thrilled and pleased to have his daughter achieve such recognition.

MRS. FLETCHER

John had problems... depression. He drank.

INTERVIEWER

Well, Mrs. Fletcher, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

Pathe News: San Simeon. Hearst hosts Zelig and Fletcher and shows how the rich and famous spend their leisure... and honor their guests.

ANNOUNCER

Here at San Simeon, glorious dreamland of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst celebrities from all walks of society sun or play. There's Marie Dressler with Mr. Hearst. Always a popular guest at San Simeon... Miss Dressler accepts a flower from an ardent admirer. Along with her is Marion Davies. When she works, Miss Davies is always dead serious. But here, at this fabulous playground, she shows us her fun side. There she is with you-know-who- Charlie Chaplin, always kidding.

Although New York is 3,000 miles away Jimmy Walker appears through Mr. Hearst's enchanted gateway. Another New Yorker is Leonard Zelig. Here shown clowning with everybody's favorite cowboy Tom Mix. Won't Tony be jealous? Tony is Tom's horse and we always thought they went everywhere together. There's that fellow Chaplin again, this time with Adolphe Menjou. There's Claire Windsor and Delores del Rio and a very charming Eudora Fletcher chatting with Hollywood's newest dancing sensation, James Cagney. And what have we here? Only a beautiful lady named Carole Lombard. And there is Dr. Fletcher and Leonard Zelig hitting a few with Bobby Jones on Mr. Hearst's golf course. Unless Leonard can go back to his old chameleon personality and turn into a golf pro, I'd bet my money on Bobby. But who cares, if they're having fun?

OFFICIAL EVENT

Leonard Zelig, do you want to give the kids of this country some advice?

ZELIG

I sure do. Kids, you got to be yourself. You know you can't act like anybody else just because you think they have all the answers. Be your own man, speak up, say what's on your mind. Maybe they can't do that in foreign countries but that's the American way. I used to be a member of the reptile family but I'm not anymore.

0:51:26

NARRATOR

Zelig, no longer a chameleon, is at last his own man. His point of view on politics, art, life and love is honest and direct. Though his taste is described by many as lowbrow it is his own. He is finally an individual, a human being. He no longer gives up his own identity to be a safe and invisible part of his surroundings.

JOHN MORTON BLUM, *historian, author of "Interpreting Zelig"*

His taste wasn't terrible. He was that kind of man who preferred watching baseball to reading *Moby Dick* and that got him off on the wrong foot or so the legend goes. It was much more a matter of symbolism. To the Marxists he was one thing. The Catholic Church never forgave him for the Vatican incident. The American people in the throes of the Depression as they were found in him a symbol of possibility of self-improvement and self-fulfillment. And of course, the Freudians had a ball. They could interpret him in any way they pleased. It was all symbolism... but no two intellectuals agreed about what it meant.

SUSAN SONTAG, *author of "Against Interpretation"*

I don't know if you can call it a triumph of psychotherapy. It's more like a triumph of aesthetic instincts. Because Dr. Fletcher's techniques didn't owe anything to then-current schools of therapy but she sensed what was needed and provided it. That was, in its way a remarkable creative accomplishment.

IRVING HOWE, *author of "World of our fathers"*

When I think about it, it seems to me his story reflected a lot of the Jewish experience in America... the great urge to push in and to find one's place and then to assimilate into the culture. I mean he wanted to assimilate like crazy.

NARRATOR

Eudora Fletcher's life has also changed from this experience. For her, fame and recognition are empty rewards and do not live up to the adolescent fantasies that prompted her ambition. She and her patient have fallen in love and it is no surprise when she forsakes the upwardly-mobile attorney Koslow and announces wedding plans with Zelig.

MERYL FLETCHER

It was wonderful to see my sister and Leonard together. She drew strength from him. And they were so much in love with each other and she looked happier than she had in years. I remember they decided to get married in the spring and then, of course, the roof fell in.

NARRATOR

Two weeks before the wedding an ex-showgirl named Lita Fox comes forth and claims that she is married to Zelig. She also claims to have had his child. It is an immediate scandal.

Newspaper: Zelig already secretly married and a father. Oh you Lizard!

LITA FOX

We were married a year ago. He said he was an actor. He sounded just like one and I'm in show business, too. We drove to Baltimore, and we were married and I have a license to prove it.

NARRATOR

He had married her while under a different personality. When she read of the plans for his forthcoming wedding to Eudora Fletcher she was mortified and decided to take legal action. Zelig says he will fight it in court but public opinion begins subtly to shift away from him. Clever attorneys portray Lita Fox as an abandoned woman. The child is neglected, poor, and fatherless.

