

# Infinite Jest



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

David Foster Wallace was the child of two professors who grew up in Illinois. Like several of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, he was a competitive junior tennis player. He was a joint major in English and philosophy at Amherst College, and his senior honors thesis for English became his first novel, *The Broom in the System*, which was published in 1987, the same year he graduated from the MFA program in creative writing from the University of Arizona. That year he enrolled in the philosophy PhD program at Harvard, but soon dropped out. It was also around this time that Wallace began writing *Infinite Jest*. In 1989 he spent four months going through drug and alcohol detox at a psychiatric hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. He taught English and creative writing at Emerson College, Illinois State University, and Pomona College. In the early 1990s he became obsessed with the writer Mary Karr, stalking her and threatening to kill her husband. During the on/off relationship that ensued, he was physically violent. Wallace published *Infinite Jest* in 1996 and was awarded the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship the following year. Throughout his career Wallace published short stories and nonfiction, including the now famous essays “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” and “Consider the Lobster.” In addition to substance abuse issues, Wallace suffered from depression for almost all of his adult life, and in 2008 he killed himself. His final novel, *The Pale King*, was published posthumously in 2011.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because it is set in an imagined near future, many of the historical events to which *Infinite Jest* alludes are not real, although in some cases similar events have actually transpired since the book was published. One of the most significant examples of Wallace “predicting” a future event is the development of video-calling, which is called “videophony” in the book. However, while in *Infinite Jest* videophony eventually loses popularity and is replaced by voice-calling due to the way it exacerbates people’s physical self-consciousness, this has obviously not happened in reality. One could argue that *Infinite Jest*’s depiction of “Teleputers” and a cultural obsession with entertainment accurately foreshadowed today’s Netflix era. At times, the novel makes reference to “historical” events involving real people that are not actually true; for example, it is very briefly mentioned that in the world of the novel Rush Limbaugh has been assassinated, which has not occurred in reality.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The novel to which *Infinite Jest* is most frequently compared is Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), which as well as being long and encyclopedic with a circular plot structure and multiple internal narratives, also explores similar themes of technology, high and low culture, free will, sex, and drugs. An earlier predecessor of both *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest* is James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), which set a precedent for very long, difficult, and experimental fiction at the beginning of the 20th century. Another earlier work that shares *Infinite Jest*’s suspicion of how drugs and entertainment sedate a population is Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), although Huxley arguably has a more clear, didactic position on these issues than Wallace, who is more ambivalent. Countless contemporary writers have been influenced by *Infinite Jest*, including Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Dave Eggers, and Ben Lerner. The title of *Infinite Jest* refers to a line from *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet describes a now-dead former court jester as having been a man of “infinite jest.”

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Infinite Jest
- **When Written:** Mid 1980s-1995
- **Where Written:** Arizona; Massachusetts; Illinois
- **When Published:** 1996
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, Hysterical Realism
- **Genre:** Encyclopedic Novel
- **Setting:** The novel’s main settings are the fictional town of Enfield, Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts, and Arizona, which are all part of the North American super-state O.N.A.N., comprised of the US, Canada, and Mexico. The story is set over a nine-year period in an unspecified near future; some critics suggest this may be the 2000s.
- **Climax:** Because the novel has dozens of different plots, there is no single climactic moment
- **Antagonist:** Several antagonists in different plotlines; the overarching antagonist is arguably corporate culture and its intersection with government power
- **Point of View:** Mostly third person, with occasional passages narrated from the first person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**The infinite novel.** Although the published version of *Infinite Jest* is 1100 pages long (including the lengthy endnote section), the manuscript Wallace originally submitted was 250 pages longer.

**Not exactly child's play.** An English professor named Kevin Griffith and his son Sebastian have created a Lego version of *Infinite Jest*, viewable at [www.brickjest.com](http://www.brickjest.com).



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Note: The narrative is non-chronological; its structure is meant to follow the pattern of a Sierpinski triangle, a mathematically-generated pattern of triangles inside triangles.*

At Hal Incandenza's admissions interview at the University of Arizona, the university's deans are concerned that he may have cheated on his highly impressive (but uneven) application. Hal tries to explain that the application is genuine, but the deans think he is having some kind of seizure or psychotic episode, and he is taken to the hospital. Hal always had difficulty communicating with his father, James, who is now dead. Their conversations would end in Hal choking. Hal shares a bedroom with his older, disabled brother Mario at the Enfield Tennis Academy in Enfield, Massachusetts. Hal speaks to his other brother Orin on the phone, but the line cuts out.

The medical attaché to Prince Q—, the Saudi Minister for Home Entertainment, wants to relax at the end of the day by watching a film cartridge. He finds an unmarked cartridge that has been sent to him in the mail and puts it in the Teleputer (TP) to watch. Orin is an NFL player who has been having nightmares about his mother, Avril. Hal has developed a secret marijuana addiction, and spends much of his time secretly getting high in the Pump Room at E.T.A.

Don Gately is a 27-year-old narcotics addict who robs houses to finance his addiction. He breaks into the home of Guillaume DuPlessis and accidentally kills him by gagging him when DuPlessis is ill with a cold and cannot breathe through his nose.

James Incandenza was the first Headmaster of E.T.A.; following his death, his brother-in-law Charles Tavis took over. Charles and Avril had an affair and Charles is likely Mario's true father. Both James and his father, James Sr., had been talented junior tennis players. James Jr. went on to gain a PhD in optical physics and then began making avant-garde films. Avril is from Québec, and her marriage to James allowed her to secure an American visa after difficulties she encountered due to her youthful involvement with Quebecois separatists. James was 54 when he killed himself.

Kate Gompert, who has just been hospitalized after her fourth suicide attempt in three years, tells her doctor about the unbearable pain of her depression and how this intersects with her marijuana addiction. Meanwhile, the medical attaché hasn't shown up for work, so Prince Q—'s personal assistant goes to his house to see what's wrong. The assistant himself doesn't come back, and neither do two security guards from the Saudi embassy or a pair of Seventh Day Adventists who attempt to deliver a pamphlet to the attaché's house. This whole group of

people now stands staring at the attaché's TP.

Rémy Marathe, a Quebecois wheelchair user and member of the separatist organization A.F.R. (the Wheelchair Assassins), meets with O.U.S. operative Hugh Steeply in Arizona. Hugh is undercover and in disguise as Helen, a female journalist. Marathe is either a triple or quadruple agent, as it is unclear whether he is actually betraying the A.F.R. or not. The two discuss a lethal film cartridge called **the Entertainment** that has been sent to the attaché. The A.F.R. want to use the cartridge as a weapon of mass destruction in order to force the secession of Quebec from both Canada and O.N.A.N. (the Organization of North American Nations). The creator of the Entertainment is from Boston, which is the nearest American city to the **Great Concavity**, a toxic wasteland that was "gifted" to Canada by the U.S. during the formation of O.N.A.N.

Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House was founded by an addict who believed in such an extreme form of submission to recovery programs that he made residents eat rocks to prove their commitment to sobriety (this practice was eventually banned). An E.T.A. student called Michael Pemulis travels into Boston to buy DMZ, an infamously powerful drug nicknamed "Madame Psychosis" after the host of a cult radio show on M.I.T.'s student radio station, WYYY. While the show is being recorded, Madame Psychosis sits behind a screen in the studio and smokes.

Ennet House sits on the site of the Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital, which is only a brief walk from E.T.A. Kate is now a resident at Ennet House, and Don Gately is a residential staffer. At E.T.A., Hal, Pemulis, and their friend Trevor Axford plan their DMZ trip, knowing they will need to set aside 36 hours for the experience.

Joelle van Dyne plans to kill herself via overdose at her friend Molly Notkin's party. Joelle and Molly met as PhD students in the M.I.T. department of Film & Film-Cartridge Theory. Joelle is addicted to crack cocaine, and although she doesn't enjoy using the drug anymore, she doesn't feel like she can stop. After attempting her overdose, she throws up into Molly's bathtub.

Orin calls Hal and tells him that he is being profiled by a journalist (presumably Helen Steeply). The brothers discuss the aftermath of James's suicide. Hal was the one to find their father's body; he had put his head inside a microwave. During Orin's freshman year of college, he fell in love with a sophomore baton-twirler (Joelle) whom he nicknamed P.G.O.A.T. (Prettiest Girl Of All Time), and switched from varsity tennis to varsity football in order to be around her. Joelle and Orin started dating, and Joelle starred in some of James's films.

Mario was born very prematurely, with a range of physical and mental disabilities. Every year on "Interdependence Day," E.T.A. students play a complex game of their own invention called Eschaton. This year, the game descends into a massive fistfight, to the dismay of Hal and the other older students. Having failed

to kill herself, Joelle checks into Ennet House. Gately is attracted to her even though she wears a veil over her face at all times. Back at E.T.A., Mario puts on his annual screening of a film he made about the formation of O.N.A.N. using puppets.

In Arizona, Marathe and Steeply have a debate about individual freedom versus collective benefit. Madame Psychosis (Joelle) goes missing from her radio station, and Mario—who is a fan of her show—is distraught. Steeply tells Marathe about a Canadian biomedical experiment in which animals were given a lever to press that produced intense feelings of pleasure through electrodes in the brain. The animals died in the experiment, yet when details of the experiment were leaked, hundreds of young, healthy volunteers attempted to sign themselves up as test subjects.

Back in Boston, members of the A.F.R. arrive at a cartridge rental store belonging to the small-time Quebecois separatist brothers Lucien and Bertraund Antitoui, searching for the master copy of the Entertainment; however, the copy they find is read-only. One of them kills Lucien by shoving a broken broom handle down his throat.

Following the Eschaton fiasco, all students at E.T.A. are disciplined, though the older ones receive the harsher punishment. Hal and his friends are also told they must take a urine test. At Ennet House, new resident Randy Lenz continues to take small amounts of cocaine, and also starts to inflict violence on animals. Rodney Tine, Chief of the O.U.S., is doing everything he can not only to track down the master copy of the Entertainment, but to stop the highly curious President Johnny Gentle from viewing the Entertainment himself to see what it is like.

Back at E.T.A., Pemulis goes into Avril's (door-less) office and catches her in the midst of a sexual roleplay scenario with E.T.A. student John Wayne. Lenz and another Ennet House resident, Bruce Green, are walking home from an AA meeting. Lenz is high on coke and won't stop talking, but Green is distracted by his own sad childhood memories. Suddenly, Lenz grabs a dog and stabs it.

Meanwhile, Orin is in a hotel having sex with his latest "**Subject**," a Swiss hand model, when a man in a wheelchair knocks on the door and requests that he answer some questions for a survey. Orin complies and the man asks him about what he misses or feels nostalgic about. However, the conversation doesn't last long, as the man sees that Orin is otherwise occupied.

Outside Ennet House, a fight breaks out between Lenz and a group of Canadian men, and despite not knowing why the fight broke out, many other residents join in. In the scuffle Gately gets shot by one of the Canadians. At E.T.A., it is revealed that Hal and the others' urine test is not for another 29 days. Hal has quit smoking weed and feels like an entirely different person; the other students wonder what is wrong with him.

Helen Steeply arrives at E.T.A. hoping to interview Hal for her "profile" on Orin, however E.T.A. staff are reluctant to let her speak with him. Something goes terribly wrong in Hal's game against Ortho Stice and he loses his 2nd place rank at E.T.A.

Kate and another Ennet House resident, Ruth van Cleve, are walking near Inman Square when an addict called Poor Tony Krause robs their purses, injuring Kate in the process. Hal watches one of his father's film cartridges and feels disappointed by the ambiguous, inconclusive ending, which he finds embarrassingly heavy-handed. The A.F.R. strategize about their next move, wondering if they should torture Joelle and/or members of the Incandenza family to help them find the master copy of the Entertainment.

Marathe arrives at Ennet House pretending to be a Swiss heroin addict seeking treatment. The Ennet House Director, Pat Montesian, agrees to house him. He is unsure whether he should betray the A.F.R. or not; he wants to pursue the course of action most likely to help his wife, Gertraude, who is severely disabled, comatose, and in need of urgent medical treatment.

Hal finally opens up to Mario, confessing to his drug use and admitting that he's feeling lost and confused about what to do. He feels guilty as he knows that Pemulis will be used as a scapegoat for the issue of **Substance** abuse at E.T.A. At a jazz club in Inman Square, Kate and Marathe are getting drunk together. Kate, who is relapsing, accuses Marathe of not really loving his wife before passing out. Hal goes to Ennet House seeking treatment. Molly is interrogated by O.U.S. operatives. She explains that Madame Psychosis/Joelle's real name is Lucille Duquette and that she is from Kentucky. Joelle's father was sexually attracted her; after he finally confessed to this, Joelle's mother attempted to pour acid on him but ended up pouring it on Joelle instead, disfiguring her.

Pemulis is told that he is being expelled from E.T.A., news he takes rather calmly. Hal goes to an NA meeting and is shocked by what he sees there. Gately is taken to the hospital, where he tries to explain that he can't be given narcotics because he is an addict. However, he is unable to communicate. Various Ennet House residents and staff visit him, but none seem to notice or care that he cannot talk back to them.

In a surreal dream sequence, Gately is visited by a "wraith" who is revealed to be the spirit of James Incandenza. During its visit, the wraith explains that it made the Entertainment as a desperate attempt to communicate with Hal. Joelle also visits, although this is later revealed to be a dream. Gately has increasingly exasperated and panicked encounters with doctors trying to give him narcotics, but is still unable to properly express himself. Gately's drug use began when he was a teenager, and eventually led to him being kicked out of high school. He then worked with a Dilaudid addict named Facklemann collecting bets for a bookmaker.

Joelle tells Hugh/Helen Steeply that a master copy of the

Entertainment probably doesn't exist, and if it does it is buried with James. Hal watches a disturbing snuff-film-like work by his father. Meanwhile, Orin has been imprisoned in a glass cage by the Swiss hand model, who turns out to be Luria P—, and M. Fortier. Luria pours cockroaches into the cage in order to force Orin to reveal the location of the master copy of the Entertainment. (This seemingly confirms that it is Orin who has been sending copies to people such as the medical attaché.) Orin breaks down and agrees.

Gately recalls the gruesome moment when Facklemann was taken down by a group of henchmen acting on behalf of Sorkin, a vengeful bookie who was scammed by him. The henchmen sewed Facklemann's eyes open and forced him to watch a film cartridge, while giving Gately an extremely strong and pleasant drug called Sunshine. Gately passes out from the Sunshine and wakes up on a beach, lying on "freezing sand."



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Hal Incandenza** – Hal Incandenza is the closest the book comes to having a protagonist. The youngest son of the Incandenza family, he is close to both of his older brothers, Orin and Mario. A tennis prodigy, he is ranked #2 at E.T.A. throughout most of the period in which the novel is set. He is also incredibly intelligent and highly gifted academically. Hal struggles with an addiction to marijuana, and enjoys the secrecy of getting high alone. However, under the threat of a urine test by O.N.A.N.T.A., Hal quits all recreational substances at the end of the novel and seeks treatment for his addiction. As well as being intelligent and talented, Hal is empathetic and kind. However, he has spent most of his life in a completely emotionless state, possibly as the result of ingesting a piece of mold/DMZ as a child. He is particularly concerned about pleasing authority figures and sees his whole life as a test that he's terrified of failing. After consuming DMZ (or accidentally synthesizing the DMZ that was already in his system) at the end of the Y.D.A.U., Hal is able to feel emotions again but becomes completely unable to express himself: when he tries to talk, the sounds that come out are terrifying and inhuman. He is possibly asexual, as he has no interest in sex and wants to stay a virgin forever. Before his father James's suicide, Hal was seemingly unable to communicate with him, and it's possible that James made the Entertainment as an attempt to reach his son.

**Don Gately** – Along with Hal, Gately is perhaps the other main character of the story. He is a large but gentle and sensitive person. The son of an alcoholic, Gately starts drinking his mother's alcohol in order to stop her getting too drunk. He plays high school football, but his drinking and drug use lead him to fail his classes; he is kicked off the football team and

leaves school. Gately begins working for Facklemann, and witnesses Facklemann's gruesome downfall at the hands of Sorkin and Eighties Bill. He became a professional burglar, and accidentally kills Guillaume DuPlessis during a botched robbery. In order to avoid going to prison he checks into Ennet House, where he eventually becomes a residential staffer. He ends up getting shot while defending Randy Lenz from a group of Quebecois men. In the hospital, he is visited by a "wraith" who is the spirit of James Incandenza. During this time, he has a potentially prophetic vision of helping Hal to dig up James's head. Despite his tough exterior, Gately is highly protective of people, particularly the Ennet House residents. He develops feelings for Joelle in spite of the rule against relationships between Ennet House residents and staffers.

**Dr. James Incandenza / Jim** – James is Avril's husband, the father (or presumed father, in the case of Mario) of Orin, Mario, and Hal, and the Founding Director of E.T.A. As a child, he was a promising junior tennis player, before going on to gain a PhD in Optical Physics. He eventually left scientific research to found E.T.A. and, later, began working as a director of avant-garde film. Aside from a few exceptions, James's films were not particularly famous or successful, although they are very popular among film fanatics and scholars. James's masterwork is a lethally compelling film called *Infinite Jest*, referred to as "**the Entertainment**" (and sometimes "the samizdat"). He made it in order to connect with Hal, whose emotionlessness and inability to communicate was deeply disturbing to James. An alcoholic with clinical depression, James managed to get sober with the help of Joelle and the goal of connecting with Hal. However, unable to bear sobriety, he committed suicide by sticking his head in a microwave at the age of 54. His sons nicknamed James "Himself" or "the Mad Stork."

**Orin Incandenza** – Orin is the eldest of the Incandenza children. He was in the first class of students at E.T.A., and originally gained a tennis scholarship to B.U. However, after falling in love with a sophomore baton twirler (Joelle), he switched to playing football. Orin ends up playing for the NFL and living in Arizona. He is not as intelligent as Hal or as kind as Mario; he is also highly dishonest, capable of convincing himself of his own lies. Orin is a sex addict who only gives but does not receive pleasure. He calls the women he sleeps with "**Subjects**," and is especially attracted to married mothers. The implication is that Orin's sex addiction results from his complicated relationship with Avril. Orin is deeply resentful of his mother, but the two of them appear to have sexual obsessions with one another, and it is possible that they have even had sex. Throughout most of the novel Orin is seemingly in possession of the master copy of **the Entertainment** and has been sending copies out to people (such as the medical attaché, presumably to punish him for his affair with Avril). At the end of the novel, Orin is kidnapped by one of his Subjects, a Quebecoise woman named Luria P— who had been posing as a Swiss hand model.

Luria and M. Fortier torture Orin in order to find the location of the master copy, and Orin surrenders.

**Avril Incandenza** – Avril is the mother of Orin, Mario, and Hal, and the wife of James. She is from Québec, and while she was in graduate school was involved with leftist separatists, which caused her problems in getting an American visa (these problems were resolved through her marriage to James). She is beautiful and intelligent, but also overly-protective and controlling. During her marriage to James she had numerous affairs, including with “over thirty Near Eastern medical attachés,” her stepbrother Charles, and possibly even Orin. She engages in a prolonged sexual relationship with E.T.A. student John Wayne while he is below the age of consent. Professionally, Avril runs E.T.A. along with Charles. Avril’s sons nickname her “the Moms.”

**Mario Incandenza** – Mario is the middle child of the Incandenza family and the only Incandenza son (and E.T.A. student) who does not play a sport. He is possibly actually the son of Charles, whom Mario believes is his uncle. Born prematurely, he has severe physical and mental disabilities. Like James, he makes films, and much of his work bears the mark of James’s style. Mario is the most moral and kind person in the novel. However, despite his kindness, people often only “tolerate” him rather than embracing his company. He cares deeply about others and offers insightful advice, particularly to Hal, with whom he shares a room at E.T.A. He is extremely close to Avril; both Orin and Hal think that Mario is her favorite child.

**Joelle Van Dyne / Madame Psychosis / Lucille Duquette** – According to her friend Molly Notkin, Joelle was born as Lucille Duquette in Kentucky. Extremely, even terrifyingly beautiful, Orin’s nickname for Joelle is P.G.O.A.T. (Prettiest Girl Of All Time). Joelle was close with her father, whom she called “My Own Personal Daddy,” until she reached adolescence, when he began treating her like a child and eventually admitted that he was sexually attracted to her. According to Molly, after hearing this revelation Joelle’s mother through acid at her father but missed and hit Joelle, disfiguring her. It is also possible that Joelle makes up this story as an excuse to join U.H.I.D. and wear a face veil, so people are no longer put off by her intense beauty. She wears the veil for the entirety of the novel, so the truth is left unclear. Joelle and Orin have a relationship that ends before most of the action in the book takes place. Joelle had also been enrolled in the Film Studies PhD program at M.I.T., but dropped out. A crack cocaine addict, Joelle attempts to commit suicide in Molly’s bathroom but fails; afterward she ends up in Ennet House, where she develops feelings for Don Gately. Joelle hosts a popular show on WYYY under the name Madame Psychosis. Mario in particular is a fan of her show and upset when she disappears from the air.

**Hugh / Helen Steeply** – Hugh Steeply is an O.U.S. operative who is undercover as a journalist called Helen throughout the novel. Steeply is loyal to his country and believes deeply in the

American principle of freedom of choice. However, as Marathe points out, Steeply’s mission of trying to intercept the master copy of **the Entertainment** in order to stop it being distributed to American citizens theoretically violates his belief in this freedom. Steeply isn’t trans, just in disguise, yet is referred to with she/her pronouns when appearing as Helen in the book. When it is unclear under what guise Steeply is in, s/he and her/his are used. Steeply is large in stature, and the book fixates on the apparent incongruity between his size and female presentation.

**Rémy Marathe** – Marathe is an A.F.R. member who is a triple and perhaps quadruple agent—he pretends to betray A.F.R. to the O.U.S. via Hugh Steeply, but it is perpetually ambiguous whether or not he is only *pretending* to betray them. Indeed, Marathe himself does not appear to have decided which side he is on. Although he likes to boast about the importance of loyalty to one’s nation to Steeply, in fact Marathe is dedicated to whichever course of action will best help him get medical care for his wife, Gertraud, who is comatose and on the brink of death thanks to exposure to the **Great Concavity**.

**Michael Pemulis** – Michael Pemulis is a popular, confident E.T.A. student and friend of Hal. He attends E.T.A. on the James O. Incandenza Geometrical Optics scholarship, and is not as skilled at tennis as Hal and some of his other friends. Pemulis is reigning champion of the game Eschaton and serves as the academy’s resident drug dealer. At the end of the novel he is used as a scapegoat for the widespread drug consumption at E.T.A. and told that he will be expelled, news he takes surprisingly well.

**Ortho Stice** – Ortho Stice is a student at E.T.A., nicknamed “the Darkness.” At one point he gets his forehead stuck to a window and loses a large chunk of skin when he is ripped away. Stice seemingly has a strange connection to Hal’s father James, as it’s suggested that James’s wraith moves around objects in Stice’s room, and possibly even possesses him.

**Medical Attaché** – The medical attaché works for the personal physician of Prince Q—, the Saudi Minister for Home Entertainment. He lives in Boston with his wife. A Sufi Muslim, the attaché does not drink or take drugs but has a compulsive relationship to watching film cartridges at the end of the day. It is hinted that he had an affair with Avril. He is mailed an unmarked copy of **the Entertainment** (possibly by Orin) and, not knowing what it is, falls victim to it (and assumedly dies as a result).

**Bruce Green** – Bruce Green is first introduced when he is in 8th grade and falls in love with Mildred Bonk. They move in together and Green gets her name tattooed onto his body. He develops substance abuse problems and ends up at Ennet House. There, he reveals that he accidentally killed his mother with a practical joke.

**Lyle** – Lyle is a mysterious “guru” who sits on top of the towel

dispenser in the weight room of E.T.A. In addition to a Hindu guru, he resembles a Christian ascetic. He doesn't eat or drink but survives on licking and inhaling the sweat of people in the room. He possibly appears to Gately in wraith form (or is a wraith all along) during Gately's feverish period in hospital.

**John Wayne** – John Wayne is a Quebecois E.T.A. student who is the best player at the school. He lost his Canadian citizenship through enrolling at the school. Wayne has a sexual relationship with Avril. Wayne's father was the only person in the history of "*La Culte du Prochain Train*" who failed to jump onto the train tracks. It is implied that Wayne is a plant placed at E.T.A. by the A.F.R.; however, he eventually watches guard when Hal and Gately dig up James's head, which implies that he betrayed the A.F.R. (or was possibly acting on behalf of the A.F.R. and forcing Hal to dig up his father). Hal indicates that something happened to him after this, and it is possible that the A.F.R. killed him.

**Randy Lenz** – Randy is a cocaine addict and former dealer who ends up as a resident of Ennet House. He violates the house's strict no-**Substance** policy and continues doing small amounts of cocaine. At the same time, he takes to compulsively and violently attacking animals in the neighborhood, which ends up getting him beaten up by a group of Quebecois men.

**President Johnny Gentle** – Gentle is a former lounge singer who successfully ran for President of the United States. Under his regime O.N.A.N. is formed and the **Great Concavity** is given to Canada; however, Gentle himself is shown to be rather clueless (even seems to go insane), and the mastermind behind these acts is Rodney Tine, Sr.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Charles Tavis** – Charles is Avril's stepbrother; following James's death, he took over as Headmaster of E.T.A. He is described as small, self-effacing, and a talented bureaucrat. He and Avril have a sexual relationship, and he is possibly Mario's father.

**Dean of Admissions** – The Dean of Admissions at the University of Arizona, who interviews Hal.

**Dean of Academic Affairs** – The Dean of Admissions at the University of Arizona, who also interviews Hal.

**Dean of Athletic Affairs** – The Dean of Athletic Affairs at the University of Arizona, who also interviews Hal.

**Director of Composition** – The Director of Composition at the University of Arizona, who also interviews Hal.

**Varsity Tennis Coach** – The Varsity Tennis Coach at the University of Arizona, who also interviews Hal.

**Aubrey deLint** – Aubrey deLint is a prorector at E.T.A. (Prorector is a European term, also used at E.T.A., for a member of staff at an academic institution.)

**Polep** – A student at E.T.A.

**Ken Erdedy** – Ken Erdedy is a marijuana addict struggling to quit, and the narrator of the novel's second chapter. He ends up as a resident of Ennet House.

**Medical Attaché's Wife** – The medical attaché's wife also falls victim to **the Entertainment** after coming home from a tennis match and finding her husband watching it.

**Prince Q—** – Prince Q— is the Saudi Minister for Home Entertainment, stationed in Boston. He only eats Toblerone chocolate bars, which leaves him with intense sinus problems that require the constant attention of his personal physician and medical attaché.

**Clenette** – Clenette is a young woman—presumably a teenager—who narrates a chapter about her friend Wardine, who is being abused by her mother and mother's boyfriend. At the end of the chapter Clenette reveals she is pregnant.

**Wardine** – Wardine is a young girl or woman who is beaten by her mother and molested by her mother's boyfriend, Roy Tony.

**Roy Tony** – Roy Tony is a heroin dealer who molests his girlfriend's daughter Wardine. At the end of the novel he attends the same NA meeting as Erdedy.

**Reginald** – Reginald is a friend of Clenette and Wardine who wants to help protect Wardine.

**Mildred Bonk** – Mildred Bonk is a beautiful girl with whom Bruce Green falls deeply in love. The two move in together, along with their drug dealer Tommy Doocey.

**Tommy Doocey** – Tommy Doocey is a drug dealer who lives with Bruce and Mildred.

**Guillaume DuPlessis** – Guillaume DuPlessis is a Quebecois separatist and A.F.R. member living in Boston. (There is a strong hint that he is connected to Orin, presumably via Avril.) He is accidentally killed by Gately during a botched robbery of his home.

**James O. Incandenza, Sr.** – James, Sr. is James's father. A former tennis prodigy, he then became an actor and briefly performed the role of "The Man from Glad." Like his son, he was an alcoholic.

**Doctor** – A humorless psychiatric doctor who treats Kate Gompert after her suicide attempt.

**Kate Gompert** – Kate Gompert is a severely depressed marijuana addict who ends up at Ennet House after multiple suicide attempts.

**Gerhardt Schtitt** – Gerhardt Schtitt is the German tennis coach at E.T.A. He is rumored to have used corporal punishment in the past, although he is not overly harsh with the students during the time the novel is set.

**Tiny Ewell** – Tiny Ewell is a well-educated alcoholic who checks into Ennet House.

**Gertraude** – Gertraude is Rémy Marathe’s wife. Thanks to exposure to the toxicity of the **Great Concavity**, she was born without a skull and spends the entirety of the novel in a coma.

**M. Fortier** – Fortier is the leader of the A.F.R.

**Luria P—** – Luria P— is a Quebecoise woman who poses as a Swiss hand model in order to seduce, kidnap, and torture Orin. Rodney Tine is in love with her, despite the fact that she works for or alongside the A.F.R.

**Disney Leith** – Disney Leith is a professor of Entertainment Studies at E.T.A.

**Rodney Tine, Sr.** – Rodney Tine is the Chief of O.U.S. He is the “architect” of O.N.A.N. and appears to be the mastermind behind President Johnny Gentle’s regime, controlling the rather hapless Gentle.

**Kent Blott** – Kent is a student at E.T.A.

**LaMont Chu** – LaMont is a student at E.T.A. He develops a suffocating obsession with tennis fame and goes to Lyle for advice. He ends up concluding that he is “trapped” and will be miserable regardless of whether he achieves fame or not.

**Millicent Kent** – Millicent is a student at E.T.A. She is #1 on the girls’ 16-A team, but dreams of devoting herself to contemporary dance instead of tennis, even though she is not a talented dancer. She has a crush on Mario and instigates a brief sexual encounter with him.

**Poor Tony Krause** – Tony is a heroin addict who wears women’s clothing. After almost taking Drano-laced heroin, he goes through a horrifying detox. Later in the novel he steals the purses of Kate and Ruth. (He is likely present at Facklemann’s downfall, although this is only hinted and not confirmed.)

**Bobby C** – Bobby C is one of Sorkin’s henchmen who helps take down Facklemann. He is a heroin addict and dies after taking Drano-laced heroin sold to him by Dr. Wo.

**Dr. Wo** – A drug dealer.

**Dwane R. Glynn** – A bricklayer who has an accident at work while drunk and tries to claim insurance.

**Mario Incandenza, Sr.** – Mario is James Sr.’s father, and thus Orin, Mario, and Hal’s great-grandfather.

**Student Engineer** – A grad student at M.I.T. who is the engineer for WYYY. He is kidnapped and tortured by the A.F.R.

**Calvin Thrust** – Calvin is former porn star turned Ennet House staffer.

**Trevor Axford** – Trevor is a student at E.T.A.

**Molly Notkin** – Molly is a friend of Joelle; they met in the Film Studies PhD program at M.I.T.

**Teddy Schacht** – Teddy is a student at E.T.A.

**Geoffrey Day** – Day is a resident of Ennet House addicted to red wine and Quaaludes.

**Burt F. Smith** – Burt is a resident of Ennet House.

**Charlotte Treat** – Charlotte is a resident of Ennet House. A former sex worker, she is now exceptionally prudish and spends all her time doing embroidery. Gately wonders if this is just an excuse for her to spend time around needles.

**Emil Minty** – Emil is a resident of Ennet House.

**Keith Freer** – Keith is a student at E.T.A.

**Bernadette Longley** – Bernadette is a student at E.T.A.

**Mlle. Thierry Poutrincourt** – Poutrincourt is a Quebecoise woman and teacher at E.T.A.

**Struck** – Struck is a student at E.T.A.

**Otis P. Lord** – Otis is a student at E.T.A.

**JJ Penn** – JJ is a student at E.T.A.

**Evan Ingersoll** – Evan is a student at E.T.A.

**Ann Kittenplan** – Ann is a student at E.T.A.; she ends up at the heart of the Eschaton fiasco.

**John L.** – John is an AA member who gives a speech at a meeting.

**Eugenio Martinez** – Eugenio is a volunteer counselor at Ennet House.

**Mexican President** – President of Mexico during the Gentle administration.

**Canadian Prime Minister** – Prime Minister of Canada during the Gentle administration.

**Marlon K. Bain** – Marlon was E.T.A. student who was friends with Orin (they attended at the same time). He is always excessively sweaty.

**US Secretary of State** – US Secretary of State during the Gentle administration.

**Mr. Ogilvie** – Mr. Ogilvie is an Entertainment Studies teacher at E.T.A. (His last name appears to be a reference to David Ogilvy, founder of the global advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather.)

**Robert F (“Bob Death”)** – Bob is a biker and AA member.

**Johnette Folz** – Johnette is an Ennet House staffer.

**Danielle Steenbok** – Danielle is a beautiful Ennet House staffer who is rumored to be a member of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.

**Amy J.** – Amy is a resident of Ennet House.

**Lucien Antitoui** – Lucien is a Quebecois man and low-level separatist dissident. Despite being from Québec, he can’t speak French. He is murdered by the A.F.R.

**Bertraund Antitoui** – Bertraund is Lucien’s brother; the two run a cartridge rental store in Boston and engage in low-level dissident activity.

**“Lateral” Alice Moore** – Alice is Charles’s secretary at E.T.A.; she gained her nickname because she can only move sideways.

