

INFINITE JEST

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

With a foreword by TOM BISSELL

“Uproarious....*Infinite Jest* shows off Wallace as one of the big talents of his generation, a writer of virtuosic talents who can seemingly do anything.” —*New York Times*

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any apparent similarity to real persons is not intended by the author and is either a coincidence or the product of your own troubled imagination.

Where the names of real places, corporations, institutions, and public figures are projected onto made-up stuff, they are intended to denote only made-up stuff, not anything presently real. Besides Closed Meetings for alcoholics only, Alcoholics Anonymous in Boston, Massachusetts also has Open Meetings, where pretty much anybody who's interested can come and listen, take notes, pester people with questions, etc. A lot of people at these Open Meetings spoke with me and were extremely patient and garrulous and generous and helpful. The best way I can think of to show my appreciation to these men and women is to decline to thank them by name.

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NOTES AND ERRATA

Also by David Foster Wallace

A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I'LL NEVER DO AGAIN
THE BROOM OF THE SYSTEM
GIRL WITH CURIOUS HAIR

For F. P. Foster: R.I.P.

FOREWORD

In recent years, there have been a few literary dustups — how insane is it that such a thing exists in a world at war? — about readability in contemporary fiction. In essence, there are some people who feel that fiction should be easy to read, that it's a popular medium that should communicate on a somewhat conversational wavelength. On the other hand, there are those who feel that fiction can be challenging, generally and thematically, and even on a sentence-by-sentence basis — that it's okay if a person needs to work a bit while reading, for the rewards can be that much greater when one's mind has been exercised and thus (presumably) expanded.

Much in the way that would-be civilized debates are polarized by extreme thinkers on either side, this debate has been made to seem like an either/or proposition, that the world has room for only one kind of fiction, and that the other kind should be banned and its proponents hunted down and, why not, dismembered.

But while the polarizers have been going at it, there has existed a silent legion of readers, perhaps the majority of readers of literary fiction, who don't mind a little of both. They believe, though not too vocally, that so-called difficult books can exist next to, can even rub bindings suggestively with, more welcoming fiction. These readers might actually read *both* kinds of fiction themselves, *sometimes in the same week*. There might even be — though it's impossible to prove — readers who find it possible to enjoy Thomas Pynchon one day and Elmore Leonard the next. Or even: readers who can have fun with Jonathan Franzen in the morning while wrestling with William Gaddis at night.

David Foster Wallace has long straddled the worlds of difficult and not-as-difficult, with most readers agreeing that his essays are easier to read than his fiction, and his journalism most accessible of all. But while much of his work is challenging, his tone, in whatever form he's exploring, is rigorously unpretentious. A Wallace reader gets the impression of being in a room with a very talkative and brilliant uncle or cousin who, just when he's about to push it too far, to try our patience with too much detail, has the good sense to throw in a good lowbrow joke. Wallace, like many other writers who could be otherwise considered too smart for their own good — Bellow comes to mind — is, like Bellow, always aware of the reader, of the idea that books are essentially meant to entertain, and so almost unerringly balances his prose to suit. This had been Wallace's hallmark for years before this book, of course. He was already known as a very smart and challenging and funny and preter-naturally gifted writer when *Infinite Jest* was released in 1996, and thereafter his reputation included all the adjectives mentioned just now, and also this one: Holy shit.

No, that isn't an adjective in the strictest sense. But you get the idea. The book is 1,079 pages long and there is not one lazy sentence. The book is drum-tight and relentlessly smart, and though it does not wear its heart on its sleeve, it's deeply felt and incredibly moving. That it was written in three years by a writer under thirty-five is very painful to think about. So let's not think about that. The point is that it's for all these reasons — acclaimed, daunting, not-lazy,

drum-tight, very funny (we didn't mention that yet but yes) — that you picked up this book. Now the question is this: Will you actually read it?

In commissioning this foreword, the publisher wanted a very brief and breezy essay that might convince a new reader of *Infinite Jest* that the book is approachable, effortless even — a barrel of monkeys' worth of fun to read. Well. It's easy to agree with the former, more difficult to advocate the latter. The book is approachable, yes, because it doesn't include complex scientific or historical content, nor does it require any particular expertise or erudition. As verbose as it is, and as long as it is, it never wants to punish you for some knowledge you lack, nor does it want to send you to the dictionary every few pages. And yet, while it uses a familiar enough vocabulary, make no mistake that *Infinite Jest* is something *other*. That is, it bears little resemblance to anything before it, and comparisons to anything since are desperate and hollow. It appeared in 1996, *sui generis*, very different from virtually anything before it. It defied categorization and thwarted efforts to take it apart and explain it.

It's possible, with most contemporary novels, for astute readers, if they are wont, to break it down into its parts, to take it apart as one would a car or Ikea shelving unit. That is, let's say a reader is a sort of mechanic. And let's say this particular reader-mechanic has worked on lots of books, and after a few hundred contemporary novels, the mechanic feels like he can take apart just about any book and put it back together again. That is, the mechanic recognizes the components of modern fiction and can say, for example, *I've seen this part before, so I know why it's there and what it does. And this one, too — I recognize it. This part connects to this and performs this function. This one usually goes here, and does that. All of this is familiar enough.* That's no knock on the contemporary fiction that is recognizable and breakdownable. This includes about 98 percent of the fiction we know and love.

But this is not possible with *Infinite Jest*. This book is like a spaceship with no recognizable components, no rivets or bolts, no entry points, no way to take it apart. It is very shiny, and it has no discernible flaws. If you could somehow smash it into smaller pieces, there would certainly be no way to put it back together again. It simply *is*. Page by page, line by line, it is probably the strangest, most distinctive, and most involved work of fiction by an American in the last twenty years. At no time while reading *Infinite Jest* are you are unaware that this is a work of complete obsession, of a stretching of the mind of a young writer to the point of, we assume, near madness.

