

THE SO-SO GATSBY

written for the screen by
Patrick Hipp

based on the novel by
F. Scott Fitzgerald

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*For my grandparents, Jack and Nancy, who have given me a lot of advice
that I've turned over and over in my head through the years.*

"There are no second acts in American lives."
—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*

The So-So Gatsby, Or: The Second Act

by Patrick Hipp

1. Lights, Camera, Adaptation

What was so great about him, anyway?

In his younger and more vulnerable years, Caleb Belleviso's parents ushered him into show business with the frivolous energy and effort of a young, unremarkable couple in the suburbs of Los Angeles. His father gave him some advice that's been twisting his mind ever since.

"Whenever anyone criticizes you," he told Caleb, "just remember that you have as much right as anyone else to be famous. All it takes is hard work and good luck."

He didn't say what proportions of work and luck were necessary, but he knew that the latter was more important than the former but much harder to control. His father was always leaving things out of his learned wisdom, which made it as valuable as a fortune cookie—his sagacity only reached great heights if the recipient did most of the heavy lifting. In consequence, Caleb was inclined to reserve judgment about whose careers and successes were mostly borne from hard work and which were owed to dumb luck. The abnormal mindset was quick to detect the privilege of others, but slow to recognize the same in its own life. When you are born looking like Caleb Belleviso, you've already had more good luck in the earliest moments of life than most people experience by the closing moments of theirs. All things being equal, Mr. Belleviso might have been on to something, but attractiveness is parceled out unequally at birth, and even in the case of child actors, that measure is sometimes fully spent by the time they reach adulthood. Caleb had no such bad luck—he had the cuteness required of a child actor, sure, but it was handsomeness wrapped in the soft cellophane of childhood that made him cute, and all it took for him to break free from the chrysalis was to survive into adulthood.

After roasting him with my criticisms, I have to come to the admission that I was only slightly less fortunate. I didn't benefit from a childhood spent wanting for nothing, but I did benefit from not being coddled and ruined by attention and adulation. Fame can be founded on hard work or good luck, but after a certain point, the world doesn't care *what* it's founded on.

When I came back east, I had made a pit stop to Philadelphia. I felt like a working actor, nothing more. But to the world I had left behind, I wore the uniform of celebrity, and people who knew me acted like I was already

famous, even though the movie wasn't due out until the spring. I went to the old haunts—the bars of my very early adulthood, the relatives' houses, the alma mater, those kinds of places—and everyone was already standing at a sort of attention. I didn't want to be seen any differently by people I'd known my entire life, but there it was, without a starring role to my name. By contrast, Caleb was in his late twenties and a perennial Oscar contender.

If personality is, in fact, "an unbroken series of successful gestures," then fame is just personality when the cameras are rolling. And that gives everyone around you, everyone you've ever known, everyone less famous than you, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if they were all seismometers quivering in the vicinity of your thunderous footsteps.

I turned out better than Caleb, but again, it was down to luck more than anything. No one who didn't already know me quaked in my presence, and those who knew me best only quaked with laughter at the idea that I was going to be the one who got famous.

Everyone, however, quaked in Caleb's presence. It was the jawline, the perpetually squinted eyes, as though he was showing us mercy by not revealing the fullness of his pale blue irises. As he approached me, I could feel myself start to quiver, uncontrollably. It felt like my first ever audition, all those years ago, to get into my college's acting program. I wondered if I had time to drop to the floor and do a few Alexander stretches before he crossed the room.

"Your face is familiar," he said, politely. "Weren't you in *Harborage*?"

"Yeah, I was a day player, British intelligence. Good memory."

"I knew I'd seen you somewhere before."

We reminisced about the little, gray village in France where the movie was shot. He had spent most of his time on the water, piloting his newly-acquired hydroplane. I had rented a Vespa but had been too self-conscious to ride it in town.

He was searching my face the entire time, like what was rolling off of his tongue wasn't dislodging what was on the tip.