**Yolanda** – Yolanda is an Ennet House resident who was formerly a member of a cult.

**Idris Arslanian** – Idris is a student at E.T.A.

**Anton Doucette** – Anton is a student at E.T.A.

**Ruth van Cleve** – Ruth is an Ennet House member who (along with Kate) is robbed by Poor Tony Krause.

**Neil Gunther** – Neil is a resident of Ennet House.

**Rodney Tine, Jr.** – Rodney is the son of Rodney Tine, Sr., and is an O.U.S. operative.

**“Mad” Matty Pemulis** – Matty is Michael’s older brother. He was raped by his father as a child and is now a sex worker.

**Tony Nwangi** – Tony is a prorector at E.T.A.

**Watson** – Watson is a prorector at E.T.A.

**Harv** – Harv leads an NA meeting Hal attends.

**Mrs. Waite** – Mrs. Waite was an elderly woman Don Gately knew as a child. She gave Don a birthday cake and shortly after committed suicide.

**Kenkle** – Kenkle is a janitor at E.T.A. A former prodigy, he received his PhD in low-temperature physics at 21 before being hired by the Office of Naval Research. However, he was dishonorably discharged.

**Brandt** – A janitor at E.T.A.

**“Ferocious” Francis** – Francis is Gately’s AA sponsor. He comes to visit Gately in the hospital and misunderstands Gately’s attempt to communicate that he doesn’t want Demerol.

**Doctor** – The second doctor is a Pakistani Muslim who misunderstands Gately’s refusal to be given Demerol or other narcotics.

**Wade McDade** – Wade is a resident of Ennet House.

**Gavin Diehl** – Gavin is a resident of Ennet House.

**Kieran McKenna** – Kieran is a student at E.T.A.

**Facklemann** – Facklemann is a Dilaudid addict and criminal who works with Gately and who attempts to scam Sorkin and Eighties Bill. He is taken down by Sorkin’s henchmen, who sew his eyes open.

**Cathy** – Cathy is a nurse who tends to Gately; Gately finds her attractive.

**Pamela Hoffman-Jeep** – Pamela Hoffman-Jeep is an alcoholic Gately dates while he is still using drugs. She is the “single passivest person” Gately has ever met.

**Eighties Bill** – Eighties Bill is a wealthy man who bets \$125,000 on a Brown v. Yale football game and wins.

**Kyle Coyle** – Kyle is a student at E.T.A.

**Cosgrove Watt** – Cosgrove is one of the only professional actors James ever used in his films. He stars in James’s pornographic, snuff-film style production *Accomplice!*

**Mikey** – Mikey is an alcoholic who speaks at an AA meeting.

**Assistant District Attorney** – The A.D.A. comes to talk to Pat Montesian about apologizing to Gately as part of his recovery program.

**Barry Loach** – Loach is a trainer at E.T.A.

**Sorkin** – Sorkin is a bookmaker whom Facklemann attempts to scam. Sorkin orders his henchmen to take down Facklemann; they do so by sewing his eyes open.

**Jim Troeltsch** A student at E.T.A. He wants to become a tennis sports reporter.

**Pat Montesian** The manager of Ennet House. Pat is herself also a recovering addict, as well as a victim of a stroke that has left her face partially paralyzed. She has a soft spot for Don Gately.

**Todd Possalthwaite** A student at E.T.A.

**Dr. Dolores Rusk** The psychologist at Enfield Tennis Academy.

**Eric Clipperton** A 16-year-old tennis phenom who became a legend when he threatened to shoot himself if he ever lost a game.

**P. Tom Veals** The campaign manager for Johnny Gentle, and a co-owner of the advertising agency Viney and Veals.

**Kevin Bain** Marlon’s older brother. Hal encounters Kevin at an Inner Infant group meeting, during which Kevin weeps more than Hal has ever seen another person weep.

## TERMS

**E.T.A.** – The Enfield Tennis Academy in Enfield, MA, an elite junior tennis academy founded by **Dr. James Incandenza** and run by **Charles Tavis** and **Avril Incandenza** after James’s suicide. Much of the novel is set at E.T.A., which is a short walk away from Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House.

**O.N.A.N.** – Organization of North American Nations, a “supernation” comprised of the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. Founded by **President Johnny Gentle**, O.N.A.N. was masterminded by **Rodney Tine**, chief of the O.U.S., who saw it as an opportunity for the U.S. to give the highly toxic **Great Concavity** to Canada as a “gift.” For this reason, O.N.A.N. is resented by Canadians and especially Quebecois secessionists like the A.F.R. “Onanism” is also a euphemistic Biblical term for masturbation, in a humorous nod to the pleasure- and entertainment-obsessed culture of Wallace’s near-future North America.

**TP** – Teleputer, a combination of a TV, film “cartridge” player, computer, and videophone.

**A.F.R.** – *Assassins Fateuils Rolents* (“Wheelchair Assassins” in English). The most violent and feared anti-O.N.A.N. terrorist organization, comprised of Quebecois miners’ sons who lost their legs through playing a game called *La Culte du Prochain*

*Train* (“The Cult of the Next Train”). Led by **M. Fortier**, prominent members include **Guillaume DuPlessis** and **Rémy Marathe**. The A.F.R. hope to obtain the master copy of [the Entertainment](#) and mass-distribute the film in the U.S. in order to destroy O.N.A.N. and allow Québec to secede.

**VPD** – Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria, a disorder that developed after the rise of “videophony” (video calling). Different solutions were tested to cure VPD, but in the end people just went back to audio-only calling.

**M.I.T.** – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a university in Cambridge, MA where parts of the novel are set.

**WYYY** – M.I.T.’s student-run radio station, home of **Madame Psychosis**’s cult radio show “Those Were the Legends That Formerly Were.”

**MP** – Member of Parliament (UK).

**P.G.O.A.T.** – “Prettiest Girl Of All Time” – **Orin** and his doubles partner’s nickname for **Joelle**, who is so beautiful that no one talks to her.

**P.W.T.A.** – Port Washington Tennis Academy, a rival school that E.T.A. plays in an annual tournament.

**U.S.T.A.** – United States Tennis Association, the administrative body that oversees junior tennis. It retains its own separate ranking system even after the establishment of the O.N.A.N.T.A. ranking.

**AA** – Alcoholics Anonymous, a recovery program with a distinctive ideology that requires total abstinence from all [Substances](#), submission as a necessary part of sobriety, meetings in which people share stories so that others may “Identify” with them, and the selection of one’s own personal “Higher Power” that can be turned to in prayer. Spinoffs include NA and CA.

**B.U.** – Boston University, where **Orin** attends college.

**WETA** – E.T.A.’s student-run radio station.

**Y.D.A.U.** Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, the eighth year of subsidized time. Most of the action in the novel takes place in this year.

**Y.W.-Q.M.D.** – Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster, the fifth year of subsidized time.

**O.E.D.** – Oxford English Dictionary.

**U.H.I.D.** – Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, an organization founded by the wife on an MP in the mid 20th century. Many members, including **Joelle**, wear face veils; they also carry membership cards. **Marathe** pretends to be a member in order to disguise his identity when he goes undercover as a Swiss resident of Ennet House. In the time before the novel is set **Mario** was approached to be a member, but **Hal** vehemently opposed this and Mario did not join.

**Y.D.P.F.A.H.** – Year of Dairy Products From the American Heartland, the seventh year of subsidized time.

**Year of the Whopper** – The first year of subsidized time.

**Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad** – The second year of subsidized time.

**Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar** – The third year of subsidized time.

**Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-to-Install-Upgrade for Infernatron/InterLace TP Systems for Home, Office, or Mobilee** – The sixth year of subsidized time.

**Year of Glad** – The eighth year of subsidized time and the last year the novel covers. The action in the opening chapter takes place in this year.

**D.S.S.** – Department of Social Services.

**DUI** – Driving Under the Influence (of drugs or alcohol) – a criminal offence.

**NA** – Narcotics Anonymous, a spinoff of AA for narcotics addicts.

**O.N.A.N.T.A.** – Organization of North American Nations Tennis Association.

**O.U.S.** – Office of Unspecified Services, a branch of the American government headed by **Rodney Tine, Sr.** that includes the C.I.A., Secret Service, A.T.F. (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives), D.E.A. (Drug Enforcement Administration), and O.N.R. (Office of Naval Research). The O.U.S. is on a mission to secure the master copy of [the Entertainment](#) before it falls into the hands of the A.F.R. or another dissident organization. O.U.S. operatives featured in the novel include **Hugh Steeply** and **Rodney Tine, Jr.**

**O.C.D.** – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

**CA** – Cocaine Anonymous, another spinoff of AA for cocaine addicts.

**M.B.A.** – Master of Business Administration (degree).

**V.R.** – Viewing room (at E.T.A.) where students can watch cartridges. The cartridge viewer in this room is new and “painfully high-definition.” The room has no windows or other furniture apart from the viewer and the shelf of cartridges.

**O.D.** – Overdose (of drugs).

**A.D.A.** – Assistant District Attorney, a state law enforcement official who investigates and prosecutes people who commit crimes.

**DMZ** – Described as coming from a kind of mold that “grows on other molds,” DMZ is an incredibly powerful and mysterious hallucinogen. It can have many different effects but often seems to transform a person’s ability to communicate. It is also nicknamed “Madame Psychosis,” after **Joelle**’s radio persona. **Michael Pemulis** manages to acquire some, but it is stolen before he and **Hal** can take it. It’s suggested that Hal has been affected by DMZ by the time of the Year of Glad, but it’s

unclear how—whether from eating a piece of mold as a child and then withdrawing from marijuana, or having his toothbrush laced with Pemulis’s drugs (possibly by **James’s** wraith). As a result of this presumed DMZ consumption, Hal is able to feel strong emotions (which was impossible for him before) but unable to communicate.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### TALENT, PRECOCIOUSNESS, AND FAME

*Infinite Jest* is set in a near-future world where contemporary obsessions with competition, celebrity, and success are exaggerated to an at

times surreal degree. The culture of the novel is completely fixated on talent, precociousness, and fame, and this is particularly true at the Enfield Tennis Academy—one of the novel’s main settings. The characters chase success and marvel at other people’s talents, yet, in keeping with the novel’s dark mood, talent, precociousness, and fame are shown to have more of a negative than positive effect. They do not lead to happiness and indeed regularly destroy the lives of those who possess them. However, the novel also suggests that it is not possible to eschew the desire for talent and fame entirely. This creates a trap in which talent, precociousness, and fame cause misery—but the lack of these things can cause misery as well.

*Infinite Jest’s* exploration of this theme centers around the Incandenza family, the Enfield Tennis Academy, and particularly the prodigious E.T.A. student Hal Incandenza. Hal’s precocious talent earns him admiration from others but leaves him feeling isolated and depressed. The novel opens with Hal’s admissions interview for the University of Arizona, a scene that introduces his extraordinary abilities and achievements. Not only is seventeen-year-old Hal ranked the fourth-best player under eighteen years old in the U.S., he is also a highly intelligent autodidact who memorized the dictionary as a child. The admissions interview demonstrates the rewards and opportunities such precocious talent yields; at the same time, Hal’s first-person narration of this episode shows that he feels completely detached from the situation he is in. Rather than feeling excited or nervous about his possible future at college, he obsessively focuses on minute, trivial observations of the people around him. Eventually he tells them: “I cannot make myself understood, now.”

Hal’s statement speaks both to the immediate context of the admissions interview and the broader phenomenon of

precocious talent. Hal’s prodigiousness alienates him from others and, in a sense, from himself. He is forced to subscribe to other people’s expectations and desires for his life rather than charting his own course. This isolation leads Hal to abuse marijuana to the point of developing a severe addiction. In a sense, Hal resembles the archetype of a child prodigy gone wrong; burdened by the weight of his own talent, he is unable to find satisfaction and meaning in life.

Hal is not the only character who experiences this problem. The narrator mentions that it is a common phenomenon for prodigious tennis players to crumble under the weight of their own success. One particularly severe example involves a talented junior player who, after a spate of wins, kills himself by drinking cyanide. This triggers a chain of suicides, both accidental and intentional, in which the player’s whole family also dies. Again, this shows how talent and success can have a profoundly negative impact on a person’s life—so negative that they no longer consider life worth living at all. Furthermore, the fact that the player’s family members also kill themselves shows how a person’s family members can be problematically invested in their talent—as is also the case with Hal. This overinvolvement adds even more pressure, heightening the misery of giftedness and success.

The novel also explores the perils of talent, precociousness, and fame through the character of LaMont Chu. A student at E.T.A., LaMont shamefully admits to having “an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame.” The narrator notes that LaMont’s “obsession with future-tense-fame makes all else pale.” The use of the phrase “future-tense-fame” here indicates how an obsession with fame and success can severely limit one’s ability to enjoy the present. At the same time, as the weight-room “guru” Lyle points out, “There are feelings associated with fame, but few of them are any more enjoyable than the feelings associated with the envy of fame.” This leads LaMont to conclude that he is trapped: fame and the envy of fame both make people miserable. This pessimistic conclusion reflects the novel’s general orientation to talent, precociousness, and fame.



### ADDICTION, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND SUICIDE

In *Infinite Jest*, addiction, mental illness, and suicide are not unusual or abnormal pathologies that affect only a select number of people. Instead, they are ubiquitous: every significant character in the novel seems to suffer from addiction or mental illness of some kind. Furthermore, while some of the characters are addicted to substances that readers traditionally think of as causing addiction (such as drugs and alcohol), others are addicted to more abstract things like sex, entertainment, or even privacy and secrecy. This widened scope therefore increases the extent to which addiction (and the related issues of mental illness and suicide) is pervasive in the novel. *Infinite Jest* provides insight into a future world

where addiction is less of a particular problem that needs remedying and more a way of being.

Drug and alcohol addiction is an important focal point of *Infinite Jest*; the world of the novel is one that encourages substance abuse to the point that it can seem as if the characters are doomed to develop addictions. Hal Incandenza, who in a way functions as the novel's main character, has a serious marijuana addiction. Yet this doesn't set him apart from the other prodigious tennis players at Enfield Tennis Academy: "But so some E.T.As—not just Hal Incandenza by any means—are involved with recreational substances," Wallace writes. "Like who isn't, at some life-stage, in the U.S.A. and Interdependent regions, in these troubled times, for the most part." Here drug and alcohol use is framed as a normal and ubiquitous part of life, as well as being something particular to the novel's geopolitical context. North American culture, and particularly the "chemically troubled times" in which the story takes place, directly causes, encourages, and perpetuates recreational drug use.

If North American culture creates a situation wherein people have little choice over whether or not they use drugs, this lack of agency is intensified by addiction itself. Not only are the addicted characters compelled to use substances, but this substance use evolves into their whole reason for being. As the narrator states, "A little-mentioned paradox of **Substance** addiction is: that once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you." This passage puts a twist on the idea of reaching "rock bottom" in order to begin recovery. Once a person is at their absolute lowest point, they will find it harder to stop using substances because their agency has eroded so much that substance has become the sole purpose of their lives.

At the same time, the notion that the characters don't have much choice in their use of recreational drugs conflicts significantly with the recovery regimes—and particularly the ideology of Alcoholics Anonymous—explored in the novel. One of the main settings of the novel is Ennet House, a drug and alcohol recovery center. Ennet House demands a level of commitment to recovery that borders on comically absurd; in previous years its founder would make new residents eat rocks in order to test their commitment to sobriety. Of course, this kind of demand is premised on the idea that people *do* have agency when it comes to substance use, and that extreme tests of this agency are necessary in order to successfully recover from addiction.

The novel explores how addiction, mental illness, and suicide are intertwined, with a causal relationship to one another. In many cases, characters' mental illness causes them to develop an addiction, which in turn worsens their mental health and sometimes leads to suicide. Yet the causal relationship can

work the other way, too, for example when Hal starts smoking weed in order to cope with the trauma of discovering his father James's grisly suicide. Again, the fact that addiction, mental illness, and suicide are so ubiquitous in the novel means that the characters find themselves surrounded by causal cycles of these issues, which come to affect everyone rather than just a section of the population.

Although the issues of addiction, mental illness, and suicide are often dealt with in a darkly comic way, the novel's outlook is ultimately pessimistic and melancholic. As the narrator explains, comedy, irony, and sarcasm can be misleading in this respect: "Sarcasm and jokes were often the bottle in which clinical depressives sent out their most plangent screams for someone to care and help them." The fact that the novel ends with Don Gately on the brink of a possible relapse confirms this melancholic, pessimistic disposition. Addiction, mental illness, and suicide appear impossible to resist or escape.



## ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment is a powerful element of *Infinite Jest*'s America. The novel takes a suspicious, if not entirely condemnatory attitude toward entertainment. In the world of the novel, entertainment is an often dangerous force, a phenomenon to which people are compulsively drawn and which can even be used as a weapon. This is particularly true of the most significant example of entertainment in the novel, which is simply known as "**the Entertainment**." James Incandenza's invention takes entertainment to its logical, horrifying conclusion—watching it is an experience so engrossing that viewers lose all interest in their basic needs and eventually die. Yet while the novel suggests that entertainment (and the Entertainment in particular) can have a seriously negative effect, it does not imply that entertainment should be shunned altogether. Rather, it encourages readers to take a more critical attitude toward entertainment in order to decrease the control it has over society.

Forms of entertainment are everywhere in the novel, and in the world of *Infinite Jest* entertainment seems to be taken more seriously than it is in everyday reality outside of the novel's pages. At Enfield Tennis Academy, for example, there is a whole Entertainment department. Classes taught in the department include Introduction to Entertainment Studies and History of Entertainment I & II.

Of course, the notion of Entertainment Studies as an academic discipline is not far from reality; after all, the disciplines of Film, Television, and Media Studies do really exist in academia. (Indeed, the field of Film Studies appears in the novel; Joelle Van Dyne, for example, is a dropout from M.I.T.'s Film Studies doctoral program.) However, the fact that the department at E.T.A. is specifically called *Entertainment* (rather than Media or

even Popular Culture) is important. While film, television, and media are usually studied from perspectives such as craft, form, genre, or cultural impact, Entertainment as an academic discipline suggests that the focus is on entertainment *itself*—on the qualities of absorption, distraction, and pleasure usually associated with entertainment.

The most important example of entertainment in the novel is *Infinite Jest*, a film made by James Incandenza. Incandenza is an expert in optics, which is part of what allows him to create a film that is so unbelievably absorbing to the viewer. The film is also referred to as the Entertainment and the *samizdat*, and these alternative names give clues to the role it serves in the novel. “The Entertainment” indicates that the film is the pinnacle of entertainment, an entertainment to end all others. This is in a sense literally true, given that the film makes viewers die and can thus be used as a weapon of mass murder.

*Samizdat*, meanwhile, is a word that was used in the Soviet Union to describe the production of banned or dissident documents that were distributed by hand in order to avoid government censorship. It literally means “self-publishing,” and the use of this term to describe the film *Infinite Jest* shows how James Incandenza’s film has the potential to be used as a form of resistance or even a weapon against the government. Indeed, this is the hope of A.F.R., the Québécois separatist group that aims to secure the master copy of *Infinite Jest* and use it as a terrorist weapon.

The names “the Entertainment” and “the *samizdat*” thus both demonstrate the film’s remarkable dangerous potential. Yet the fact that the film’s actual title is *Infinite Jest* of course links it to the novel itself. Both the film *Infinite Jest* and the novel *Infinite Jest* are forms of entertainment, though they have very different effects on those who consume them. While the film makes viewers resemble a “drug-addicted newborn,” readers must work hard to keep track of the novel’s numerous intersecting plots and dozens of characters as well as to simply plough through its over 1,000 pages. The novel’s complex, idiosyncratic use of language and its many endnotes are even more ways in which the reader is forced to critically and actively work at reading it rather than passively consume it. At the same time, it’s suggested that James made the Entertainment in the first place in an attempt to communicate with his son Hal, and similarly *Infinite Jest* itself is both a complex “entertainment” and Wallace’s attempt to actually connect to the reader.

Returning to the way that the film *Infinite Jest* impacts its viewership, the phrase “drug-addicted newborn” points to the important relationship between entertainment and drugs in the novel. Both entertainment and drugs create a pleasurable distraction that can function as a suspension from reality (of course, this is particularly true of the Entertainment). Both entertainment and drugs can make people passive and vulnerable to manipulation and control. In order to resist this

phenomenon, it is essential to maintain a critical distance from entertainment. Unlike drugs, it is not necessary (or possible) to eschew entertainment altogether; however, it is important not to let entertainment distract from reality. In this sense, having a critical relationship to entertainment is linked to sobriety because both involve confronting the fullness of reality.



## REALITY AS CORPORATE DYSTOPIA

*Infinite Jest* is set in a near-future alternate world that resembles contemporary reality in many ways, but is also an exaggerated, surreal, and extreme version of this reality. This is particularly true in the case of corporations and the dystopian power they wield in the novel. While many science fiction novels contain portrayals of corporate dystopias, *Infinite Jest* stands out for the fact that the corporate dystopia it depicts is so close to the reality readers actually inhabit. The novel uses this alternate world to show that contemporary North American reality is a corporate dystopia, even if it does not exactly resemble the world of the novel.

One of the most immediate and humorous ways in which Wallace explores the idea of reality as a corporate dystopia is through the corporate sponsorship of years, known as “North American Nations’ Revenue-Enhancing Subsidized Time™.” Rather than being labelled numerically and consecutively, years are given the names of brands and products, such as “Year of the Whopper,” “Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar,” and “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.” This surreal and comic take on corporate sponsorship may seem absurd. Yet in the contemporary world, corporate sponsorship is everywhere: sports games, academic scholarships, art exhibitions, and scientific research all receive corporate sponsorships all the time. The fact that “subsidized time” seems extreme is therefore rather arbitrary. Yet it is also clear that something like time itself should *absolutely* not be corporately sponsored. Time is universal and abstract, something completely beyond human control. The fact that corporations have “branded” time like a product shows how seriously dystopian the world of the novel has become, and implicitly casts corporate sponsorship in general as suspicious and hubristic—inevitably a means to commodify and profit from all human activity or to lay claim to concepts that preclude ownership.

The practice of corporate naming also emerges in a more abstract way through the novel’s use of acronyms. Acronyms, which are very common in business and finance, are everywhere in *Infinite Jest*, with some more surreal and extreme than others. The North American mega-nation comprising Mexico, the United States, and Canada is known as O.N.A.N., which stands for the Organization of North American Nations. In a sense, this acronym makes North America seem less like a country and more like a business conglomerate (and indeed, O.N.A.N. itself behaves in a ruthlessly corporate manner, for

example through its “gift” of the heavily polluted “**Great Concavity**” to Canada). This kind of abdication of responsibility is typical of large corporations, which use their power in order to force other entities to absorb the consequences of their own environmental destruction.

Even stranger uses of acronyms include Orin’s nickname for his ex-girlfriend, Joelle Van Dyne, who is also known as Madame Psychosis and whom Orin calls P.G.O.A.T., standing for “Prettiest Girl of All Time.” In this instance, the acronym P.G.O.A.T. makes Joelle seem more like a trademarked brand or product than a real, human person. The name seems more like an advertisement for Joelle than a nickname, thus further objectifying her.

Another way in which *Infinite Jest* portrays reality as a corporate dystopia is through its exploration of technology. The novel was published in 1996, although Wallace began writing it a decade earlier. As such, it was written at a time when the internet and other communication and media technologies were developing rapidly but were far from the state in which they exist today. Throughout the novel, Wallace depicts a natural resistance to consumer technology which, from the perspective of the present, can seem rather outdated.

Describing the rise and fall of a video-call technology called “videophony,” the narrator explains that the initial success and ultimate failure of videophony contains a “revealing lesson [...] in the beyond-short term viability-curve of advances in consumer technology.” The advance from audio to video calling at first seemed thrilling and wonderful but had “unforeseen disadvantages for the consumer.” This eventually led people to workarounds that essentially involved returning to old-fashioned voice calling.

Such “consumer-recidivism” suggests that the world of *Infinite Jest* may not be quite the corporate dystopia that it initially seems. However, it equally indicates that twenty-first century reality is already a corporate dystopia. Resistance to advances in consumer technology has dwindled significantly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Indeed, what Wallace calls “videophony” is now a common and widely-embraced feature of the modern world. In this sense, the alternate world of *Infinite Jest* strongly indicates that readers’ own reality is a corporate dystopia. The novel suggests it is important that we are aware of this, although it doesn’t portray any real avenues of dissent from this grim reality.



## INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL VS. REBELLION

*Infinite Jest* is set among a number of prominent institutions, which—rather than simply existing in the background—play a prominent and powerful role in the lives of the characters and the narrative as a whole. These institutions include Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), the Ennet

House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). In a more abstract sense, Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R.), the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.), and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are also important “institutions” in the novel, although they lack the physical structure of the former three. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against the demand to submit to and be controlled by the institutions of which they are members. The novel ultimately takes a profoundly ambivalent attitude toward institutional control, suggesting that while submitting to the control of institutions is sometimes necessary, it is never harmless.

E.T.A. and Ennet House are twinned institutions in the novel. They are next to each other, have similar names, and both require extreme forms of submission from their members. The proximity of their buildings means that the characters at each residence often interact, which makes the parallels between the institutions all the more prominent. At E.T.A., students are required to follow an intense training regime that can have the effect of making them play in a robotic manner: “There’s surprisingly little thought. Coaches tell serious players what to do so often it gets automatic.” Being a highly skilled tennis player means dismissing or suppressing one’s own thoughts in order to behave in an almost mechanical way.

Similarly, Ennet House and Alcoholics Anonymous require complete submission from members in order to prove their commitment to sobriety. Behind this is the idea that addicts’ minds are controlled by their **Substance** of choice, and thus in order to counteract this control, extreme submission to another form of control is necessary. Some characters in the novel find that this is the only way to effectively resist the temptation of substance abuse and remain sober. Again, this encourages a kind of robotic behaviour: “When people with AA time strongly advise you to keep coming you nod robotically and keep coming.” Although such total submission may be unappealing, for many addicts the only other choice is allowing their addiction to consume them to the point of death. This leads to the paradoxical maxim regarding submission to AA ideology: “It’s all optional; do it or die.”

Despite the high stakes of refusing to submit to the institutional control of sobriety programs, many characters still rebel against this control. A section of the novel that takes the form of transcripts of conversations between the Executive Director of Ennet House Patricia Montesian and various patients explores the resistance and rebellion that occurs among Ennet House residents. One resident protests, “So what is this? You’re ordering me to pray? Because I allegedly have a disease? I dismantle my life and career and enter nine months of low-income treatment for a disease, and I’m prescribed prayer?” Another exclaims: “I’m on a month’s Full-House Restriction for using freaking mouthwash? Newsflash: news bulletin: mouthwash is for spitting out! It’s like 2% proof!” Even

while the residents at Ennet House may desperately desire to overcome their addictions, they still resist the overbearing forms of submission demanded by the institution.

Other institutions in the novel—namely A.F.R.—are formed around rebellion against a larger institution (in A.F.R.'s case, O.N.A.N.). A.F.R. is “pretty much Québec’s most dreaded and rapacious anti-O.N.A.N. terrorist cell.” Its members hope to secure the master copy of **the Entertainment** and mass-distribute it across the U.S. as an act of terrorism. Yet despite being united by the goal of rebellion, A.F.R. demands its own forms of extreme submission from its members. The most obvious and horrifying example of this is that A.F.R. members are required to lie on train tracks in order to injure their legs and end up as wheelchair users (the name of the organization means “Wheelchair Assassins” in French).

The symbiotic relationship between institutional control and rebellion exposed by A.F.R. is particularly explored through A.F.R. member Rémy Marathe. The narrator notes that “A.F.R. believed Marathe functioned as a triple agent.” In reality, however, Marathe is a *quadruple* agent who is also betraying A.F.R. itself. Marathe’s role in the novel suggests that one (rather extreme) way of dealing with the demand for submission to institutional control is to perform this control to multiple institutions, which inherently means secretly rebelling against them. At the same time, Marathe is a rather exceptional case. For most characters in the novel, submission to institutional control is difficult to escape, even in the context of simultaneous rebellion against institutions.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE ENTERTAINMENT

The Entertainment is undoubtedly the most important symbol in the novel and reflects the negative and dangerous potential of entertainment. It is the final film made by James Incadenza, and its actual title is *Infinite Jest*. The fact that it is referred to as “the Entertainment” rather than by its title points to its status as the ultimate form of entertainment—a film so engrossing that it kills its viewers by destroying their willingness to do anything but watch it. The first victim of the Entertainment depicted in the novel is the medical attaché to Saudi Prince Q—, who watches the cartridge after receiving it in the mail by accident. The attaché’s wife and several others die in the same incident, as each person who enters the attaché’s apartment to check on him ends up looking at the film and becoming instantly overpowered by it. Indeed, the Entertainment is so potent that one does not have to spend any significant period of time looking at it. Rather, as

soon as one’s eyes catch sight of the screen on which it is playing, there is no hope of looking away. This surreal exaggeration of entertainment’s capacity to totally absorb viewers becomes a way for the novel to explore the negative and dangerous aspects of entertainment in general.

The other key element of the Entertainment lies within the fact that the A.F.R. wants to use it as a terrorist weapon to advance the cause of Québécois separatism. This goal drives several of the novel’s many subplots, as members of the A.F.R. attempt to get hold of the (possibly fictitious) master copy of the Entertainment while government agents, most notably Hugh/Helen Steeply, attempt to thwart the separatists’ plan. The idea that a film could be used as a weapon of mass destruction again emphasizes that while entertainment may seem harmless, it can have a powerful, dangerous effect on people. In some senses, the novel suggests that entertainment is damaging because, like **Substances**, it has a soporific effect, meaning that it makes people passive, sluggish, and vulnerable to manipulation. This may indicate that the most dangerous forms of entertainment are those that are popular, addictive, and easy to consume. At the same time, it is also important to remember that James Incadenza was known as an avant-garde filmmaker who did not have a mass following. Indeed, his biggest fans tend to be overly-intellectual film scholars. This suggests that entertainment is perhaps no less dangerous even if it is artful and “challenging.”



## THE GREAT CONCAVITY/CONVEXITY

The Great Concavity is a heavily-polluted region of New England that was “gifted” to Canada during the formation of O.N.A.N. In Canada, it is referred to as the “Great Convexity” rather than Concavity, a humorous nod to the fact that the shape of the area looks different depending on the angle from which it is viewed. The Great Concavity is symbolic of the fact that the world of the novel is something of a corporate dystopia, in which serious environmental damage has been triggered by high-consumption, wasteful capitalist culture and neither corporations nor governments take responsibility for this environmental damage. The novel includes transcripts of the meetings between government representatives in which it was decided that the U.S. would “give” the Great Concavity to Canada. These transcripts portray political leaders as entirely corrupt and ludicrously incompetent. The existence of the Great Concavity also lends some credibility to the A.F.R.’s separatist impulses. Many Québécois separatists cite the Great Concavity as one of the main reasons why they want independence from Canada and O.N.A.N.; this is especially personal for A.F.R. member Rémy Marathe, whose wife, Gertraude, is one of the many people who has been severely disabled by exposure to the region’s toxicity. In this sense, the existence of the Great Concavity indicates that the separatist movement is actually not entirely

unreasonable.



## SUBSTANCES

One of *Infinite Jest*'s main themes is addiction, and the novel explores this in an expansive sense. The novel's use of the term "Substance" for drugs, alcohol, and other addictive entities shows that it has an expansive view of addiction. Many of the characters are addicted to drugs and alcohol, but some are addicted to more surprising or abstract things, such as food, sex, or entertainment. The word Substance symbolizes that all addictions are united in some way, regardless of what the object of attachment actually is. This is shown through the novel's reflections on addiction, which discuss how people become enslaved to a Substance (rather than any particular drug or group of drugs). The novel suggests that all experiences of addiction have more or less the same structure. In the beginning, a person loves their Substance of choice; it makes them feel exhilarated, fulfilled, or functional. They then develop a dependence on the Substance, and over time the Substance becomes less enjoyable. Following the ideology of Alcoholics Anonymous, the novel suggests that most addicts need to reach "rock bottom" before they are able to entertain the possibility of quitting their Substance. However, there is a paradox here, because at that point the addict's whole life has become totally consumed by this Substance, to the point that they likely won't see any point in living without it. Substances are powerful not only because of the psychological and biological effects they have on people, but also because they give people a much-needed sense of meaning and purpose.



## SUBJECTS

"Subjects" is the term Hal and Orin use to describe the women that Orin seduces, and the word reflects the reduction of women to tempting, druglike objects at the cost of their full humanity. It is strongly implied that Orin is a sex addict, with particular sexual neuroses that include a fetish for married mothers. (Again, it is strongly implied that this is the result of his own strained relationship with his overbearing mother, Avril.) The similarity between the words "Subject" and "**Substance**," and the fact that they are both capitalized in the novel, indicates that Orin is *addicted* to sex rather than just promiscuous. It also suggests that women can have the same overpowering, harmful effect as addictive substances like drugs and alcohol. Orin treats his "Subjects" in a callous, transactional way, usually losing interest in them as soon as they have sex. (One notable exception is Hugh/Helen Steeply, an American agent who seduces Orin as part of the government's effort to obtain the master copy of **the Entertainment**, and to whom Orin becomes devotedly attached.) Orin's dismissive treatment of his Subjects arguably

reflects a larger misogynistic attitude toward women within the novel as a whole. Of the dozens of main characters, hardly any are women. Women are often discussed in a sexually objectifying manner (or, in the opposite extreme, called "Feminazis"). Although it might appear that the novel condemns Orin's behavior toward women, this behavior actually aligns with the treatment of women in *Infinite Jest* as a whole.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Infinite Jest* published in 1996.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ 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.