Zelig has sold his life story to Hollywood for a large sum of money. When the scandal breaks the studio demands its money back. Zelig can only return half. The rest has been spent. Outraged, the studio gives him half his life back. They keep the best moments. He is left with only his sleeping hours and mealtimes.

Zelig is shaken by the scandal, but it is only the beginning. Now another woman steps forward. Helen Gray, a salesgirl from a Wisconsin gift shop claims that Zelig is the father of her twins. She tells lawyers that he passed himself off as a fur trapper. Zelig has no recollection, but admits it could have happened during one of his spells. It's the signal for the floodgates to open.

HELEN GRAY, woman from Harlem

He married me at the First Church of Harlem. He told me he was the brother of Duke Ellington.

WRIST VICTIM

He was the guy who smashed my car up. It was brand-new. Then he backed up over my mother's wrist. She's elderly and uses her wrist a lot.

COUPLE OF HOUSE-PAINTING VICTIM

He painted my house a disgusting color. He said he was a painter. I couldn't believe the results. Then he disappeared.

NARRATOR

That Zelig could be responsible for the behavior of each personality he assumed means dozens of lawsuits. He is sued for bigamy, adultery, automobile accidents, plagiarism, household damages, negligence, property damages and performing unnecessary dental extractions.

ZELIG

I would like to apologize to everyone. I'm awfully sorry for marrying all those women. It just... I don't know. It just seemed like the thing to do. To the gentleman whose appendix I took out I don't know what to say. If it's any consolation I may still have it somewhere around the house. My deepest apology goes to the Trokman family in Detroit. I never delivered a baby before in my life and I just thought that ice tongs was the way to do it.

NARRATOR

Thriving mercilessly on loopholes and technicalities the American legal profession has a field day. Zelig is branded a criminal. Despite Dr. Fletcher's insistence that he cannot be held responsible for actions while in his chameleon state it is no use.

MORALISTIC WOMAN

Leonard Zelig sets a bad moral influence. America is a moral country. It's a God-fearing country. We don't condone scandals... Scandals of fraud and polygamy. In keeping with a pure society, I say, lynch the little Hebe.

NARRATOR

Throughout the humiliating ordeal Eudora Fletcher stands by the man she loves, valiantly. Privately, she tells friends that she is worried about Zelig's emotional condition which seems to her to be deteriorating under the weight of conservative moral opinion. In public, he tries to keep up an appearance of composure but it is increasingly difficult. It is clear that he is coming apart when he and Eudora Fletcher dine at a Greek restaurant and in the midst of the meal, Zelig begins to turn Greek. He longs desperately to be liked once again to be accepted, to fit in. Public clamor over his morality reaches a fever pitch and on the eve of his sentencing Leonard Zelig vanishes.

Uncle Sam points Zelig as a quadruple menace: white, black, red and yellow men, and demands four gallows for him.

0:59:49

THOMAS DOWD, *chief inspector*

This is Chief Inspector of Police Thomas Dowd with a national broadcasting news break. Leonard Zelig is missing. On the eve of his sentencing for an assortment of

crimes and misdemeanors ranging from polygamy to fraud, he has disappeared. We are searching for clues and would appreciate speaking with anyone who might have any information leading to his apprehension.

MERYL

My sister was just shattered. She tried to keep up a calm front but she was just too upset. And she wasn't a person who usually displayed emotion easily except where Leonard was concerned.

NARRATOR

Dr. Fletcher and the police confer daily. Together they make public appeals to anyone who might know of his whereabouts. Apart from several crank telephone calls there is little response. Months go by, and Zelig is not heard from. Cars are searched. False leads pour in from everywhere. His jacket is recovered in Texas. A manhunt in that state proves futile. He is reported seen in Chicago, in California. This still photo appears to have a man resembling him with a mariachi band in Mexico. Dr. Fletcher continues to search for Zelig but hopes fade with each passing day.

EUDORA

All I could think of was Leonard how much I missed him and loved him and all the terrific times we'd spent together. It was really a very painful time for me.

NARRATOR

The year ends, and Zelig is still missing.

EUDORA, *today*

I just moped around and wept. And one night after a very bad time my sister Meryl said to me: "Come on, let's go out for dinner or a concert." I said, "No. I can't do it", but she insisted. We went out and ended up in a movie. We saw *Grand Hotel* and with it, there was a newsreel. [*National Socialists on the rise*] Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party continue to consolidate gains in depression-ridden Berlin. Denouncing the Treaty of Versailles the Nazis make fervent appeals to German patriotism...

NARRATOR

Eudora Fletcher is stunned by what she sees. Amongst the brown shirts she spots a figure who could be Zelig.