"Peter Logue," I said.

"Pete!" he said, his hand outstretched a full five feet before it was necessary. "It's great to see you again!" We shook. "You don't prefer Peter, do you?"

"No, I'm pretty much Pete to everyone," I said. He was so goddamn tall. I felt the immediate need to give him my lunch money, not out of fear or

intimidation, I just wanted to feed him, make sure he had a good meal.
"Good to see you again, Cal."

"Well, I guess this is where the rubber meets the road, as they say, old sport," he said, already in character.

"I guess so," I said, somehow still in his grip thirty seconds after the handshake had ended. "Where's everyone else?"

"On their way from the city, I imagine." He took his place on his set chair. I gave mine the once-over twice before even attempting to sit. "Go on, Pete. It's got your name on it!"

That it did. On the backrest of the chair was my name printed in the stand-in font they'd picked for the production. Once I sat down, though, the name would be obscured, and anyone standing behind us would only see the two names on the backs of our chairs: Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby.

The practical thing would've been to find rooms out in Great Neck, where we were filming. That's where Cal and I were staying, although his team had put him in a gaudy modernist house near the bay that looked like its previous owner was John Wick, and I was staying in a suite at Best Eastern Long-Stay. Rowan Easton, our Daisy Buchanan, already lived in the West Village, and had decided to commute. She told the production company it gave her time to read and reflect on the way too and from the set. I opted for sleeping in. Josie Archer, our Jordan Baker, installed herself on the outskirts of Astoria, largely because her Instagram account would've suffered from the lack of nightlife in Great Neck.

It was lonely when I first checked in. I didn't think there'd be much action at the Great Neck Best Eastern—or in Great Neck generally—until I bumped into a group at the continental breakfast after my first full night at the hotel.

"You know anything about Great Neck?" a man, about my age, who could've easily been named Great Neck himself, asked. He looked familiar in the way that all attractive people look familiar.

"I know that F. Scott Fitzgerald called it 'West Egg,'" I told him. "The less fashionable of the two Eggs. As far as anyone knows, he came up with the town names based on this little bay that separates them, a little part of Long Island Sound known as 'Egg Harbor.' Other than that, I couldn't tell you a single thing about this town. I do know that it has a Best Eastern."

The man laughed, hearty and just long enough to show that knew exactly how long to laugh at a good joke. He had palmed four single-serving cereal boxes in one hand and looked like he was about to steal the entire half gallon of milk for his own use. A skinny young woman tried to look around his vast back, searching for the milk with a steaming cup of tea in her hand and a box of mixed fruit in the other.

"I'm Deck," he said, offering his elbow to bump.

"*Dex?*" I asked.

"*Deck*. Short for Declan. Declan Brock." That's why he seemed familiar: he was marginally more famous than me, although the margin was about as wide between him and me as it was between him and Caleb. He had played all of one season of football before his antics and charisma made him more valuable as a different sort of player.

"Tom Buchanan," I said. Why hadn't he said something when I brought up Fitzgerald?

"Now why does that name sound familiar?" he said, as we touched elbows again. "Nice to meet you, Tom."

"I mean, you're *playing* Tom Buchanan."

"Oh god, the fog that surrounds me first thing in the morning. Yes, Jesus, I'm playing Tom Buchanan. How did you know that? You with the crew? Seems like half the building is filled with crew. Impossible to identify them without the walkies on their hips and everyone looking like they just got tossed along with their rooms."

I reached up to my hair and scrambled it out of reflex, my tried-and-true method of doing my hair since I dropped the long locks in '01.

"I'm your Nick Carraway," I said. "Peter Logue. Pete."

This necessitated another shake. I was tempted to take his elbow in my hand that time and shake it that way, since one of my hands was free.

"Pete. Petey. Petri dish. Peter Pepper. Peter Parker." Whether this was a mnemonic game he played to remember people's names, I didn't know. I feared I was watching the man search for a nickname. "Let's grab us a table, Spidey."