**Related Characters:** Hal Incandenza (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

Hal is sitting in the Admissions Office at the University of Arizona, accompanied by his Uncle Charles. He is facing three of the university's deans. In this quotation, he notes that he has been "coached" to appear neutral, which shows that far from acting naturally in his interview, Hal is attempting to follow careful instructions he has received (presumably from E.T.A. staff, including members of his family). The word "coached" is also revealing, as it shows that Hal's athletic training influences all aspects of his life, not just tennis.

This passage also reveals Hal's feelings of detachment and difficulty expressing emotion. Rather than reacting organically to the situation he is in, he behaves according to what he believes others expect of him. This manner of behavior recurs throughout the novel, and indicates that Hal prioritizes the feelings and reactions of others over his own experience. Indeed, Hal is so used to modeling his behavior on the expectations of others that he often seems clueless about how he actually feels himself.

“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.

**Related Characters:** Hal Incandenza (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

The deans in the Admissions Office have explained that they are puzzled by the mismatch between the extraordinary grades Hal has received at E.T.A., the virtuosic admissions essays he wrote (some of which are book-length), and his mediocre test scores. They explain that they can't help but suspect that nepotism is to blame, as Hal's mother and uncle are in the fact the ones running E.T.A. Hal tries to explain himself, urging the deans to believe that he is not a “machine” but rather someone with individual thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, his manner of speaking does not convey this—there is an extreme disconnect between what Hal is trying to say and what his audience hears.

The idea that talent and success depend on practicing mechanical behavior is an important theme of the novel. This idea comes from tennis and the notion that being a great athlete involves turning one's body into a machine. Even if this is true in the realm of sports—which many would argue it isn't—turning oneself into a machine is not usually considered a recipe for success when it comes to interpersonal behavior. Indeed, the whole point of university admissions interviews is arguably to prove that talented students are not just machines, but rather complex, sensitive individuals with their own feelings and opinions.

The passage pushes this idea to the extreme, in fact, as it turns out that the deans cannot even understand what Hal is saying, and they believe he is having some kind of seizure. Because the chapter is narrated from Hal's point of view, we cannot know how Hal's sophisticated speech here gets interpreted as nothing more than horrifying “sounds” by the deans. In a way, this turn of events implies that Hal is like a *malfunctioning* machine in this moment, not even properly human.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

“I'm *ten* for Pete's sake. I think maybe your appointment calendar's squares got juggled. I'm the potentially gifted ten-year-old tennis and lexical prodigy whose mom's a continental mover and shaker in the prescriptive grammar academic world and whose dad's a towering figure in optical and avant-garde film circles and single-handedly founded the Enfield Tennis Academy but drinks Wild Turkey at like 5:00 a.m. and pitches over sideways during dawn drills, on the courts, some days, and some days presents with delusions about people's mouths moving but nothing coming out. I'm not even up to *J* yet, in the condensed O.E.D., much less Québec or malevolent Lurias.

**Related Characters:** Hal Incandenza (speaker), Luria P—, Dr. James Incandenza / Jim, Avril Incandenza

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

Back during his childhood, Hal has been sent to speak with an unnamed man in an office by his father, James. The man is impressed by Hal's ability to recite the dictionary definitions of words, and tells Hal that through a team of researchers he has learned everything there is to know about him—including his involvement with a crisis in Québec. At this point, Hal objects to the questions posed by the man (who is later revealed to be James in disguise). This quotation contains an exaggerated and comic demonstration of Hal's intelligence and prodigious talent. At the same time, it shows the emotional toll that Hal's precociousness and strange family have had on his life.

Hal doesn't explicitly complain about his life, but simply by listing the bizarre circumstances of his life we realize how difficult it must be to be him. He faces pressure from his parents due to their own success as well as Hal's talent and their high expectations of him. And even though he is only 10, he is also aware of problems such as his father's “delusions” and alcoholism and the political crisis in Quebec.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ A more than averagely devout follower of the North American sufism promulgated in his childhood by Pir Valayat, the medical attaché partakes of neither kif nor distilled spirits, and must unwind without chemical aid... The medical attaché sits and watches and eats and watches, unwinding by visible degrees, until the angles of his body in the chair and his head on his neck indicate that he has passed into sleep, at which point his special electronic recliner can be made automatically to recline to full horizontal, and luxuriant silk-analog bedding emerges flowingly from long slots in the appliance's sides.

**Related Characters:** Medical Attaché

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34

**Explanation and Analysis**

A medical attaché who is the ear-nose-and-throat specialist to Prince Q—, Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment, is staying in Boston with his wife. This quotation explains how the attaché chooses to relax at the end of the day. As a Muslim, he does not drink or consume any other drugs, which makes him one of the few characters in the novel who does not take “Substances” of one kind or another. At the same time, the method the attaché uses to “unwind” is shown to be somewhat comparable to taking drugs in that it gradually puts him in a kind of stupor until he is asleep.

Drugs and other “Substances” are compared to entertainment in this way throughout the novel. In the world of *Infinite Jest*, entertainment has become so technologically sophisticated and elaborate that it produces a state of total passivity. Consumers of entertainment are coddled like newborn babies—note that the attaché does not even have to pull his own bedding over himself, because in his high-tech recliner the bedding “emerges flowingly” by itself.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high.

**Related Characters:** Hal Incandenza

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 49

**Explanation and Analysis**

17-year-old Hal is smoking weed in the Pump Room of Enfield Tennis Academy in the time between the afternoon matches and E.T.A.'s “communal supper.” No one has any idea that he is down there. This passage contains a common piece of wisdom about addiction and other forms of compulsive behavior: that the “secrecy” of this behavior can be as compelling as the behavior itself. For Hal, who has spent his entire life under the intense surveillance of both his family and the institution they run, E.T.A., getting a moment in private to participate in illicit behavior is something of a luxury.

☞ Recreational drugs are more or less traditional at any U.S. secondary school, maybe because of the unprecedented tensions: post-latency and puberty and angst and impending adulthood, etc. To help manage the intrapsychic storms, etc... But so some E.T.A.s - not just Hal Incandenza by any means - are involved with recreational substances, is the point. Like who isn't, at some life-stage, in the U.S.A. and Interdependent regions, in these troubled times, for the most part.

**Related Characters:** Hal Incandenza

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 52-53

**Explanation and Analysis**

Few people know about Hal's covert marijuana habit, beyond a handful of his peers. His mother Avril knows that he drinks alcohol occasionally, but believes that Hal's extraordinary achievements mean that it can't be a serious problem. This passage explains that recreational drug use is a common feature both of American high schools and the world of the novel at large. It suggests that all the challenges and pressures of being a teenager make people likely to turn to drugs in order to deal with their own psychological experience.

Yet as the quotation goes on to argue, high school is hardly unique in fostering drug use. The phrase “these troubled times,” which recurs later in the book as “chemically troubled times,” suggests that life in O.N.A.N. more

generally encourages people to use drugs. Note that the tone of the narration, especially toward the end of the quotation, is somewhat apologetic. The phrase “like who isn’t” and the many short, hesitant clauses qualifying the main argument bring to mind someone who is perhaps self-conscious about their own drug use.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☛☛ Sarcasm and jokes were often the bottle in which clinical depressives sent out their most plangent screams for someone to care and help them.

**Related Characters:** Kate Gompert

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 71

### Explanation and Analysis

Kate Gompert has tried to commit suicide, and this attempt has landed her in the psychiatric ward of a hospital for the fourth time in three years. When a doctor comes to examine her, she tries to joke around with him and is disappointed by his humorlessness. This quotation emphasizes that Kate’s willingness to make jokes does not mean that she is feeling less depressed than before. Rather, her jokes are actually a *function* of her depression—a cloaked attempt to reach out for human connection and aid. This idea is important in relation to the novel as a whole, which is gloomy, disturbing, and cynical as much as it is witty and silly. Comedy and the “horror” of depression thus emerge as two sides of the same coin.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ It's no accident they say you Eat, Sleep, Breathe tennis here. These are automonical. Accretive means accumulating, through sheer mindless repeated motions. The machine-language of the muscles. Until you can do it without thinking about it, play.

**Related Characters:** Jim Troeltsch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 117-118

### Explanation and Analysis

Hal and a group of other E.T.A. students are discussing life at

the academy and their future prospects. They complain about how much they suffer through the grueling nature of E.T.A.’s training regimen, and worry that a professional tennis career will only lead to more suffering. Furthermore, the fact that tennis is an individual sport leaves them feeling isolated from one another. One student, Jim Troeltsch, expresses the view that E.T.A. aims to encourage “autonomical” behavior in students. (“Autonomical” is a neologism that presumably means automatic, mechanical, and robotic.)

The view that being a great athlete involves training oneself to play “automatically” is repeated throughout the novel. However, it is a controversial idea; some would argue that athletic skill requires passion, personality, and human sensitivity rather than being a “machine.” The book overall has a suspicious attitude toward anything (be it entertainment, Substances, or tennis) that controls and manipulates people, removing their own agency. At the same time, it is frequently suggested that surrendering one’s agency can be important for a greater cause, whether that cause is sobriety or tennis.

## Chapter 31 Quotes

☛☛ So what is this? You're ordering me to pray? Because I allegedly have a disease? I dismantle my life and career and enter nine months of low-income treatment for a disease, and I'm prescribed prayer?

**Related Characters:** Pat Montesian

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 180

### Explanation and Analysis

This chapter takes the form of excerpts from conversations between Patricia Montesian, the Executive Director of Ennet House, and various unidentified residents. In some excerpts the residents discuss their addictions, while in others they complain about their fellow residents or seek other kinds of advice. In this passage, a resident complains that the treatment program at Ennet House involves prayer (and according to them nothing else, although we know this is not quite true).

The unidentified resident may be unhappy about receiving advice to pray simply because they are not religious. Yet they also point to a specific contradiction within common

beliefs about addiction: on one hand, addiction is framed as a “disease,” yet at the same time, treatment for this disease involves prayer and other forms of behavior that in the contemporary world would never be prescribed to treat a disease like cancer. Of course, just because something is a disease doesn’t mean it is in the same category as other diseases. When it comes to addiction, the sufferer’s behavior clearly has a greater impact on their chance of recovery than on diseases like cancer.

### Chapter 33 Quotes

☞☞ That a little-mentioned paradox of Substance addiction is: that once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you. Or that sometime after your Substance of choice has just been taken away from you in order to save your life, as you hunker down for required a.m. and p.m. prayers, you will find yourself beginning to pray to be allowed literally to lose your mind, to be able to wrap your mind in an old newspaper or something and leave it in an alley to shift for itself, without you.

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 201

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator has been explaining the different pieces of information one learns after spending time in Ennet House. This includes strange and grisly facts about addiction and recovery as well as details about what happens when many people live together in one house. This passage contains one of the most important ideas about addiction expressed in *Infinite Jest*. While the novel never diminishes the importance of recovery and indeed has a generally positive attitude toward recovery programs, it also makes clear that recovering from addiction is one of the hardest tasks a person can do.

Part of the reason for this is that, to an addict, recovery does not feel logical. This is because, as the quotation explains, when a person has become “enslaved by a Substance” then that Substance becomes the whole purpose of their life. While clearly this is not a good situation, the novel does not really provide an alternative source of finding purpose and meaning in life. Indeed, *Infinite Jest* shows life to be absurd, chaotic, and full of

suffering. The characters try various ways of finding meaning and alleviating their own pain, but none of these methods are shown to be particularly healthy or effective.

### Chapter 38 Quotes

☞☞ Time is passing. Ennet House reeks of passing time. It is the humidity of early sobriety, hanging and palpable. You can hear ticking in clockless rooms here.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 279

#### Explanation and Analysis

Don Gately, a former narcotics addict, has been working at Ennet House for four months. This requires closely observing all the residents, whose addictions and various quirks have been described in this chapter. Today Pat is interviewing potential new residents, and when they arrive Gately will greet them. This passage describes the suffocating atmosphere inside Ennet House. Without the rhythm created by waiting for another hit of one’s Substance of choice, time becomes so oppressively noticeable that it seems like it has a smell (hence the word “reeking”). Again, while *Infinite Jest* never diminishes the importance of recovery, it paints a depressing portrait of the bleak, seemingly meaningless existence that greets those new to sobriety.

### Chapter 43 Quotes

☞☞ Sobriety in Boston is regarded as less a gift than a sort of cosmic loan. You can’t pay the loan back, but you can pay it *forward*, by spreading the message that despite all appearances AA works, spreading this message to the next new guy who’s tottered in to a meeting and is sitting in the back row unable to hold his cup of coffee. The only way to hang onto sobriety is to give it away, and even just 24 hours of sobriety is worth doing anything for, a sober day being nothing short of a daily miracle if you’ve got the Disease...

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 344

**Explanation and Analysis**

This chapter begins with a description of Boston AA groups and the nature of speaker meetings, where a group travels to another group's meeting in order to share their stories. The hosts never speak, but rather wait until they are hosted at another group's meeting to do so. This passage describes the ideology behind the AA practice of sharing sobriety with others. This combats the isolation many addicts feel, both in addiction and recovery. This passage is also one of the most sincere moments in the novel. The narrator's assertion that "even just 24 hours of sobriety is worth doing anything for" is a genuinely emotive moment in a novel that is otherwise filled with irony and pessimism.

☝ It's all optional; do it or die.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 357

**Explanation and Analysis**

This chapter has explained in detail the culture, rules, norms, and ideology of Boston AA meetings. The stories of most people at meetings follow the same pattern, describing how the initial joy of the Substance turned into something darker, more destructive, and eventually soul-destroying. Gately initially found AA meetings abhorrent and was shocked to find that they worked. This short quotation summarizes another aspect of the ideology of recovery. Agency is an important dimension of sobriety; if an addict does not *want* to recover, then there is no chance that they will be able to do so. At the same time, this quotation highlights that recovery isn't really a "choice" considering that the only other option is death.

Of course, not all addicts die from substance abuse, and some people live with addiction for many years. Yet the risk of death is so high—and the quality of life with a severe addiction so poor—that in a sense this quotation, while dramatic, is nonetheless true.

**Chapter 45 Quotes**

☝ "To be envied, admired, is not a feeling. Nor is fame a feeling. There are feelings associated with fame, but few of them are any more enjoyable than the feelings associated with envy of fame"...

"So I'm stuck in the cage from either side. Fame or tortured envy of fame. There's no way out."

**Related Characters:** LaMont Chu, Lyle (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 389

**Explanation and Analysis**

LaMont Chu has come down to the weight room to seek advice from Lyle, the weight room guru. Although he is only 11, LaMont has developed a "crippling" obsession with tennis fame. He cannot stop thinking about the glamour of a professional tennis career and it's making him feel "trapped." The advice Lyle gives him is rather wise and perceptive. It is well known that very famous and successful people are not usually happier than the general population—in fact they are often *less* happy. As Lyle points out, becoming famous and successful will not make LaMont feel happier or more fulfilled.

At the same time, LaMont's reply is also incisive—though much more depressing. LaMont seems ready to believe that fame will not necessarily bring him happiness, yet rather than seeing this as a reason to stop obsessing over fame, he concludes that he will be "stuck in a cage" of misery forever. LaMont's tortured thoughts reflect the experience of David Foster Wallace himself, who had a notoriously difficult relationship to success which oscillated between craving and shunning public attention, which in turn caused him to experience intense self-loathing.

**Chapter 51 Quotes**

☝ I couldn't even stand to be in the same room, see him like that. Begging for just even a few seconds - a trailer, a snatch of soundtrack, anything. His eyes wobbling around like some drug-addicted newborn.

**Related Characters:** Hugh / Helen Steeple (speaker), Rémy Marathe

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 507

**Explanation and Analysis**

On the mountainside in the Arizona desert, Steeple has asked Rémy Marathe if he has ever been tempted to watch the Entertainment. Marathe replies that he hasn't, and Steeple admits that the Office of Unspecified Services has lost two people to the Entertainment already. One of these

was the Head of Data Analysis, whom Steeply describes in this passage. After viewing the Entertainment, the man was so obsessed with it that he begged for glimpses of the film in the exact same way as an addict begs for a hit. Indeed, this is one of the points in the novel where the connection between drugs and entertainment is made most explicitly.

The phrase “drug-addicted newborn” is also revealing. Overall, the novel is suspicious of anything that reduces people’s agency and makes them akin to babies who are passive and needy. Adding “drug-addicted” to this image is both humorous and disturbing, and suggests that the Entertainment combines the worst effects of both entertainment and drugs. It simultaneously “enslaves” people into caring about nothing other than watching it, and makes them completely passive.

## Chapter 65 Quotes

☝ Listen to any sort of sub-16 exchange you hear in the bathroom or food line: 'Hey there, how are you?' Number eight this week, is how I am. They all still worship the carrot. With the possible exception of the tormented LaMont Chu, they all still subscribe to the delusive idea that the continent's second-ranked fourteen-year-old feels exactly twice as worthwhile as the continent's #4.

**Related Characters:** LaMont Chu

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 693

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has discussed Kate Gompert’s thoughts on anhedonia, the kind of depression that leaves a person unable to care about anything in the world. Everything that once had meaning suddenly becomes meaningless. Some younger E.T.A. students believe that anhedonia made James Incandenza commit suicide, but they are wrong in this interpretation. Indeed, they only believe this because they are immersed in a world structured entirely around achievement, and don’t understand that external achievements do not ultimately make people feel happier or more valued.

This quotation describes a misconception among E.T.A. students, who all believe that happiness *exactly* corresponds with success. By this point in the novel, it is clear how the institution fosters this belief. Yet it is also striking that it is so widely held despite the fact that the students likely already have experiences that disprove it. The only person who

(possibly) doesn’t subscribe to this belief is LaMont Chu, probably as the result of his conversation with Lyle. LaMont no longer believes that his happiness will increase along with his rank, but the word “tormented” indicates that he has still not let go of his obsession with fame and success, even though he knows they will not make him happy.

## Chapter 69 Quotes

☝ After so long not caring, and then now the caring crashes back in and turns so easily into obsessive worry, in sobriety. A few days before the debacle in which Don Gately got hurt, Joelle had begun to worry obsessively about her teeth. Smoking 'base cocaine eats teeth, corrodes teeth, attacks the enamel directly.

**Related Characters:** Joelle Van Dyne / Madame Psychosis / Lucille Duquette, Don Gately

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 723

### Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening passage of Chapter 69, which describes the increased anxiety that comes with Joelle’s recovery from cocaine addiction. During her addiction, she didn’t care very much about anything other than getting high. Now, without the distraction of focusing only on her Substance, Joelle is left facing the harsh realities of life, including the fact that substance abuse has seriously damaged her teeth.

This quotation highlights yet another dimension of the difficulty of recovery. Joelle is left thinking “obsessively” about her teeth in the way that she once thought obsessively about cocaine. As the beginning of the passage indicates, it can be hard to find a balanced, healthy way of caring about things when for so long the only care one had was consuming drugs.

☝ Was *amateurish* the right word? More like the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication. Technically gorgeous, the work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic towardness - no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience.

**Related Characters:** Dr. James Incandenza / Jim, Joelle Van Dyne / Madame Psychosis / Lucille Duquette

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 740

### Explanation and Analysis

Joelle has been thinking about Orin and the whole Incandenza family. Although Orin thought his family issues were unique and serious, Joelle considered them to actually be rather “banal.” She thinks about James’s film work, which she concludes is “amateurish.” In this passage, she then questions whether this assessment is correct. Her thoughts help explain why James’s work was so popular among film scholars and arthouse film fanatics but gained little popular success: there was none of the emotional momentum (or “towardness”) that audiences expect from film.

It is possible to read this passage as a self-conscious reference to Wallace’s own writing and *Infinite Jest* in particular. While Wallace did end up achieving a significant amount of fame and popular success for an author of experimental literary fiction, it would certainly be fair to argue that *Infinite Jest* is both “technically gorgeous” and lacking in “narrative movement.” It is equally possible that Wallace is mocking such interpretations of his work or showing a kind of self-deprecating appreciation for them.

## Chapter 74 Quotes

☛☛ LIFE IS LIKE TENNIS  
THOSE WHO SERVE  
BEST USUALLY WIN

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 952

### Explanation and Analysis

Hal has been reflecting on memories of his family and childhood, particularly of the time when the Incandenzas still lived in Weston, MA, before the founding of E.T.A. He recalls a church near his house that once displayed an announcement of the quotation above. In some senses this quotation reflects a broader stance in the novel, which is that much of life can be understood through the framework of competitive sport. Tennis is not just a game in the novel, but rather a complex, philosophically meaningful way of being in the world.

The idea that “those who serve best usually win” relates to the theme of submitting to control versus rebelling. The church wants to argue that those faithful to God and Christianity will “win” in the end (by getting rewards on earth and/or ultimately going to heaven). In some ways the novel supports this view, such as when it shows that submitting to the control of recovery programs is necessary for sobriety. On the other hand, the novel is also suspicious of being overly submissive to control, such as in the case of E.T.A. students and Hal in particular. Getting too good at “serving” others (or Substances) can make a person detached from their own feelings, needs, and opinions.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

*Year of Glad.* Hal Incandenza, who is narrating, is in the admissions office of the University of Arizona along with his Uncle Charles. He is seated across from the Dean of Admissions, the Dean of Academic Affairs, the Dean of Athletic Affairs, the University's Director of Composition, the varsity tennis coach, and an Enfield Tennis Academy prorector called Aubrey deLint. Hal is trying to seem "neutral." His uncle is the headmaster of E.T.A., the boarding school in Enfield, Massachusetts that Hal has attended since the age of seven. Now 18, he is a "continentally ranked junior tennis player" with substantial promise.

Various men in the room chime in to discuss Hal's talent and achievements. Hal says nothing, and the Dean of Athletic Affairs asks Charles if Hal is all right, because it looks like he just grimaced. The varsity tennis coach replies that it's best to let the applicant speak for himself. The Dean of Admissions then remarks that Hal's test scores are "subnormal," strangely low considering that he receives grades of "A++" at E.T.A. This is suspicious, especially considering that both his uncle and mother are administrators at his school. At the same time, Hal wrote nine admissions essays, some book-length, which were "stellar."

The deans are concerned that Hal may not have written the admissions essays himself. Hal starts to panic, feeling that he is being misunderstood. In reality, he *did* write the essays. Meanwhile, the deans ask Uncle Charles to step outside in order to let Hal speak for himself. Eventually, Hal slowly states: "I am not just a jock." He explains that his most recent grades may have been altered because he has been having a difficult time, but that everything before the past year has been his own work. He then says: "I cannot make myself understood, now," blaming it on something he ate.

Hal's first home was in a suburb called Weston. He recounts a story his older brother Orin told him from their childhood. Orin was helping their mother Avril, who they nickname "the Moms," to mow the lawn. Hal came out of the house crying and clutching a patch of mold. Hal told Avril "I ate this," at which point she started screaming: "Help! My son ate this!" and running around.

*The enormous group of people assembled to judge Hal's suitability for admission to the University of Arizona introduces the importance of talent and precociousness in the novel (as Hal is so young but clearly so brilliant), as well as the (rather excessive) measures for evaluating talent. The pressure that this puts on Hal is shown by his struggle to look "neutral" amidst all the attention focused on him. This struggle also suggests that something is wrong with him, and he is unable to communicate how he really feels or what he really wants to say.*



*The question the deans are asking is if Hal is a "real" prodigy or has simply been made to appear that way by the efforts of his uncle and mother. Perhaps the answer is a bit of both. Whatever natural talent and intelligence Hal possesses has surely been boosted by the fact that he attends a competitive tennis academy run by members of his family. After all, precociousness and success always depend on a mix of nature and nurture.*



*This passage introduces a key aspect of Hal's character—his difficulty in expressing his emotions and communicating with others. While this issue appears to be related to the pressure Hal faces as a smart and talented junior tennis player studying at an academy run by his family, the problem also seems to go deeper, and is perhaps rooted in mental health problems. Because this scene takes place after most of the events of the novel, Hal's difficulty communicating here is very significant.*



*This surreal memory at first seems to bear no connection to Hal's interview at the University of Arizona. However, recall that Hal blames his inability to communicate on something he ate: perhaps the mold. Later, it is hinted that the mold could have led to Hal synthesizing a severely intense psychoactive substance called DMZ.*



Back at the Admissions Office, Hal repeats that he is not just a tennis player, but a complex person and an avid reader. The deans suddenly begin to act horrified; the Director of Composition pins Hal's arms behind him and forces him to the ground. One dean demands: "What in God's name are those... those sounds?" Hal tries to reassure them that everything is fine. He tells them, "I am not what you see and hear," and then hears sirens approaching while the door opens to reveal other people looking shocked and frightened.

Hal is dragged out of the Admissions Office by the Director of Composition, who seems to think Hal was either having a seizure, choking, or having a psychotic episode. Hal lies on the floor of a bathroom while Uncle Charles tries to explain that he is fine. The deans reply that Hal was making "subanimalistic noises and sounds" in the office and claim that he was moving his arms in a strange way. They say he needs "care." Someone mentions that Hal is a "genius" on the tennis court, where he has never displayed any strange behavior. The men continue to argue while Hal lies still, saying nothing.

Hal is taken to the hospital in an ambulance. He observes details about the emergency room, and thinks about his family, friends, and other people he knows. He is confident that Uncle Charles will ensure he is out of the hospital in time to play in the semi-final match the next day. He thinks about John Wayne, who certainly "would have" won the WhataBurger tournament. Hal also thinks about Wayne standing guard when Hal dug up his father's head with Don Gately. Because Wayne is not playing, Hal is sure that he himself will win, and that he will play either Stice or Polep in the final on Sunday. There is a rumor that Venus Williams might attend the match.

*There appears to be a significant mismatch between Hal's understanding of his surroundings and that of the deans. While Hal believes he is speaking normally, the deans hear only strange and terrifying sounds. This surreal scene emphasizes Hal's isolation and difficulty connecting with others, and indicates that he may have trouble processing reality at this point. The question, then, is what has led him to this state.*



*The deans appear to be potentially willing to ignore Hal's disturbing behavior if they are assured that he is a talented enough tennis player. They don't really care about Hal or his wellbeing; rather, they want to use him to their own advantage. This is shown by the fact that they continue to argue over Hal's body while he lies motionless on the floor.*



*This passage contains many clues about the novel's (chronological) ending, clues that can only be properly understood once one has read the whole novel. As we will later learn, John Wayne is likely planted at E.T.A. by the Quebecois terrorist organization A.F.R. By helping Hal and Gately dig up James's head (believed to contain an implanted film cartridge), he possibly betrayed A.F.R. Hal's note that he "would have won" WhataBurger shows that he was not able to play, likely because A.F.R. did something to him—including possibly killing him. It's also suggested that Ortho Stice has a mystical connection to Hal's dead father, James, and so Hal looking forward to playing Stice could mean that he is looking forward to finally communicating to his father in some way.*



## CHAPTER 2

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ken Erdedy is waiting for a woman who promised to sell him 200g of marijuana for \$1250. He has tried to quit the drug before and has told all the dealers he knows not to sell to him anymore, so each time he relapses he has to find someone new. Erdedy calls the woman and it goes to voicemail; he doesn't leave a message because he doesn't want to seem desperate.

*Erdedy is stuck in the cycle of desperation and shame that affects many people with addictions. He clearly wants to stop smoking marijuana, as evidenced by the fact that he has asked all the dealers he knows to stop selling to him—yet he can't bring himself to do it.*



Erdedy has made many preparations for this purchase: asked a colleague to cover him at work; left a message on his voicemail saying he is away from the office; cleaned his room; thrown out his alcohol to avoid the sickness that comes from combining drinking and weed. He's also purchased junk food and antacids, rented film cartridges, and bought a new bong, because every time he gives up marijuana, he throws out all his drug paraphernalia, too. The woman who is selling him weed is a set designer he met through work. They've slept together twice, though Erdedy is not sure if he finds her attractive.

Erdedy feels depressed at all the preparation for something he no longer even finds fun. Weed does terrible things to him, making him feel "afraid of everything." He plans to smoke the whole 200g in four days, which will require 200-300 bong hits per day, "an insane and deliberately unpleasant amount." He guesses that the woman dropping off the weed might want to smoke with him and have sex, and the thought disgusts him. He decides to be rude to her in order to make her not want to stay.

Four hours have now passed since the woman promised she would come, and Erdedy sobs briefly, before composing himself again. He looks at the film cartridges he bought, but each one makes him feel anxious. Finally the phone rings, but he is crushed to hear that it is only a colleague calling. For a while, he is unsure what to do. Then both the phone and buzzer to his apartment go off at the same time. He can't decide which to answer first and ends up frozen in a comic position, reaching out in two directions at once.

## CHAPTER 3

*1 April – Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad.* A young Hal has been sent to speak with an unnamed man by his father, James, who told the man that Hal is 11. The man insists that Hal drink some soda because of the unbearable dry-mouth sounds he is making when he speaks. Hal can recite the full Oxford English Dictionary definition of words on command, and gets beaten up for this at E.T.A. Hal asks the man if he has been sent to speak with him because his parents think he is gifted. The man explains that he is a "professional conversationalist," and Hal asks about his credentials.

*Erdedy's elaborate ritual of preparation certainly shows how much time he has spent smoking weed; however, it does not necessarily indicate that he is excited or happy about the prospect of smoking again. Similarly, he has slept with the set designer but doesn't know if he is actually attracted to her. In both cases he is going through the motions rather than having any real experience.*



*This passage confirms that Erdedy does not even enjoy smoking weed anymore, partly because he chooses to smoke too much for it to be enjoyable. This illustrates the painful paradox of addiction: the stronger the compulsion to consume a particular substance, the less likely that the person will actually enjoy taking the substance.*



*The image of Erdedy paralyzed by indecision over whether to answer the phone or buzzer first is a metaphor for the way that addiction robs people of agency. Addicts ostensibly face choices like anyone else, but the grip of addiction is so powerful that this choice is only an illusion. Erdedy's frozen posture illustrates this trap.*



*Because Hal is both a child prodigy and someone who struggles with communication, it is unclear whether the man he has been sent to speak with is a psychologist, therapist, special tutor, or perhaps someone else entirely. Despite Hal's maturity and intelligence, the man does not feel the need to properly explain who he is, instead relying on the euphemistic phrase "professional conversationalist." Note also the marked difference between Hal's character at this point and how he acts and appears to others in the first chapter (which takes place several years after this scene)*



Hal explains that he calls James “Himself,” a nickname his brother invented. He adds that James experiences hallucinations. The man suggests they discuss Byzantine erotica, and Hal is surprised that the man knows he has an interest in this. The man explains that he employs a full team of researchers and that he also knows about Hal’s involvement with the crisis in Quebec. Hal doesn’t know what he is talking about. The two talk across each other. The man mentions that Avril has had sexual relations with over 30 “Near Eastern medical attachés,” while Hal gets increasingly uncomfortable and tries to leave.

*Again, this passage contains several important clues that will only become meaningful later in the book. Avril’s promiscuity is a central part of the narrative, and her affairs with the Near Eastern medical attachés give Orin a motivation for killing the Saudi attaché by sending him a copy of the deadly film known as “the Entertainment.” Wallace introduce an overwhelming amount of details from the start—many of these details connect to each other, but they also create the overall impression that the novel is something complex and “infinite.”*



Hal suddenly realizes that the man sitting opposite him is actually his own father, James, in disguise. Hal points out that while James has “rented a whole office” and even donned a fake face, he neglected to take off his trademark sweater vest, which is how Hal recognized him. James explains that he wanted to have a conversation with Hal which for once didn’t “end in terror,” with Hal staring silently at his father and swallowing. However, the conversation ends this way anyway.

*Hal’s realization that James has put on a fake face is one of the first truly surreal moments in Infinite Jest. Throughout the novel, characters use technology to strange ends—often, as is the case here, to transform their physical appearance. James’s cluelessness is revealed by the fact that he thought this bizarre stunt would make Hal less scared to talk to him. The impossibility of communication between James and Hal (and the difficulty of communication in general) is an important motif throughout the book.*



## CHAPTER 4

*9 May – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Hal usually leaves his dormitory before 6 am and doesn’t get back until after dinner. He shares a room with his younger brother Mario, who doesn’t play tennis. Someone calls Hal on his cell phone and tells him: “My head is filled with things to say.” Hal replies that he doesn’t mind and “could wait forever.” The line cuts out; the person who called was Orin. Mario wakes up and asks who was calling, and Hal tells him to go back to sleep. He says the person on the other end was someone Mario doesn’t know.

*This passage introduces us to more layers of the Incandenza family’s unique dysfunctionality. Hal and Orin’s words to each other on the phone sound like those of lovers; meanwhile, Hal’s lie that he was talking to someone Mario doesn’t know points to unspecified tensions between the brothers.*



## CHAPTER 5

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* A Saudi medical attaché (who is ethnically only half-Arab and was born in Canada) is in the northeast U.S. as the personal ear-nose-throat consultant to Prince Q—, the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment. The attaché is usually based between Montreal and Rub’ al Kahli. Prince Q— only eats Toblerone chocolate bars and thus suffers from “yeasty sores and sinal impactions” that need to be drained almost every day. A devout Sufi Muslim, he does not drink or take drugs. At the end of each day, he relaxes by eating a hot dinner while sitting in a recliner and watching entertainment cartridges, while his wife attends to him.