Which isn't to say it's madness in the way that Burroughs or even Fred Exley used a type of madness with which to create. Exley, like many writers of his generation and the few before it, drank to excess, and Burroughs ingested every controlled substance he could buy or borrow. But Wallace is a different sort of madman, one in full control of his tools, one who instead of teetering on the edge of this precipice or that, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, seems to be heading ever-inward, into the depths of memory and the relentless conjuring of a certain time and place in a way that evokes — it seems so wrong to type this name but then again, so right! — Marcel Proust. There is the same sort of obsessiveness, the same incredible precision and focus, and the same sense that the writer wanted (and arguably succeeds at) nailing the consciousness of an age.

Let's talk about age, the more pedestrian meaning of the word. It's to be expected that the average age of the new *Infinite Jest* reader would be about twenty-five. There are certainly many collegians among you, probably, and there may be an equal number of thirty-year-olds or fifty-year-olds who have for whatever reason reached a point in their lives where they have determined themselves finally ready to tackle the book, which this or that friend has urged upon them. The point is that the average age is appropriate enough. I was twenty-five myself when I first read it. I had known it was coming for about a year, because the publisher, Little,

Brown, had been very clever about building anticipation for it, with monthly postcards, bearing teasing phrases and hints, sent to every media outlet in the country. When the book was finally released, I started in on it almost immediately.

And thus I spent a month of my young life. I did little else. And I can't say it was always a barrel of monkeys. It was occasionally trying. It demands your full attention. It can't be read at a crowded café, or with a child on one's lap. It was frustrating that the footnotes were at the end of the book, rather than on the bottom of the page, as they had been in Wallace's essays and journalism. There were times, reading a very exhaustive account of a tennis match, say, when I thought, well, okay. I like tennis as much as the next guy, but enough already.

And yet the time spent in this book, in this world of language, is absolutely rewarded. When you exit these pages after that month of reading, you are a better person. It's insane, but also hard to deny. Your brain is stronger because it's been given a monthlong workout, and more importantly, your heart is sturdier, for there has scarcely been written a more moving account of desperation, depression, addiction, generational stasis and yearning, or the obsession with human expectations, with artistic and athletic and intellectual possibility. The themes here are big, and the emotions (guarded as they are) are very real, and the cumulative effect of the book is, you could say, seismic. It would be very unlikely that you would find a reader who, after finishing the book, would shrug and say, "Eh."

Here's a question once posed to me, by a large, baseball cap-wearing English major at a medium-size western college: Is it our duty to read *Infinite Jest*? This is a good question, and one that many people, particularly literary-minded people, ask themselves. The answer is: Maybe. Sort of. Probably, in some way. If we think it's our duty to read this book, it's because we're interested in genius. We're interested in epic writerly ambition. We're fascinated with what can be made by a person with enough time and focus and caffeine and, in Wallace's case, chewing tobacco. If we are drawn to *Infinite Jest*, we're also drawn to the Magnetic Fields' *69 Songs*, for which Stephin Merritt wrote that many songs, all of them about love, in about two years. And we're drawn to the ten thousand paintings of folk artist Howard Finster. Or the work of Sufjan Stevens, who is on a mission to create an album about each state in the union. He's currently at State No. 2, but if he reaches his goal, it will approach what Wallace did with the book in your hands. The point is that if we are interested in human possibility, and we are able to cheer each other on to leaps in science and athletics and art and thought, we must admire the work that our peers have managed to create. We have an obligation, to ourselves, chiefly, to see what a brain, and particularly a brain like our own — that is, using the same effluvium we, too, swim through — is capable of. It's why we watch *Shoah*, or visit the unending scroll on which Jack Kerouac wrote (in a fever of days) *On the Road*, or William T. Vollmann's 3,300-page *Rising Up and Rising Down*, or Michael Apted's *7-Up*, *28-Up*, *42-Up* series of films, or . . . well, the list goes on.

And now, unfortunately, we're back to the impression that this book is daunting. Which it isn't, really. It's long, but there are pleasures everywhere. There is humor everywhere. There is also a very quiet but very sturdy and constant tragic undercurrent that concerns a people who are completely lost, who are lost within their families and lost within their nation, and lost within their time, and who only want some sort of direction or purpose or sense of community or love. Which is, after all and conveniently enough for the end of this introduction, what an author is seeking when he sets out to write a book — any book, but particularly a book like this, a book that gives so much, that required such sacrifice and dedication. Who would do such a thing if not for want of connection and thus of love?

Last thing: In attempting to persuade you to buy this book, or check it out of your library, it's useful to tell you that the author is a normal person. Dave Wallace — and he is commonly

known as such — keeps big sloppy dogs and has never dressed them in taffeta or made them wear raincoats. He has complained often about sweating too much when he gives public readings, so much so that he wears a bandanna to keep the perspiration from soaking the pages below him. He was once a nationally ranked tennis player, and he cares about good government. He is from the Midwest — east-central Illinois, to be specific, which is an intensely normal part of the country (not far, in fact, from a city, no joke, named Normal). So he is normal, and regular, and ordinary, and this is his extraordinary, and irregular, and not-normal achievement, a thing that will outlast him and you and me, but will help future people understand us — how we felt, how we lived, what we gave to each other and why.

— Dave Eggers
September 2006



YEAR OF GLAD

I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which Uncle Charles, Mr. deLint and I were lately received.

