

Great Gatsby Roulette

by Con Chapman

It was May of my senior year in college. Everybody was coasting, knowing either what they were going to be doing the next year, or that they'd be doing nothing. Except for one guy, Tom.



Tom had been accepted at medical school—Harvard, no less—so his future was pretty much mapped out for him, assuming he graduated from college first. Med schools are funny that way. They make you dot your “i’s” and cross your “t’s” before they let you cut body parts off cadavers and stick them in the purses of the placement office secretaries.



Fitzgerald: “The road to med school goes through me.”

And so as we assembled for one of our last nights of drug-enhanced conviviality, we felt a general sense of relief and anticipation—except for Tom, whose face was clouded by a look that suggested he had a lot of work left to do.

“What’s eating you?” somebody finally asked.

“I need to finish one course in the humanities to graduate,” he said.

“So—what's the big deal?” came the question from one to whom a course in literature was a day at the beach.

“I need to write a paper on *The Great Gatsby*,” Tom said.

“Christ, I've probably read that book for three courses the past four years,” said somebody else.

“Well I haven't,” Tom said.

“Haven't what?” I asked. “Haven't read it three times?”

“Haven't read it at all,” Tom said sheepishly.



Like many pre-med students, Tom had spent so much time taking organic chemistry and other hard science courses that he hadn't had time to take any electives to round out his personality, and his heavy load of classes, labs, shooting pool, going to the race track and Wrigley Field and Comiskey Park and staying up all night playing poker had left him little time to read for pleasure.

“You've only got, like, two days, right?” a guy named Alan asked.

“One,” Tom replied, like a prisoner on death row who's just finished his last meal.

A collective gulp of five Adam's apples was heard. “You have to read it *and* write a paper about it . . . *tonight?*”

He was silent for a moment. “You got it.”

The gloom that had, just a moment before, been one man's burden spread like a contagious disease on the wings of a sneeze. We all felt terrible for Tom, but we were on the South Side of

Chicago, home of Saul Alinsky, inspiration to generations of radicals and later even a President of the United States!



Saul Alinsky

What we had learned from the example of Alinsky was that there was a time for talk, and a time for radical social action to improve the everyday lives of ordinary people. We looked at each other and at Tom's downcast head and as if by telepathy, formed a common purpose.

"We'll help you write your paper!" someone said emphatically.

"Yeah—all of us—together!" said another.

"Guys—I couldn't ask you to . . ." Tom began, but I cut him off.

"You were there for me in *Rocks and Stars*," the elementary science course for English majors, I said. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have gotten that B that kept my grade point average where it needs to be in case I ever figure out what I'm going to do with my life."



"You gotta work the shirt scene in there somewhere."

Tom looked around the room and we could see his eyes misting over. "You—you guys would do that for me?" he asked, a lump in his throat.

"You'd do it for us, if you'd read the book and we hadn't and we had screwed around like you and left the paper to the last minute," somebody said.

By now Tom's eyes were red. "You guys—you're the greatest!" he said. He'd had a few beers.

"C'mon," a guy named Bates said. "No time for emoting—we've got a lot of writing to do."



As the only guy in the room who had mastered touch typing, I was assigned the role of scrivener. I loaded a manual typewriter with a sheet of white paper, rolled it up, and centered it for the title.

"Okay—'The Great Gatsby—colon,'" I said. "What comes next, and it has to be a question."

"Why's that?" Tom asked.

"Because if it's a question, you don't have to have a thesis," Bates said. "You're just raising an issue . . ."

". . . for consideration by future generations of scholars," said a guy named Jack.

"Uh, let's see—Threat or Menace?" I offered.

"Too sociological. How about—'Process or Event'?" Jack suggested.

"You used that for your Haymarket Anarchist Bombing paper," Bates said. "What about—'Icon or Shibboleth'?"

"Great," I said and typed it in. "Okay—we've got to be organized, otherwise you're going to drive me crazy," I said. "We'll go around the room—Russian Roulette style—and take turns. One sentence per person, then on to the next—okay?"



"I'm in," said Bates, as he put on the Jefferson Airplane's "Crown of Creation" album at a volume just slightly below the level that would attract the attention of a resident assistant.

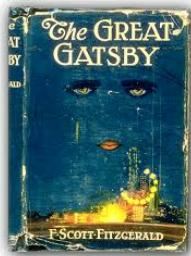
"You really think that's a good idea?" Tom said. "Don't we have to like—concentrate?"

"Dude, you took too many science classes," Bates said. "This is how creative-types do their thing."

"First sentence—somebody, anybody," I called out. Bates had already inhaled a reefer on the quad below, so his creative juices were flowing freely.

"Uh, 'The Great Gatsby is a seminal work that calls attention to, and plays upon, class distinctions that are customarily submerged beneath the surface in America due to the leveling pressure of democratic principles.'"

"Great start!" I exclaimed as I tapped out the opening lines. "Next."



"The narrator, young Nick Carraway, serves as the . . . uh . . . sounding board for Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream, as

he is alternately attracted to and repulsed by the materialism with which Gatsby has surrounded himself," Alan said.

"Got it—who's next?"

"I guess me," Jack said. 'Carraway is sucked into' . . ."

"Scratch that," Bates said. "Not high-toned enough. Say 'Carraway is drawn into Gatsby's life'—something like that."

"Okay," Jack said, a little peevisly I thought. Pride of authorship. "'Carraway is drawn into Gatsby's life because he is second cousin to Daisy Buchanan, whom Gatsby desires because she is from a social class above his, and thus unattainable.'"



I looked over at Tom as I typed and noticed that his mouth was hanging open. "You guys are—incredible!" he said, a big smile on his face.

"Why don't you take a turn?" Bates asked, as he passed the joint to Tom.

"Me? But . . . I only read the first chapter!"

"That's enough man—go ahead," Bates said. "Give it a shot!"

Tom inhaled, held his breath for a moment, then opened his mouth to allow the smoke to escape, along with these words. "In this respect, Daisy represents the American Dream, always luring us onward, always receding as we draw near it."



Arnold Rothstein, fictionalized as Meyer Wolfsheim

“See—you don't need to read the book,” I said. “It's in the air you breathe.”

We continued in that vein for several hours until we had collectively banged out three pages—double-spaced, inch-and-a-half margins—of the most bogus symbol-spotting literary claptrap that likely ever issued from the mind of an American undergraduate. As we wrapped things up with the obligatory analytical pecking and poking at the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, I pulled the last sheet of paper out of the typewriter, and everyone gathered around to admire our work.

“You know,” Bates said as took a final hit on what was left of the joint, “it's true what they say about art having a cathartic effect.”

“Yeah,” Tom said. He was a little blissed out, but recovered enough to realize he may have missed something. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I dunno,” Bates said. “But it sounded good.”