*While the medical attaché and presumably also Prince Q— do not consume drugs or alcohol due to their Muslim faith, they both compulsively use other substances. In Prince Q—’s case, this is his debilitating addiction to Toblerone chocolate. In the case of the attaché, it is his nightly habit of eating dinner while watching entertainment cartridges (cartridges are the method by which people watch movies or TV in the world of the novel), which—although different to drug-taking—has the same soothing, stupefying effect of certain drugs.*



On Wednesday nights, the attaché's wife plays in an Arab Women's tennis league at the Mount Auburn Club in Watertown. On April 1, the attaché is dismissed by Prince Q— for doing a bad job and goes home to an empty house, no dinner, and no entertainment. He angrily searches the house for entertainment cartridges and finds only the ones that arrived that night. Normally, his wife scans them to see if he'll like them before giving them to him.

Searching through the new cartridges, the attaché finds a medical film and a women's magazine for his wife. He also finds a mysterious package that has been sent from Phoenix, AZ, with the words "HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!" where the return address should be. The attaché and his wife's anniversary is months away, and he almost throws the unmarked cartridge in the trash. However, he is so desperate for entertainment that he decides to watch the cartridge before switching over to the news. When he inserts it, it is 7:27 p.m.

*The medical attaché's surprise and anger at finding himself alone in the house after coming home early from work highlights his dependence on his wife. He is not used to taking care of himself but rather prefers to be passively taken care of.*



*While it might be an exaggeration to say that the attaché is addicted to entertainment, he certainly seems to be craving a "fix" in the same way as someone addicted to drugs. The Phoenix address is a hint that the package has been sent by Orin Incandenza, who (as we will soon learn) lives there. "Happy Anniversary" is then perhaps a snide comment about the attaché's past affair with Avril, Orin's mother.*



## CHAPTER 6

*Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar.* This chapter begins in the first person, in African-American Vernacular English. The narrator, Clenette, describes someone called Wardine whose mother beats her. Wardine's mother's boyfriend, Roy Tony, molests her. Clenette's mother says Wardine's mother is "not right in the head." A boy called Reginald loves Wardine and tries to help her, but also tries to pressure her into having sex with him. Roy Tony, who is on parole and wears an ankle bracelet, is also Wardine's father's brother. Clenette is Wardine's half-sister; Wardine tells Clenette and Reginald that if they tell their mothers what's happening to her, she will kill herself.

Four years ago Roy Tony killed someone out of love for Clenette's mother. Clenette doesn't tell her mother about Wardine, but Reginald does in order to save Wardine from being beaten again. Reginald plans to confront Roy Tony, and Clenette fears that Roy Tony will kill him if he does so. Then Clenette will be the only one left with the secret. At the end of the passage, she says she is pregnant.

The narrative switches back to the third person. In 8th grade, Bruce Green falls in love with a stunningly beautiful girl in his class called Mildred Bonk. By 10th grade, Mildred becomes part of a crew at their high school who smokes cigarettes and weed, drinks alcohol, and skips class. By the time they are 18, Bruce and Mildred live together with their baby daughter, two other couples, and a drug dealer named Tommy Doocey. Mildred gets high in the afternoon and watches entertainment cartridges, while Bruce works at Leisure Time Ice. For a while their life is "more or less one big party."

*Infinite Jest is filled with unexpected narrative shifts to new locations, situations, and casts of characters. However, this is perhaps the most jarring shift in the novel. Not only is the reader suddenly introduced to an enormous, complex group of characters with intricate relations to one another, but the prose has suddenly switched to AAVE. This is a disorientating (and perhaps ethically dubious) move.*



*Adding to the ethically suspect dimension of this paragraph is the fact that it is filled with negative stereotypes about poor black communities: domestic abuse, incest, criminality, prison, violence, and teen pregnancy.*



*Depending on one's perspective, Bruce and Mildred are either living a dream or a nightmare. Bruce's childhood crush on Mildred means that their life together is something of a "happily ever after," as emphasized by the phrase "one big party." At the same time, they are also high school dropouts, teen parents, and drug users—all identities generally condemned by society.*



## CHAPTER 7

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Mid-conversation, Mario asks Hal if he is asleep, and Hal reminds him that he can't talk if he is sleeping. They discuss the tennis match Hal played that day, in which he eviscerated his opponent. Mario asks Hal if he believes in God, and Hal says that God seems to be "pro-death" while Hal himself is "anti-death." Mario mentions James's death. Hal says he will tell Mario a joke as long as he promises to fall asleep after. However, after the joke Mario keeps talking. He reflects that Avril seems happier after James's death, but Hal disagrees, saying she has become more of a "workaholic." Mario begins to cry. The chapter ends with a note that the medical attaché is still watching the unmarked entertainment cartridge.

*In this scene, we begin to see some ways in which Mario and Hal are opposites. Whereas Hal has struggle communicating and tends to be cut off from his own emotions, Mario wears his heart on his sleeve. Mario is also unafraid of difficult topics, from the existence of God to their father's suicide. Hal may be the talented tennis player and academic prodigy of the family, but Mario possesses what is perhaps a more fundamental and important talent—the ability to be open with others.*



## CHAPTER 8

*October – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Orin wakes up alone in Phoenix; the woman he slept with the night before left her number on his pillow. He and the rest of his NFL team returned from Chicago two days ago. There is a cockroach infestation at his house in Phoenix that he can't get rid of, no matter how many times the exterminator comes. Orin is terrified of cockroaches, heights, and the early morning—and especially by flying cockroaches. He frequently has nightmares about cockroaches and heights, which usually begin "with some sort of competitive-tennis situation." Last night he dreamed that Avril's head was attached to his own like a helmet.

*Like Hal, Orin also suffers from a number of neuroses. His nightmare about Avril's head suggests that these neuroses originate in his relationship with his mother. Dreaming that Avril's head was attached to his own suggests that Orin finds Avril overbearing and suffocating. He feels that he cannot get away from his mother; her presence is so inescapable that she horrifyingly becomes part of his body.*



One of the women Orin was recently sleeping with liked watching InterLace education cartridges, and Orin ended up watching a CBC documentary about schizophrenia with her. The documentary was horrifying. As a result of the recent stress he's been experiencing, Orin begins calling the woman again.

*Again, the implications of this paragraph are pretty clear: Orin attempts to escape his neuroses through sexual promiscuity. In a sense, Orin's "drug" of choice is sex with women.*



## CHAPTER 9

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Hal is secretly getting high in the Pump Room of Enfield Tennis Academy. He uses a one-hitter because this is the most inconspicuous way of smoking weed. Only a handful of Hal's acquaintances knows he gets high, and he avoids doing it with anyone else whenever possible. Avril knows that Hal occasionally drinks, and while she worries about this because of James's alcoholism, Hal's achievements assure her that it is not a major problem. The presence of recreational drugs is "traditional" in American high schools, and there have always been students at E.T.A. who use them.

*Avril's rather relaxed attitude toward her son's drug use could be an indication that she is a reasonable, open-minded parent. On the other hand, perhaps it indicates that—like Uncle Charles and the deans at the beginning of the novel—she doesn't really care about Hal's feelings, as long as he is performing well athletically and academically.*



Most Americans take drugs or use some other method to “give themselves away.” Using drugs or alcohol is technically grounds for expulsion for E.T.A., but this is rarely enforced, particularly because the proectors of the school—who are E.T.A. alumni—tend to get high themselves, too. Hal is nonetheless completely fixated with erasing all traces of his marijuana use. He doesn’t know why he feels this way.

*Hal’s obsession with eradicating the evidence of his marijuana use recalls the behavior of Ken Erdedy, who was stuck in a repeating cycle of obsessively setting up the conditions and equipment for smoking weed before throwing away all the evidence, only to begin the whole process again. Hal is addicted to the process and the secrecy almost as much as he is addicted to the substance itself.*



Just after midnight on April 2, the medical attaché’s wife leaves her tennis evening while the medical attaché sits at home still watching the cartridge—he has rewound it once and now has it playing on the loop. He sits staring at it, his dinner untouched, having peed his pants. Meanwhile, Mario is tasked with filming E.T.A. students playing tennis, so they can visualize their mistakes and learn to correct them.

*This is the first real indication that there is something unusual and perhaps sinister about the entertainment cartridge the attaché is watching. He has lost control of basic human functions, overwhelmed by whatever kind of entertainment is on the cartridge.*



## CHAPTER 10

*Autumn – Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland.* Most addicts who commit crime in order to buy drugs do not choose violent crime, but rather opt for burglary. Don Gately is a 27-year-old narcotics addict with a preference for Demerol and Talwin, and also “more or less a professional burglar.” He has a surprisingly upbeat disposition. One day he decides to break into a house without realizing the owner is still home, lying in bed with a cold. Gately’s associate confirms that the safe in the house can be opened easily, and because Gately is desperately craving a fix of narcotics, he decided to go ahead with the burglary despite the owner being home.

*As we will come to see, Gately is one of the main characters in the book. Although the first time we are introduced to him is when he is burgling someone’s house, this decision is presented in a somewhat sympathetic light. It is clear that Gately doesn’t want to harm anyone, but rather just wants to some money in order to buy drugs. While we may not condone Gately’s actions, he is not presented as ruthless or evil.*



The homeowner, Guillaume DuPlessis, begs Gately not to gag him because his illness means he can only breathe through his mouth. In exchange, he tries to offer Gately tips about where to find valuable items in the house. However, unfortunately due to his cold DuPlessis’s words do not even sound “human” to Gately. Gately balls up a kitchen cloth and tapes it inside DuPlessis’ mouth. DuPlessis is in fact “the right-hand man to the most infamous anti-O.N.A.N. organizer north of the **Great Concavity**.” He has moved to Boston to act as a liaison between Québec separatists and Albertan right-wing extremists, who are aligned only in their militant resentment of the Great Concavity.

*O.N.A.N. stands for the Organization of North American Nations; as will become clear later in the novel, it is a super-nation comprised of Canada, the US, and Mexico, and was formed largely as an excuse for the US to “gift” the highly toxic Great Concavity to Canada. Secessionists like DuPlessis want to both break up O.N.A.N. and separate Quebec from the rest of Canada. DuPlessis’s identity is thus another small, seemingly arbitrary detail that becomes important much later.*



After Gately and his associate leave, DuPlessis remains bound for hours, slowly suffocating from a combination of nasal congestion and the towel taped over his face. Eventually DuPlessis dies. The chapter ends with a list of technological innovations originating in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.

*The end of this chapter begins to indicate more heavily that the world of the novel is a dystopia: although it may be full of technological innovations, it is also rife with strange, disturbing events and political turmoil.*



## CHAPTER 11

3 November — *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. E.T.A. student Jim Troeltsch is ill again. The illness came on extremely quickly, and Jim can tell that it is a severe case of rhinovirus. The narrative switches to first person, and the narrator describes a dream all E.T.A. students have in which they realize that there is some evil presence in their dorm room. They see a face in the floor and realize that the face is evil. When they wake up and don't see the face in the floor, they cannot be completely sure that it is not actually there.

*By this point in the novel, illness—and especially congestion of the sinuses—has cropped up again and again. While there is no clear meaning linking all these incidences of illness yet, there does seem to be a connection between congestion and the difficulty in communicating experienced by Hal. This passage also suggests that there is something supernatural going on at E.T.A.*



## CHAPTER 12

*As of Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. E.T.A. was first directed by James Incandenza, and after his death, by James' brother-in-law, Charles Tavis. James's father, James Sr., had been both a competitive junior tennis player and a "promising young pre-method actor" who fell from grace and was no longer able to find work. James himself was also a talented junior tennis player who went on to gain a PhD in optical physics. He made experimental films that were "too far either ahead of or behind [their] time," though some were also just simply bad.

*The pressures of early talent and promise have evidently affected more than one generation of the Incandenza family. Both James and his father found success in a particular field early on in their lives, yet failed to sustain this success and ended up having to switch careers. This speaks to the well-known cliché that too much success at a young age can be harmful.*



James was a tall and awkward alcoholic, yet still managed to marry Avril, one of the only "bombshell-type females" of the academic world. Avril was a highly successful academic—yet a history of involvement with leftist Québec separatists in graduate school meant that she struggled to obtain a visa to enter the United States. Having a child (Orin) with James helped Avril to overcome this obstacle. In the five years before James's death, he gave Charles control of E.T.A. and spent all his time making documentaries and other opaque and "dramatic" cartridges. At 54, he committed suicide. He was intensely mourned by those in his many different fields: academia, film, and junior tennis.

*James and Avril certainly make an odd match, and part of what makes their union so mysterious is that we still know little about the characters themselves. For example, it is completely unclear why James committed suicide. Similarly, we don't know whether Avril ever actually loved him or if she was just using him to overcome her immigration issues.*



## CHAPTER 13

*Denver CO, 1 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Orin and the rest of his football team (the Arizona Cardinals) are flying around a stadium in bird costumes. Orin, who is afraid of heights, is hating every minute of it. He angrily thinks to himself: "I'm an athlete! Not a freakshow performer!" In the next passage, an E.T.A. student called Michael Pemulis tells a group of little kids about the effects of eating *Amanita muscaria*, a psychoactive mushroom.

*The surreal passage featuring Orin and his NFL team draws attention to the relationship between sport and entertainment. Orin's indignation at being made to behave like a "freakshow performer" suggests he believes being an athlete is something more dignified and skillful. At the same time, this publicity stunt is only incrementally more extreme than the real world of sports entertainment—after all, there really are football teams called things like "the Cardinals" who wear bird logos on their uniforms while competing against each other for peoples' entertainment.*



The narrative switches to first person again. The narrator, Hal, explains that he did not start smoking Bob Hope (an endnote explains that this is Boston slang for marijuana) until he was 15. Smoking weed helps him to go to sleep and makes him have a recurring dream in which he is playing a competitive tennis match being watched by an enormous crowd. He can see Avril in the audience, her fist raised in a gesture of “unconditional support.”

*In contrast to all the nightmares that have featured in the narrative thus far, Hal’s dream is rather comforting and sweet. Or at least so it seems—in reality, perhaps the image of Avril and her “unconditional support” actually intensifies the feelings of pressure to succeed that Hal faces from all the adults around him.*



## CHAPTER 14

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* A doctor in the psych ward of a hospital finds Kate Gompert curled up on the bed in her room. Kate is on suicide watch and has a staff member observing her 24 hours a day. The doctor tells the current staffer on duty that he needs some time alone with Kate. He looks through Kate’s notes and sees that she suffers from depression and has been hospitalized four times in the last three years. Her latest suicide attempt, which has landed her here, was “serious, a real attempt,” and the doctor is worried about her.

*This scene presents us with a new kind of institutional control: that of medical institutions, and specifically psychiatric care. Kate’s suicide attempt has led her to be placed under 24-hour surveillance, which—although obviously implemented for her own safety—has the same infantilizing effect of E.T.A.’s control of its students.*



Kate describes what she remembers of her suicide attempt to the doctor. When the doctor asks why she tried to hurt herself, she clarifies that she was not trying to hurt herself but *kill* herself. Kate says she knows some people attempt suicide out of self-hatred, but this is not why she did it. She simply did not want to keep living, because the feeling she has now, which she cannot shake, is worse than feeling nothing at all. She has always thought “depression” does not capture the feeling well, and that it feels more like horror to her than sadness.

*Sometimes the novel suggests that there is truth in clichés—this is particularly true in later sections on alcohol and drug recovery. However, in this moment Kate asserts that the clichéd understanding that suicide is about self-harm is mistaken. She seems to feel that suicide was actually a rational response to the psychological agony she was experiencing.*



The doctor points out that Kate’s depressive episodes have passed before, but she replies that in the midst of them, she is absolutely convinced she will feel that way forever. She then explains that marijuana is a factor in her depression, even though this seems ridiculous because it is not considered a particularly serious drug. Yet she explains that her addiction to weed has ruined her life. Periodically she quits, but each time she does the terrible feeling she has been describing returns. Kate tells the doctor that she has received electroshock therapy before and that she would be willing to have it again.

*Kate is now the third character in the book with a serious marijuana addiction, which is strange considering that (as Kate herself points out) marijuana is not considered to be a highly addictive or debilitating drug. The fact that so many characters are addicted to weed suggests that something about the world of the novel compels people to seek out a calming, numbing effect more than a stimulating one.*



In a brief passage, the medical attaché’s wife arrives home to find the medical attaché watching the entertainment cartridge in a “soiled” state. Although she cries out and touches him, he won’t respond to her. Eventually she turns to look at the screen too.

*The medical attaché is usually rather helpless when watching entertainment, but has clearly somehow become paralyzed by watching this particular cartridge.*



The Head Coach and Athletic Director of E.T.A., Gerhardt Schtitt, has a reputation for using corporal punishment, although it is also generally believed that these stories are exaggerated. Now he is almost 70 and less strict. He is fond of having long conversations with Mario in which he mostly talks while Mario listens. One day, while Schtitt and Mario are talking, three teenage boys walk past and make fun of Mario's appearance. Mario and Schtitt then get ice cream, as is their habit. Schtitt laughs at his own thoughts, and Mario joins in, spilling ice cream on himself.

Many of the adults who run E.T.A.—including Uncle Charles, Avril, and Schtitt—behave kindly to the students. Yet at the same time, they subject the students to immense pressure to succeed (as evidenced by the rumor that Schtitt uses corporal punishment). Placing this amount of pressure on young people arguably undercuts their otherwise kind and gentle treatment of them.



## CHAPTER 15

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Tiny Ewell is in a cab driving through Watertown, Massachusetts. Tiny's wife recently took out a restraining order against him, and Tiny is now going through detox, the first stage of alcohol rehabilitation, at St. Mel's Hospital. In the taxi, Tiny is accompanied by a rehabilitative staffer. Together they are headed for the Enfield Marine VA Hospital Complex.

This passage introduces yet another character suffering from addiction, and highlights some of the disastrous consequences that can result from substance abuse.



Meanwhile, on the afternoon of April 2, Y.D.A.U., Prince Q—'s personal physician's personal assistant goes to the medical attaché's house to check why he hasn't shown up for work. When the assistant doesn't come back, the personal physician goes to check himself, followed by two security guards from the Saudi Embassy, followed by two Seventh Day Adventists who had seen faces through the living room window and attempted to deliver a pamphlet to the residents. Now this whole group of people stands still, watching the TP (teleputer) in silence.

The entertainment cartridge that the medical attaché is watching functions as a kind of Venus fly trap, paralyzing everyone who watches it. Yet no one seems to know it is possible for cartridges to have this effect, which means that more and more people are becoming trapped by the cartridge, which—because it is has been set on a loop—just keeps playing.



## CHAPTER 16

30 April — *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Rémy Marathe sits alone in his wheelchair watching the sun set in a suburb of Tucson, Arizona. He hears Hugh Steeply, a field operative from Unspecified Services, yell and curse as he accidentally collides with a cactus. Marathe and Steeply usually speak English together, even though Fortier would prefer them to speak Quebecois French. (An endnote explains that Fortier is the leader of the USA cell of A.F.R., which a further note explains stands for *Les Assassins des Fauteils Rollents* (Wheelchair Assassins), which is “pretty much Québec's most dreaded and rapacious anti-O.N.A.N. terrorist cell.”)

Although the A.F.R. are described as widely-feared terrorists, there is a lot of comedy in this opening scene. Steeply's collision with the cactus has a slapstick effect, and there is also humor within the fact that the A.F.R. are separatists are from Quebec, defying the stereotype that Canadians are nice, conciliatory, and apologetic.



Steeple wears women's clothing and prosthetic breasts. Marathe was originally supposed to pretend to betray A.F.R. to Steeple in order to secure medical care for his sick wife, but in actual fact he is sharing real information with Steeple. (As an endnote explains, this means he is "pretending to pretend". Rather than being a triple agent as A.F.R. assume, he is in fact more like a quadruple agent.) Steeple discusses an unmarked cartridge distributed through the mail, which he calls "**the Entertainment**." He notes that the cartridge was received by a Saudi medical attaché in Boston, and that the package was sent from the Southwest.

Steeple accuses A.F.R. of having something to do with **the Entertainment**, suggesting that the cell wanted to "make an example" out of the attaché. He adds that the attaché may have had a connection to the Québécoise wife of the man who made the Entertainment, which he also calls the *samizdat*, and that the wife is rumored to have been sexually promiscuous. Marathe responds that A.F.R. are not interested in "making an example" of ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, a "major herd" of feral hamsters is traversing across the **Great Concavity**, a northeastern territory of North America that now belongs to Canada. The narrator gives advice on how to stay safe around the hamsters.

Steeple tells Marathe that the Office of Unspecified Services knows Marathe is acting as a "quadruple" agent, and asks if A.F.R. knows this too. Marathe mentions DuPlessis, who recently died during a burglary, "under circumstances of almost ridiculous suspicion." Steeple mentions that DuPlessis suspected that another A.F.R. member "tried to hold back" on the information he passed on to someone else named Luria. Marathe said that if this were true, A.F.R. would know about it. The two of them stand in contemplative silence.

## CHAPTER 17

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. On November 3, Hal and other E.T.A. students are discussing an exam in the locker room. They then quiz each other on material from a class they have tomorrow with Disney Leith, who teaches History of Entertainment I and II. Charles instituted a "Big Buddy System" at E.T.A. whereby upperclassmen are assigned to look out for a group of students who are 14 and under. Hal quite likes being a Big Buddy and sometimes sits with his Little Buddies at dinner. Hal has Italian, Native American, and Canadian heritage and is the only living Incandenza who looks "ethnic."

*In this chapter, more information about the political crisis in Quebec and its relation to the dangerous entertainment cartridge starts to emerge. However, this information is deliberately obscured by confusing detail, such as the fact that Rémy Marathe is a quadruple agent. The result is an absurd, comic twist on a conventional thriller narrative.*



*Although she is not mentioned by name, the detail about the filmmaker's wife being from Quebec tells us that they are probably talking about Avril. This begins to link multiple narrative threads of the novel together, although again, it is still highly unclear why these different threads have anything to do with each other. The final image of feral hamsters adds more absurdist humor, once again through implying that something generally thought to be tame should actually be greatly feared.*



*The phrase "circumstances of almost ridiculous suspicion" has a double meaning. Marathe is primarily claiming that the way in which DuPlessis died was extremely suspicious; yet at the same time, "almost ridiculous" describes pretty much everything we have witnessed about Marathe, A.F.R., Steeple, and the Entertainment thus far.*



*The History of Entertainment instructor's name is a humorous nod to the Walt Disney Company. (In a surreal twist of fate, the professorship David Foster Wallace was given at Pomona College in 2002—six years after Infinite Jest was published—was endowed and named after Roy E. Disney, a Disney executive who was Walt Disney's nephew.)*



Hal and the other E.T.A. students complain about how tired they are. They have class and training seven days a week, and dream of having time off to relax. One kid calls Schtitt a Nazi, and another student—who is known for sucking up to Schtitt—objects. Back in Tucson, Steeply talks to Marathe about someone called Rod Tine’s love for Luria. Marathe comments that it is better to commit yourself to loving your nation than to loving a woman. He hums the American national anthem.

*As becomes ever clearer over the course of the novel, Marathe and the other A.F.R. members are some of the only characters who have a clear sense of purpose in life outside of the pursuit of substances, entertainment, fame, or sex. Yet it’s also an open question if loving one’s country is any more noble than these pursuits, or just another kind of addiction.*



## CHAPTER 18

3 November Y.D.A.U. Hal and a group of other students discuss the struggle they endure at E.T.A. and wonder if it is all worth it. Kent Blott admits that he’s started to think that even if he succeeds in achieving a career as a pro tennis player, that will only lead to “more suffering.” They discuss the student rankings and the fact that tennis, as an individual sport, makes them “deeply alone here.” These days Hal gets high so regularly that if he hasn’t smoked weed by dinnertime his mouth fills with saliva. LaMont Chu discusses the different “Types” of E.T.A. student, some of which he considers worse than others.

*Hal is clearly not the only E.T.A. student with a precociously mature understanding of life. At the same time, it’s clear that although the E.T.A. students understand why life there takes a heavy emotional toll, this does not necessarily make it any easier. They may discuss their feelings with each other, but the individually competitive nature of tennis ultimately keeps them in isolation.*



Troeltsch reflects on the repetition of tennis playing and suggests that becoming a good tennis player involves training yourself to act in an automatic, machine-like fashion. He observes: “The point of repetition is that there is no point.” The boys then discuss what to do if you feel the need to fart during a match, but then realize you actually need to poop. It’s almost time for dinner. Sometimes, Mario is allowed to ring the triangle that signals mealtimes. Hal tries to calculate if there’s enough time for him to smoke weed before getting to the dining hall.

*E.T.A. students may be unusually mature and reflective, but they are also still adolescent boys (hence the discussion of farting and pooping). Life under such tight institutional control clearly exacerbates the pressure they already face as competitive junior tennis players, as shown by Hal’s desperate calculations to see if he has time to smoke before dinner.*



## CHAPTER 19

*Mario Incandenza’s First and Only Even Remotely Romantic Experience, Thus Far.* Around 7 pm one day in October Y.D.A.U., Hal and Mario walk together through the E.T.A. grounds. Mario can tell that Hal wants time alone and thus lets him slip off while Mario himself walks through the autumn leaves. Suddenly, a girl called Millicent Kent, who is the #1 Singles on the Girl’s 16-A squad, comes walking over. She tells Mario that she saw a silver tripod in the thicket, and they try to find it together. Millicent admits that, despite her extraordinary talent, she doesn’t like tennis that much and prefers modern dance, even though she’s not very good at it.

*Millicent is yet another example of someone whose talent and success does not make them happy. Indeed, her preference for modern dance over tennis shows that “doing what you love” is not necessarily a recipe for success—in fact, frequently it is the opposite.*



Millicent takes Mario's hand and tells him about her father's fetish for wearing clothes belonging to female relatives. Suddenly, Millicent pushes Mario's head into her ribcage and confesses that she has had a crush on him for a long time. She tries to take off Mario's pants and Mario tries to tell her that he is very ticklish, while Hal calls Mario's name in the background. Millicent thrusts her hand into Mario's pants, which makes him laugh uncontrollably. Hal locates them and the three of them walk out of the thicket. On the way, they stumble across the tripod.

*In Infinite Jest, sex is rarely presented in a sensual or appealing way. Instead it is usually bizarre, aggressive, and disturbing. In this case, Mario's first sexual experience is more of an assault. We don't know how he feels about it beyond his instinctive physical reaction of laughing because he was ticklish.*



## CHAPTER 20

30 April – *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Steeply points out that Boston is the home of the creator of **the Entertainment**, and Marathe replies that it is also the city nearest to the **Great Concavity** and Québec. Marathe asks why Steeply is never sent into the field as himself; he mentions that “the last time” Steeply was pretending to be Haitian. Marathe has a reputation for having a “near-perfect” memory, but he himself knows that his memory is flawed.

*The fact that Steeply is sent into the field in comically extreme disguises—first in blackface, then crossdressing as a woman—is another surreal, comic (and somewhat offensive) take on the thriller genre's use of disguise.*



## CHAPTER 21

30 April – *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. A guru sits in the lotus position on top of the towel dispenser of the E.T.A. weight room. No one knows where he came from, but he can always be found there and is now “an E.T.A. institution.” He gives useful advice on avoiding injury and licks the sweat off of students with his tongue, although this isn't thought to be a sexual thing. Some of the newer kids think he is creepy and object to his presence. He is “supposedly” named Lyle.

*The bizarre character Lyle is somewhat akin to a stylite, a Christian ascetic who lives on top of a pillar, praying, preaching, and abstaining from worldly sustenance. His ongoing presence confirms that E.T.A. is a highly unconventional institution with a potentially questionable approach to student wellbeing (and also potentially supernatural or at least surreal elements).*



The narrative switches to first person again. In misspelled English and a Boston dialect, the narrator describes a mission to get high with Poor Tony and someone called C. The three buy heroin from Roy Tony at the Brighton Projects, then steal NyQuil from CVS in Central Square. They plan to rob a foreign student, but instead end up robbing a drunk man who is not a student, even taking his shoes. The men now have \$400 in cash and take the Orange line to Chinatown to buy more heroin from Dr. Wo.

*Recall that Roy Tony was mentioned in the chapter narrated by a young black woman named Clenette. In that chapter Roy Tony was presented as a physical and sexual abuser who was on parole from prison; in this one we see that he is a drug dealer. The overlapping map of the different narrative threads steadily builds a fuller picture.*



When the narrator, C, and Poor Tony cook up and inject the heroin they purchased from Dr. Wo, they realize it is laced with something—likely Drano. C screams while blood flows from his eyes and mouth. He dies, and the narrator and Poor Tony leave his body in a dumpster. Poor Tony vows to get clean, and on Christmas Day he “depart[s] for green pastures.” Meanwhile, after spending time at his mom's apartment, the narrator decides to go into detox.

*Again, we are confronted with what can be the truly horrifying reality of substance abuse. The narrator and Poor Tony's decision to abandon C's body is an act of cruelty and negligence; yet at the same time, if caught they could be held responsible for his death, which was not really their fault.*



## CHAPTER 22

3 November Y.D.A.U. Orin calls Hal and asks why Hal always sounds so out of breath when he answers the phone. Orin jokingly implies that it is because Hal has been masturbating, when in fact it is because he has been secretly getting high. Orin talks about the desperate heat of Arizona, asking Hal to describe snow for him and admitting that he is “heat-crazed.” Orin explains that he met someone special, and then asks Hal about the Canadian separatist movement.

Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House was founded by a weathered addict who had come to believe that “total self-surrender” was the only way to successful recovery. The founder was so committed to Alcoholics Anonymous that he refused to tell others his name. In the period just after he opened Ennet House, the founder would make new residents eat rocks to test their commitment to sobriety. (This practice was eventually overruled by government authorities.) The founder died of a brain hemorrhage in the Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-To-Install Upgrade for Infernatron/InterLace TP Systems for Home, Office, or Mobile, at the age of 68.

## CHAPTER 23

*From Internal Interlace-System E-Mail Memo CAH-NNE22-3575634-22, Claims Adjustment Headquarters, State Farm Insurance Companies, Inc., Bloomington IL 26 June Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland.* An employee of State Farm Insurance forwards an email to other employees with a message saying “guys, get a load,” adding that the person who wrote the email was found to have a blood alcohol content of .3+, which exempts State Farm from liability. The email is from a bricklayer named Dwayne R. Glynn. He explains how he fractured his skull, collar bone, and both ankles through an accident involving a DIY pulley system at work. There are multiple stages to the accident, some of which are cut off as only the first page of the email has been forwarded.

*Hal may be the younger brother, but he seems to be more intelligent than Orin, something Orin recognizes by asking Hal about Canadian separatism. Orin also doesn't know Hal as well as he thinks he does, which is shown by his joke about Hal masturbating.*



*The Ennet House founder's comically extreme belief in self-surrender points to some of the most important questions in the book, including: under what circumstances is self-surrender necessary? When does submitting to an institution or ideology go too far? And does such submission necessarily entail sacrificing one's own sense of agency? The founder's rock-eating practice may be ridiculous, but the questions it raises are difficult and serious.*



*This strange digression, while having no direct narrative connection to the rest of the novel, nonetheless touches on the same themes: addiction, responsibility and agency, and corporate dystopia. The cruelty of the State Farm employees making fun of Glynn's claim strengthens the novel's implication that there is something distinctly evil about corporate culture.*



## CHAPTER 24

*Hal Incandenza's First Extant Written Comment on Anything Even Remotely Filmic, Submitted in Mr. Ogilvie's Seventh-Grade 'Introduction to Entertainment Studies' (2 Terms, Required), Enfield Tennis Academy, 21 February in the Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken, @ Four Years After the Demise of Broadcast Television, One Year after Dr. James O. Incandenza Passed from this Life, a Submission Receiving Just a B/B+, Despite Overall Positive Feedback, Mostly Because its Concluding ¶ was Neither Set Up by the Essay's Body nor Supported, Ogilvie Pointed Out, by Anything More than Subjective Intuition and Rhetorical Flourish.* This chapter takes the form of Hal's essay described in the chapter title. Hal discusses the changing concept of the "hero" in North American culture of the 1970s-80s. He compares the "classic" hero of Chief Steve McGarrett in *Hawaii 5-0* to the "postmodern" hero of Captain Frank Furillo in *Hill Street Blues*. Hal discusses both the character traits of the two figures and the technical dimensions of how they are filmed. He notes that class discussions have established that North American audiences prefer the postmodern version of the hero, and predicts that following this archetype there will arise "the hero of non-action."

There are several metafictional elements to this chapter. Firstly, including the essay is itself a postmodern technique, which links the ideas that Hal is discussing to Infinite Jest itself. Furthermore, Hal himself is something of a postmodern hero. He is certainly a "hero of non-action," and also subverts the usual status of a hero by the fact that the story isn't overly focused on him. Rather, he is just one of an enormous ensemble of characters.



## CHAPTER 25

*Enormous, Electrolysis-Rashed Journalist 'Helen' Steeply's Only Putative Published Article Before Beginning her Soft Profile on Phoenix Cardinals Punter Orin J. Incandenza, and her Only Putative Published Article to Have Anything Overtly to Do with Good Old Metropolitan Boston, 10 August in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Four Years After Optical Theorist, Entrepreneur, Tennis Academician, and Avant-Garde Filmmaker James O. Incandenza Took his Own Life by Putting his Head in a Microwave Oven.* This chapter consists of the article by Hugh/Helen Steeply described in the chapter title. The article describes a 46-year-old Boston woman who was the second North American citizen to receive a "Jarvik IX Exterior Artificial Heart." At first the heart transplant was a success and greatly improved the woman's quality of life; however, tragically her heart (which was in her purse) was snatched by a drug-addicted "transvestite purse snatcher" in Harvard Square. The woman cried out: "She stole my heart!" and then collapsed. The heart was found smashed to pieces behind the Boston Public Library.