I am in here.

Three faces have resolved into place above summer-weight sportcoats and half-Windsors across a polished pine conference table shiny with the spidered light of an Arizona noon. These are three Deans — of Admissions, Academic Affairs, Athletic Affairs. I do not know which face belongs to whom.

I believe I appear neutral, maybe even pleasant, though I've been coached to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile.

I have committed to crossing my legs I hope carefully, ankle on knee, hands together in the lap of my slacks. My fingers are mated into a mirrored series of what manifests, to me, as the letter X. The interview room's other personnel include: the University's Director of Composition, its varsity tennis coach, and Academy prorector Mr. A. deLint. C.T. is beside me; the others sit, stand and stand, respectively, at the periphery of my focus. The tennis coach jingles pocket-change. There is something vaguely digestive about the room's odor. The high-traction sole of my complimentary Nike sneaker runs parallel to the wobbling loafer of my mother's half-brother, here in his capacity as Headmaster, sitting in the chair to what I hope is my immediate right, also facing Deans.

The Dean at left, a lean yellowish man whose fixed smile nevertheless has the impermanent quality of something stamped into uncooperative material, is a personality-type I've come lately to appreciate, the type who delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me. Passed a packet of computer-sheets by the shaggy lion of a Dean at center, he is speaking more or less to these pages, smiling down.

'You are Harold Incandenza, eighteen, date of secondary-school graduation approximately one month from now, attending the Enfield Tennis Academy, Enfield, Massachusetts, a boarding school, where you reside.' His reading glasses are rectangular, court-shaped, the sidelines at top and bottom. 'You are, according to Coach White and Dean [unintelligible], a regionally, nationally, and continentally ranked junior tennis player, a potential O.N.A.N.C.A.A. athlete of substantial promise, recruited by Coach White via correspondence with Dr. Tavis here commencing... February of this year.' The top page is removed and brought around neatly to the bottom of the sheaf, at intervals. 'You have been in residence at the Enfield Tennis Academy since age seven.'

I am debating whether to risk scratching the right side of my jaw, where there is a wen.

'Coach White informs our offices that he holds the Enfield Tennis Academy's program and achievements in high regard, that the University of Arizona tennis squad has profited from the

prior matriculation of several former E.T.A. alumni, one of whom was one Mr. Aubrey F. deLint, who appears also to be with you here today. Coach White and his staff have given us —

The yellow administrator's usage is on the whole undistinguished, though I have to admit he's made himself understood. The Director of Composition seems to have more than the normal number of eyebrows. The Dean at right is looking at my face a bit strangely.

Uncle Charles is saying that though he can anticipate that the Deans might be predisposed to weigh what he avers as coming from his possible appearance as a kind of cheerleader for E.T.A., he can assure the assembled Deans that all this is true, and that the Academy has presently in residence no fewer than a third of the continent's top thirty juniors, in age brackets all across the board, and that I here, who go by 'Hal,' usually, am 'right up there among the very cream.' Right and center Deans smile professionally; the heads of deLint and the coach incline as the Dean at left clears his throat:

'— belief that you could well make, even as a freshman, a real contribution to this University's varsity tennis program. We are pleased,' he either says or reads, removing a page, 'that a competition of some major sort here has brought you down and given us the chance to sit down and chat together about your application and potential recruitment and matriculation and scholarship.'

'I've been asked to add that Hal here is seeded third, Boys' 18-and-Under Singles, in the prestigious WhataBurger Southwest Junior Invitational out at the Randolph Tennis Center —' says what I infer is Athletic Affairs, his cocked head showing a freckled scalp.

'Out at Randolph Park, near the outstanding El Con Marriott,' C.T. inserts, 'a venue the whole contingent's been vocal about finding absolutely top-hole thus far, which —'

'Just so, Chuck, and that according to Chuck here Hal has already justified his seed, he's reached the semifinals as of this morning's apparently impressive win, and that he'll be playing out at the Center again tomorrow, against the winner of a quarterfinal game tonight, and so will be playing tomorrow at I believe scheduled for 0830 —'

'Try to get under way before the godawful heat out there. Though of course a dry heat.'

'— and has apparently already qualified for this winter's Continental Indoors, up in Edmonton, Kirk tells me —' cocking further to look up and left at the varsity coach, whose smile's teeth are radiant against a violent sunburn — 'Which is something indeed.' He smiles, looking at me. 'Did we get all that right Hal.'

C.T. has crossed his arms casually; their triceps' flesh is webbed with mottle in the air-conditioned sunlight. 'You sure did. Bill.' He smiles. The two halves of his mustache never quite match. 'And let me say if I may that Hal's excited, excited to be invited for the third year running to the Invitational again, to be back here in a community he has real affection for, to visit with your alumni and coaching staff, to have already justified his high seed in this week's not unstiff competition, to as they say still be in it without the fat woman in the Viking hat having sung, so to speak, but of course most of all to have a chance to meet you gentlemen and have a look at the facilities here. Everything here is absolutely top-slot, from what he's seen.'

There is a silence. DeLint shifts his back against the room's panelling and recenters his weight. My uncle beams and straightens a straight watchband. 62.5% of the room's faces are directed my way, pleasantly expectant. My chest bumps like a dryer with shoes in it. I compose what I project will be seen as a smile. I turn this way and that, slightly, sort of directing the expression to everyone in the room.

There is a new silence. The yellow Dean's eyebrows go circumflex. The two other Deans look to the Director of Composition. The tennis coach has moved to stand at the broad window, feeling at the back of his crewcut. Uncle Charles strokes the forearm above his watch.

Sharp curved palm-shadows move slightly over the pine table's shine, the one head's shadow a black moon.