I followed him to a modestly worn IKEA living room set off the lobby. He settled himself in the middle of the sofa, looking like he needed the whole thing. I took one of the armchairs, already uncomfortable at the nickname and ready to be even less comfortable sitting in an armchair with very high arm rests. He had no way of knowing I was once in the running to

play Spider-man, but I hadn't been as English, accomplished, or attractive as Andrew Garfield. Turned out I had dodged a bullet. Talk about spider-sense.

"Looks like we're pretty co-equal stars on this one, Pete," he said. "What do you reckon about Belleviso?" I was to learn, eventually, that there only existed two classes of people in Deck's book: equals, who got called by their first name or worse, and everyone else, who he addressed strictly by their last names.

"I know about as much about him as you do, I expect. Or at least, what filters down from the rags to the news." We weren't due on set until after the weekend. Even after all that transpired, I wouldn't say I know Cal any better.

"Comes a point where fame makes a person harder to know than a perfect stranger." I was caught between this human ox's equally broad brain and wondering if he was talking about Bronson Pinchot.

After breakfast, I helped myself to another coffee from the lobby. The hotel is on the dodgy west coast of this particular "egg," and while half of the view was dominated by Moses Valley—that stretch of Connecticut that bursts from either side of I95 like the swollen red edges of an infected cut—the other half is of Manhattan. With the sun gleaming from the east, the reflections off of the skyscrapers backlit the lower skyline of Astoria and Long Island City, which was probably better for all eyes involved.

Fitzgerald had saw fit to call Long Island 'one of the strangest communities in North America' without illuminating his reasoning and a 'slender riotous island' without giving a single glimpse into what the exact hell constituted a riot.

I'd brought a separate suitcase solely for books, half-empty to accommodate whatever I ended up buying while I was on Long Island filming. I started out with *The Great Gatsby*, thumbing it open as the coolness worked its way out of the air off the Sound. I was rather literary in college for someone majoring in acting and minoring in anthropology, and I suppose I was looking to either reinforce my sense of the source material or give myself a reason to bristle at the changes made in the script.

"Now I was going to bring back all such things into my life and become again that most limited of all specialists, the 'well-rounded man,'" Fitzgerald read to me in my inner voice. "This isn't just an epigram—life is much more

successfully looked at from a single window, after all." One benefit to the well-rounded man is that they're easy to roll down a fucking hill when the mood strikes.

Two pages in, and I was already thinking about my cousin-in-law, the husband of my only worthwhile cousin. They had moved to Long Island a few years ago—why, I don't know. After a year in France for no particular reason, they had drifted towards New York City but had too much stubborn inertia to get overshadowed by the gravity of the city. Landing in Long Island meant they were still the largest objects in their particular orbit, I guess. Eventually, I knew they would find out I was on the island. That's just the inevitable truth of Catholic families. I just didn't think it would happen the day after I arrived.

And so it happened that on that warm Saturday evening, I drove over to whatever town is opposite Great Neck to see a blood relative who I loved but whose life I could not relate to and her husband—the impossibly broad Franklin Hawthorne, Frank to almost everyone—who made my blood boil. In the fashion of people who don't pay a premium for *where* they live, they were able to afford a bigger house than I would have imagined, a McMansion counterfeit of a Cape Codder. The lawn existed, for starters, and was embarrassed at the far end by stopping at what only they would've considered a beach. It would have been fair to say they had a garden, although 'topiary hedge maze' wouldn't have been wholly inaccurate, either. Frank was practicing his golf form on the second floor terrace when my car pulled up.