This is another highly surreal chapter, which emerges from the joke of literalizing the saying "she stole my heart." The exterior artificial heart is yet another example of an impressive yet counterintuitive, bizarre, and somewhat sinister technological development that has taken place in the world of the novel. Carrying around an artificial heart in a purse is surely a recipe for disaster—as the woman's fate shows.



## CHAPTER 26

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*Alphabetic Tally of Séparatisteur / Anti-O.N.A.N. Groups whose Opposition to Interdependence / Reconfiguration is Designated by R.C.M.P. and U.S.O.U.S. as Terrorist / Extortionist in Character.* This chapter is a list of Anti-O.N.A.N. groups with a key to denote whether the groups are Quebecois, environmental, separatist, violent, and/or extremely violent. The groups listed include *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (which is designated extremely violent) and six others.

*Although the political background of how O.N.A.N. came to be formed has not been explained yet, this chapter reveals that opposition to the super-nation is diverse, intense, and dangerous.*



## CHAPTER 27

*Why—Though in the Early Days of Interlace’s Internetted Teleputers that Operated Off Largely the Same Fiber-Digital Grid as the Phone Companies, the Advent of Video-Telephoning (a.k.a. ‘Videophony’) Enjoyed an Interval of Huge Consumer Popularity—Callers Thrilled at the Idea of Phone-Interfacing Both Aurally and Facially (the Little First-Generation Phone-Video Cameras Being Too Crude and Narrow-Apertured for Anything Much More than Facial Close-Ups) on First Generation Teleputers that at that Time Were Little More than High-Tech TV Sets, Though of Course They Had that Little ‘Intelligent-Agent’ Homuncular Icon that would Appear at the Lower-Right of a Broadcast/Cable Program and Tell You the Time and Temperature Outside or Remind You to Take Your Blood-Pressure Medication or Alert You to a Particularly Compelling Entertainment-Option Now Coming Up on Channel Like 491 or Something, or of Course Now Alerting You to an Incoming Video-Phone Call and then Tap-Dancing with a Little Icon Straw Boater and Cane Just Under a Menu of Possible Options for Response, and Callers did Love their Little Homuncular Icons—but Why, Within Like 16 Months or 5 Sales Quarters, the Tumescient Demand Curve for ‘Videophony’ Suddenly Collapsed Like a Kicked Tent, so that, by the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Fewer than 10% of all Private Telephone Communications Utilized any Video-Image-Fiber Data-Transfers or Coincident Products and Services, the Average U.S. Phone-User Deciding that s/he Actually Preferred the Retrograde Old Low-Tech Bell-Era Voice-Only Telephonic Interface After AI, a Preferential About-Face that Cost a Good Many Precipitant Video-Telephony-Related Entrepreneurs their Shirts, plus Destabilizing Two Highly Respected Mutual Funds that Had Ground-Floored Heavily in Video-Phone Technology, and Very Nearly Wiping Out the Maryland State Employees’ Retirement System’s Freddie-Mac Fund, a Fund Whose Administrator’s Mistress’s Brother Had Been an Almost Manically Precipitant Video-Phone-Technology Entrepreneur... and but so Why the Abrupt Consumer Retreat Back to Good Old Voice-Only Telephoning?* This chapter provides a three-part answer to the long question in the chapter title. Firstly, people find “videophony” far more stressful than audio-only calling. On an audio call, you can do other things while pretending that your attention is entirely devoted to the person on the other line. With video calling, people have to show that they are giving the other caller their full attention or else seem rude. The second problem is that video calling is also disturbing for image-conscious people (which the narrator argues is pretty much everyone). People tend to be horrified by their own image during the video call, leading psychologists to define a new condition called *Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria* (VPD).

Reading this account of the problems with “videophony” is fascinating from a contemporary perspective, given that—unlike during the time when Wallace was writing—video-calling is now widespread. The problems this chapter describes are accurate, although perhaps not as extreme as is suggested here. On the other hand, while “VPD” may not exist in reality, cosmetic surgeons have recently coined the idea of “Snapchat dysmorphia,” which basically amounts to the same thing.



In response to the issue of VPD, a new technology arose called High-Definition Masking, which began as a way of making a flattering composite image of users' faces but then turned into actual masks people would wear while video-calling each other. However, ultimately the masks themselves ended up causing more psychological distress. They were replaced by something called a Transmittable Tableau, which was a doctored image of someone who slightly resembled the caller but who was extraordinarily attractive.

In the end, however, videophony was a failure. This demonstrates a trend wherein a new form of technology is initially greeted with enthusiasm, before customers have an issue with it that is then solved by further technological fixes—yet these “fixes” undermine the original technological development such that consumers ultimately abandon it. In this case, returning to audio-only calls became “a kind of status-symbol of anti-vanity.” At the same time, people’s evident resistance to interacting with one another face-to-face allowed “teleputerized” shopping and home delivery services to flourish.

All junior tennis players ranked above #64 are subject to urine tests four times a year. This includes many E.T.A. students, and about a quarter of them would not be able to pass the urine test, and thus buy clean urine from Michael Pemulis. Pemulis attends E.T.A. on the “coveted” James O. Incandenza Geometrical Optics Scholarship, and is more talented at math and science than at tennis. He gives Hal clean urine for free in exchange for Hal’s help with the verbal side of academics. At 17, Hal is ranked the fourth-best American under-18s tennis player and the sixth-best on the continent.

## CHAPTER 28

*Winter B.S. 1960 – Tucson AZ.* The narrator of this chapter addresses someone called Jim (James Incandenza). They discuss Jim’s mother, who was a “long-suffering wife and breadwinner.” She once had a small part in a movie with Marlon Brando, who moved with the grace of a tennis player. The narrator predicts that Jim will be a “near-great” and “truly great” tennis player. At this point it is revealed that the narrator is Jim’s father, James Sr.. He admits that on the day his son beats him at tennis, he will cry with “an obliterated father’s terrible joy.” Jim is currently ten years old, with a “quick little scientific-prodigy’s mind.”

*Again, this is something like an exaggerated version of what is happening in our contemporary reality. In the age of virtual reality, Snapchat filters, and photo editing apps, what Wallace is describing doesn’t really seem so far-fetched.*



*This part of the chapter is where the description of videophony’s trajectory diverges most from reality. While there may be negative side effects from new technological developments, in reality it is rare for the new technology to be abandoned in favor of a return to existing methods. People usually adapt to new technologies no matter how dystopian they might first appear—in part thanks to companies’ strong financial interest in them doing so.*



*This passage explores the multiple ways in which E.T.A. students are subjected to evaluation. Each student is ranked in tennis, and in addition is subject to academic assessment. Then their behavior is also monitored, for example through the drug tests they are made to take. While none of this is unusual or unique to E.T.A., it does illustrate that life as a student there means being constantly monitored and judged.*



*In a very obvious way, James Incandenza’s childhood and parents are plagued by the same issues that will affect his own family. James Sr., his wife, and James Jr. are all preoccupied with precociousness, talent, and success. James Sr. feels threatened by his son, in part due to his insecurities about failing to succeed in his own tennis career.*



James Sr. trains Jim in tennis, teaching him to think of himself as a body and nothing else. He offers Jim a drink of something, and Jim initially refuses until his father insists. James Sr. then forces him to put down a book about refractive indices and focus on playing tennis. Jim reacts badly and his father reprimands him for being oversensitive. James Sr. says that the family is moving back to California in the spring. He then bitterly recalls the memory of his own father, Mario Sr., refusing to watch any of his tennis matches when he was a teenager.

Mario Sr., who James Sr. also calls “Himself,” ended up coming to a match only once, accompanied by a client. James Sr. heard the client remark that he was a good tennis player, to which Mario replied: “Yes, But He’ll Never Be Great.” At this point James Sr. had already slipped on something and was falling to the ground. The fall destroyed his knees forever, and made him learn “what it means to be a body.”

## CHAPTER 29

4 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Michael Pemulis travels through Boston, taking an indirect route in case he is being followed. An extremely powerful drug called DMZ has become the second most difficult substance to find in North America; it originates in a rare mold that only grows on other molds, and is known as “the single grimmest thing ever conceived in a tube.” Boston drug users have nicknamed it Madame Psychosis after a “cult radio personality” on M.I.T.’s student-run station, WYYY. Mario is a devout listener. Pemulis gets home to his E.T.A. dorm and immediately calls Hal, who gives the code indicating that he would like to buy something from Pemulis.

*Again, the problems of the Incandenza family are shown to have occurred in every generation. Jim’s alcoholism seems to have come from his own father, and James Sr.’s insecurity about tennis stems from Mario Sr.’s cruel indifference to his achievements. The fact that the family names are repeated emphasizes this sense of recurring patterns.*



*Here Mario Sr.’s remark becomes a kind of curse. James Sr. may have already been falling when Mario uttered it, but as soon as Mario says the words James hits the ground, injuring himself and ruining his capacity to be a “great” player.*



*Recall that at the beginning of the novel, Hal mentions a moment in childhood wherein he ate a piece of mold. Some interpretations of Infinite Jest hold that this mold was DMZ, or at least a component of it, and that Hal’s inability to communicate stems from his consumption of it. However, there is a division of opinion over whether the DMZ stayed in his system and was synthesized through changes in his body’s chemistry later in life, or if—as we will see eventually—James’s spirit later drugs Hal by depositing DMZ on Hal’s toothbrush.*



## CHAPTER 30

*Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, Narrated by Hal Incandenza, an 11.5-Minute Digital Entertainment Cartridge Directed, Recorded, Edited, and—According to the Entry Form—Written by Mario Incandenza, in Receipt of New-England Regional Honorable Mention in Interlace Telentertainment's Annual 'New Eyes, New Voices' Young Filmmakers' Contest, April in the Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-to-Install Upgrade for Infernatron/Interlace TP Systems for Home, Office or Mobile (Sic), Almost Exactly Three Years After Dr. James O. Incandenza Passed from this Life. This chapter is narrated in the form of instructions, beginning with an instruction of how to wear a red E.T.A. shirt. The narrator (Hal) also gives instructions on how to play tennis and excel at E.T.A. He then remarks: "Here is how to handle being a feral prodigy." He gives further instructions on how to survive screenings of his father's art films, how to turn down a date, how to endure a growth spurt, and how to "be no one." Hal finishes with a recommendation of different medications and balms.

There is tension between the long, detailed chapter title and the content of the chapter. The title seems to imply (through the clause "according to the entry form") that it is unlikely that Mario himself wrote the film. Indeed, the tone of the film—including the phrase "feral prodigy"—does not sound like the kind of language Mario would use. It's unclear if this means that Hal wrote it instead.



## CHAPTER 31

*Selected Transcripts of the Resident-Interface-Drop-in-Hours of Ms. Patricia Montesian, M.A. C.S.A.C., Executive Director, Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (Sic), Enfield MA, 1300-1500H., Wednesday, 4 November – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* In the first transcript, an Ennet House resident complains about the way another resident drums his fingers on the table. In the next, a resident complains that Patricia hasn't given a definition of "alcoholic," while also describing his life in a way that makes it indisputably clear that he has a drinking problem. Another resident describes having to refuse Percocet during a trip to the Emergency Room on account of their sobriety. Another asks for a prayer for those considering suicide, while another complains about something in an upstairs toilet that won't flush.

This chapter takes the form of an anonymous chorus of voices. The fact that we don't know the identity of each of the residents highlights the connections and similarities between people's experience of recovery. This sense of similarity is an important part of the ideology of recovery. People can help each other get through it because they have experienced a similar trajectory themselves.



In another transcript, a resident fretfully wonders why he is finding it difficult to stop taking cocaine considering that he obviously wants to. Another resident objects to the framing of alcoholism as a "disease," considering that the prescribed "cure" is prayer. Another complains about the fact that they are being kicked out and asks where they are supposed to go. Another protests being punished for using mouthwash, considering its low alcohol content. Another complains about a fellow residents' farting, while another expresses concern over their loss of hope.

Some of the residents' complaints may seem silly (such as the one about farting), but there is also a strong basis for sympathy with their concerns. Detox, recovery, and sustained sobriety are obviously extremely difficult. Like much of the novel (and especially the parts about addiction), this chapter is both comic and deeply emotive.



## CHAPTER 32

*Late October Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* The show before Madame Psychosis's on WYYY is called "Those Were the Legends That Formerly Were," and features students reading in "silly cartoon voices." WYYY's engineer is an asthmatic graduate student on work study; the only paid host on the station is Madame Psychosis, who sits behind a screen so no one can see her and smokes. Her show has a fairly small but very reliable listener base. On it, she discusses a wide range of topics, though film is one of the most consistent. Once, she read out instructions for making U-235 (used in nuclear weapons), which—although this was not particularly complex or secret information—got her in a lot of trouble with the M.I.T. administration.

Avril Incandenza quit her studies at M.I.T. to focus full-time on designing E.T.A.'s curriculum. E.T.A. is one of the few sports academies in North America with a rigorous academic program. There is a six-term Entertainment Requirement on the basis that students who are going to become professional athletes should also know how to be entertainers. Despite the fact that WYYY emits a high-pitched sound while Mario listens to it in the dining room, Avril doesn't stop him. Mario would love to talk to Madame Psychosis, but would also be too scared to do it.

Madame Psychosis has a somewhat negative worldview, and for a while only discussed depressing books on her show. Avril retains the Canadian habit of eating supper very late, just before bed, and twice a week Hal is allowed to eat with her (as well as Uncle Charles and Mario). For dessert, she serves "high-protein-gelatin squares" which are like "Jell-O on steroids." The dinner always ends in the same way, with Hal and his mother exchanging the exact same words before Hal leaves at around 1 am.

Ennet House is one of several satellite units that sit on the grounds of Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital. The other units include a methadone clinic. A methedrine addict in Ennet House laughs at the sight of the people who have been refused methadone that day and told to come back tomorrow. Her laugh is so violent that she drops the binoculars she was holding onto the beloved Corvette of Calvin Thrust, a sober retired porn actor, making a dent in the car.

*The opening of this chapter explores a different side of fame and success: cult fame, the kind of appreciation that comes from a small group of people who love something even more because it is not widely appreciated. Madame Psychosis's scientific abilities and interest in film bring to mind another character: James, who had a PhD in "optical physics" as well as being an avant-garde filmmaker.*



*This passage's discussion of the link between sport and entertainment is significant. Of course, there are many levels on which sport is a form of entertainment—it would be reasonable to argue that this is sport's primary purpose in the public sphere. On the other hand, the book often presents tennis as having a deeper meaning than "just" entertainment, suggesting that tennis is more like a philosophy or way of life.*



*On the surface, Hal's relationship with Avril seems to be close. He is certainly able to communicate with her better than he could with James, whose very presence made him choke. At the same time, is robotically exchanging the exact same set of words with Avril much better?*



*Once again, silly, light-hearted comedy is mixed with dark themes. The porn actor Calvin Thrust and his Corvette are clearly ridiculous, but the cruelty of the unnamed resident who laughs is disturbing. Being unable to get methadone could easily cause the addicts waiting to relapse.*



Another unit houses veterans with Alzheimer's, and another is nicknamed "The Shed." (An endnote explains that this is because residents are "stored" rather than "housed" there, and that residents are united by the fact that they are "debilitatingly phobic"—essentially paralyzed by fear.) The final unit, Unit #7, is boarded up and known as the place where Ennet House residents go to secretly relapse. For this reason, any Ennet House resident who enters Unit #7 is immediately discharged. Some Ennet House residents have custodial or kitchen jobs at E.T.A., which sits on a flattened hilltop right behind Unit #7.

*The area surrounding Ennet House is essentially a sea of institutions, all of which serve slightly different functions, yet which are united by the fact that they each have a specific reputation and purpose. The residents of (or visitors to) each institution are imagined to behave in a certain way by being there, such as the people paralyzed by phobia in The Shed. In this sense, each individual's identity becomes collapsed into the identity of the institution.*



## CHAPTER 33

6 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. It is 4:10 pm in the E.T.A. Weight Room, and a group of students are completing their weight training while yelling aggressive, almost sexual encouragements to each other. The narrator comments that spending time in Ennet House will reveal a host of new information, such as the fact that quitting a "**Substance**" often triggers outbreaks of acne, that even industrial-strength earplugs cannot block out some snores, and that the majority of people arrested for drug and alcohol offences were sexually abused as children. Another fact is the paradox of recovery: only once an addict is truly "enslaved" by their addiction will they want to seek recovery, but by that point their Substance of choice will be the only thing giving their life meaning.

*One of the major questions around substance abuse is whether people are biologically inclined to develop addictions or if it is all the result of socialization. This fits into a broader consideration of how much agency people have when it comes to addiction. The fact that most people arrested for sex and drug offences were sexually abused as children suggests that socialization is a big factor, and that there should be lenience when it comes to punishment for drug and alcohol-related crimes.*



The narrator gives more facts: in Boston, penises are nicknamed "units." People are less smart than they think they are. Sleep deprivation, gambling, work, shopping, shoplifting, sex, abstinence, food, exercise, prayer, and cartridge-viewing can all be forms of "abusable escape." Many American adults can't read. Craving a **Substance** can feel so intense that it is as if you will die if you don't get it. Statistically, people with a lower IQ find it easier to overcome an addiction than those with a higher IQ. Most people addicted to Substances are also "addicted to thinking." Surprisingly, "it is more fun to want something than to have it."

*As someone who heavily intellectualizes addiction, it is clear why Wallace includes these details about the relationship between addiction, intelligence, and thinking. Yet the statistic about high and low IQs is perhaps a little ethically concerning. People with higher IQs tend to already have more wealth and resources than those with lower ones, so is it's potentially problematic to suggest that they also need more help in recovery.*



Still more facts: God acts through human beings, and probably doesn't care if you believe in him/her/it. Most Ennet House residents have tattoos, and this is partly because getting a tattoo is something people are likely to do while intoxicated. The permanence of the tattoo actually increases the feeling of intoxication that comes with the decision to get one. Tiny Ewell expresses this theory to anyone who will listen, which usually includes Kate Gompert, as she does not have the will to get up and walk away. Ewell believes there are two types of people with tattoos: those who feel quietly proud of them, and those who feel regretful.

*Willpower is an important idea within addiction and recovery. Kate Gompert's character takes the concept of having insufficient willpower to an extreme degree. For Kate, lack of willpower isn't about poor self-discipline, laziness, or a habit of making bad choices. Instead, it is so extreme that it creates total inertia, almost as if Kate is a physical object with no force acting on it.*



Tiny Ewell then comes up with a third category: Bikers, who are “one-man tattoo festivals.” The most regrettable tattoos are the ones men get of women’s names, such as Bruce Green’s tattoo that reads MILDRED BONK. After two months of obsessive thinking about tattoos, Ewell asks Don Gately if prison tattoos should constitute a whole separate category. Gately, who usually ignores Ewell partly because he often doesn’t understand what Ewell is saying, explains how prison tattoos are usually made. Gately believes that Ewell’s obsession with tattoos is a product of his sobriety and will eventually subside, which Ewell finds patronizing.

Michael Pemulis, Trevor Axford, and Hal Incandenza are in Pemulis’s dorm room with the DMZ tablets Pemulis has acquired. Pemulis explains how rare the tablets are and how many people would like to get their hands on them. He explains that no one really knows how many hits are in each tablet. Pemulis got the tablets from French Canadian insurgents who didn’t know how much they were worth. Hal, Pemulis, and Axford know they will need to set aside 36 hours of time to experiment with the tablets. They will also need time to conduct medical research about DMZ’s potential addictiveness and side effects, something about which Hal is particularly insistent.

With all this in mind, they plan to take the drugs on the weekend of 20-21 November. However, in order to have this time off Pemulis will need to make the traveling list for the Tucson-WhataBurger Invitational, which is unlikely, as his rank has remained consistently low.

## CHAPTER 34

*7 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Joelle van Dyne always feels depressed when parties come to an end. Molly Notkin is currently holding a party to celebrate passing her Oral Exams for the PhD program in Film & Film-Cartridge Theory, where she and Joelle met. Joelle thinks about committing suicide by locking herself in Molly’s bathroom and overdosing on drugs. She dreams of an end to her crack addiction, which she can no longer pretend is under control. She hates crack now and wants to stop using, but also feels like she can’t live without it.

*The social dynamic between Tiny Ewell and Don Gately is fascinatingly complex. Gately’s inability to understand anything Tiny Ewell is saying could be a product of differing class and educational backgrounds, which theoretically gives Ewell power over Gately. Yet Gately has a lot of wisdom that Ewell doesn’t, particularly when it comes to sobriety. This results in Ewell claiming to feel patronized by Gately.*



*It is somewhat endearing that even when it comes to taking drugs, Hal and his friends have a distinctively nerdy approach. Their extensive research and preparation is in fact exactly what is advised when it comes to taking substances with intense effects. However, there is also a distinct recklessness in what they are doing. DMZ is rare and mysterious, and the fact that they don’t know how many hits are in each tablet could prove extremely dangerous.*



*Somewhat perversely, the promise of taking DMZ may be just the incentive Pemulis needs to work hard enough in tennis that he improves his rank.*



*Although Joelle and Molly are characters who have just been introduced, Joelle’s crisis is something that many other characters have also experienced thus far. There is thus a distinct sense of familiarity to her narrative, even though the particular circumstances are different.*



## CHAPTER 35

*Chronology of Organization of North American Nations' Revenue-Enhancing Subsidized Time™, By Year.* The order of subsidized years is as follows: 1) Year of the Whopper, 2) Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, 3) Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, 4) Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken, 5) Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster, 6) Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-to-Install-Upgrade for Infernatron/InterLace TP Systems for Home, Office, or Mobile (*sic*), 7) Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland, 8) Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, and 9) Year of Glad.

Walking through Boston, Joelle thinks about Québécois separatists and how pointless their actions seem, but this is in part because drug-addicted and suicidal people find it hard to understand why anyone cares about anything. Before his death, Jim (Incandenza) filmed Joelle for many hours but never let her see the footage. Joelle nicknamed him “Infinite Jim.” After Orin left, Joelle went through a phase of getting high and cleaning. At this point it is revealed that Joelle is Madame Psychosis.

That morning, Joelle freebased cocaine “for the last time” and threw away all her paraphernalia. She then picked up 8 grams of crack from her dealer, telling her that this really was the last time and paying double the usual amount as a kind of goodbye present. While she is waiting for the T at Davis Square, an older black man approaches her and, unusually, Joelle agrees to engage in conversation with him. She shows him her ID card for the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, which was founded in London in 1940 by the wife of an MP.

## CHAPTER 36

*Putative Curriculum Vitae of Helen P. Steepley, 36, 1.93 M., 104 KG., A.B., M.J.A.* This chapter begins with Helen Steepley’s resume, which includes one year as a graduate intern at *Time* magazine, five years at *Southwest Annual*, one year at *Ladies Day*, and her current job at *Moment* magazine based in Arizona.

The hilarious names of the corporately-sponsored years, some of which are so long that they are deeply impractical, point to the absurdity of the corporate dystopia in which the novel is set. The money earned through naming rights trumps all other considerations about these ridiculous names and the impracticality of their use.



In this passage, several seemingly disparate aspects of the narrative are braided together. As someone with links to Boston, drugs, mental illness, filmmaking, M.I.T., and the Incandenza family, Joelle is at the intersection of many different parts of the world of the book, some of which overlap only through her.



*The Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed* is the kind of invention that has Wallace’s signature all over it. An organization that mixes absurdist humor with grim reality, it supports the idea that people gravitate toward institutional affiliation—no matter how obscure and bizarre the cause for that affiliation.



Helen Steepley is, as we know, a fake identity. Being in disguise as a journalist allows Hugh/Helen to pursue investigations without being outed as a spy.



Molly attends her party dressed as Karl Marx, a costume she originally donned in order to deliver a critique of post-millennial Marxist Film-Cartridge Theory from the perspective of Marx himself. Joelle arrives wearing her face veil. At the party, several guests are dancing the Minimal Mambo, an “anticraze” popular in Y.D.A.U. that basically looks like standing still. Joelle was Orin’s lover and James’s “optical beloved” for about two years each. Joelle thinks about James’s suicide, wondering how he made the microwave work with its door open, and wonders if she is responsible for his death.

*It often seems that everything in the world of the novel is a slight twisted, exaggerated version of what exists in our own reality. For example, graduate students really do passionately critique Marxist film theory (yet usually don’t do so dressed up as Marx). Similarly, while the word “anticraze” is an invention of Wallace’s, many trends are formed as backlashes to existing trends in reality.*



A woman at the party seems to be “in love with her own breasts.” In snippets of conversation, the partygoers discuss cartridges, the cheese being served, Heideggerian philosophy, the **Great Concavity/Convexity**, and the “cartridge-as-ecstatic-death rumor.” In Molly’s bedroom Joelle spots her own monograph (an endnote details that it is entitled *Theory and Praxis in Peckinpah’s Use of Red* and that it is published as part of the series *Classic Cartridge Studies*). She thinks about how much fun freebasing was at the beginning. Neither James nor Orin showed any interest; Orin because of the urine tests he had to undergo for football, and James because his **Substance** of choice was alcohol.

*Joelle’s decision to remove herself from the party highlights how isolated she feels due to her drug addiction. As an earlier part of the chapter noted, she finds it hard to understand how people care about things. This is a significant contrast to the excitement at the party over the “cartridge-as-ecstatic-death rumor,” which of course refers to the Entertainment. The film scholars’ excitement suggests that their passion for avant-garde film may be self-destructive, as they are not taking the threat of the Entertainment seriously.*



In Molly’s bathroom, Joelle has to improvise after throwing away her paraphernalia. When her hands first start trembling with excitement while preparing the crack and assorted equipment, she knows “she like[s] this more than anyone can like anything and still live.” As she gets to the end of her careful preparations, she finds the idea that she will never see all the people she knows again “sentimental and banal.” Through the door, someone asks if anyone is in the bathroom. Joelle inhales while the person continues knocking and complains about a weird smell emerging from the bathroom. After a few blissful moments Joelle vomits into the bathtub.

*In the bathroom, Joelle has a similar realization to other addicts who hit “rock bottom”: it dawns on her that if she keeps using drugs, she won’t survive. Yet instead of taking this as an incentive to get clean, Joelle decides that she might as well die, and that she should do so by overdosing on the very substance that she loves too much. This is a similar to the idea of the Entertainment—death by “too much fun.”*



Enfield is “composed almost entirely of medical, corporate, and spiritual facilities.” The final passage of the chapter describes the geography of Enfield in detail, ending with a restatement of the proximity between E.T.A. and Enfield Marine.

*Again, in this part of the novel many of the seemingly different strands come together, in part due to their geographic proximity.*



## CHAPTER 37

5 November – *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Orin calls Hal and Hal tells him that he's picked an "interesting" time to call, as Hal is clipping his toenails, a sound Orin hates. Hal describes the nail clippings flying straight into the wastepaper bin, which he and Orin compare to the feeling of having a particularly successful streak while playing their respective sports. They then discuss superstitions. Orin admits that he thinks he's being followed "by handicapped people," although he also dismisses it as likely a product of his imagination. He mentions that he is being profiled in *Moment* magazine, and that the journalist keeps asking about Orin's family. He's now realized that the story seems to mostly be about James.

Orin says the journalist is unusually large, but "weirdly sexy." Orin says he's reluctant to discuss family matters with the journalist, and reviews the details of James's suicide with Hal. Hal notes that no one except Mario really talks about James or his suicide these days. Orin asks who found James's body, and Hal replies that he did, at the age of 13. Orin mentions that the journalist's name is Helen. Orin asks about the P.G.O.A.T.—Joelle—and Hal explains that she hasn't been around E.T.A. since she and Orin broke up.

Hal explains that James had sawed a head-shaped hole in the microwave door, and that there was a bottle of Wild Turkey whisky next to him on the counter when he died. Orin grows more and more horrified by the details of the suicide, and Hal tells him not to feel bad, while casually mentioning the fact that Orin didn't come to the memorial service. Orin comments on how traumatized Hal must have been, and Hal recalls the grief counseling Avril made him attend. He describes the grief counselor as insatiable, and says it was "the most brutal six weeks of full-bore professional conversation anybody could imagine."

At the time, Hal voraciously consumed books and other material about grief in order to give a convincing account of his feelings, with little success. The fact that Hal couldn't manage to tell the counselor, "a top-rank authority figure," what he wanted to hear was deeply disturbing. Hal was suffering enormously: he lost weight, couldn't sleep, was losing matches, and getting B grades. He was petrified that he was going to "flunk grief-therapy." In despair, Hal paid a visit to Lyle, who told him that instead of being a "student of grief," he should start reading books for grief professionals in order to gain insight into the counsellor's perspective.

Orin dismisses his own concerns about being followed by disabled people as nonsense. However, as readers we know that his fears could actually be well-founded, as it is possible that he is being followed by the A.F.R. This would make even more sense considering he is also being profiled by the magazine that Hugh/Helen Steeply works for. In light of the meeting between Steeply and Rémy Marathe, Orin probably is being followed by the A.F.R.



It is somewhat shocking that until this moment, Orin didn't know that Hal was the person who discovered James's body. This highlights that even though the brothers talk often, there is still a communicative impasse between them, as they cannot talk about the most painful and difficult subjects in both their lives.



Again, we see that Hal has a distanced, detached relationship to his own emotions. Rather than experiencing them in an organic, authentic way, he thinks about his grief counselor's insatiable appetite to hear him speak about grief. As in the beginning of the novel, Hal is more concerned with how people around him will react to his emotions than he is to his emotional experiences themselves.



Hal sees everything in life as a test and dreads failing. This is clearly the result of growing up in both a family of precocious high-achievers and in the educational institution that they founded. Again, it doesn't seem to have occurred to him to just speak honestly with the grief counselor and reveal whatever he was feeling about James's death. Instead, he is desperate to please the counselor because he is a figure of authority, showing how much he has been shaped by hierarchical institutions.



Orin is incredulous about this twist in the story, but Hal insists that from then on, everything changed for the better. He misbehaved in exactly the way the books for grief professionals suggested he would, dramatically confessing that the first thought he had on entering the room with James's body was "that something smelled delicious!" He then acted out the process of grief he'd learned from the books, and left the counsellor in a euphoric state. Hal explains that he was always disturbed by the fact that the counsellor would keep his hands hidden under his desk, but during their final session he realized it was because his hands were deformed. This made him laugh hysterically, forcing him to flee the room.

*Just as every character in the novel seems to have some kind of addiction, so too does every character seem to be damaged or deformed in some way. Hal felt that he had to give a "perfect" performance of grief in order to satisfy the counselor, but it turns out that—like Hal himself—the counselor also had a secret of which he was ashamed. Hal's uncontrollable laughter shows that in addition to being damaged, everyone is also capable of cruelty.*



## CHAPTER 38

6 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. It is the annual meet between E.T.A. and the Port Washington Tennis Academy, hosted at P.W.T.A. in Long Island as it is every year. Players from the losing school have to sing a silly song during the end-of-meet supper, and the headmasters have to partake in an "even more embarrassing tradition," though no one knows what it is. Last year E.T.A. lost, but this was before the school gained John Wayne, who is from Quebec and was the top ranked player in Canada at the age of 16. He is now #2 in the U.S.T.A., only a couple of points behind #1, who is believed to be "hiding out" from him.

*This passage illustrates the mix between silliness and seriousness that characterizes the junior tennis world. As the second part of the passage shows, rankings are taken extremely seriously; E.T.A.'s acquisition of John Wayne recalls the buying of players by professional teams. At the same time, the silly song mentioned at the beginning of the passage is a reminder that the players are still schoolchildren.*



Hal, meanwhile, who was ranked #43 in the U.S.T.A., has undergone a "quantumish competitive plateau-hop" and is now ranked #4. Wayne begins to play; his game has "a kind of automatic beauty." He falls backwards at one point and his body makes a dramatic sound hitting the tarp, but he is okay and returns to the match immediately. His game is "less alive than undead." At E.T.A., he spends most of his time alone. No one knows how he feels about the fact that his Canadian citizenship has been revoked. His "undead" disposition will likely make him a cool, effective, businesslike professional tennis player.

*Wayne is the best junior player depicted in the novel, and it is thus significant that his playing style is described as "automatic" and "undead." This supports the earlier passage about robotic repetition being the key to athletic success. Yet once again, passion and sensitivity play a role in athletic success for many people.*



Pemulis has been vomiting from nerves before his match. He needs to win if he's going to make the traveling list for WhataBurger. Most E.T.A. students receive corporate sponsorship in the form of gifts (they are not permitted to receive money). Wayne is sponsored by Dunlop and Adidas, and Hal by Dunlop, Nike, and Air Stirrup (a brace company). Teddy Schacht has stopped caring about winning, and ever since has started playing better tennis. He glances up at Wayne's match and, although he is too far away to see the score, he can tell that Wayne is decimating his opponent.

*The corporate sponsorship rule means that E.T.A. students resemble (a slightly less ridiculous version of) the years in the novel. Brands sponsoring high school teams (although not individual players) is actually something that happens in reality, again showing that the supposedly exaggerated version of the world presented in Infinite Jest is actually not very different from real life.*



Coach Schtitt's attitude to success at tennis is that in order to succeed, one must "both care a great deal about it and also not care about it at all." Wayne and Hal's games are both at the point of "carnage." All the adults in the audience wear the kind of tennis outfits that indicate that the wearer does not actually play tennis.