'Is Hal all right, Chuck?' Athletic Affairs asks. 'Hal just seemed to... well, grimace. Is he in pain? Are you in pain, son?'

'Hal's right as rain,' smiles my uncle, soothing the air with a casual hand. 'Just a bit of a let's call it maybe a facial tic, slightly, at all the adrenaline of being here on your impressive campus, justifying his seed so far without dropping a set, receiving that official written offer of not only waivers but a living allowance from Coach White here, on Pac 10 letterhead, being ready in all probability to sign a National Letter of Intent right here and now this very day, he's indicated to me.' C.T. looks to me, his look horribly mild. I do the safe thing, relaxing every muscle in my face, emptying out all expression. I stare carefully into the Kekuléan knot of the middle Dean's necktie.

My silent response to the expectant silence begins to affect the air of the room, the bits of dust and sportcoat-lint stirred around by the AC's vents dancing jaggedly in the slanted plane of windowlight, the air over the table like the sparkling space just above a fresh-poured seltzer. The coach, in a slight accent neither British nor Australian, is telling C.T. that the whole application-interface process, while usually just a pleasant formality, is probably best accentuated by letting the applicant speak up for himself. Right and center Deans have inclined together in soft conference, forming a kind of tepee of skin and hair. I presume it's probably *facilitate* that the tennis coach mistook for *accentuate*, though *accelerate*, while clunkier than *facilitate*, is from a phonetic perspective more sensible, as a mistake. The Dean with the flat yellow face has leaned forward, his lips drawn back from his teeth in what I see as concern. His hands come together on the conference table's surface. His own fingers look like they mate as my own four-X series dissolves and I hold tight to the sides of my chair.

We need candidly to chat re potential problems with my application, they and I, he is beginning to say. He makes a reference to candor and its value.

'The issues my office faces with the application materials on file from you, Hal, involve some test scores.' He glances down at a colorful sheet of standardized scores in the trench his arms have made. 'The Admissions staff is looking at standardized test scores from you that are, as I'm sure you know and can explain, are, shall we say... subnormal.' I'm to explain.

It's clear that this really pretty sincere yellow Dean at left is Admissions. And surely the little aviarian figure at right is Athletics, then, because the facial creases of the shaggy middle Dean are now pursed in a kind of distanced affront, an I'm-eating-something-that-makes-me-really-appreciate-the-presence-of-whatever-I'm-drinking-along-with-it look that spells professionally Academic reservations. An uncomplicated loyalty to standards, then, at center. My uncle looks to Athletics as if puzzled. He shifts slightly in his chair.

The incongruity between Admissions's hand- and face-color is almost wild. '— verbal scores that are just quite a bit closer to zero than we're comfortable with, as against a secondary-school transcript from the institution where both your mother and her brother are administrators —' reading directly out of the sheaf inside his arms' ellipse — 'that this past year, yes, has fallen off a bit, but by the word I mean "fallen off" to outstanding from three previous years of frankly incredible.'

'Off the charts.'

'Most institutions do not even *have* grades of A with multiple pluses after it,' says the Director of Composition, his expression impossible to interpret.

'This kind of... how shall I put it... incongruity,' Admissions says, his expression frank and concerned, 'I've got to tell you sends up a red flag of potential concern during the admissions process.'

‘We thus invite you to explain the appearance of incongruity if not out-right shenanigans.’ Students has a tiny piping voice that’s absurd coming out of a face this big.

‘Surely by *incredible* you meant very very very impressive, as opposed to literally quote “incredible,” surely,’ says C.T., seeming to watch the coach at the window massaging the back of his neck. The huge window gives out on nothing more than dazzling sunlight and cracked earth with heat-shimmers over it.

‘Then there is before us the matter of not the required two but *nine* separate application essays, some of which of nearly monograph-length, each without exception being —’ different sheet — ‘the adjective various evaluators used was quote “stellar” —’

Dir. of Comp.: ‘I made in my assessment deliberate use of *lapidary* and *effete*.’

‘— but in areas and with titles, I’m sure you recall quite well, Hal: “Neoclassical Assumptions in Contemporary Prescriptive Grammar,” “The Implications of Post-Fourier Transformations for a Holographically Mimetic Cinema,” “The Emergence of Heroic Stasis in Broadcast Entertainment” —’

‘“Montague Grammar and the Semantics of Physical Modality”?’

‘“A Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass”?’

‘“Tertiary Symbolism in Justinian Erotica”?’

Now showing broad expanses of recessed gum. ‘Suffice to say that there’s some frank and candid concern about the recipient of these unfortunate test scores, though perhaps explainable test scores, being these essays’ sole individual author.’

‘I’m not sure Hal’s sure just what’s being implied here,’ my uncle says. The Dean at center is fingering his lapels as he interprets distasteful computed data.

‘What the University is saying here is that from a strictly academic point of view there are admission problems that Hal needs to try to help us iron out. A matriculant’s first role at the University is and must be as a student. We couldn’t admit a student we have reason to suspect can’t cut the mustard, no matter how much of an asset he might be on the field.’

‘Dean Sawyer means the court, of course, Chuck,’ Athletic Affairs says, head severely cocked so he’s including the White person behind him in the address somehow. ‘Not to mention O.N.A.N.C.A.A. regulations and investigators always snuffling around for some sort of whiff of the smell of impropriety.’

The varsity tennis coach looks at his own watch.