I'd known him briefly in school. He'd breezed through for a semester, on a sort of holiday from Princeton to slum it with actors in New York, just to see if he'd enjoy a permanent change of career before he'd even embarked on the first one. Now, at thirty, he'd settled into the life of a fourth-generation rich kid, with a supercilious manner he expected everyone to entertain and two arrogant eyes that seemed to search through the fibers of your clothes to see how much money you had on you. Even at the tee, he was always pitching ever-so-slightly forward, like his head had to arrive wherever he was bound a five full minutes before the rest of him got there. Even the golf outfit he had on could not diminish his overwhelming masculinity. There weren't plaid pants tight enough to make him look effeminate. His was a body capable of enormous leverage—only his net worth was capable of even crueler influence.

"Nice place I've got here!" he said, looking down at me from the balcony.

Bringing me inside, he gestured to the foyer. "You've never lived in a place this size," he said. "Oil money. 'Demaine Standard,' the realtor said. Built in the '20s. We'll go find Faye."

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space with windows ajar. A breeze blew through the room, making a mess of curtains that were too long to have ever been intended to be functional. In the midst of all this, stationary by comparison and getting too literal with a 19th century fainting couch, was my cousin. Frank pirouetted around, closing the windows as though she was letting the cold air out and he couldn't afford to air condition the whole of out of doors, even though he absolutely could.

"My dearest cousin!" she laughed, as though we were not each other's only cousins on that side of the family. She asked if I'd stopped in Philadelphia on my way east. I said, regrettably, I had.

"Do they miss me?" she cried ecstatically.

"You know Philly—if one person is missing, people feel it more keenly than in New York or LA. The whole town is desolate by design. All the cars are assumed abandoned the second they're parked. They've started putting parking boots on moving vans just so no one can leave. Fishtown is only inhabited by fish anymore. The hipsters turned into longshoreman and ended up replacing themselves."

"Fuck! Fishtown is finally free? Let's go back, tomorrow!" she called to her husband. "You mind watching the baby?"

"I'd like to, but I'm sort of busy."

"She's three years old, she'll probably be asleep the entire time. Wait, have you even met her yet?"

"The answer to that is the same as to the question, 'Have you visited Los Angeles in the last three years?'"

"Well, shit, we have to introduce you. Now you've got twice as many cousins as I do—"

Frank's cell rang, and he excused himself.

"We don't know each other very well, Pete," my cousin said suddenly. "Even if we are cousins. You didn't come to my wedding."

"I was filming that war movie, and you got married with almost no notice."

"That's true." She hesitated. "Well, I've had a very bad time, and I'm pretty cynical about everything."

Evidently, she had reason to be—her and her husband both played the real estate game, and they'd overexposed their portfolio. It wasn't that they couldn't wait it out—it was that it required turning to her in-laws for help. That I knew from the free-flowing exchange of gossip between my mother and her father, who didn't particularly like his son-in-law, his parents, or their money. And, even as a thoroughly lapsed Catholic—the only type we seemed to mint anymore—he hated their Protestantism, despite them being as devout to the sect as we were to ours. "They wear their faith as a crown," my uncle had once said to me, "we wear ours as shackles."

I waited for my cousin to expand, to fill my hump with more gossip I could pass along, but she didn't say any more, and after a moment, I turned rather feebly to the subject of her daughter.

"I suppose she talks and eats and everything."

"Oh, yes." She looked at me absently. "Let me tell you what I said when she was born. Would you like to hear?"

I would not have liked to hear, but there isn't a mime on our family crest for a reason.

"It'll show you how I've gotten to feel about things. Well, she was less than an hour old, and her father was god-knows-where. I came out of the anesthesia with the most acute feeling of emptiness, and I asked the nurse straightaway—was it a boy or a girl? We never asked the OB/GYN. Wanted it to be a surprise. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. 'Fair enough,' I said—I was still high as a fucking kite, mind you; they really ought to make that shit available over the counter—I'm glad it's a girl. I hope she'll be smarter than me so she can be absolutely rip-shit with the boys who try it with her—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world: an absolute *assassin*."