Both Pat Montesian and Don Gately's AA sponsor say that Gately should take a lesson in "patience and tolerance" from Geoffrey Day, a new resident at Ennet House. During morning meditation, Day talks about how he practices gratitude and accepts the truth of various clichés. He has been at Ennet House for six days, having just detoxed from his red wine and Quaalude addiction. He is a professor at a junior college in Medford and has spent the past few years "in and out of a blackout."

Gately has witnessed dozens of people enter Ennet House only to relapse, end up in prison, or die. He could tell Day that the clichés are easy to believe but "hard to actually do." Gately has been "**Substance**-free" for 421 days. One resident, Burt F. Smith, is attempting sobriety for about the 50th time. Gately, who has been working at Ennet House as a residential staffer for four months, is suspicious of another resident, Charlotte Treat, and her obsession with embroidery, considering how it revolves around needles.

Gately has been taking mental notes on all the residents. Emil Minty is a punk heroin addict who has been homeless since the age of 16. Bruce Green, who has the MILDRED BONK tattoo, has even worse insomnia than the average Ennet House resident. Randy Lenz is a "seedily handsome" low-level cocaine dealer. Charlotte Treat is a former sex worker who is now exceptionally "prim." Gately himself is 29; before he became an AA devotee, his **Substance** of choice was oral narcotics. Today Pat is interviewing three potential new residents. Time passes slowly and painfully in Ennet House. Lenz asks Day the time, and this provokes a squabble between them. Gately farts.

The E.T.A. players make a triumphant return from P.W.T.A., having watched their opponents sing the silly song. As usual, Schtitt does not ride in the bus with the students back to E.T.A., but instead takes his own mysterious private route. In the bus, someone passes round a leaflet offering a kingdom to the person who "could pull Keith Freer out of Bernadette Longley." Freer and Longley had been discovered having sex under an Adidas blanket during an E.T.A. bus trip back in September. Now, Longley's doubles partner says that it's a shame someone on the bus is "so immature."

*Coach Schtitt's mantra about success in tennis is typical of the genre of wisdom that may have profound meaning, or may mean nothing at all.*



*Day's fondness for clichés links this passage back to the previous one featuring Coach Schtitt's questionable wisdom about tennis. This in turn highlights the similarity between athletic training and drug and alcohol recovery. In both cases, cliché wisdom can be useful and profound—or it can be nothing more than irritating nonsense.*



*Gately's suspicion of Charlotte Treat's embroidery hobby might seem ridiculous, but this is the kind of vigilance that is needed when running a recovery program. It is not so much that Charlotte is somehow considering relapsing via embroidery, but rather that the visual, tactile, and muscle memory associated with addiction is so strong she might not be able to overcome it.*



*Recovery brings together people from wildly different walks of life. Not only this, but each resident has an intense, colorful history that may not be obvious based on their current behavior. Indeed, several residents desperately want to distance themselves from their past behavior, such as Charlotte. The detail of Green's MILDRED BONK tattoo serves as a reminder that no matter how hard we try, we cannot ever truly escape our pasts.*



*Despite their talents and the unusually intense pressures they face, E.T.A. students are in a way still just ordinary adolescents. Furthermore, life inside an institution where the staff often seem to turn a blind eye to misbehavior allows them to explore sex, drugs, and other illicit activities rather freely.*



Orin left the world of competitive tennis when Hal was 9 and Mario 10. As a tennis player, Orin peaked at 13. Still, he had good grades and, considering that “mediocrity is relative” when it comes to junior tennis, he received several good offers from colleges. He chose to attend Boston University, which is not a strong school for tennis. Avril helped him make the decision, believing it was good for him to leave home but important that he be able to come back easily. With Avril and Uncle Charles’s help, Orin agreed to play for B.U.’s tennis team and secured a full ride with added benefits.

On April 1 of Orin’s senior year of college (Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar), James killed himself. Later, in a Convocation address to E.T.A., Uncle Charles explained that it would have been absurd for Avril to become Headmistress on top of her many other responsibilities, not to mention her grief. Earlier in his college career, Orin had decided not to play competitive tennis at B.U. after all, and instead, during his freshman year, made the “unlikely” switch to competitive football. This was because he’d developed an enormous crush on a sophomore baton-twirler. Although Orin had slept with many girls, he’d never felt like this before.

Orin and his doubles partner nicknamed this girl P.G.O.A.T., or Prettiest Girl Of All Time. She was so beautiful that she was “almost universally shunned,” because even the most confident guys could not bring themselves to talk to her. (It is hinted here that the girl is Joelle.) Orin wanted to switch to football to be closer to her, a decision that greatly upset the B.U. tennis coach. Yet his tryouts for the football team were “too pathetic to describe.” However, just as he was walking glumly away there was a dramatic accident involving the team’s best defensive tackle and the punter, in which all the punter’s bones were broken.

While everyone’s attention was focused on the collision, Orin kicked the football from where it had landed near him back toward them. He had never kicked a football before, but it turned out that he had an extraordinary talent for it, and he made the team after all. Orin soon developed a 69 yard-per-kick average, and his full ride scholarship was renewed for football. Within four weeks his talent at football far exceeded any talent he’d had for tennis. Then, during a Columbus Day Major Sport event, Joelle asked him to autograph a football for her father. By the end of Orin’s freshman fall, they were living together in an East Cambridge co-op.

*Thanks to attending the elite, high-intensity program at E.T.A. and the support of his family, Orin is able to attend college on a tennis scholarship despite his relative lack of talent. Indeed, the extent to which this was more Avril’s decision than Orin’s is revealed by the fact that she wanted him to attend B.U., a school very near to her in Enfield. Again, Avril is shown to be a somewhat suffocating presence in her children’s lives.*



*Considering that Orin has been portrayed as a sex addict, it is significant that he decided to switch sports to football all because of the crush he developed on a baton-twirler. Recall also that Orin’s sex addiction is blamed on his overly-intense relationship with his mother. Tennis was his connection to his home and family, but thanks to his crush on the baton twirler he was able to sever this connection and break out on his own.*



*This passage is a great example of the way that the world of the novel is exaggerated in surreal ways. For example, the detail that Joelle is so beautiful that she is “almost universally shunned” makes her beauty seem mythic or supernatural. Meanwhile, the idea that Orin could transfer to the varsity football team is ludicrous—until the horrifying yet fairy tale-like twist of the punter breaking all of his bones.*



*This happy-ever-after turn in the narrative resembles a corny movie. This is particularly true of the sudden, dramatic realization that Orin has a profound natural talent for kicking a football, and Joelle’s subsequent pursuit of him (which occurs seemingly on the basis of that talent). Sudden twists in good fortune also stand out in a novel that is otherwise so preoccupied with the depressing, tragic, and disturbing nature of reality.*



That year, Joelle spent Thanksgiving with Orin's family and Orin spent Christmas with hers in Kentucky. On New Year's Eve, Orin watched Joelle take "very small amounts" of cocaine (which he himself declined). Joelle was a "film fanatic" and Film/Cartridge major. Via Orin she developed an enthusiasm for art films and soon after began acting in James's productions. In her junior year, she skillfully films Orin playing a football game.

*Although Joelle was theoretically a way for Orin to escape the clutches of his family by quitting his tennis career, her interest in film and relationship with James mean that she instead brings Orin closer to his family again.*



## CHAPTER 39

*14 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Poor Tony has a seizure on the T after a week drinking codeine cough syrup. After the horrible events of the previous winter he has been avoiding all his old haunts in Boston, which means he cannot buy drugs and has gone into heroin withdrawal. He becomes incredibly sick, to the point that "his symptoms themselves developed symptoms." He loses the ability to control his urination, and in desperation starts ingesting cough syrup while confined to a toilet. His experience of time changes drastically and horribly.

*The description of Poor Tony's withdrawal illustrates the most grim, ugly, and horrifying side of drug use. While details such as his symptoms themselves developing symptoms seem humorous, they do not alleviate the ghastly reality of Tony's withdrawal.*



Two days after he runs out of syrup, Tony begins to withdraw from the syrup's alcohol, codeine, and morphine. Catching the Gray Line from Watertown Center, Tony realizes that he's become the kind of person people move away from on public transport. He cries in shame, shits his pants, and then has the seizure. This is a painful experience and involves multiple terrifying visions. He swallows his tongue and feels someone's hands reach into his mouth and pull it back out. His final thought is fear that people can see up his dress.

*Here Poor Tony has a painful moment of confronting his own dehumanization, which occurs both through his physical degradation and the judgment of others. That someone actually helps Tony by pulling his tongue out of his mouth comes almost as a surprise. People who are ostracized and dehumanized by the wider society are often left to suffer because people refuse to touch them.*



## CHAPTER 40

*7 November – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Every prorektor at E.T.A. teaches one class per term, and these classes are thought to be "jokes" by the students. Yet upperclassmen still compete for spots in them, both because they are easy to pass and because they are entertaining in a horrifying way. Schacht is completing his midterm exam for a class named "The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds" when he hears Troeltsch's radio program come on E.T.A.'s student-run radio station, WETA. Troeltsch dreams of a career in tennis broadcasting and has been WETA's resident sports reporter for some time.

*E.T.A.'s radio station demonstrates that the academy is a kind of world unto itself. Although the students are only children and teenagers, they perform adult, professional worlds within the microcosm of the school. This includes Troeltsch's role as the academy's sports reporter and Pemulis's role as its resident drug dealer.*



Troeltsch reports E.T.A.'s victory over P.W.T.A. in creative language. Hal is currently enrolled in a proector class called "Separatism and Return: Québécois History from Frontenac Through the Age of Interdependence," which he is finding difficult because the instructor, Mlle. Poutrincourt, teaches only in Quebécois French. Hal is puzzled by Quebécois Separatism, which has grown in intensity ever since the establishment of O.N.A.N.

(A long endnote here describes Hal on the same day, 11/7/Y.D.A.U., looking through a box of Mario's old letters and snapshots. It mentions that Avril's honors thesis at McGill was about the punctuation in Emily Dickinson's poetry. This is followed by a letter Avril sent to Orin in June, Y.W.-Q.M.D., in which she tells him news from E.T.A. and tells him she loves him and misses him. The reply, which is also included in the endnote, is a stock letter sent by the "Assistant Mailroom Technician" of the New Orleans Saints, explaining that the team's players receive too much mail to send individual replies.)

(The same endnote then recounts a phone conversation between Hal and Orin in which Hal mentions an Emily Dickinson poem. He explains to Orin that he is looking through a box of old letters, and Orin gives him romantic advice. Hal then tells him news from E.T.A., and Orin asks him what the word "samizdat" means. Hal explains that it is a Soviet idiom referring to self-published and -distributed dissident materials. He adds that the only comparable example in the U.S. would be Canadian separatist materials, although these aren't officially banned by O.N.A.N.)

(In the same endnote, Orin asks why James's name would be associated with the word *samizdat*. Hal muses that it's possible to interpret some of his films in a separatist light, but that overall James's work was "all very self-consciously American" and not overtly political. Orin admits that he is interested in all this because of his latest **Subject**, Helen, who he claims is different to all his previous Subjects. He questions Hal about Canadian separatism. Hal says he is the wrong person to ask, but still gives Orin an overview of what he's learned in Mlle. Poutrincourt's class.)

*One of the strange quirks of the novel is the idiosyncratic and inaccurate use of French. Throughout, the word Quebécois is spelled Québécois (the word can be spelled Québécois, but just one "é" is wrong). Alongside the neologisms and acronyms, this purposefully wrong French suggests the prose follows only its own rules.*



*The novel quite clearly blames Avril for Orin's neuroses, but this passage presents her in a more sympathetic light and suggests that Orin is unnecessarily cruel to her. While she may be an overly intense mother, ultimately she loves her sons and eagerly shows them affection. In return, Orin continues to push her away.*



*Recall that in a conversation between Steeply and Marathe, it was revealed that James's mysterious film (usually referred to as "The Entertainment") is also called the samizdat. This establishes a clear connection between the film and politics, and particularly the issue of Quebécois separatism.*



*Despite their Quebécoise mother, Orin and Hal do not seem to have any connection to Quebec—as shown by their ignorance around the issue of separatism. Perhaps Avril's decision to remain in the U.S., marry James, and raise three sons who identified strongly as American emerged from her own desire to reject her homeland.*



(Still in the same endnote, Hal says he thinks that Quebecois separatists hate Anglophone Canada far more than they hate O.N.A.N. Hal asks for more information about Helen, and when Orin gets cagey, Hal brings up Orin's promiscuity and fetish for married mothers. Hal angrily urges Orin to tell the truth about himself to Helen, but immediately regrets the outburst, admitting that he hates losing his temper. At this point Pemulis cracks open the door to Hal's room. Hal and Orin then discuss Quebecers' resentment of the **Great Concavity**, which disproportionately affects them. Indeed, this could be what is driving the anti-O.N.A.N. sentiment.)

(The same endnote details that Pemulis is now wildly gesturing to Hal, who gestures for Pemulis to throw him a pair of underwear. Hal tells Orin that Pemulis is there signaling that it's time for dinner. Hal, Pemulis, Struck, and Troeltsch have a tradition of smoking an enormous blunt in the woods before dinner. Orin asks why, given that all Canadians resent the **Great Concavity**, Quebecois separatists don't use this to support their anti-O.N.A.N. mission. Pemulis is getting more and more impatient and begins to gesture to someone outside Hal's window. Finally, Hal tells Orin he has to go.)

(In the final passage of this extended endnote, Orin tries to continue the conversation while Pemulis threatens to break off the antenna of Hal's phone. Hal insists that what the separatists really want is for Québec to secede, and that their anti-O.N.A.N. position is "not what it appears." He is searching under his desk for his shoe. He sneezes twice, and while this is happening Pemulis flicks off the phone console's power unit, cutting off Orin mid-sentence.) Back in the main narrative, more details emerge about the Quebecois anti-O.N.A.N. separatist movement, which has proven to be very violent.

Exhibiting almost no signs of pregnancy, Avril did not know she was pregnant with Mario until her water broke. Mario was extremely premature and "had to be more or less scraped out." He was kept in an incubator for many weeks and was named after James's grandfather, Mario Sr., who was the inventor of *X-Ray Specs!*, a mail-order novelty item. Mario Jr. ended up with a range of physical disabilities, including his small size, "withered" arms, "block feet," a squished nose, a heavy eyelid, a squint, and an "involuntarily constant smile." His skin is "an odd dead gray-green" color, which makes him look somewhat lizard-like. He always wears a police lock to help him stand upright.

*On the surface, the parallel conversations that Hal and Orin are having—one about Quebecois separatism and the other about Orin's crush on Helen—are totally unrelated. Yet we know that Hugh/Helen works for the U.S. government on issues related to Quebecois separatism, and that these two narrative threads are thus more closely related than either Hal or Orin realize.*



*The fact that this whole scene is played inside an endnote makes it difficult to assess how important it is. On one level, it seems like a completely ordinary day at E.T.A., during which Hal and his friends engage in their usual habits. However, Orin's curiosity about Quebecois separatism suggests that this could actually be a key movement within the plot—even if it is somewhat hidden in the endnotes. This emphasizes the novel's unique structure—the endnotes are equally important to the text itself.*



*This scene is a great example of how Hal is always trying to keep everyone around him happy, and how this often proves to be an impossible task. Hal tells Orin that he has to go because Pemulis is waiting, and stays on the phone because Orin keeps talking. Of course, what we never learn is what Hal himself wants.*



*Mario is just one of many characters in the novel with physical disabilities and deformities, and thus in a sense these qualities are normalized through the frequency with which they occur. Yet some of the descriptions of his body seem to be deliberately horrifying, such as his lizard-like skin, or deliberately comic, like the police lock he wears to keep himself upright. This might lead us to question Wallace's depiction of people with disabilities and deformities.*



Mario is also cognitively impaired, and he remains on the outside of life at E.T.A., although he had a special role in supporting James's filmmaking. He continues to record E.T.A. students playing tennis as well as pursuing more creative film projects. Many E.T.A. students see Mario as a mild annoyance, although Lyle loves him and Hal, who calls him "Booboo," secretly "idealizes" him. Hal thinks Avril might believe that Mario is the true prodigy of the family. Mario was the first person to give Hal a copy of the O.E.D., and when a representative from U.H.I.D. approached Mario in the Y.D.P.F.A.H., Hal told him to get lost.

While this passage appears to present a more positive view of Mario, it also contains tropes about people with disabilities that are arguably harmful. For example, people with disabilities are often presented as being inspirationally wise and morally righteous, as if they exist to make abled people feel better about life. This is arguably a component of the portrayal of Mario.



## CHAPTER 41

30 April / 1 May *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Marathe suggests to Steeply that Canadians are not the real threat, considering that **the Entertainment** was produced by an American. He points out that the American government knows the country's entire population could be wiped out by the cartridge, which A.F.R. will not force on anyone but will simply "make... available." He explains that someone already killed the U.S. by making people "forget how to choose." Steeply criticizes Marathe's overly positive view of the nation state and insists on the importance of freedom. Marathe mocks this obsession with freedom. Both are ignoring how difficult it will be for them to get down from the mountainside now, in the darkness of night.

Here Marathe and Steeply represent two sides of an age-old political divide. Marathe believes that it is important to have a purpose in life greater than oneself. For Marathe, this is serving his nation (Québec) and its people. Steeply, however, expresses the more traditionally American view that individual freedoms are sacred and must be protected at all costs. Marathe mocks this, but the real issue is that he believes that the American version of freedom is actually an illusion.



## CHAPTER 42

8 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment* *Interdependence Day Gaudeamus Igitur*. Every year a group of E.T.A. students around the ages of 12-15 get obsessed with a highly complex game called Eschaton. No one knows who brought it to the academy, though Pemulis was the one to "make it way more compelling." In the game, unused tennis balls represent nuclear warheads, and the players are called Combatants. Pieces of clothing symbolize different territories, resources, and forms of infrastructure. The "warheads" must be launched with tennis rackets. The E.T.A. administration possibly permits students to play Eschaton because it is really another form of tennis practice.

It should come as little surprise that the ritual game E.T.A. students play is a highly complex representation of international relations and warfare. Equally unsurprising is that it is a game so close to tennis practice that the E.T.A. officials allow it to take place as part of training. Eschaton becomes another way in which E.T.A. students revel in their own precociousness.



Each year a different student is appointed as gamemaster and “statistician of record,” and this year it is Otis P. Lord. Adjudicating the game can be very difficult, as each game features an avalanche of detailed developments. The damage that warheads would do to the precise regions they hit is precisely calculated. It is Interdependence Day, “an E.T.A. day of mandatory total R&R,” and Hal, Pemulis, and Troeltsch sit together on the pavilion by the East tennis courts, where Eschaton is being played. Hal refuses a toke of the “psychochemical cigarette” the others are sharing; while he wants to get high, he hates doing it in front of other people.

Shortly after, however, when Axford absent-mindedly passes the blunt to Hal, Hal accepts it and finds himself “smoking dope in public without even thinking about it.” All the older boys are now deeply absorbed in the Eschaton game unfolding in front of them. It begins to snow for the first time that fall. Pemulis, the reigning Eschaton champion and authority over the game, keeps track of the score with a pencil and clipboard. Desperately trying to add up the numbers, Lord has a moment of total confusion and appeals to Pemulis for help, but Pemulis refuses.

Lord bursts into tears, and Pemulis finally intervenes, yelling at a young student called J.J. Penn. An argument erupts over whether the snow should be counted as affecting the world of the game, with Pemulis insisting it shouldn’t. Hal, who knows he has been struck by “marijuana thinking,” finds the debate over whether the snow should be counted as real far more interesting than the actual game. Evan Ingersoll ends up aiming for a group of super-Combatant leaders in “West Africa” and hitting Ann Kittenplan on the head.

Everyone is stunned; it is the first time that a Combatant has hit another Combatant directly. Both Pemulis and Kittenplan immediately begin angrily denouncing Ingersoll, while Lord dons the “Utter Global Crisis” beanie, which has only been worn once before in Eschaton history. Pemulis is furious. Lord notes that the rules do not prohibit individual players being targeted, but Pemulis disagrees, saying if this were true it would lead to carnage in which all players were hitting each other. Yelling that if players can be targets so be it, Kittenplan grabs a ball and fires it at Ingersoll’s head.

*Now that the U.S. is part of the mega-nation O.N.A.N., Independence Day has been replaced with Interdependence Day. This passage shows how difficult it is for Hal to unwind. His shame around getting high in front of other people overpowers his desire to get high in the first place. At the same time, it is perhaps little wonder that Hal has trouble relaxing, considering that he has spent his life in an institution where both work and “R&R” are scheduled in “mandatory” doses.*



*This passage explores the intense social hierarchies that develop within an enclosed community like a boarding school. Hal and his friends have a position of authority due to their seniority. In Pemulis’s case, this authority is increased by his victorious track record in Eschaton—so much so that he feels it would be improper for him to help Lord.*



*Hal ashamedly frames his reflections as “marijuana thinking,” but the argument over whether snow should count is in a way more fascinating and profound than the game itself. The debate touches on questions of how our sense of reality is created through communication, disagreement, and consensus.*



*There is a hilarious mismatch between how seriously the Eschaton players are treating the game and how fundamentally silly it is—as best demonstrated by the “Utter Global Crisis” beanie. Yet one of the overall messages of the novel is arguably that life is so absurd that taking anything seriously is fundamentally ridiculous—even if it is also perhaps necessary to survive.*



LaMont Chu begs everyone to continue the discussion calmly while Lord calls for order, but both are ignored. Ingersoll is severely injured while Pemulis backs away with his hands in the air. The game descends into total chaos while the upperclassmen stare, astounded. Soon the players stop using tennis balls altogether and simply attack each other, and Pemulis concludes that he “told them so.” Chu is throwing up; Lord trips over him and goes flying. Hal checks his own face to see if he is wincing. Lord crashes directly into a TP. Many other players are bleeding.

This [Lord of the Flies](#)-esque descent into violence and chaos could be read as disturbing, proof of the sinister cruelty lying within children. At the same time, E.T.A. students are so strictly controlled by their institutional environment that there is something encouraging about seeing them break free and behave badly. This scene emerges as something of a necessary relief.



## CHAPTER 43

8 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment Interdependence Day *Gaudeamus Igitur*. Most Boston AA meetings are speaker meetings, meaning that members of a particular group come and speak at another group’s meeting on a reciprocal basis. The White Flag Group of Enfield meets in a nursing home on Sundays. Tonight they are hosting a group from Concord, a Boston suburb. In Boston AA, sobriety is seen as a “cosmic loan” that you must pay forward to other people. The chairperson of the Concord group shares his story while Gately listens from the front row. Despite the Interdependence Day holiday, the meeting is still packed.

As this passage indicates, AA culture varies along geographic lines, even if the overall ideology remains broadly the same. This shows that there is some leeway to tailor the program to suit regional needs (if not individual ones). However, as we have seen throughout the novel, recovery in AA is still largely about submitting to a framework that has been provided by the program.



The next speaker is called John L. Ennet House requires its residents to attend meetings and encourages them to get as close as possible to the speaker in order to identify with their story. John L. talks about how he lost his job due his alcoholism, but manages to make it funny. He then describes how he lost his wife, and although he uses the same joke structure few people laugh this time. Following this, John’s life became like “a fuckin livin death.” It is at this point in an addict’s life that their addiction becomes most horrifying; they lose all sense of themselves and although it doesn’t even get them high any more, they can’t stop taking their **Substance**.

John L.’s speech shows how AA meetings combine performance, entertainment, therapy, and church-like testimony. While everyone’s experience varies, the takeaway of each testimony at AA is the same: that addiction will ruin your life and eventually kill you, and that sobriety is the only solution to addiction. Adding humor and other performative elements keeps the testimonies fresh in the face of repetition.



Most speakers’ stories conclude “at the same cliff’s edge,” where the choice is between death or sobriety. In a sense, every AA meeting is like a “reunion” for survivors of the same disaster. Newcomers are often skeptical of AA, and this skepticism gives way to shock when they find that it actually does help to keep you sober. Gately was actually disturbed when he initially realized that AA worked, convinced that he must be in “some sort of trap.” He didn’t get *how* it could possibly work, but he kept coming anyway. People in AA always tell newcomers to keep coming and so, “robotically,” they do.

This passage highlights a key similarity between recovery and tennis. Achieving success in either requires repeating certain practices “robotically,” deliberately suppressing one’s own agency. The fact that it is surprising that this works suggests that we usually think constant agency and intention are necessary in order to make changes in our lives—but perhaps the opposite is sometimes true.



AA newcomers find themselves obeying the instructions of older members as if they have no will of their own. An Irish member of the Concord group tells his story in a heavy, almost incomprehensible accent. One of Gately's best assets as an Ennet House staffer is his skill in explaining how he came to trust AA after initially hating it. He tends to implore that no matter what you say in AA, they will not kick you out. There's even a member of the White Flag group that chooses to worship Satan as his personal Higher Power.

In Gately's first month of sobriety, he was comforted by telling everyone present at the meeting how he thought AA was "horseshit." After this, older members would come up and pat him on the back, saying that at least he seemed "ballsy" while encouraging him to keep coming. The oldest guys in White Flag cluster together in meetings and are nicknamed "the Crocodiles." They often discuss the countless people they've seen start coming to meetings and not be able to stick it out. Some return again, once more "beaten to shit" by their addiction. Sometimes they even point out men on the street who've tried—and failed—to come to meetings.

If a new member "slips" and consumes a **Substance**, they are not supposed to be judged but rather welcomed back to meetings. Even those who attend meetings drunk are tolerated as long as they don't cause too much disruption. The Boston AA groups have about a dozen "basic suggestions," which are comparable to the "suggestion" that someone jumping out of an airplane should wear a parachute. Eugenio Martinez, a volunteer staffer at Ennet House, calls addiction "*The Spider*" and argues that you have to Starve the Spider, which requires *wanting* to follow the rules of staying sober.

It's strange that clichéd truths exist, suggesting that "the truth is usually not just un- but *anti*-interesting." One of Gately's jobs as a live-in staffer is to be on "Dream Duty," taking care of people new to sobriety who have horrifying, traumatic dreams. Gately himself once had a dream about AA whose meaning was almost embarrassingly obvious, and it was at this point that he finally decided to fully surrender to the meetings. At the same time, there are still some things about Boston AA that bother him. There is too much silly jargon, and the meetings are too long.

*The lesson of Don's explanation that no matter what you do AA won't kick you out is that people crave community. This is particularly true of people with addictions, who often struggle with intense isolation. Yet even those without addiction issues want to feel accepted and like they belong, which is perhaps why so many characters submit to the control of institutions.*



*Though there are a handful of female characters who attend AA meetings and check into Ennet House, the culture of recovery as it is depicted in the novel—as with the rest of the narrative—is decidedly masculine. By congratulating Gately on being "ballsy," the tough older "Crocodiles" show him that masculine bravado is respected in AA. It's unclear if they would extend the same kindness and appreciation to a woman.*



*As well as subscribing to the broader ideology of AA, many people in recovery develop their own personal philosophies. This is a good example of mixing submission to institutional control with maintaining a sense of one's own independence and agency. Indeed, this combination seems to be vital to successfully maintaining sobriety.*



*Gately's feelings about AA show that one does not have to like or agree with every aspect of an institution in order to submit to it. In fact, it is useful to have some critical distance from the institution of which one is a member. Overidentifying with the institution could jeopardize one's own sense of self.*



Gately is fond of Ken Erdedy, who is at Ennet House to tackle his marijuana addiction. Kate Gompert, who is rarely able to leave her bed, is also there because of weed. Gately used to smoke weed “like it was tobacco,” but now he doesn’t really miss it. Gately is now speaking with Erdedy and Joelle van Dyne. There are a handful of veiled people from U.H.I.D. there that night. Joelle has just moved into Ennet House after a grisly overdose and Gately is unsure how to treat her. She seems to have made a special arrangement for her treatment with Pat that involves no minimum-wage “humility job.”

Erdedy is attracted to Joelle, partly because of her gorgeous body but also because of her veil. Joelle says she finds it odd that people say they are “here But For the Grace of God,” because “But For the Grace of God” is a subjunctive phrase and thus should introduce a conditional clause. Hearing her voice, Gately feels like he’s met her before. He thinks she’s expressing her denial through this kind of intellectual posturing.

A brief note mentions that the Statue of Liberty holds a product in her raised arm, and each year on January 1 this product is swapped by workers hoisted up there on cranes.

The next speaker at White Flag is overly rehearsed and affected. He is followed by a man who speaks in an anxious, pained manner, yet who receives a better reception because what he’s speaking his own truth. Irony is not tolerated at Boston AA meetings, and neither is blaming one’s addiction on some particular factor or other. A young woman now speaking blames her addiction on the fact that she was a teenage sex worker, that she’d been fostered by crazy parents who were in denial that their biological daughter was brain dead. The father would molest the daughter’s lifeless body in a twisted ritual.

It is not considered acceptable to blame one’s addiction on personal circumstances like this, no matter how terrible the personal circumstances are. People in the meeting react to the story with awkward discomfort. Boston’s “classically authoritarian” dictum has been carved into the men’s room: “Do not ask WHY / If you dont want to DIE / Do like your TOLD / If you want to get OLD.”

*Joelle’s place within social hierarchies is difficult to determine. Before the incident that left her deformed, she had a certain amount of social power due to her extreme beauty—though considering that she was so beautiful no one spoke to her, perhaps not as much as we would expect. Similarly, her fame as Madame Psychosis seems to bring her advantages, but it’s unclear if people actually know that this persona is her.*



*Once again, the novel suggests that high intelligence and a tendency to analyze situations makes recovery more difficult. Instead of accepting the clichés that are a part of recovery, Joelle overintellectualizes them, which makes it difficult for her to properly take part in the program.*



*This is another example of the extent to which the world of the novel has become a horrifying (and hilarious) corporate dystopia.*



*AA’s policy about not blaming one’s addiction on external factors might seem surprising, considering it is the total opposite of what is usually done in many everyday discussions about addiction. Yet even if there are obvious factors in a person’s life that have influenced their addiction (as this woman’s story shows), blaming these factors can make it difficult or impossible for addicts to get sober.*



*Again, this passage reinforces the message that while submitting to an “authoritarian” institution certainly has its downsides, in the case of addiction it is necessary. This is because of the likelihood that recovering addicts will simply die if they do not totally submit.*



## CHAPTER 44

30 April / 1 May *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Many years ago, James sought advice from Lyle after critics kept saying that the fatal flaw in all his work was plot. (An endnote here contains a “transcript-fragment” from Helen Steeply’s interview with Orin in *Moment* magazine. Orin explains how James slowly lost his sanity and that it was “funny” to watch. He discusses James’s filming style.)

(In the same endnote, Orin says that he and Hal always called James “Himself” or “the Mad Stork,” although when he first mentions this, he accidentally says “the Sad Stork.” He then explains a genre James invented called “Found Drama,” where a person is picked at random (by throwing a dart at a sheet of the White Pages) and becomes the protagonist of the drama for the next hour or so. Orin says that no real Found Drama cartridges existed, but critics still embrace it as “the ultimate in Neorealism.”)

Back in the main narrative, a woman speaks to the AA meeting about how she was not able to quit crack even while she was pregnant and ended up giving birth to a stillborn baby. She was so traumatized by the event that she went into total denial and cared for the baby as if it was alive for months. In the end, a police officer called the Department of Social Services, and the DSS agents forced her to bury the baby. She spent four months in the hospital in withdrawal, and when she emerged, she started drinking. When she asks the people at the meeting to pray for her, it doesn’t sound corny; everyone present is deeply moved.

When James would go to seek help from Lyle, he spent hours drinking whisky while Lyle drank caffeine-free Diet Coke. Mario would be there too, drifting in and out of sleep. During one of these nights he heard James tell Lyle that he would give his marriage a grade of C–. Lyle would get drunk from the whisky James was sweating out and would sometimes read aloud from William Blake.

*If readers are actually reading the endnotes, then the beginning of this chapter serves as a false start. The story about James and Lyle is merely the frame within which a completely different story is nested.*



*“Found Drama” appears to be a film version of the objet trouvé or “found object” subgenre of sculpture, wherein the artist displays a found object as an artwork with seemingly little modification. In the case of film, this type of practice suggests a dissolution of the boundary between life and art/entertainment.*



*This is one of the most horrifying stories in a novel full of horrifying stories. What is most disturbing is arguably not the physically disgusting factor of a mother caring for her dead baby’s corpse, but rather the emotional turmoil and detachment from reality that the woman clearly experienced during this time.*



*This account of the surreal scenes involving James, Lyle, and Mario somehow manages to be quite moving. There is a rare sense of trust, vulnerability, and openness within the way that these three characters share space with one another.*



## CHAPTER 45

8 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment  
*Interdependence Day Gaudeamus Igitur*. Mario's first finished and "halfway-coherent" film was of a finger puppet show, and it was such a surprising hit with E.T.A. students and staff that it is screened every year on Interdependence Day. (An endnote here explains that Charles and Schtitt spent I-Day giving presentations about E.T.A. at tennis clubs and missed the whole Eschaton fiasco. Charles has also been preoccupied with the imminent arrival of Helen Steeply on E.T.A.'s campus.) Mario gives a very short introduction to the film, which is loosely based on a political propaganda film made by James called *The ONANTiad*.