‘Assuming these board scores are accurate reflectors of true capacity in this case,’ Academic Affairs says, his high voice serious and sotto, still looking at the file before him as if it were a plate of something bad, ‘I’ll tell you right now my opinion is it wouldn’t be fair. It wouldn’t be fair to the other applicants. Wouldn’t be fair to the University community.’ He looks at me. ‘And it’d be especially unfair to Hal himself. Admitting a boy we see as simply an athletic asset would amount to just using that boy. We’re under myriad scrutiny to make sure we’re not using anybody. Your board results, son, indicate that we could be accused of using you.’

Uncle Charles is asking Coach White to ask the Dean of Athletic Affairs whether the weather over scores would be as heavy if I were, say, a revenue-raising football prodigy. The familiar panic at feeling misperceived is rising, and my chest bumps and thuds. I expend energy on remaining utterly silent in my chair, empty, my eyes two great pale zeros. People have promised to get me through this.

Uncle C.T., though, has the pinched look of the cornered. His voice takes on an odd timbre when he’s cornered, as if he were shouting as he receded. ‘Hal’s grades at E.T.A., which is I should stress an *Academy*, not simply a camp or factory, accredited by both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the North American Sports Academy Association, it’s

focused on the total needs of the player and student, founded by a towering intellectual figure whom I hardly need name, here, and based by him on the rigorous Oxbridge Quadrivium-Trivium curricular model, a school fully staffed and equipped, by a fully certified staff, should show that my nephew here can cut just about any Pac 10 mustard that needs cutting, and that —,

DeLint is moving toward the tennis coach, who is shaking his head.

‘— would be able to see a distinct flavor of minor-sport prejudice about this whole thing,’ C.T. says, crossing and recrossing his legs as I listen, composed and staring.

The room’s carbonated silence is now hostile. ‘I think it’s time to let the actual applicant himself speak out on his own behalf,’ Academic Affairs says very quietly. ‘This seems somehow impossible with you here, sir.’

Athletics smiles tiredly under a hand that massages the bridge of his nose. ‘Maybe you’d excuse us for a moment and wait outside, Chuck.’

‘Coach White could accompany Mr. Tavis and his associate out to reception,’ the yellow Dean says, smiling into my unfocused eyes.

‘— led to believe this had all been ironed out in advance, from the —’ C.T. is saying as he and deLint are shown to the door. The tennis coach extends a hypertrophied arm. Athletics says ‘We’re all friends and colleagues here.’

This is not working out. It strikes me that EXIT signs would look to a native speaker of Latin like red-lit signs that say HE LEAVES. I would yield to the urge to bolt for the door ahead of them if I could know that bolting for the door is what the men in this room would see. DeLint is murmuring something to the tennis coach. Sounds of keyboards, phone consoles as the door is briefly opened, then firmly shut. I am alone among administrative heads.

‘— offense intended to anyone,’ Athletic Affairs is saying, his sportcoattan and his necktie insigniated in tiny print — ‘beyond just physical abilities out there in play, which believe me we respect, *want*, believe me.’

‘— question about it we wouldn’t be so anxious to chat with you directly, see?’

‘— that we’ve known in processing several prior applications through Coach White’s office that the Enfield School is operated, however impressively, by close relations of first your brother, who I can still remember the way White’s predecessor Maury Klamkin wooed that kid, so that grades’ objectivity can be all too easily called into question —’

‘By whomsoever’s calling — N.A.A.U.P., ill-willed Pac 10 programs, O.N.A.N.C.A.A. —,’

The essays are old ones, yes, but they are mine; *de moi*. But they are, yes, old, not quite on the application’s instructed subject of Most Meaningful Educational Experience Ever. If I’d done you one from the last year, it would look to you like some sort of infant’s random stabs on a keyboard, and to you, who use *whomsoever* as a subject. And in this new smaller company, the Director of Composition seems abruptly to have actuated, emerged as both the Alpha of the pack here and way more effeminate than he’d seemed at first, standing hip-shot with a hand on his waist, walking with a roll to his shoulders, jingling change as he pulls up his pants as he slides into the chair still warm from C.T.’s bottom, crossing his legs in a way that inclines him well into my personal space, so that I can see multiple eyebrow-tics and capillary webs in the oysters below his eyes and smell fabric-softener and the remains of a breath-mint turned sour.

‘... a bright, solid, but very shy boy, we know about your being very shy, Kirk White’s told us what your athletically built if rather stand-offish younger instructor told him,’ the Director says softly, cupping what I feel to be a hand over my sportcoat’s biceps (surely not), ‘who simply needs to swallow hard and trust and tell his side of the story to these gentlemen

who bear no maliciousness none at all but are doing our jobs and trying to look out for everyone's interests at the same time.'

I can picture deLint and White sitting with their elbows on their knees in the defecatory posture of all athletes at rest, deLint staring at his huge thumbs, while C.T. in the reception area paces in a tight ellipse, speaking into his portable phone. I have been coached for this like a Don before a RICO hearing. A neutral and affectless silence. The sort of all-defensive game Schtitt used to have me play: the best defense: let everything bounce off you; do nothing. I'd tell you all you want and more, if the sounds I made could be what you hear.

Athletics with his head out from under his wing: '— to avoid admission procedures that could be seen as primarily athletics-oriented. It could be a mess, son.'

'Bill means the appearance, not necessarily the real true facts of the matter, which you alone can fill in,' says the Director of Composition.

'— the appearance of the high athletic ranking, the subnormal scores, the over-academic essays, the incredible grades vortexing out of what could be seen as a nepotistic situation.'

The yellow Dean has leaned so far forward that his tie is going to have a horizontal dent from the table-edge, his face sallow and kindly and no-shit-whatever:

'Look here, Mr. Incandenza, Hal, please just explain to me why we couldn't be accused of using you, son. Why nobody could come and say to us, why, look here, University of Arizona, here you are using a boy for just his body, a boy so shy and withdrawn he won't speak up for himself, a jock with doctored marks and a store-bought application.'