Frank returned just as the kid was making it known that talking to me was taking precious attention away from her. Faye forgot the whole conversation and returned to playing with the child. It was like watching a lioness teach her cub how to hunt.

"The hell is this thing you're filming, Peter?" The downside of people meeting you as ostensible extensions to your family is that they call you the same thing as your family, without having the goddamn right.

"They're remaking *The Great Gatsby*."

"Who with?"

"Well, me, for one."

"Never heard of him. Who else?"

My newest cousin had rushed the room, turning us all into inching gargoyles by comparison. Faye started fussing with her, having completely forgotten I was even there.

"Rowan Easton—"

"Good lord, she is a *smokeshow*."

"*Smokeshow*," the baby cousin mimicked. Her mother didn't notice.

"I haven't met her yet." She *was* a smokeshow. She'd been famous about as long as our generation had been old enough to be trusted in movie theaters, everyone in our cohort had been or was still in love with her to at least some degree. "Declan Brock, Josie Archer—"

"Never heard of them," he remarked derisively. This annoyed me, even though I hadn't recognized Deck earlier that day. If he was aware of Rowan, he must've been aware of Josie. She was only a little younger than us, and not nearly as private about her star-studded life as her co-star.

"You will," I answered shortly. "Even if this thing is a flop, it still stars Caleb Belleviso."

"Belleviso?" Faye demanded. "What Belleviso?" Before either of us could reply, she was clobbered by the baby, which set my cousin giggling, madly proud that she had produced such a perfect monster. "The pure viciousness!" she exclaimed.

Then some absolutely random person entered the room and announced that dinner was ready. I didn't know whose dinner they were announcing. Maybe it was the neighbor, and they liked the intimacy and community of randomly announcing that meals were in the offing. Maybe we were supposed to follow them. Had my cousin married into such wealth? Her child held lightly on her hip, she preceded us out onto a porch that could've been the foundation for one of the houses we'd grown up in.

"I've actually got to head back," I told my cousin-in-law as he led me along.

"Belleviso, huh?" he said. "Now that's a name I know. This thing's going to be big, huh?"

"Like I said, unless it's an absolute dumpster fire, it'll make a splash."

We brought up the rear of the train, onto this—I dared not think of it as a 'porch' again, not once I'd remembered the word 'veranda.'

"I've really got to get back," I told my cousin. I absolutely didn't have to get back. Not until Monday, anyway. But I really had to get out. "I just wanted to stop by while I had time. I'm sure I'll have a day or two off in the next six weeks."

"We ought to plan something," she said, now fussing the baby into her seat. The baby wasn't having it. "What's a thing people plan?"

"Dinner?" I said, looking around.

"That's it!" she said. "We'll have dinner."

"Until then," I said. This cook or butler or whoever had already appeared with my coat. I was fairly certain I hadn't worn a coat, but it seemed impolite to argue.

"To be continued," my cousin said, "in our very next issue."

I tucked into the book again when I got back to the hotel. It was too cold to station myself on the Sound, so I returned to the armchair I'd had breakfast in. Its condition had somehow worsened, as if a day of seating the likes of us had made it sag with disgust.

I started to have a sense of *deja vu*, and then a migraine mounted its earliest incursions into my otherwise unfettered thoughts.

Scott's Tom Buchanan was musing: "Civilization's going to pieces. I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard?"

Nick Carraway, keeping himself in character, said he had not. It's something he and I, and I'm certain Tom had in common. The people who lord about their fringe revelations and edgelord opinions have rarely read what they lovingly quote. One could call it the Second Amendment Effect.

"The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proven." Even in an era without YouTube or its algorithmic handholding down the primrose path towards fascist and white supremacy, dingdongs had still been able to get themselves radicalized.

"Tom's getting very profound," our Daisy said, which meant she was dumber than Tom. "He reads deep books with long words in them." Tom had probably read the highlights of those books in *Führer's Digest*.

