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From Jimmy Gatz to Jules Wendall: A Study of “Nothing Substantial”

When Jimmy Gatz met Daisy, he came “face to face” with the embodiment of everything he had dreamed of possessing. She was wealth, and power, and beauty. In order to obtain her and those things she represented, he even attempted to become someone else. If one believes that determined romantic Nick Carraway, the change was so successful that Jay Gatsby was “born” and died a man of historic significance— he assumed the heroic stature of the last great American “dreamer”. Still even Nick knew that the transformation was never that successful — Jimmy Gatz did not die until Jay Gatsby did. So the murdered man in the swimming pool was someone else— someone “better than the whole damn bunch” perhaps, but still neither Gatz nor Gatsby.

From childhood, Jimmy Gatz, maker of schedules and reader of *Hopalong Cassidy*, had venerated the Franklin version of “the Puritan Ethic” (“study needed inventions”) and the frontier promise of unlimited opportunities for restructuring one’s existence. But a man in a hurry must resort to desperate measures, and Franklin and the frontier are finally not the way to win an extremely mortal girl from Louisville. There was never any way for Jimmy Gatz to win her of course; still, he bought a lot of silk shirts without realizing the futility of his quest.

Jules Wendall, in Joyce Carol Oates’ *Them*, is in many ways comparable to Jimmy Gatz. His experience does not kill him; in fact, at the end of the novel, he is preparing to go to California “to make some money and come back and marry” (p. 507) his Daisy. Jules’ Daisy is Nadine Greene who shot him the last time he saw her, but Jules is seemingly a man of no little faith and he still believes that money can win “the golden girl” and bring him inside “the golden city”. Moreover, California is the west, and Jules has already tried just about everything

else in America that once passed for a frontier (Texas, Oklahoma). Nadine Greene is a goal for Jules to pursue and perhaps win. Nadine Greene, like the green light at the end of Daisy's pier, is a dream that dies hard.

However, Jules can no more capture his grail than Jimmy Gatz can. Especially in 1969, California was no frontier, and the only ways to get rich quick there were comparable to the means by which Jimmy Gatz attained wealth. Nadine cannot be won by Jules, and he will surely find it out. Perhaps he knows it already. Either way, knowing it now or finding it out later, will make little difference to Jules, for Nadine has already destroyed him. When the wealthy girl from Grosse Point (it is wonderful how America provides its writers with ready-made symbols) fired her revolver into the boy from the slums, she did not physically kill him, but "the Spirit of the Lord departed from Jules". In a more total way than Jimmy Gatz could have conceived of, Jules, from that moment, became someone else. Violence is virtually always a two-sided sword in Oates—it liberates, but it liberates one into chaos. After the shooting, Jules joins the drug and revolutionary subculture of the nineteen-sixties (an attempted "new frontier" in itself born of despair and disillusionment with that more respectable one so eloquently promised by the government). Yet, he cares nothing about any revolution because he cares about nothing. "The Spirit of the Lord" is indeed gone from Jules—he is as dead as Fitzgerald's corpse in the swimming pool except that he still breathes, eats, sleeps, even occasionally has sex. However, he feels nothing. Whoever he is during this period, he is not the Jules Wendall who saw a girl standing in a doorway and fell so in love with her that, through elaborate subterfuge, he claimed her and went with her to Texas, acting the part of Clyde to her passive and uninterested Bonnie. He "becomes a Communist", but only because someone asks him to, and he is too indifferent to care what he is labelled. It would be a considerable understatement to say that Jules is non-political at this point; he is simply "non". Oates' satire of new left revolutionaries is cutting in this segment of the book. One amazingly insane conversation between the "leaders" of the movement about whom they are going to kill in the midst of the riot they precipitate is a case in point, but perhaps even more meaningful is the fact that they see in Jules, a spiritual zombie, some mysterious key to the success of their movement. Whoever this revolutionary is, he is morally and spiritually less than Jules Wendall before the shooting, and even Nick Carraway would have trouble saying

otherwise. Jules' mother, the incredible and horrifying Loretta, has no trouble defining her son during this period. When she sees him with the "Revolutionaries" on a television talk show, she calls him a "murderer".

Loretta is speaking more literally than she knows. Her son has killed, and the result is transformation into the Jules at the end of the novel once again seemingly a confident believer in his ability to attain his "golden girl". Appearances deceive, however, and the movement here is not cyclical—the first Jules has not been reborn. A third identity has been born of violence, and this one is the most horrifying of all.