The Brewster's-Angle light of the tabletop appears as a rose flush behind my closed lids. I cannot make myself understood. 'I am not just a jock,' I say slowly. Distinctly. 'My transcript for the last year might have been dickied a bit, maybe, but that was to get me over a rough spot. The grades prior to that are *de moi*.' My eyes are closed; the room is silent. 'I cannot make myself understood, now.' I am speaking slowly and distinctly. 'Call it something I ate.'

It's funny what you don't recall. Our first home, in the suburb of Weston, which I barely remember — my eldest brother Orin says he can remember being in the home's backyard with our mother in the early spring, helping the Moms till some sort of garden out of the cold yard. March or early April. The garden's area was a rough rectangle laid out with Popsicle sticks and twine. Orin was removing rocks and hard clods from the Moms's path as she worked the rented Rototiller, a wheelbarrow-shaped, gas-driven thing that roared and snorted and bucked and he remembers seemed to propel the Moms rather than vice versa, the Moms very tall and having to stoop painfully to hold on, her feet leaving drunken prints in the tilled earth. He remembers that in the middle of the tilling I came tear-assing out the door and into the backyard wearing some sort of fuzzy red Pooh-wear, crying, holding out something he said was really unpleasant-looking in my upturned palm. He says I was around five and crying and was vividly red in the cold spring air. I was saying something over and over; he couldn't make it out until our mother saw me and shut down the tiller, ears ringing, and came over to see what I was holding out. This turned out to have been a large patch of mold — Orin posits from some dark corner of the Weston home's basement, which was warm from the furnace and flooded every spring. The patch itself he describes as horrific: darkly green, glossy, vaguely hirsute, speckled with parasitic fungal points of yellow, orange, red. Worse, they could see that the patch looked oddly incomplete, gnawed-on; and some of the nauseous stuff was smeared around my open mouth. 'I ate this,' was what I was saying. I held the patch out to the Moms, who had her contacts out for the dirty work, and at first, bending way down, saw only her crying child, hand out, proffering; and in that most maternal of reflexes she, who feared and

loathed more than anything spoilage and filth, reached to take whatever her baby held out — as in how many used heavy Kleenex, spit-back candies, wads of chewed-out gum in how many theaters, airports, backseats, tournament lounges? O. stood there, he says, hefting a cold clod, playing with the Velcro on his puffy coat, watching as the Moms, bent way down to me, hand reaching, her lowering face with its presbyopic squint, suddenly stopped, froze, beginning to I.D. what it was I held out, countenancing evidence of oral contact with same. He remembers her face as past describing. Her outstretched hand, still Rototrembling, hung in the air before mine.

‘I ate this,’ I said.

‘Pardon me?’

O. says he can only remember (sic) saying something caustic as he limboed a crick out of his back. He says he must have felt a terrible impending anxiety. The Moms refused ever even to go into the damp basement. I had stopped crying, he remembers, and simply stood there, the size and shape of a hydrant, in red PJ’s with attached feet, holding out the mold, seriously, like the report of some kind of audit. O. says his memory diverges at this point, probably as a result of anxiety. In his first memory, the Moms’s path around the yard is a broad circle of hysteria:

‘*God!*’ she calls out.

‘Help! My son ate this!’ she yells in Orin’s second and more fleshed-out recollection, yelling it over and over, holding the speckled patch aloft in a pincer of fingers, running around and around the garden’s rectangle while O. gaped at his first real sight of adult hysteria. Suburban neighbors’ heads appeared in windows and over the fences, looking. O. remembers me tripping over the garden’s laid-out twine, getting up dirty, crying, trying to follow.

‘God! Help! My son ate this! Help!’ she kept yelling, running a tight pattern just inside the square of string; and my brother Orin remembers noting how even in hysterical trauma her flight-lines were plumb, her footprints Native-American-straight, her turns, inside the ideogram of string, crisp and martial, crying ‘My son ate this! Help!’ and lapping me twice before the memory recedes.

‘My application’s not bought,’ I am telling them, calling into the darkness of the red cave that opens out before closed eyes. ‘I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex.

‘I *read*,’ I say. ‘I study and read. I bet I’ve read everything you’ve read. Don’t think I haven’t. I consume libraries. I wear out spines and ROM-drives. I do things like get in a taxi and say, “The library, and step on it.” My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect.

‘But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you’d let me, talk and talk. Let’s talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table,’ I say. ‘I’m not just a *creātus*, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.’

I open my eyes. ‘Please don’t think I don’t care.’

I look out. Directed my way is horror. I rise from the chair. I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white. The chair recedes below me.

‘Sweet mother of Christ,’ the Director says.

‘I’m fine,’ I tell them, standing. From the yellow Dean’s expression, there’s a brutal wind blowing from my direction. Academics’ face has gone instantly old. Eight eyes have become

blank discs that stare at whatever they see.

‘Good God,’ whispers Athletics.

‘Please don’t worry,’ I say. ‘I can explain.’ I soothe the air with a casual hand.

Both my arms are pinioned from behind by the Director of Comp., who wrestles me roughly down, on me with all his weight. I taste floor.

‘What’s *wrong?*’

I say ‘*Nothing* is wrong.’

‘It’s all *right!* I’m *here!*’ the Director is calling into my ear.

‘Get help!’ cries a Dean.

My forehead is pressed into parquet I never knew could be so cold. I am arrested. I try to be perceived as limp and pliable. My face is mashed flat; Comp.’s weight makes it hard to breathe.