The film features a lounge singer and B movie actor called Johnny Gentle who became President of the U.S., and it mixes historical facts with Mario's own inventions. The O.N.A.N. era is introduced with President Gentle telling the Mexican President and Canadian Prime Minister: "We North Americans have to stick together... we're interdependent." The Canadian P.M. replies: "It is a smaller world, today," and this leads into the song "It's a Small World After All."

Down in the weight room, Lyle recalls an E.T.A. student called Marlon whose skin was always wet. There are almost always people in the weight room, even though it's technically locked at night. Tonight, LaMont Chu confesses that he has "an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame." He is only 11 but completely fixated on every aspect of life as a professional tennis player. Lyle responds by explaining that after the initial rush of fame, professional tennis players end up just as "trapped" and unhappy as LaMont is now. In despair, LaMont concludes that he is therefore trapped either way.

Lyle's advice tends to be straightforward and effective. Back upstairs, Mario's film features James's signature blending of clips from real and fake news cartridges. The headers are listed side by side with no indication of which ones are real. They announce the emergence of the O.N.A.N. pact, the enormous waste problem the U.S. was facing at the time, and the decision to dump this waste in the **Great Concavity**.

*Like every other part of life at E.T.A., Interdependence Day has its own complex set of norms and rituals. This includes both Eschaton and the screening of Mario's film, both of which are loosely relevant to the holiday considering that they concern geopolitics and the relationships between nations. (After all, though we don't yet know what Mario's film is about, it's based on a political film with "ONAN" in the title.)*



*Mario's childlike approach to the political events that led to the creation of O.N.A.N. is best expressed by the fact that he chooses to include "It's a Small World," the song from a children's ride at Disneyland. This is reminiscent of the ways that historic political events are oversimplified in elementary education so as to be understood by children.*



*Although LaMont is one of the only characters in the novel to admit to this obsession with fame and success, he is certainly not the only one to suffer from it. Perhaps the fact that he is able to confess to Lyle is actually a sign that LaMont is more emotionally mature than some of his fellow students. While Lyle's advice is wise, it does not end up giving much solace to LaMont, suggesting that the truth is not always comforting or helpful.*



*The mixture between fact and fiction in James and Mario's films reflects a similar mix that occurs in Infinite Jest's portrayal of world history. While the novel refers to some real people and events, it is set in a near-future where much of the world as we know it has been surreally fictionalized.*



One of Lyle's repeated phrases of advice is "Do not underestimate objects!" When Stice seeks Lyle's help about the problem of his bed moving around his room at night, he regretfully apologizes for not following Lyle's advice before, but Lyle dismisses this as no problem at all. Almost no E.T.A. students smoke cigarettes because it makes training so much more painful, but Hal is addicted to nicotine and thus chews and spits tobacco instead. He also has a compulsion issue with sugar, which—when he ingests it in significant amounts—induces strange, unappealing emotional experiences.

Mario's interest in puppets is another thing he inherited from James, who once made a short film called *The Medusa v. the Odalisque*, which depicted a fake theatre production. The Odalisque is a Medusa-like character from Quebegeois mythology who is so beautiful that anyone who looks at her turns into a precious stone. The film was not a huge success, but is far from James' "most hated" cartridge, which is undoubtedly one called *The Joke*. *The Joke*'s marketing advised viewers not to see it, which had the effect of encouraging art film fans to see it, only to find that the entire film was just a shot of the audience itself. It ran as long as anyone could bear to stay watching it.

Back in Mario's film, more headlines announce the emergence of birth defects in babies born near the **Great Concavity**, and the President Gentle administration's denial that anything shady was afoot. Having initially denied the existence of the Great Concavity, President Gentle declares it a "federal disaster" and offers disaster relief to affected citizens. His administration came to be nicknamed "The Concavity Cabinet"; Mario inexplicably depicts it as consisting entirely of glamorous black women with coiffed hair.

In Mario's representation of the meeting between Gentle's cabinet, the President of Mexico, the P.M. of Canada, and various other statesmen, Mr. Rodney Tine, the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services, announces Gentle's plan to "give it away" ("it" meaning the **Great Concavity**). The Secretary of State is appalled that Gentle let Tine persuade him to have the toxic waste dumped on that site in the first place. Yet Tine insists that the Great Concavity will be a "an unprecedented intercontinental gift," which the Secretary of State calls "a kind of ecological gerrymandering."

*Some interpretations of the novel hold that the phenomenon of objects moving around E.T.A. seemingly of their own accord is the result of James's spirit moving them. Meanwhile, the connection between Hal's sugar consumption and his strange emotional experiences could suggest that sugar activates the DMZ inside his system (from the mold he ate as a child).*



*As is probably clear by now, much of the novel is occupied with making fun of avant-garde film fans and scholars. This passage suggests that such fans have a perverse, unnecessarily masochistic relationship to art. Rather than seeking out art that they will enjoy, they deliberately choose difficult, off-putting works (such as "The Joke"). However, they still then get annoyed when the work is not pleasant to see, which suggests that on some level even avant-garde film fans actually do want to be entertained.*



*As well as jokes about women and people with disabilities, Infinite Jest also features a remarkable amount of humor based in racism. While on the surface there might be nothing wrong with depicting Gentle's cabinet as entirely staffed by glamorous black women, we ought to pause and reflect on why this is considered funny. Is it because the existence of such a cabinet is seen as incongruous?*



*The idea of the American government giving a toxic wasteland to another country and framing it as a generous gift would be ridiculous if it weren't so close to reality. Once again, Wallace exposes how absurd the current state of the world is by creating a surreal, fictionalized, but not entirely unbelievable version of the world in the novel.*



More headlines describe Gentle's effort to force Canada to accept the "gift" of the **Great Concavity**, despite the Canadian P.M.'s extreme reluctance to do so. One news cartridge announces that Gentle has isolated himself in a private suite in hospital and is engaged in extremely erratic behavior. Tine publicly claims that the President "has completely lost his mind" and is threatening to both commit suicide and bomb his own nation if Canada doesn't accept the gift.

Some E.T.A. students know that this part of the film is a "puppet-à-clef-type allusion" to the story of Eric Clipperton. Clipperton was an independent junior tennis player who owned a gun and, if he was losing a game, would play with it pressed to his head. As a result, no one could bring themselves to beat him. No one knows where Clipperton came from; the only person he befriended was Mario, who was eight at the time they met.

Hal has smoked weed four times this I-Day, and while watching the film has eaten four chocolate cannolis in half an hour. The film mentions Tine's love affair with a mysterious Quebecoise woman called Luria P——. Hal is well informed about the contemporary American advertising industry, having once written a long research paper about advertising and television for Mr. Ogilvie's Introduction to Entertainment Studies class in seventh grade. Ratings for TV networks have been falling for some time, and in his paper Hal argued that the pressure of fighting for short-term financial viability made it impossible for TV execs to adequately plan for how to adjust to longer-term changes in entertainment culture.

A trio of black and white ads for a small company that made tongue scrapers was ultimately what sealed the TV networks' fate. The ads "shook viewers to the existential core," and for a year the whole American population became obsessed with tongue hygiene. At the same time, the "big four" TV networks suffered complete financial collapse, taking the major advertisement agencies who focused on TV ads with them. A visionary video-rental mogul persuaded the big four to consolidate behind a front company she founded after predicting this exact turn of events. She advocated a future of self-selected programming, rather than viewers passively choosing a particular channel.

Thus began the cartridge era. Suddenly, televisual production no longer depended on advertising. For the first time, "personal pleasure and gross revenue looked... to lie along the same demand curve." Cartridges were played on Teleputers (TPs) and featured no ads at all. Advertising agencies were overrun with panic and chaos. The enormously successful ad exec P. Tom Veals, on learning about the lounge singer Johnny Gentle, decided to serve as the manager of his presidential campaign.

*While President Gentle (who like former U.S. President Ronald Reagan is a former actor) seems to be naïve and incompetent, Rodney Tine serves the role of the smart, sneaky, and sinister advisor who is really pulling the strings. Of course, when it becomes advantageous to him, Tine is quick to disaffiliate himself with the president.*



*To further complicate Mario's blend of fact and fiction, his film does not simply aim to represent O.N.A.N.'s political history but also the legends of junior tennis. "Puppet-à-clef" is a play on roman-à-clef ("novel with a key"), a literary genre wherein a real story is told using fictionalized names and details.*



*While the society depicted in the novel may seem to have a problematic obsession with entertainment, it is also true that Hal and other students who have taken classes like Introduction to Entertainment are much better informed about media than most people in our reality. This is significant, as it is widely believed that having "media literacy" makes people better citizens. Understanding the ways in which media influences one's life is important and empowering.*



*This is another moment in which Wallace accurately predicts our contemporary reality. At the time when he was writing Infinite Jest, on-demand TV was still in its early stages, and the total domination of streaming sites such as Netflix within the entertainment market was very far in the future. Yet Wallace had an accurate grasp of people's appetite for constant entertainment, and as such was able to accurately predict the future of our media landscape.*



*While the desire for on-demand viewing was not solved by "cartridges" in reality, there are again key similarities between the future Wallace predicts here and what has transpired in real life. The advent of streaming revolutionized advertising, as TV adverts very quickly became less popular.*



## CHAPTER 46

30 April / 1 May *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Marathe and Steeply remain on the mountainside. They both refuse to discuss how they are going to get down; Steeply is puzzled how Marathe managed to get his wheelchair up there in the first place. Marathe's eyes are closed in half-sleep, but Steeply remains standing. They discuss the ideologies of different terrorist cells, and Steeply accuses Fortier of not having a real set of principles or even opinions about political matters. Marathe comments that Americans want to "maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure," and that they think of this as the ultimate good. Each person's "right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain" is considered sacred.

Marathe and Steeply have a philosophical debate involving a hypothetical single serving of soup that two people both desire. Both of Marathe's older brothers committed suicide by throwing themselves in front of trains in their youths, and he stresses the importance of communal happiness rather than individual agency. He praises the "delayed gratification" that comes from momentarily sacrificing one's personal happiness in service of a longer-term goal. Marathe's wife, Gertraude, was born without a skull (a common side-effect of proximity to the **Great Concavity**).

Again, Marathe asks how A.F.R. could be blamed for harming the U.S. simply by making **the Entertainment** available. If Americans believe that freedom is so important, then why ban the Entertainment at all and go to such great lengths to track it down? Surely this shows that they do not *actually* trust citizens to make their own free choices. Steeply insists that there is a huge difference between the "enslaving" nature of the Entertainment and other things like alcohol or candy.

The narrative returns to the tennis player Eric Clipperton. Clipperton ended up amassing a giant collection of trophies, he did not receive an official rank as none of his victories were deemed legitimate. However, after the founding of O.N.A.N. and the establishment of an O.N.A.N. ranking system, a systems analyst who was converting the U.S. rankings into the O.N.A.N. system and did not know the background of Clipperton's success input his data such that he was placed #1 in the Under-18s Continental rankings. People wondered if Clipperton would simply disappear after this accidental success, but instead he turned up at E.T.A. shortly after, in an obviously bad state.

*Although Marathe and Steeply seem invested in their political debates, there is a sense in which these debates are doomed to remain circular because they are beginning from two very different sets of principles. Steeply ardently believes in freedom, and Marathe thinks that the version of freedom Steeply espouses is false; they thus remain in a kind of argumentative stalemate, all while being literally stuck on a mountain.*



*Steeply likes to frame Marathe's political commitments as the result of a blind allegiance to his nation. Yet as this passage shows, Marathe's actions are in fact rooted in a deeply personal tragedy: the physical deformities endured by his wife and others as a result of living near the Great Concavity. (Although being born without a skull may sound scientifically unrealistic, there are actually a few cases of babies born with much of their skulls missing.)*



*Marathe's point here is rather incisive, and illuminates some of the main philosophical questions the Entertainment raises, including: Do viewers have any "choice" at all when it comes to watching the Entertainment after they've glimpsed the screen? And should it be counted as a weapon if it only kills people by making them lose interest in living?*



*A junior tennis player who won games through threatening suicide accidentally achieving a legitimate rank through a bureaucratic error is a classic Wallace plot detail. For all the drama of Clipperton's games, any glory he achieved as a player was the result of a totally banal and unintentional slip. This is one of the many cruel ironies of life presented in the novel.*



Clipperton wanted to speak with James. At some point during the conversation Clipperton shot himself in the head, killing himself for real in front of James, Mario, and Lyle. At Clipperton's funeral in Indiana Mario still did not stop smiling, even as he was also sobbing. Mario was the one to clean up the mess that Clipperton's body made. The room where he shot himself is still used to threaten disobedient E.T.A. students, who are told they will be sent to the "Clipperton Suite" if they do not behave.

As well as being a residential staffer at Ennet House, Gately works as a janitor at the Shattuck Shelter for Homeless Males on the side. He knows some of the men who stay there, either from sobriety or from his days as a petty criminal. Gately's janitorial partner has been clean for eight years, and dreams of opening a fancy women's shoe store in a nice part of Boston.

Along with Clipperton, there is another case of a junior tennis player from Fresno, CA who killed himself by drinking cyanide after winning the Pacific Coast Hardcourt Boys' Tournament. On finding him, the boy's father tried to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, which resulted in the father dying too. The boy's mother then tried to give the father mouth-to-mouth, and before long not only her but all the boys' six siblings were dead too. E.T.A.'s staff counselor, Dr. Dolores Rusk, is notoriously "worse than useless."

Mario's film is still playing, and the E.T.A. audience members are getting increasingly fidgety. Headlines announce that President Gentle is "more or less at large." The U.S. is experiencing an economic downturn, and Luria P— is now attending cabinet meetings, where Gentle speaks nonsensically.

## CHAPTER 47

*Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* In July, Don Gately tells the White Flag meeting that he feels ashamed that he still doesn't have any sense of a Higher Power. While AA members are allowed to submit to whatever God they choose, Gately wishes someone would just choose for him. He feels embarrassed to be discussing his struggle to connect to God rather than focusing on the day-to-day "miracle" of sobriety. However, after he finishes speaking, people in the audience stand up, clap, and cheer. A biker who introduces himself as Robert F., yet whose jacket reads "Bob Death," tells Gately that it was good to hear him talk about his difficulties with the God thing.

*Of the many suicides in the novel, Clipperton's is significant in its similarity to James's. Just as Hal found his father's body, Mario (inexplicably, considering he is still a child at the time) is made to clean up the mess of Clipperton's suicide. The brothers are thus united by both having endured such a traumatic experience.*



*Earlier in the novel the minimum-wage jobs that Ennet House residents are made to take on were called "humility jobs." Yet this arguably undersells the importance of working with one's hands, engaging in productive work, and giving back to the community.*



*As has been made startlingly clear by now, E.T.A. students are in desperate need of good counseling. The extraordinary pressures of junior tennis alongside the everyday challenges that face adolescents are evidently too difficult for most E.T.A. students to cope with alone. Yet rather than seeking help from counseling, most turn to recreational drugs instead.*



*Recall that Luria P— has already been mentioned at the beginning of the novel, when James speaks with Hal in disguise and questions him about Luria in relation to Quebécois separatism.*



*In discussing his struggles identifying a "Higher Power" Gately risks alienating himself from the AA community. However, his words turn out to have the opposite effect. Clearly, people are relieved to hear him articulate something that they have all been thinking but are too afraid to say. This is another pertinent way in which institutional control is shown to work on people: by making them afraid or ashamed of voicing their own thoughts.*



When AA members talk about how everything gets better through abstinence and recovery, they fail to mention the enormous amount of pain these things involve. The urge to take **Substances** usually disappears after about six months of sobriety, but it is also at this point that people start “getting in touch” with their most painful feelings and memories. Both Gately’s father and stepfather beat his mother, who was also an alcoholic. As a child, Gately began drinking his mother’s vodka after she passed out so that she wouldn’t drink any more. She developed cirrhosis and attended AA meetings sporadically, relapsing in between.

*The novel’s grimly realistic account of life includes a refusal to romanticize recovery. While the book leaves no room for doubt that recovery is absolutely necessary, it also doesn’t hesitate to show the most grisly, difficult, and painful aspects of the recovery process. Furthermore, there is nothing redeeming about this negative side—no “happy ever after” where the pain goes away. The only redemption is in not dying through addiction.*



## CHAPTER 48

*Very Late October Y.D.A.U.* Hal has a recurring dream in which his teeth crumble and splinter inside his mouth. Mario is distressed by Madame Psychosis’s unexplained absence from WYYY. For a while a grad student calling herself Miss Diagnosis filled the slot, but no one mentioned if or when Madame Psychosis will come back. Now no one covers the show and the station just plays ambient music for an hour.

*Both Hal and Mario are clearly suffering from intense stress (for very different reasons). Yet despite sharing a room, the brothers remain isolated in their own psychic distress, unable to help one another.*



## CHAPTER 49

*9 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* There are currently 12 available spots at E.T.A., which Charles wants to fill only with male applicants because the current 64:72 male-to-female ratio needs correcting. At the moment, some girls are having to be housed in the boys’ dorms. Charles is deeply stressed by the many administrative conundrums currently affecting the academy. In passing it is then hinted that Charles is actually Mario’s father. At E.T.A., training times are split by gender and staggered, and the best players get up the earliest to begin their day. In between drills, students swig and spit Gatorade from little paper cups to combat “cottony mouth.” Today it is chilly but not too cold once the sun comes out.

*Infinite Jest is filled with clues that are mentioned in passing and that can easily be missed. As a result, interpretations of the novel have been built communally, with many people contributing theories based on evidence that is extremely subtle and easy to miss, yet nonetheless important. (Another theory suggests that Hal is the son of one of the 30+ Near Eastern medical attachés Avril has slept with, although the evidence for this is less compelling than the Mario/Charles theory.)*



A bucket is put out in case anyone throws up during the final conditioning drills (which, an endnote explains, are nicknamed “Pukers”). At 15, Hal injured his ankle while moving in a similar way to the Side-to-Side drill, so he gets to take this drill easy to avoid hurting himself again. Schtitt yells that he is seeing “sluggish drilling, by sluggards.” He accuses LaMont Chu of decreasing the effort he puts into training ever since he developed this obsession with tennis fame. When Hal suggests that they need to “adjust” to the cold conditions, Schtitt replies that they should instead focus on a world inside the world where there *are* no conditions.

*Coach Schtitt’s humorous insistence that the students must combat the cold by attempting to delude themselves is typical of the kind of unrealistic demands that coaches can make in order to push players to the edge of their capabilities. Of course, a negative side effect of Schtitt’s advice is to further isolate the students, who are already divided from each other and effectively living alone in their own private worlds.*



Schitt adds that if it is difficult for them to adjust between the warmth and cold of inside and outside, then they could simply do everything—sleep, eat, study—outside. At his own gymnasium in Germany, he says, he was forced to live inside the tennis courts for months in order to “learn to live inside.” He also points out that if the boys want to be somewhere else, they can always leave. When they are there, they must be fully present.

Ennet House’s other residential staffer is called Johnette Foltz, but it is rumored she might be leaving soon. Everyone at Ennet House hopes she will be replaced by the attractive Danielle Steenbok, who is “rumored also to attend Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.” Back when he was drinking, Gately’s driver’s license was revoked after he was given a DUI. Gately originally came to Ennet House to avoid going to jail, where he knew that drugs and alcohol would be easier to find than they were in the outside world.

Pat, who is “both pretty and not,” was divorced by her first husband because of her alcoholism. She had several stints in rehab before a stroke led her to give up drinking for good. When she first arrived at Ennet House, aged 32, she was almost completely paralyzed and used a wheelchair, yet still signaled that she was willing to eat a rock to prove her commitment to sobriety. Her right hand, on which she wears a brace, remains in a permanent claw position. Gately had been one of her favorite residents when he arrived.

Boston AA members compare the meetings to a cake mix: it doesn’t matter if you understand how it works, all you have to do is relax and follow the instructions and you’ll get a cake. Gately is Ennet House’s resident chef, which is odd because he isn’t a very good cook. However, no one dares complain (at least not outright). Some even feign pleasure at the disgusting food he makes.

## CHAPTER 50

*Pre-Dawn, 1 May – Y.D.A.U. Outcropping Northwest of Tucson AZ U.S.A., Still.* Steeply mentions a Canadian biomedical experiment in the 1970s wherein electro-implantations were to be placed in epileptics’ brains as a form of treatment. During testing on animals, scientists discovered that firing particular electrodes inside the brain produced “intense feelings of pleasure.” All of the animals used in the tests became fixated on pressing the lever that delivered the pleasure, and eventually died as a result of exhaustion and fatigue.

*Schitt’s point that the boys can leave if they want is a classic mark of asserting control within an institutional context. While it may literally be true that any student who decides to do so can leave E.T.A., the consequences of such a decision would be so immense that the choice Schitt refers to is really an illusion.*



*One thing that is made emphatically clear in the novel is that people in recovery do not magically gain a robust moral compass simply by getting sober. The residents’ lust for Danielle Steenbok and the excitement over the rumor that she is in Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous is a perfect example of this fact.*



*Another way in which sexism surfaces in Infinite Jest is via the fact that almost every female character is evaluated on the basis of their attractiveness. Pat is not a romantic interest of anyone in the novel, yet it is still mentioned that she is “both pretty and not,” a detail that seems irrelevant to the rest of the way her character is portrayed.*



*Although he is hardly free of flaws, Gately is certainly one of the “heroes” of the novel and is depicted in a sympathetic light. One aspect of this is his care for others. While he may be a terrible cook, he nonetheless nurtures the Ennet House community through food.*



*The experiment described here suggests that humans are not unique in their addiction to pleasure. If animals have the same compulsion, one could potentially assume that it is biologically determined, and therefore not within people’s capacity to change. Of course, such a position stands at odds with AA’s philosophy regarding addiction.*



When it came to testing on humans, the scientists presumed that it would be difficult to find volunteers. However, around this time the details of the experiment were leaked, and suddenly the lab was overrun with hundreds of volunteers, mostly young and able-bodied. As a result of this surprising twist, a whole new psychology study about the human desire for pleasure was conducted on the eager volunteers. The team of psychologists concluded that they were totally normal, average young people. The Canadian government was horrified by the whole situation. Steeply points out that the experiment is a good analogy for **the Entertainment**.

New resident Amy J. tries to get out of eating Gately's boiled hot dogs by claiming that Red Dye #4 gives her "cluster migraines," while Joelle claims to be a vegetarian. Shockingly, Pat tells Gately to pick up eggs and peppers so the two new residents can make a quiche instead. Gately drives Pat's car. He hasn't had sex in two years, and never sober. At 29, he is having wet dreams again. He drives through Inman Square to up near Harvard. He passes the storefront of Lucien and Bertraund Antitoui, Quebecois brothers who are members of a "not very terrifying insurgent cell."

The Antitoui brothers were friends with DuPlessis before he was "martyred." The cartridge-rental store they own is called Antitoui Entertainment and doesn't have many customers. Through the door, Lucien catches sight of two figures in wheelchairs on the shop floor. When he realizes that it is the A.F.R., Lucien begins to "whimper." At that moment, a snag in zipper causes the entirety of his pants to unravel and fall from his legs. He clutches a gun and desperately tries to cover himself. The A.F.R. members greet him in French, but Lucien (unlike his brother) cannot understand French despite being from Quebec.

The leader of the A.F.R. takes Lucien's gun from his hand, still speaking to him in French and ignoring the fact that Lucien has shit himself. The leader asks about an entertainment that Lucien and Bertraund have recently acquired. Lucien is not able to answer, and the A.F.R. members begin searching the shop. One of them strokes Lucien's mouth with the sharp handle of Lucien's own broom. He then shoves the broom down Lucien's throat. Happy memories flash through Lucien's mind before he dies. Having left his body behind, he is "free, catapulted home" over the **Great Convexity** at great speed.

*Here there is a twist in the story that is decidedly unflattering to humans. That young people eagerly volunteered themselves for a test even though they knew the animals involved ended up dead demonstrates the extreme extent of people's desire for pleasure. Yet even though Steeply claims this is a useful analogy for the Entertainment, it is in fact still unclear how much agency people have in each case, and whether they can therefore be blamed for "choosing" to seek pleasure in such a destructive way.*



*As we have seen, the early stages of recovery bring lots of difficulty, trauma, and pain. Yet this passage hints at some positive sides of the beginning of recovery as well. Gately may feel like an awkward teenager now that he is having wet dreams again, but this is actually a sign that he is regaining a healthy interest in sex after losing it through his addiction.*



*The Antitoui brothers are entirely foolish, comic characters. This is shown in many ways—by the fact that they are involved with terrorism as members of a "not very terrifying" cell, that they run an unsuccessful store, that they are terrified of A.F.R., and that Lucien inexplicably cannot speak French.*



*Throughout the novel we have been told that the A.F.R. are terrifying, but this is the first time that this statement is actually supported by action. The gruesome murder of Lucien shows that the A.F.R. are totally merciless, even when it comes to their own countrymen. The surreal end of the chapter is a surprisingly sentimental portrayal of life after death.*



*Pre-Dawn*, 1 May – Y.D.A.U. *Outcropping Northwest of Tucson AZ U.S.A., Still*. Steeply asks if Marathe has ever considered watching **The Entertainment**. First Marathe confirms that the A.F.R. have a “read-only” copy of the cartridge, and then he adds that he’s never been tempted to watch it. Steeply mentions that the author of the Entertainment was “a cutting-edge optics man.” There is a theory that the optical density of the film, combined with its “realism,” are what make it irresistible. Marathe dismisses the theory as “irrelevant.”

*This is the first time that we receive any sense of why the Entertainment is actually so addictive. That the explanation is a rather scientific one based in optics suggests that the Entertainment hypnotizes people on a subconscious level.*



## CHAPTER 51

*Winter, B.S. 1963, Sepulveda CA*. This chapter is also narrated in the first person. (An endnote mentions that it is taken from Chapter 16 of *The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion*, an edited collection published in Karlsruhe, Germany. The author of this chapter is not listed.) The narrator’s father is drinking a tomato juice and asks for help while he presses down on a bed in their house. After much pressing, the father finally shouts “Eureka,” because he has located the one part of the mattress that squeaks. At this point it is revealed that the narrator is Jim (and his father is thus James Sr).

*The endnote contextualizes this chapter, showing that it is taken from an edited collection of memoirs written by the scientists who discovered “DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion.” This fact, along with the phrase “Chill of Inspiration,” suggests that the childhood memory Jim is recounting will somehow provide context to his work as a scientist.*



At this point James Sr. is working as “the Man from Glad” and is made to wear a white outfit and wig. He believes that the bedframe is making the squeaking sound, likely because of a loose bolt. Jim and his mother, who is also in the room, chain-smoking, both believe the mattress is responsible for the sound. With much difficulty, they take the mattress out of Jim’s parents’ bedroom and into the hallway. Back in the bedroom, the space underneath the bed is dirty and even smells, and James Sr. angrily asks when the room was last “deep-cleaned.” Jim mentions that his bed squeaks, too.

*Like many of the female characters in the novel, Jim’s mother does not play a central role but rather lingers in the background. Of course, in the time period this essay is recalling, women were often treated as secondary figures whose significance was confined to domestic work. This is shown through James Sr.’s angry comment about the room not being properly cleaned.*



Suddenly, James Sr. throws up, which happens quite often after he comes home from work. Jim tries to give his father some privacy and keep working at the bedframe himself, but then James Sr. faints on top of the bedframe, breaking it. While James Sr. remains unconscious, Jim can hear his mother vacuuming. He goes into his own bedroom and tries to make his own bed squeak by diving onto it. As he does so, he accidentally topples a lamp, which in turn knocks off the doorknob of Jim’s closet door. The doorknob rolls in a particular way that Jim represents with a diagram. He explains: “This was how I first became interested in the possibilities of annulation.”

*The beginning of this passage reminds us that James Sr. is an alcoholic and indicates that, contrary to Jim’s beliefs, he is probably not drinking a “tomato juice.” As is common of children who have parents with addiction issues, Jim has learned to be somewhat self-sufficient and to find ways not to let his father’s alcoholism interfere with his life. Rather than fretting over James’s unconscious body, Jim is able to find escape through thinking about science.*



Johnette Foltz takes Ken Erdedy and Kate Gompert to an NA meeting, where the members always end up discussing their problems with marijuana. People at the meeting describe the stages of marijuana use, addiction, and withdrawal in intense detail. They also complain that doctors and hard-drug addicts don't tend to feel sympathy for marijuana addicts because the drug is supposedly so gentle and harmless. Erdedy notices that no one mentions depression, at least not explicitly. Gompert pretends to shoot herself with her fingers.

Like AA, NA meetings end with the members holding hands in a circle, reciting a mantra, followed by the Our Father prayer. However, unlike AA, NA attendees then hug one another without saying much. Gompert is reluctant to join in but eventually does; Erdedy, on the other hand, is horrified and goes to stand by himself near the coffee. A man tries to hug him and Erdedy refuses, instead introducing himself. The man says his name is Roy Tony. Erdedy explains that he is simply "not a hugger," and Roy Tony seems offended, as this implies that he is one.

Roy Tony lifts Erdedy by the lapel and asks: "You think *any* of us like this *shit*?" before insisting on the importance of surrender and calling Erdedy a "faggot." He curses Erdedy for disrespecting him, then asks again if he is going to give him a hug. Johnette tries to tear Roy Tony away, but by this point Erdedy is already desperately clinging to him.

Steepley admits that the Office of Unspecified Services have already lost a couple of people to **the Entertainment**, people whose curiosity got the better of them and chose to watch it. One of the victims was the Head of Data Analysis, who is now in "four-point restraints" being fed through a tube. Steepley claims that this man was once the picture of reason and self-discipline, but now resembles a "drug-addicted newborn." Marathe admits that the A.F.R. have lost people, too. Steepley asks again if Marathe ever fantasizes about what the Entertainment is like, but Marathe replies that he only fantasizes about its possible uses.

*While most of the characters in attempting sobriety eventually lose their cynicism and embrace the need to submit to recovery programs, Kate Gompert stubbornly refuses to engage with the NA meeting. Perhaps this is because, as we saw in the chapter in which she was introduced, she feels that the common clichés about addiction, self harm, and suicide do not describe her experience. This kind of struggle with cliché in the face of depression and addiction is a major preoccupation of the novel.*



*Roy Tony's offence at Erdedy's refusal to hug and statement that he is "not a hugger" is actually quite significant. By exempting himself from the practice of hugging at the end of the meeting, Erdedy implies that he is unique and, in a sense, deserving of special treatment, which in turn implies that the others in the meeting aren't. This blatantly violates the ideology of recovery.*



*There is obvious comedy in the fact that Roy Tony violently forces Erdedy to hug him. But again, Roy Tony's reasoning for forcing Erdedy to do so is actually rather well-founded.*



*Steepley seems desperate to believe that Marathe harbors a secret desire to watch the Entertainment, but perhaps it is true that not everyone has the same compulsion to seek out pleasure. Indeed, in a sense it is bizarre that anyone would want to see what the Entertainment is like after witnessing its horrifying effect on people. That Steepley still has this curiosity reveals the often self-destructive nature of people's desire for entertainment and pleasure.*



## CHAPTER 52

10 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Almost everything in the Headmaster's Office at E.T.A. is blue. Charles's receptionist is nicknamed "Lateral Alice Moore" by students because she is a former helicopter pilot and airborne traffic reporter who was involved in a crash that left her only able to move from side to side. There is no door on Avril's office because she has a disregard for physical boundaries. Avril is Dean of Academic Affairs and Dean of Females, though she is not paid for either role. Every female E.T.A. student below the age of 13 (except Ann Kittenplan) is currently in Avril's office.

Every month, E.T.A. runs a check to make sure none of the students are being sexually abused, referred to as a "diddle-check" in the text. Dr. Rusk usually runs this check, but this month Avril is doing it. This leads Hal to suspect that Rusk might be involved in the post-Eschaton disciplinary procedure. Although Ingersoll is in a sense unofficially Hal's Little Buddy, none of Hal's actual Buddies were involved in the Eschaton fiasco. Hal listens as Avril asks the female students if they have been touched by "a tall person" in a way that makes them uncomfortable. The girls start to complain about grandmothers who pinch their cheeks and adults who patronizingly pat their heads.

At tennis academies, punishments are often hardly different from normal athletic conditioning, only more harrowing and extreme. Considering that Hal lives in an institution founded and run by his family, he doesn't spend much time thinking about them on an individual level. Like James, Charles has a career split between sports and science, two fields he has managed to combine in some of his professional pursuits. Hal thinks of Charles as a very shy person; in childhood he had a habit of lurking on the outside of groups and then announcing his own awkwardness and lurking.

Charles is small in size, a trait common in "gifted bureaucrats." He has a small, wonky mustache, and eyes that sit at different angles. Avril has a way of placing herself in the middle of every room such that she is always directly in the line of sight. Now she comes into Charles's office and smokes a cigarette. It emerges that Hal has been waiting outside Charles's office for an hour and hasn't yet eaten dinner, and Avril gives him an apple. The conversation in Avril's office has descended into all the girls comparing their family members to particular animals.