SAUL BELLOW

Then it made all the sense in the world because although he wanted to be loved, craved to be loved there was also something in him that desired immersion in the mass and anonymity. And Fascism offered Zelig that kind of opportunity, so that he could make something anonymous of himself by belonging to this vast movement.

NARRATOR

She sails for Europe the following week. Ten days later, she arrives in Berlin. Germany is a country deep in the throes of the Depression. Militarism and unrest are in the air. She searches everywhere and makes inquiries but it is impossible. After three weeks the authorities begin to get suspicious. They watch her. While she is out, they search her hotel room.

A fourth week goes by and she is about to give up and go home when news of a large rally at Munich catches her attention. It is rumored that it will be the largest gathering to date of Nazi personnel. Eudora Fletcher is counting on the hope that Zelig may also attend and that if she can confront him the strong feeling he has always had for her can be awakened. At first, all appears hopeless. The crowd is huge and it seems impossible to locate any one particular face. Then suddenly, a figure flanking the chancellor catches her attention. Behind and to the right of Hitler, she spots Zelig. Struggling to make contact, she manages to catch his eye. Like a man emerging from a dream, Zelig notices her. In a matter of seconds, everything comes back to him.

Sequence from "The changing man", Warner Bros., 1935

EUDORA, *today*

It was nothing like it happened in the movie. When Leonard came down from the podium, they didn't know what to think.

OSWALD POHL, *former SS Obergruppenführer*

We couldn't believe our eyes. Hitler's speech was ruined. He wanted to make a good joke about Poland but just then, Zelig interfered and Hitler was extremely upset. The SS wanted to grab Zelig but if they would have grabbed him they probably would have tortured him or maybe even shot him. So in the confusion Fletcher and Zelig got out of the building through a side door. They grabbed a car, sped away in the car and the SS after them, shot them.

NARRATOR

In a rare German newsreel footage a quick glimpse of the escape was recorded.

EUDORA

I was flying. It was wonderful. And then suddenly, something happened. I was frightened. I lost control. We went into a dive. Leonard was so terrified that he changed his personality and before my eyes, because I was a pilot he turned into one, too.

NARRATOR

Zelig takes control of the airplane. Acting the role of pilot he struggles valiantly with the aircraft. The Germans, who are stunned, take a full fifteen minutes before following in hot pursuit of their quarry. With Eudora Fletcher unconscious Zelig, who had never flown before in his life, not only escapes the German pilots but sets a record for flying nonstop across the Atlantic upside down.

1:07:30, Zelig return

ANNOUNCER

With a storm of cheers and a blizzard of ticker tape New York welcomes back Eudora Fletcher and Leonard Zelig, the human chameleon. His remarkable feat of aviation fills the nation with pride and earns him a full presidential pardon. Forgiving multitudes flock to see him as he sits by the side of his plucky bride-to-be. Their journey of triumph leads to City Hall. New York's greatest honor, the Medal of Valor, is bestowed on Zelig by Carter Dean.

CARTER DEAN

You are a great inspiration to the young of this nation who will one day grow up and be great doctors and great patients.

EUDORA

This was a great thrill. I'm glad we lived to see this day.

ZELIG

Right. I've never flown before in my life and it shows exactly what you can do if you're a total psychotic.

SAUL BELLOW

The thing was paradoxical because what enabled him to perform this astounding feat was his ability to transform himself. Therefore, his sickness was also at the root of his salvation and I think it's interesting to view the thing that way. It was his very disorder that made a hero of him.

IRVING HOWE

It was really absurd in a way. I mean, he had this curious quirk, this strange characteristic. And for a time, everyone loved him and then people stopped loving him. Then he did this stunt with the airplane and then everybody loved him again. And that was what the twenties were like. When you think about it, has America changed so much? I don't think so.

NARRATOR

After untangling countless legal details Leonard Zelig and Eudora Fletcher marry. It is a simple ceremony captured on home movies. "Wanting only to be liked, he distorted himself beyond measure", wrote Scott Fitzgerald. "One wonders what would have happened if at the outset he had had the courage to speak his mind and not pretend. In the end, it was, after all, not the approbation of many but the love of one woman that changed his life."

LEGEND

Leonard Zelig and Eudora Fletcher lived full and happy years together. She continued practicing psychoanalysis while he gave occasional lectures about his experiences. Zelig's episodes of character change grew less and less frequent and eventually his malady disappeared completely.

On his deathbed, he told doctors that he had a good life and the only annoying thing about dying was that he had just begun reading Moby Dick and wanted to see how it came out.

[OTHERS WORKS ABOUT WOODY ALLEN](#)