‘Try to listen,’ I say very slowly, muffled by the floor.

‘What in God’s name are those..., ’ one Dean cries shrilly, ‘... those *sounds?*’

There are clicks of a phone console’s buttons, shoes’ heels moving, pivoting, a sheaf of flimsy pages falling.

‘*God!*’

‘*Help!*’

The door’s base opens at the left periphery: a wedge of halogen hall-light, white sneakers and a scuffed Nunn Bush. ‘Let him *up!*’ That’s deLint.

‘There is nothing wrong,’ I say slowly to the floor. ‘I’m in here.’

I’m raised by the crutches of my underarms, shaken toward what he must see as calm by a purple-faced Director: ‘Get a *grip*, son!’

DeLint at the big man’s arm: ‘*Stop* it!’

‘I am not what you see and hear.’

Distant sirens. A crude half nelson. Forms at the door. A young Hispanic woman holds her palm against her mouth, looking.

‘I’m not,’ I say.

You have to love old-fashioned men’s rooms: the citrus scent of deodorant disks in the long porcelain trough; the stalls with wooden doors in frames of cool marble; these thin sinks in rows, basins supported by rickety alphabets of exposed plumbing; mirrors over metal shelves; behind all the voices the slight sound of a ceaseless trickle, inflated by echo against wet porcelain and a cold tile floor whose mosaic pattern looks almost Islamic at this close range.

The disorder I’ve caused revolves all around. I’ve been half-dragged, still pinioned, through a loose mob of Administrative people by the Comp. Director — who appears to have thought variously that I am having a seizure (prying open my mouth to check for a throat clear of tongue), that I am somehow choking (a textbook Heimlich that left me whooping), that I am psychotically out of control (various postures and grips designed to transfer that control to him) — while about us roil deLint, trying to restrain the Director’s restraint of me, the varsity tennis coach restraining deLint, my mother’s half-brother speaking in rapid combinations of polysyllables to the trio of Deans, who variously gasp, wring hands, loosen neckties, waggle digits in C.T.’s face, and make *pases* with sheafs of now-pretty-clearly-superfluous application forms.

I am rolled over supine on the geometric tile. I am concentrating docilely on the question why U.S. restrooms always appear to us as infirmaries for public distress, the place to regain control. My head is cradled in a knelt Director’s lap, which is soft, my face being swabbed

with dusty-brown institutional paper towels he received from some hand out of the crowd overhead, staring with all the blankness I can summon into his jowls' small pocks, worst at the blurred jaw-line, of scarring from long-ago acne. Uncle Charles, a truly unparalleled slinger of shit, is laying down an enfilade of same, trying to mollify men who seem way more in need of a good brow-mopping than I.

'He's fine,' he keeps saying. 'Look at him, calm as can be, lying there.'

'You didn't see what *happened* in there,' a hunched Dean responds through a face webbed with fingers.

'Excited, is all he gets, sometimes, an excitable kid, impressed with —'

'But the *sounds* he made.'

'Undescribable.'

'Like an animal.'

'*Subanimalistic* noises and sounds.'

'Nor let's not forget the *gestures*.'

'Have you ever gotten *help* for this boy Dr. Tavis?'

'Like some sort of animal with something in its mouth.'

'This boy is damaged.'

'Like a stick of butter being hit with a mallet.'

'A writhing animal with a knife in its eye.'

'What were you possibly *about*, trying to enroll this —'

'And his *arms*.'

'You didn't see it, Tavis. His arms were —'

'Flailing. This sort of awful reaching drumming wriggle. *Wagging*,' the group looking briefly at someone outside my sight trying to demonstrate something.

'Like a time-lapse, a flutter of some sort of awful... growth.'

'Sounded most of all like a drowning goat. A goat, drowning in something viscous.'

'This strangled series of bleats and —'

'Yes they *waggled*.'

'So suddenly a bit of excited wagging's a crime, now?'

'You, sir, are in trouble. You are *in trouble*.'

'His face. As if he was strangling. Burning. I believe I've seen a vision of hell.'

'He has some trouble communicating, he's communicatively challenged, no one's denying that.'

'The boy needs *care*.'

'Instead of caring for the boy you send him here to *enroll, compete?*'

'Hal?'

'You have not in your most dreadful fantasies dreamt of the amount of *trouble* you have bought yourself, Dr. so-called Headmaster, *educator*.'

'... were given to understand this was all just a formality. You took him aback, is all. Shy —'

'And you, White. You sought to *recruit* him!'

'— and terribly impressed and excited, in there, without us, his support system, whom you asked to leave, which if you'd —'

'I'd only seen him play. On court he's gorgeous. Possibly a genius. We had no idea. The brother's in the bloody NFL for God's sake. Here's a top player, we thought, with Southwest roots. His stats were off the chart. We watched him through the whole WhataBurger last fall. Not a waggle or a noise. We were watching ballet out there, a mate remarked, after.'

‘Damn right you were watching ballet out there, White. This boy is a balletic athlete, a player.’

‘Some kind of athletic savant then. Balletic compensation for deep problems which *you* sir choose to disguise by muzzling the boy in there.’ An expensive pair of Brazilian espadrilles goes by on the left and enters a stall, and the espadrilles come around and face me. The urinal trickles behind the voices’ small echoes.

‘— haps we’ll just be on our way,’ C.T. is saying.

‘The integrity of my sleep has been forever compromised, sir.’

‘— think you could pass off a damaged applicant, fabricate credentials and shunt him through a kangaroo-interview and inject him into all the rigors of college life?’