"Well, these books are all scientific," insisted Tom, glancing at her impatiently. "This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of

things. This idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are, and — " here, Fitzgerald's Buchanan refuses to include Daisy at first, which is a fine thing to do when her cousin is standing right there.

I don't know that, on my first read, sometime in late 20th century, I knew what was going on there. Fitzgerald, an Irish Catholic if ever there was one, taking the Protestant elite's penchant for race science to task, albeit in about as deadpan a way as imaginable. That was a dryness he had probably learned from his WASP cohorts at Princeton and had failed to apply it to white America as a whole. Suddenly, I remembered Meyer Wolfsheim was waiting just beyond the next few chapters, like a Nazi propaganda poster popping up during an otherwise idyllic stroll through Berlin.

Tom's treatise on the underpinnings of the Thule Society were interrupted by the other Tom Buchanan.

"Pietro," Deck said, his voice coming from a height and angle that told me his hands were already on the back of my armchair, as though he might tip it over to get me on my feet. "What're you reading?"

"*Gatsby*," I said, closing the book to show him the cover. He wasn't paying any attention.

"A fine script. Bosworth's a genius."

Oswalt 'Oz' Bosworth was the director and writer of the adaptation. He was known for his unorthodox movies, and *Gatsby* was shaping up to be as much a remix as it was an adaptation.

"He's something, all right."

"What do you have on the docket for tonight?"

I once again indicated the cover of the book.

"Well, that's all fine and good, but we've got ourselves a Gatsby-level *fête* in the making. Josie Archer got a hold of my people and said she's having a party at her place in Astoria. You game, *old sport*?"

I was relieved from my impulse to immediately evade and avoid this party, sprung on me as it was like a bear trap—I say that because it was both a trap *for* bears and a trap set *by* a bear—by being confronted with the main issue I was going to have with being in this movie. 'Old Sport,' *Gatsby*'s catchphrase. Aside from being the most patrician detail in a paean to patrician America, it was impossible to hear it without thinking of Old Spice. And from there, it was a short intellectual walk to the Spice Girls, although that connection I can't blame Fitzgerald for.

But 'old sport'? Not 'old man' or 'sport,' but 'old sport'? It may have been employed at the time, it might've even been as popular then as people saying, 'dude' or 'man' or—god help us—'chief' today, but good lord, did it feel forced. Maybe that was the point, knowing what we know about Gatsby's genesis.

Here's where I admit that I did not become a performer because I can say no to pleasing people, and so I found myself in one of three high-capacity SUVs careening towards the city. I was in the lead car with Deck, the assistant director, cinematographer, and the guy they'd cast to play George Wilson, Deck's lover's husband. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to who got into which car. Behind us on the Long Island Expressway were Myrtle Wilson, the head of makeup, the wardrobe supervisor, and the set designer—all women—and behind them was Meyer Wolfsheim, Dan Cody, Henry Gatz, and two flappers with speaking roles.

"I love coming up over this hill at sunrise," the driver said. Manhattan lay before us, backlit by the setting sun, a portrait in orange and black with Astoria just below the edge of the canvas. Deck ignored him.

"So, Sal," he said, turning towards the three of us in the back seat and addressing the cinematographer. "What're we working with? Did you study the screen tests?"

"I did, and I have to say," Sal had to say, "I don't know if Bosworth is doing this right. But I'll be honest," this guy had a real issue speaking his mind, "if he's going to oversaturate everything in post, it doesn't matter a good goddamn what I do."

This was untrue. He was only providing covering fire for himself, the hallmark of a DP who has worked with control freak auteurs before.

"I trust you," Deck said. This was also untrue. Deck had been on a lot of film sets, and whether he was dealing with a blockbuster director or an independent filmmaker, he knew they only had two possibly priorities: shoot for the mood or shoot for the star. We would have to live or die by Caleb's light, just like everyone else that wound up in the shade of his looming figure.