Instead of a Nick Carraway, Maureen Wendall, the pathetic shattered sister who has finally attained her dream of joining the American middle class, observes and reacts to this final Jules Wendall. Her reaction to him is appropriate for reasons which she doesn't herself fully understand and, thus, could never begin to verbalize. What she does understand is that Jules insists upon reminding her of the past life in the slums. She has vowed to erase her life prior to her recent marriage from her mind: "I'm going to forget everything and everybody. I'm going to have a baby. I'm a different person" (p. 507). The irony in this conclusion scene is multi-layered. While the only pattern of Jules' life has been one of startling and unplanned transformations of identity, Maureen is consciously struggling to create a new self. An epigraph to the novel is from John Webster's *The White Devil*: "... because we are poor Shall we be vicious?" Maureen has seen enough, been brutalized enough to believe that the question can only be answered affirmatively. She does not want to be "vicious" however; indeed, she never has been, especially not when she was giving herself sexually to anyone who would take her. But she was beaten by her step-father, she has seen her mother become increasingly bigoted and self-pitying, and she has known her sister Betty who can only be described as "vicious". Thus, she was able to commit adultery and break up a marriage to escape that kind of environment. The presence of Jules, especially since he has so recently been a "communist", can only remind her of that past life. In fact, he wants to serve as such a reminder:

I love you for being such a sweet sister and suffering so much and getting out of it, using your head, but don't forget that this place here can burn down too. Men can come back in your life, Maureen, they can beat you up again and force your knees apart, why not? There's so much of it in the world, so much semen, so many men! Can't it happen? Won't it happen? Wouldn't you really want it to happen? (p. 507)

Finally, it is this last series of questions that most disturbs Maureen though she really isn't aware of what they imply. Jules would "want it to happen", for his final identity is that of a believer in nothing but chaos and horror. Believing now that there are no valid rules (one can kill and not be struck down) and finding that "the Spirit of the Lord" has truly "departed" from his soul, he fears nothing, cares about nothing, and is ready to manipulate anything and everything. If he were to get rich in California and actually get his "golden girl", it would mean little since nothing can really be "golden" to Jules again. His attitude throughout this concluding scene is ironic and that will be the attitude of the rest of his life. Jules has gone through three stages: a "dreamer" like Jimmy Gatz, a man so shocked by the chaos of existence that he retreats into passivity, and finally a man so accepting of the chaos and brutality that he is ready to utilize it for anything and nothing. He has truly become a man of his times—the bloodstained, futile sixties and the dehumanized seventies. Maureen doesn't see this Jules even when he makes a last "ironic" bow; consciously, she still sees "the Jules she had always loved". But she must feel the change and, inwardly, she must wonder about the validity of her own change of identity. Did she give up too much of moral value when she chose to escape her environment by any means possible?

At any rate, Jules is not the brother "she had always loved". That first Jules had been deserving of love. For one thing, he had been brave. Early in his life he saw "the horror" of reality, and it had deeply touched him. A plane crashed near the farm where he was living with his mother and grandmother, and Jules saw the wreckage up close. One of the victims of the crash "had had the top of his skull sheared right off—'like with an axe' ". Jules saw that and ran away and hid in a dark barn and mumbled to himself until his mother found him. For some days he slept locked in a nightmare, and Loretta was unable to comprehend how "that sad fact" (the sight of the man's skull) had fixed itself so seriously into a child's brain when it had already faded out of her own. The fact that everything "fades out of" Loretta's brain enables her to bear a brutal existence with comparably little shock and pain. Jules recovered from his vision of violent death, but he never forgot it. Until "the Spirit of the Lord" departs from him, he never forgets anything. Still he faced what he saw and overcame it. He had seen "the horror" of violence, chaos, and death and not been shattered or awed into animal-life indifference. A different kind than Kurtz's (because he was a child and not facing his own

ultimate chaos), Jules' recovery from the vision of the "skull sheared right off" was a "moral victory". He understood "the horror" of man's mortality, but still clung to the belief that life could and should be lived with decency and idealism anyway.

Thus, he acted as the protector of his sister during her traumatic childhood and adolescence and did what he could for his mother. Seemingly, he had answered Webster's question with a definite *no*.

However, Jules saw Grosse Point and, most importantly, Nadine Greene; and from that time on, the direction of his life changed. Violence, which comes ever closer to Jules personally, accompanies his quest for the grail almost from the beginning. A key figure in Jules' first transformation is the surreal Bernard Geppen, the man who writes checks for one hundred dollars, two hundred dollars, finally ten thousand dollars with little thought or hesitation. Bernard plans to change Jules' life and introduce him to education and wealth because he likes the young man's face. Bernard has many plans; he is a man of immense schemes and flamboyant style; he has connections with Grosse Point. He has other connections as well, however, and he ends up with his throat slit in a dingy deserted house. The boundary between Grosse Point and the underworld is as tenuous as that between Jay Gatsby and Meyer Wolfsheim. Bernard, in fact, has much in common with Jay Gatsby: he is flamboyant, he throws around money, he is associated with the mob, and he can't enter East Egg either.

Before his death, Bernard affords Jules his first vision of Nadine Greene. Jules reacts in much the way Jimmy Gatz did when he first saw Daisy:

But never had he really been given a gift, a surprising gift of the kind that stuns the heart, that lets you know why people keep on living — why else, except in anticipation of such gifts, such undeserved surprises?