‘Hal here *functions*, you ass. Given a supportive situation. He’s fine when he’s by himself. Yes he has some trouble with excitability in conversation. Did you once hear him try to deny that?’

‘We witnessed something only marginally *mammalian* in there, sir.’

‘Like hell. Have a look. How’s the excitable little guy doing down there, Aubrey, does it look to you?’

‘You, sir, are quite possibly ill. This affair is not concluded.’

‘What *ambulance*? Don’t you guys *listen*? I’m telling you there’s —’

‘Hal? Hal?’

‘Dope him up, seek to act as his mouthpiece, muzzling, and now he lies there catatonic, staring.’

The crackle of deLint’s knees. ‘Hal?’

‘— inflate this publicly in any distorted way. The Academy has distinguished alumni, litigators at counsel. Hal here is provably competent. Credentials out the bazoo, Bill. The boy reads like a vacuum. *Digests* things.’

I simply lie there, listening, smelling the paper towel, watching an espadrille pivot.

‘There’s more to life than sitting there interfacing, it might be a news-flash to you.’

And who could not love that special and leonine roar of a public toilet?

Not for nothing did Orin say that people outdoors down here just scuttle in vectors from air conditioning to air conditioning. The sun is a hammer. I can feel one side of my face start to cook. The blue sky is glossy and fat with heat, a few thin cirri sheared to blown strands like hair at the rims. The traffic is nothing like Boston. The stretcher is the special type, with restraining straps at the extremities. The same Aubrey deLint I’d dismissed for years as a 2-D martinet knelt gurneyside to squeeze my restrained hand and say ‘Just hang in there, Buckaroo,’ before moving back into the administrative fray at the ambulance’s doors. It is a special ambulance, dispatched from I’d rather not dwell on where, with not only paramedics but some kind of psychiatric M.D. on board. The medics lift gently and are handy with straps. The M.D., his back up against the ambulance’s side, has both hands up in dispassionate mediation between the Deans and C.T., who keeps stabbing skyward with his cellular’s antenna as if it were a sabre, outraged that I’m being needlessly ambulated off to some Emergency Room against my will and interests. The issue whether the damaged even have interested wills is shallowly hashed out as some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from south to north. The M.D. has both hands up and is patting the air to signify dispassion. He has a big blue jaw. At the only other emergency room I have ever been in, almost exactly one year back, the psychiatric stretcher was wheeled in and then parked beside the waiting-room chairs. These chairs were molded orange plastic; three of them down

the row were occupied by different people all of whom were holding empty prescription bottles and perspiring freely. This would have been bad enough, but in the end chair, right up next to the strap-secured head of my stretcher, was a T-shirted woman with barnwood skin and a trucker's cap and a bad starboard list who began to tell me, lying there restrained and immobile, about how she had seemingly overnight suffered a sudden and anomalous gigantism in her right breast, which she referred to as a titty; she had an almost parodic Québécois accent and described the 'titty's' presenting history and possible diagnoses for almost twenty minutes before I was rolled away. The jet's movement and trail seem incisionish, as if white meat behind the blue were exposed and widening in the wake of the blade. I once saw the word *KNIFE* finger-written on the steamed mirror of a nonpublic bathroom. I have become an infantophile. I am forced to roll my closed eyes either up or to the side to keep the red cave from bursting into flames from the sunlight. The street's passing traffic is constant and seems to go 'Hush, hush, hush.' The sun, if your fluttering eye catches it even slightly, gives you the blue and red floaters a flashbulb gives you. 'Why *not*? Why *not*? Why not *not*, then, if the best reasoning you can contrive is why not?' C.T.'s voice, receding with outrage. Only the gallant stabs of his antenna are now visible, just inside my sight's right frame. I will be conveyed to an Emergency Room of some kind, where I will be detained as long as I do not respond to questions, and then, when I do respond to questions, I will be sedated; so it will be inversion of standard travel, the ambulance and ER: I'll make the journey first, then depart. I think very briefly of the late Cosgrove Watt. I think of the hypophalangial Grief-Therapist. I think of the Moms, alphabetizing cans of soup in the cabinet over the microwave. Of Himself's umbrella hung by its handle from the edge of the mail table just inside the Headmaster's House's foyer. The bad ankle hasn't ached once this whole year. I think of John N. R. Wayne, who would have won this year's What aBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head. There's very little doubt that Wayne would have won. And Venus Williams owns a ranch outside Green Valley; she may well attend the 18's Boys' and Girls' finals. I will be out in plenty of time for tomorrow's semi; I trust Uncle Charles. Tonight's winner is almost sure to be Dymphna, sixteen but with a birthday two weeks under the 15 April deadline; and Dymphna will still be tired tomorrow at 0830, while I, sedated, will have slept like a graven image. I have never before faced Dymphna in tournament play, nor played with the sonic balls the blind require, but I watched him barely dispatch Petropolis Kahn in the Round of 16, and I know he is mine.

It will start in the E.R., at the intake desk if C.T.'s late in following the ambulance, or in the green-tiled room after the room with the invasive-digital machines; or, given this special M.D.-supplied ambulance, maybe on the ride itself: some blue-jawed M.D. scrubbed to an antiseptic glow with his name sewn in cursive on his white coat's breast pocket and a quality desk-set pen, wanting gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method, ordered and point-by-point. There are, by the *O.E.D. VI*'s count, nineteen nonarchaic synonyms for *unresponsive*, of which nine are Latinate and four Saxonian. I will play either Stice or Polep in Sunday's final. Maybe in front of Venus Williams. It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably — a nurse's aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban orderly who addresses me as *jou* — who will, looking down in the middle of some kind of bustled task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask So you then man what's *your* story?