The girl who had gone into the house was like that too, a surprise. Jules could not stop thinking of her. Yet he could not quite remember her face. (p. 242)

More direct and impatient than Jimmy Gatz, Jules soon, by an elaborate ruse, wins his way into Nadine's bedroom:

He kissed her lightly, wanting to put her to sleep with kisses, comfort her, his mouth light against hers like the petals of roses or the fluttering wings of moths, nothing substantial. It was all so airy, even this embrace How he wanted that intoxication!. . . (p. 282)

After he sleeps with her he vows that "if he did not cherish her he would never forgive himself" (p. 282). When Jimmy Gatz kissed Daisy, it "was like a tuning fork being struck upon a star", but "he knew that his mind would never romp again with the mind of God". The writing in these two scenes is strikingly similar. In both cases, it is romantic, intensely so, "airy", "like the petals of roses", like "a tuning fork being struck upon a star". But each writer foreshadows the impending danger: Jules' contact with Nadine is "nothing substantial"; Gatsby's mind is limited forever.

"Nothing substantial" is a truly accurate description of the "affair" between Jules and Nadine, but he is determined not to admit it. He hits upon the same solution that Gatsby did: (Jules to Nadine:) ". . . I will set myself a few years to make enough money, I won't fail. We'll be close together all of our lives and nothing can undo it. . ." (p. 285) His self-deception is immense: "He had never been so close to anyone before—as if he were with someone he had made up, a girl he'd dreamed into being" (p. 286). Indeed, just as Gatsby had Daisy, he had "dreamed [Nadine] into being". Gatsby probably never saw the real woman, and Jules did not until it was far too late.

At any rate, he decides that the frontier—the Southwest—is the best place to make "enough money". Nadine accompanies him in a pathetic and demeaning journey through Texas. The writing in this section of the book is awesome in its brutally naturalistic description of petty crime, and emotional and physical illness. Nadine recognizes the folly of their quest almost immediately: Texas is no longer a frontier. Its shopping centres are as plastic as any in the midwest, and it has every bit as many cheap colonial homes and miniature golf courses. Nadine sees beyond the plasticity to further horror:

Nadine looked around in amazement. "Is this Texas?" she said. The road turned suddenly to dirt. It branches, and one branch led to what must have been the city dump. Jules followed the bus on the other branch. The smell of gas grew stronger. A gang of Negro children darted across the street in front of the car. Wood and tar-paper shanties appeared beside the road, chickens pecked in the dirt, a skeletal dog stared out mournfully at Jules with Jules's own eyes.

"Now it's starting to drizzle," Nadine said. "This is a place to die in." (pp. 304-305)

Jules will see nothing but the inevitability of the fulfillment of his quest: "Out of all this traveling Jules wanted at least to put together some kind

of personality for himself, the personality of a young man in love or a born criminal or a millionaire on the first stretch of his 'career'; all this land had to add up the something" (p. 304).

Jules, however, does almost die; and Nadine, revolted by the violence and filth of his illness, then leaves him. Even when he recovers to find "the golden girl" gone, Jules persists in his idealism. For a while he works for a real estate company in Houston until it is closed by the police and he almost lands in jail. One could hardly ask for a more powerful image of a perverted frontier: the corrupt sale of the land itself. In Tulsa, he gets a mysterious "six weeks job" in which he submits to assorted physical examinations. Near death, he is hospitalized and learns that he has been serving as a "guinea pig" for the United States government. No, there is no longer the possibility of physical escape.

After Jules returns home, he gets a job with a wealthy uncle and is content to "work his way up" in the classic American pattern. But he meets Nadine again — the green light beckons and he answers. This time, something substantial almost happens. Jules almost touches the soul of the terrified and embittered woman, and she shoots him. From the time the bullets enter his body until he is caught up in the riots in Detroit and kills a policeman, Jules exists in the ghetto. The murder of the policeman then produces the final Jules:

Having done this he had done everything. It was over. His blood ran wild, he was not to blame for anything, why should he stop? He aimed the rifle into the man's face and pulled the trigger. (p. 497)

There is no "moral victory" in his final identity. He has seen "the horror" of the universe, his age, and himself and said, "So what?" He could easily be a member of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition. Jimmy Gatz was mercifully spared this stage—he died either still believing or so shortly after the shock of disbelief that he had no time to become a cynic even if such a transformation were possible for him.

It seems likely that these Gatsby parallels are conscious, and that they are meant in respectful parody. It would be difficult for an American writer not to respect Fitzgerald's masterpiece, but it would be folly for one to attempt to duplicate its tone and mood. Jules Wendall, as we last see him, is a man of his time, of Nixon's America. One even feels that he will succeed in California and that his success there will be as hollow and meaningless as that of all the button-down men who appeared as witnesses before the Ervin committee. Truly, "the Spirit of the Lord has departed" from Jules, and from America. Even Nick Carraway would have to struggle mightily to maintain his "Romanticism in this, *our* brave new world".