*This passage makes fun of Avril's aversion to physical boundaries, which the book has made clear is a source of psychic distress and neurosis for her sons. However, in the context of her administrative roles at E.T.A., the fact that her office does not have a door could in fact be taken as a sign of friendliness, honesty, and transparency.*



*Depending on one's perspective, this passage is either an example of daringly controversial humor or a bizarrely unfunny attempt to make a joke about sexual abuse. While Infinite Jest certainly never shies away from charged topics, one has to wonder what the actual source of humor is here. Are child victims of sexual abuse a very funny phenomenon?*



*This is the first information provided about Charles's personality, but in a way, the details given here only make Charles seem more mysterious. There is something oxymoronic about a shy outsider being charged with running an institution like E.T.A.; Charles must somehow command authority while dealing with his own impulse to stay out of the spotlight.*



*In this passage Avril and Charles, the siblings in charge of running E.T.A., are portrayed as opposites. Whereas Charles shrinks into the background, Avril always manages to be at the center of attention. If being small and unassuming is a characteristic of gifted bureaucrats, then Avril's ability to draw attention to herself is perhaps a sign that she is the opposite of a bureaucrat.*



Finally, Hal is ushered into Charles's office, where Dr. Rusk is already waiting. Otis P. Lord is in there too, along with an E.T.A. nurse and a urologist wearing an O.N.A.N.T.A blazer. Hal, Pemulis, and Axford all come in together, and Charles asks the urologist to please close the doors.

*In contrast to Avril's no-door policy of openness and transparency, the mood in Charles's office is secretive, suggesting that Hal and the other boys might be in major trouble.*



## CHAPTER 53

*Pre-Dawn and Dawn, 1 May Y.D.A.U. Outcropping Northwest of Tucson AZ U.S.A., Still.* Marathe and Steeply discuss an "Oriental myth" about a woman with blonde hair all over her body. Although very little is usually "accomplished" during these meetings between the men, both the O.U.S. and A.F.R. get excited about them. The two men then discuss the myth of the Odalisque, alluding to the similarity between this figure and **the Entertainment**. Marathe said he has to leave soon, but that it has been good to be in the fresh air for the night.

*The myth of the Odalisque is another example of the novel blending fact and fiction. The Odalisque is an actual mythic figure that emerged from Ottoman culture. The name refers to a female member of a harem, and the figure was appropriated into French culture (but has no specific relation to Quebec).*



## CHAPTER 54

*0450H., 11 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment Front Office, Ennet House D.A.R.H., Enfield MA.* Someone is telling Joelle a story about watching a woman shoot a man in a bar in Lowell. The person telling the story asks about Joelle's veil, and she jokes that it is a "bridal thing" and that she is an "aspiring Muslim." Eventually she explains that she's a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, and mentions the similarities between U.H.I.D. and AA. It is revealed that the person Joelle is talking to is Don Gately. She tells him about the different steps of membership in U.H.I.D. Don says that he used to be on his high school's football team, and Joelle shares that she used to twirl baton.

*This passage confirms the novel's message that society is essentially a collection of many different institutions. Not only U.H.I.D. and AA, but high school football and baton twirling are all institutions. While submitting to the ideology and practices of AA may feel strange to some addicts newly in recovery, it is actually less unfamiliar to most people than we might assume, as everyone has a history of membership in institutions.*



Joelle points out that Don has a tendency to hide behind his own (metaphorical) mask. Don begins to get irritated and defensive, indicating that he was just minding his own business before Joelle sat down beside him. Joelle responds by saying that she is so beautiful she can drive anyone insane, before adding: "I am so beautiful I am deformed." Don remains annoyed.

*While it is still not clear how (or if) Joelle is actually deformed, this passage illustrates a well-known cliché: that there is a thin line between extreme beauty and ugliness. Indeed, this is true of Joelle considering that her beauty made her repellent to other people.*



Randy Lenz, who is still in his first months of sobriety, always walks back to Ennet House from AA meetings, despite the fact that he has a car and could easily catch a ride with someone else. Any resident who spends time alone like this is flagged at Ennet House staff meetings, so Lenz is subject to extra scrutiny; yet his urine tests always end up clean. On his night walks Lenz began collecting stray rodents and cats in a garbage bag. Since coming to Ennet House he has secretly taken "organic cocaine" from his emergency stash perhaps six times.

*One of the things that makes the early stages of recovery so challenging is the surveillance and scrutiny inflicted on newcomers. Even something as seemingly innocuous as spending time alone is treated with suspicion. Yet as the story of Randy Lenz shows, such suspicion is often actually warranted.*



One night after a White Flag meeting, Bruce Green asks Lenz if he can join him on his walk home. Green then starts doing this regularly, which Lenz finds annoying, though in a way he also enjoys Green's company. One Saturday, Lenz manages to grab a bird that had fallen out of a nest without Green noticing, and shoves it down the garbage disposal. After this he still feels "impotent and unresolved."

*Disturbingly, Lenz seems to be coping with the struggle of recovery by inflicting violence on animals. Perhaps the "high" of committing these extreme acts of violence on vulnerable creatures helps diffuse his cravings for cocaine.*



## CHAPTER 55

*Early November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Rodney Tine, Chief of the O.U.S., owns a "special metric ruler" with which he measures his penis every morning. **The Entertainment** has been surfacing in a number of different locations, and each time the O.U.S. dispatches special agents to deal with it. In the latest instance, a film scholar and his partner disappear for multiple days, and a group of police, paramedics, and TP technicians are dispatched to the couple's home in Berkeley, CA. The Entertainment has also appeared to wipe out the majority of the audience of an avant-garde film festival in Arizona, not to mention the medical attaché and associated "incidentals" in Boston.

*The O.U.S. may be doing everything in their power to track down the Entertainment, but this is not easy considering that it looks like any other film cartridge. Furthermore, film cartridges can be copied, meaning that there is no way of knowing or controlling how many copies of the Entertainment exist. In this sense, the Entertainment is like a virus—and fundamentally beyond the government's control.*



Extreme measures have had to be taken to prevent President Gentle from acting on his wish to see **the Entertainment** himself. The intelligence community as a whole refer to it as "the *samizdat*." Technically, the threat it poses falls under the jurisdiction of the O.U.S.'s Anti-Anti-O.N.A.N. Activities' Agency (which an endnote explains is O.U.S.'s "most elite and least specific division").

*"Samizdat" is a Russian word. It was used in the Soviet era to describe self-published dissident materials, and thus its application to the Entertainment speaks both to the DIY nature of the film's production and the intention of political insurgents to use it against the state.*



## CHAPTER 56

*Late P.M., Monday 9 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Pemulis and Stice are in Dr. Rusk's office, and Stice is being told that he suffers from "counterphobia," a form of magical thinking related to issues of control. Stice objects to Dr. Rusk's diagnosis. It is late, though the lights inside both Avril's office and the Headmaster's Office are still on. Pemulis enters Avril's office and finds John Wayne in there with Avril. Wayne is wearing a football helmet and little else, and Avril is wearing a cheerleader's uniform. Pemulis comments that it is obvious he is interrupting and tells Avril he was hoping to speak with her.

*The shocking twist of Pemulis finding Avril and John Wayne in the midst of some kind of sexual role play scenario puts Avril's roles as a mother and school administrator in a truly different light. John Wayne's football helmet indicates that Avril is acting out an incestuous fantasy about Orin, while as a cheerleader Avril is arguably playing the part of Joelle (who was a baton twirler). This strengthens the impression that Avril was pathologically jealous of Joelle.*



## CHAPTER 57

*Wednesday 11 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Randy Lenz and Bruce Green are walking together. Lenz has realized that he likes Green, which gives him intense social anxiety. In desperation, Lenz had retrieved around a gram of his emergency stash to cope with the situation, convincing himself that it's in the interests of his overall sobriety. However, he underestimated the cocaine's effect and now finds himself manically talking to Green, sharing story after story from his personal life, including one about how he once met a deformed infant who was a refugee from the **Great Concavity**. At E.T.A., Hal and John Wayne have a brief, silent encounter.

Lenz chews gum in order to hide the fact that he is grinding his teeth together. He keeps talking to Green, telling him stories from his time as a coke dealer. Green comments that he can understand why addicts say that cocaine is the "Express Elevator to AA." Lenz mentions how he has been scouted as a male model, but didn't want to enter the industry because of all the closeted gay men. He is testing his theory that Green is a closeted gay man himself. Green repeats Gately's saying that there's no problem if AA brainwashes you, because his brain is in need of washing.

*It is not only negative situations that can trigger anxiety and cravings in those who are in recovery. As this passage shows, the simple realization that Lenz likes Green and wants to be friends with him is enough to make him relapse. Of course, this relapse ultimately ends up being a form of self-sabotage, not only harming Lenz but potentially isolating him from Green.*



*Lenz and Green seem to be operating on different wavelengths here. Lenz's stories about his time as a coke dealer fails to impress Green, who only thinks about the story in relation to their current quest for sobriety. Green also fails to pick up on Lenz's probing to see if he is gay. Indeed, Green's mind seems to be entirely focused on AA, whereas Lenz is clearly in a very different position.*



## CHAPTER 58

*Selected Snippets From the Individual-Resident-Informal-Interface Moments of D.W. Gately, Live-In Staff, Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, Enfield MA, On and Off From Just After the Brookline Young People's AA Mtng. Up to About 2329h., Wednesday 11 November Y.D.A.U.* In the transcripts from these "interfaces" between Don Gately and the Ennet House residents, the residents complain about mundane things, usually voicing their irritation with other people or features of the house. One resident complains that the "H" faucet on one of the taps should stand for "*Holy Cow That's Cold*." Another, Yolanda, has been sexually harassed by a man in her AA meeting. Gately advises her to avoid him at all costs, before realizing she's referring to Randy Lenz, though Yolanda refuses to confirm if this is true.

*This passage confirms the earlier implication that a culture of sexism makes AA an unwelcoming (and even dangerous) place for women. As Yolanda's story shows, it is not easy to avoid the man who has been harassing her. Not only do they attend the same meetings, but they are both residents at Ennet House. Avoiding him could mean jeopardizing her sobriety (and potentially leave her homeless).*



In a hotel room, Orin is having sex with a Swiss hand-model he met in Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport after dropping off Helen Steeply at departures. (An endnote here provides more transcript fragments of Steeply's interview with Orin for *Moment* magazine. In the interview, Orin insists that James was insane in the last years of his life, which is demonstrated by his chosen suicide method. Orin no longer speaks to Avril because he doesn't trust her. He believes that she has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder but that because she is so high-functioning it has never been diagnosed. Orin's former doubles partner also had OCD, but in that case the man's life fell apart because of it.)

(In the same endnote, Orin also accuses Avril of "worship[ing] Mario," treating him as a "secular martyr." However, he then starts refusing to answer Helen's questions, pointing out that Hal will read the article and then show it to Mario. He suggests that Hal and Mario won't understand how insane their mother is until they finally leave E.T.A. He then tells the story about Hal eating the piece of house mold as a young child. He recommends that Helen get in touch with a man called Bain if she wants more information about Avril and James.)

Back in the main narrative, it is noted that the Swiss woman approached Orin at the airport and asked him to sign a football for her "toddler-age son." Orin was sure this was the universe's way of saving him from any negative feelings triggered by Helen's departure.

Idris Arslanian, Ted Schacht, and others are blindfolded in the hall by the weight room. They can hear Anton Doucette crying to Lyle; apparently some of the other boys are watching him "like it's entertainment." Troeltsch and Pemulis are there too. The boys discuss other E.T.A. students, then nuclear fusion. They then discuss annular medicine, which involves practices like "treating cancer by giving the cancer cells themselves cancer." This medical breakthrough is now seen as normal, but was once unimaginable. There is now a theory that a similar principle could be applied to the **Great Concavity**—that injecting toxic material into an already toxic site could actually de-toxify it.

*Although there can be no denying that Orin had a strange and difficult childhood, he seems to be stuck in a rather immature habit of blaming and shunning his family while refusing to reflect on his own flaws. Furthermore, he dismissively diagnoses his parents of being insane and having OCD respectively, as if these diagnoses alone were grounds to condemn them. (Of course, we know that there are solid reasons to condemn both Avril and James, but Orin doesn't mention these.)*



*Orin comes across as even more childish here through his blatant jealousy of Mario. Even though Orin resents Avril's attention, he is clearly resentful of Mario for getting so much of it. This is a typical paradox when it comes to the way that children feel about their parents, craving their love and pushing them away at the same time.*



*Recall that Orin has a fetish for married mothers, which is assumedly rooted in his own complex and tortured relationship to Avril.*



*Yet another disturbing aspect of the human desire for entertainment lies in the fact that this desire often functions as a sadistic pleasure in seeing others suffer. Of course, many people would deny that they find the suffering of others entertaining, yet evidence suggests that in reality, people tend to be drawn to this sight (even if this attraction takes the form of fascinated horror).*



After Orin leaves the hotel, he thinks about a man in a wheelchair he saw there, and reflects that this man and the Swiss model had the same accent. Meanwhile, Lenz continues to chatter away to Green, telling excessively detailed stories about his obese mother and her eventual death. Green's own parents both died when he was a toddler, but he has deeply repressed this traumatic memory to the point that it is actually difficult to recall any details. Green's father had been a highly successful aerobics instructor until one day, at the peak of his career, his legs became oddly mismatched in size.

Unable to continue teaching aerobics, Green's father worked for a practical joke company instead. One Christmas, a very young Bruce played a joke on his parents, giving his mother a gift that she thought was her favorite brand of macadamia nuts, but which in fact contained a snake on a spring. Green's mother's shock at the protruding snake was so intense that it caused her to have a heart attack and die. Green's father had a "psycho-spiritual" breakdown after the death of his wife. Not long after, he was arrested and given the death penalty for fatally putting real explosives inside his company's "Blammo Cigars."

It is a very misty night, and Green keeps losing sight of Lenz before finding him again. Green recalls a Hawaiian beach-themed party that he and Mildred Bonk once went to in a Harvard dorm, where Green had got so drunk that he shit his pants. He now sees Lenz holding out a piece of meatloaf to a dog and then slyly retrieving something from his sleeve that Green can't quite see. Lenz then picks up the dog by its throat, says something like "How *dare* you," and dashes the dog down onto the yard.

Green wants to call out to stop him but is strangely suffocated and can't say anything at all. Lenz then stabs the dog with what Green can now see is a knife. People gather around the dog, shouting in distress and pointing out that Lenz is running away. Some of the surrounding people are in wheelchairs.

On November 25, Mario will turn 19. When he was six, the disability he'd had since birth was diagnosed as Familial Dysautonomia, a condition that means he doesn't properly feel pain. Hal has always been slightly jealous of Mario for this. Mario is still distressed about the disappearance of Madame Psychosis and also worried about Hal, whose feelings he used to be able to intuit but who now seems distant and mysterious. Mario sometimes takes walks alone at night. Tonight, he walks past Ennet House and listens to the snippets of conversation emerging from behind its walls.

*Orin's acknowledgment that the Swiss hand model and a nearby man in a wheelchair had the same accent should tell us that the model is likely not "Swiss" at all, but from Quebec. Indeed, the shady activities that seem to be surrounding Orin suggest he is being followed by the A.F.R. Perhaps he has been chosen as a target because he is more gullible than Hal, yet is older and more informed than Mario—or maybe the A.F.R. already suspect that Orin has the master copy of the Entertainment.*



*Once again, the novel mixes silly humor with disturbing, dark ideas. The idea of someone dying from a practical joke toy is ludicrous; yet the suffering that this causes Green and his father ends up being strangely moving. Interestingly, Green's father's decision to put explosives in the "Blammo Cigars" is another example of entertainment being turned into a weapon.*



*Green is initially too wrapped up in his own psychological distress, stewing in memories of his childhood trauma and subsequent addiction to notice the equally distressing sight before him. Rather than dealing with his demons in a reflective way like Green, Lenz acts out, inflicting his inner turmoil in the form of external violence.*



*Green's inability to speak recalls Hal's own troubles communicating with his father and at the University of Arizona admissions interview.*



*Throughout much of the novel, Mario is framed as a perpetual child and hanger-on; someone to be tolerated or taken care of rather than someone who takes an active role in caring for others. Yet here it becomes clear that Mario is very protective of Hal and has in fact been caring for him in his own way.*



Suddenly, Mario hears the sound of a recording of Madame Psychosis's radio show coming through an open window. He has noticed that more and more whenever he tries to talk about "real" things people around him get uncomfortable. Gately, meanwhile, has a long list of evening duties to complete, some of which are more pleasant than others. Checking if the bathroom cleaning chore has been completed inside the women's bathroom provides a rude awakening that women behave just as disgustingly in the bathroom as men. Kate Gompert has been making allusions to self-harm, and Gately calls Pat to report it.

A new resident has arrived named Ruth van Cleve, and Gately has to oversee her introduction and orientation to the House. In general, he has to intervene in the rumors circulating around the house, keeping speculation in check but encouraging anyone who has even the smallest hint that a resident might be taking **Substances** to come forward.

Orin can only give and not receive pleasure, to the delight of many of his **Subjects** but not Orin himself. While he is still with the Swiss model, someone knocks on the hotel room door and the model hides under the bed, fearing that her husband will find out. The man at the door is in a wheelchair and announces that he is conducting a survey. He gives almost a dozen reasons for the survey, saying it is an academic project, a "commerce survey," and a demographic evaluation. Orin happily complies, supplying basic information about himself.

The man in the wheelchair asks Orin what he misses, elaborating that he wants to know what Orin feels nostalgia or yearning for. Orin comments that he misses TV and TV commercials, speaking at length about the specific aspects of TV culture that he recalls fondly. The man in the wheelchair then asks what Orin *doesn't* miss, and Orin asks how much time the man has. The man in the wheelchair looks in Orin's room and observes that he is perhaps currently "engaged."

Ennet House's curfew is 11:30 pm, and at 11:15 Clenette and Yolanda return from Footprints (an endnote explains that this is "a depressing new Sober Club" in Davis Square). Two other residents return together, and Gately concludes from their body language that they may be conducting a forbidden relationship. Lenz slips in moments before Gately locks the door for the night, and by 11:30 Amy J. and Bruce Green are both still missing. At 11:36 pm Green shows up; Gately lets him in and gives him a week's "Full House Restriction" while aggressively asking if there are any problems he should know about.

*Mario's observation that people are made uncomfortable by his attempts to discuss "real" things suggests that people expect him to play a certain role and are disturbed when he deviates from that role. This kind of behavior perhaps emerges from people's prejudice about Mario's disabilities. They will tolerate him as long as he conforms to their idea of what a disabled person should act like.*



*As we have seen, the policy surrounding substances at Ennet House is strict to the point of paranoia; however, it has also been made clear that such an approach is undoubtedly necessary when it comes to people with severe addictions.*



*The unidentified man in the wheelchair does a comically bad job of disguising himself and not seeming suspicious. Orin's obliviousness further indicates that he is the perfect target for the A.F.R., as even in the face of highly suspicious behavior he has no clue what is going on.*



*Orin's nostalgic affection for TV and even TV commercials shows how widespread the desire for entertainment is. His comment also echoes a similar nostalgia that has occurred in real life. Although few people express appreciation for TV commercials when they are bombarded with them on a daily basis, it is easy to feel nostalgic for them as retro remnants of a previous era.*



*This is one of the moments where the resemblance between Ennet House and a boarding school (like E.T.A.) is most clear. Residents of Ennet House must submit to being treated like children in order to remain in the program. While this is fine in theory, situations like the one Green faces prove difficult. Rather than being able to explain himself adult-to-adult, Green must endure being treated like a disobedient teenager.*



Gately dislikes the fact that he must now ask Green for a urine test, as the two of them are friends, but Green complies with reassuring speed. Meanwhile, several of the residents have left their cars in spots where they will be towed. Recovering addicts tend to be in a kind of denial about the law, and although other staffers recommend that residents' cars should be towed "at least once" to teach their owners a lesson, Gately is determined to intervene. He assembles a group of car-owning residents, and in doing so notices that Lenz is clearly high.

Despite his recent scolding, Green offers to move a mis-parked car belonging to a resident lying in bed with a fever brought on by diverticulitis, a condition suffered by alcoholics new to sobriety. Stepping outside, Gately sees Lenz being chased in a circle by two men with "vaguely non-U.S. beards." A third man standing nearby is holding a gun, which seems to frighten some of the assembled residents but not others. Gately isn't sure what he's feeling. He approaches and sees one of the men pull out a knife.

Gately explains to the non-American men that he is responsible for the people assembled there and that he doesn't want to fight. The men curse him out in Quebecois French. A fight breaks out. Gately dislocates one of the men's shoulders and is slashed in the calf in return. One of the men then breaks Gately's toe. Gately manages to kick him, and then suddenly feels that he's been shot in the shoulder. The fight continues with Nell Gunther and Green joining in as Joelle shouts something inaudible from her window. More residents get involved and Joelle climbs out onto her balcony, still holding a toothbrush, shouting Gately's first name.

Joelle keeps climbing and ends up dangling and kicking her legs, while other residents keep fighting and Charlotte Treat repeatedly recites the Serenity Prayer. Joelle successfully lands on the ground and runs toward Gately, who's decided he needs to immediately lie down on the ground. The residents crowd around Gately, frantically discussing whether they should call Pat, an ambulance, or someone else. Gately asks Lenz and Green to carry him inside and insists that nobody call anyone until this is done. He tells Joelle that he's going to jail, but she assures him that he has dozens of eyewitnesses on his side.

Despite Gately's insistence, several residents are trying to make calls anyway. An Enfield Marine Hospital security guard strolls by and Gately forces Erdedy to go and distract him. Meanwhile, Gately tells Joelle that he's realized she's Madame Psychosis, and that he was sure he knew her from somewhere. Joelle squeezes Gately's arm, and Lenz and Green lift him up.

*Again, as a residential staffer Gately must navigate a fine balance between treating the residents like children and respecting them as adults. Indeed, the issue of whether or not to allow the residents' cars to be towed is similar to dilemmas parents face about letting their children get into trouble in order to learn a lesson versus intervening and thus risking overprotecting their kids.*



*Gately's feelings of detachment suggest that he still has not reached the stage of recovery where he has regained a fear of violence and losing his life. As the book has shown, addiction sometimes causes recklessness that is felt as a lack of fear. The positive side to this is that Gately is now able to behave courageously in a dangerous situation, and to protect others from danger.*



*Wallace again finds humor here in subverting the expectation that Canadians are supposed to be nice and apologetic by depicting the Quebecois men as confrontational and violent. Indeed, the conflict escalates with frightening speed as Gately is shot. Yet there is still dark comedy to be found in the image of a group of newly-sober addicts fighting Quebecois men without knowing the reason for the conflict.*



*Here we begin to see a blossoming romance between Joelle and Gately, formed in the dramatic circumstances of Gately's injury and possible imprisonment. (Recall that Gately originally checked into Ennet House to avoid going to prison, because he knew he would be surrounded by drugs and alcohol there.) These dramatic surroundings escalate the suspenseful air of romance between them.*



*In addition to Joelle and Gately's feelings for one another, another moving element of this scene is the way that the Ennet House residents chaotically band together to help one another. There is a sense in which, despite their differences, they are a real community.*



The next paragraph lists technological and cultural innovations that have emerged in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. These technological developments cannot be thought of as “bad” because, although they have their downsides, no one can now imagine living without them. Rodney Tine is standing in the State House Annex in central Boston, looking out at the Boston Duck Pond undergoing its annual draining. Tine’s son Rodney Tine Jr., who—like Hugh Steeply—is a O.U.S. operative, is sitting with Steeply in the same conference room as his father.

The grad student WYYY engineer has been taking endless calls from worried listeners, neither confirming nor denying rumors that Madame Psychosis has committed suicide, been institutionalized, or undergone a pilgrimage. In reality, all the engineer knows is that she is receiving “treatment” somewhere. The engineer is standing out on the cold street when suddenly he is grabbed by a man in a wheelchair, who grabs the engineer’s glasses from his face and runs them over.

*The impossibility of concluding that certain technological developments are “bad” profoundly resonates with the era in which we currently live. Technology is constantly transforming our lives, and clearly not always for the better. However, people adapt and become dependent on new technologies with frightening speed. Seen in this way, technology has an addictive quality, and it is certainly now just a fact of life.*



*The ruthlessness of the A.F.R. is shown by the fact that, in the typical manner of terrorist gangs and cartels, they attack innocent civilians with only vague connections to their true target. It is not quite clear how the WYYY engineer is related to the goal of using the Entertainment as a weapon, but any connection is enough for the A.F.R. to go after him.*



## CHAPTER 59

*11 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* It is dinner time at E.T.A., and everyone is eating except Axford, who after a childhood accident developed a neurological condition that makes food taste like the smell of vomit. Stice has been telling a long Christmas story about his parents’ “epic rows.” Theirs is a passionate, tumultuous relationship, and they’ve divorced and remarried four or five times. There are rumors that Hal and Axford have been subjected to a urine test by Charles and the O.N.A.N.T.A. urologist.

Recently, inanimate objects have been moving around E.T.A. seemingly of their own accord, though there seems to be an unspoken consensus not to discuss it. The boys begin debating the correlation between one-handed backhands and breast size in female players. Hal thinks about the girl Orin was once “wildly in love with” who starred in James’s films and who ended up becoming disfigured. Orin has always kept a kind of diary listing all his “**Subjects**.” Many of the boys at the table have already had sex, but Hal actively wants to remain a virgin forever.

*Axford’s strange neurological condition and Stice’s stories about his parents’ arguments are yet more reminders that every E.T.A. student is struggling with their own personal problems. Yet certain people’s problems—notably Hal and Axford’s meeting with the urologist—are also the subject of intense speculation by others.*



*This passage reveals the key piece of information that Joelle was the star of James’s films, including—presumably—the Entertainment. This explains why the A.F.R. have been following Orin and have attacked the WYYY engineer. It also reveals that Hal has sexual neuroses of his own, most likely triggered by his family’s dysfunction and especially Orin’s strange relationship with sex.*



Hal has a urine test coming up in 29 days and has stopped smoking weed or taking any other kind of **Substance**. He is “a whole new Hal,” one who no longer has any secrets. Everyone suddenly gets quiet as Evan Ingersoll walks in on crutches, a prorektor carrying his dinner tray. Overall E.T.A. is a place surprisingly devoid of sex. The boys wonder why Hal seems so miserable. Although it’s plausibly related to the meeting with Charles and the urologist, Pemulis was in that meeting too and is his normal, jovial self.

*It is not clear whether the other students’ fascination with Hal’s condition is the product of curiosity or concern—likely a mixture of both. Yet just as Hal is highly secretive and unable to express his emotions to others, so do his fellow students refuse to ask him what is wrong.*



## CHAPTER 60

*1 May Y.D.A.U. Outcropping Northwest of Tucson Arizona U.S.A.* Steeply admits that his own father became “consumed with a sort of entertainment” at one point in his life—the TV show M\*A\*S\*H\*. He tells Marathe that his father at first just liked the show, but after a while he developed a kind of addiction to it, losing interest in all other aspects of his life. He began keeping a secret notebook filled with notes about the show. Eventually, Steeply’s father couldn’t speak about any topic other than the program. He began writing letters to the characters and believing that information was being communicated in code to certain viewers of the show.

*The surreal and disturbing story of Steeply’s father again reveals the frightening psychological power of entertainment. Yet unlike in the case of the Entertainment, in this story it appears as if Steeply’s father simply had a mental health condition such as paranoid schizophrenia. After all, the TV show M\*A\*S\*H\* did not have the same effect on its millions of other viewers.*



Steeply’s mother began taking anti-anxiety medication. His father stopped leaving the “den” where he watched the show, not even to go to the bathroom. He died there, and after his death Steeply and his family discovered that the notebooks were filled with an indecipherable code. Marathe says he can’t stay much longer, and that he would appreciate if Steeply left first. Steeply discusses the look on the faces of those transfixed by entertainment, a look of being totally trapped in an empty moment of wondering.

*We now understand that Steeply’s investment in tracking down the Entertainment is not motivated only by his professional commitments or his fear for the American people. Rather, he has a painful personal relationship with the damage entertainment can do.*



## CHAPTER 61

*13 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* It is 2:45 am, and Eugenio is covering Johnette’s slot on Dream Duty at Ennet House. Kate Gompert, Geoffrey Day, Ken Erdedy, and Bruce Green are watching cartridges in the living room. Everyone is still recovering from Wednesday’s events outside the house. Day talks about a memory from childhood, when the certain sound of playing the violin, combined with a rattling window, would produce a massive abstract shape in his mind that somehow represented “death, decay, dissolution, cold empty black malevolent lonely voided space.”

*Although Day is the only person thus far in the novel to express being triggered by playing a musical instrument, the horrible shape he describes is strongly reminiscent of Kate Gompert’s account of her depression. His description is abstract and surreal, yet also a powerful image of the horror of depression—something Wallace was very familiar with.*



Day explains that the last time the shape appeared was during his sophomore year at Brown University. He was shocked that it had returned and felt sure that he would have to kill himself—anything to make the feelings the shape conjured go away. In the end, a random fellow student sat with Day for the night, saving his life. At this point Kate is listening intently. It is clear that she knows exactly what Day is talking about.

*This simple and moving story is one of the more earnest moments in the novel. It shows that just sitting with someone in their time of need can be a genuinely life-saving act. It is also moving to see how transfixed Kate is by the story, perhaps wishing that she had had a friend like Day's at various points in her own life.*



## CHAPTER 62

*11 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Helen Steeply has arrived at E.T.A. and watches a match Hal plays against Stice. Both players are left-handed. Steeply has (ostensibly) come to speak to Hal about Orin, but Charles won't let her have a conversation with him yet. No one knows where Avril is. Back in Arizona, Orin is once again having sex with the "Swiss" hand-model. Aubrey deLint sits with Helen and gives a constant stream of commentary on Hal's performance. DeLint observes that as a player, Hal is "in essence a torturer."

*There is a marked increase in suspense during this scene, partly caused by the dramatic irony of knowing information that the characters don't. For example, we know that Helen is really Hugh, that she is not a journalist and that she is at E.T.A. under false pretensions. We also know that the Swiss hand-model is likely Quebecois and possibly associated with the A.F.R.*



Steeply asks when she will be able to talk to Hal; deLint initially ignores her, and then says he doesn't think she will be able to at all. He explains that it is Charles's decision, but adds that they've never allowed a current E.T.A. student to be interviewed before. Steeply is panicked and irritated. DeLint advises her to speak with Charles, and then suggests that she profile Coach Schtitt instead of Orin, because Schtitt is a "genius." He is confused why she is writing about Orin, considering that he only "appears four times a game, never gets hit, [and] doesn't even wear pads."

*Although it's unclear, it doesn't seem as though deLint is suspicious of Steeply's motivations in profiling Orin and wanting to interview Hal. Rather, he is simply puzzled by them. He is also acting in a manner typical of a bureaucrat, insisting that Steeply shouldn't be allowed to interview Hal simply because a current student has never been interviewed before.*



The next passage is a letter from Helen Steeply to Marlon K. Bain, who now appears to work for a greeting card company in Waltham, MA. Helen says she is writing a profile on the Incandenza family and asks if Bain would be willing to answer questions about them. Bain's response reads simply: "Fire away." Helen's response is included, but all her questions have been omitted and replaced with the word "Q." (An endnote contains Bain's answers, which he sends back to Helen in another letter. Bain explains that he and Orin were childhood friends who met through competitive junior tennis. They were the top two under-10 boys in Boston.)

*Once again, key information is hidden away in an endnote. This requires the reader to act as a kind of researcher or detective, much like Steeply her/himself. The responsibility of figuring out the full story through limited information is heightened further by the fact that Steeply's questions are omitted, so the reader is forced to figure out what they are based on Bain's answers.*



(In the same endnote, Bain continues that he was one of the first students at E.T.A. after it was founded when he was 15. At the academy, he and Orin experimented with substances; taking psychedelics left Bain with several disabilities that now make his life very difficult. As a result Bain left E.T.A. at 17. He adds that he doesn't know much about James' suicide. He knows that James cast Joelle in a "radical new type of filmed **entertainment** that supposedly was driving him to a breakdown." Bain warns Helen that Orin has a tendency to misrepresent the truth, convincing himself of his own fabrications.)

(In the same endnote, Bain describes a horrifying story in which he and Orin drove Orin's parents' car without realizing that the family dog, S. Johnson, was attached to it, thereby killing S. Johnson in a gruesome manner. Orin lied to Avril, saying S. Johnson was killed by another driver while he and Bain were taking the dog for a walk. Bain then conducts a more abstract meditation on parental love and abuse, and how parenting so often goes so terribly wrong. He admits that there was always something "not *right*" and "*creepy*" about Avril, saying that she extended a "pathological generosity" to her sons. It is almost as if she wanted them to suffer so she could be sympathetic and loving to them.)

Back in the main narrative, younger players involved in the Eschaton fiasco—while not in as much trouble as their Big Buddies—are punished by being made to inspect the underground tunnels that workers will have to use in the construction of the Lung, a new inflatable covering for the E.T.A. courts. Some of the tunnels have been used for storage and are now strewn with random items and litter, including a microwave and TP cartridges. James's old editing "facilities" are also located in the tunnels. The young Eschaton players spend much of their time hanging out in the tunnels anyway, even having a sort of informal "Tunnel Club." The club has no clear purpose, but members are adamant that girls are not allowed to join.

The boys have filled several trash bags and are making Kent Blott, who was also denied membership to the Tunnel Club, drag them up to the tunnel's entrance. In the distance they can hear the applause from Hal's match. LaMont Chu takes an inventory of everything they find in the tunnel. The boys are all hoping to find an infestation of feral hamsters—the kind that originate in the **Great Concavity**—which would distract Charles from the Eschaton situation. Avril has a severe phobia of rodents.

*Like many E.T.A. students, Bain was left harmed and traumatized by his time in the academy. Yet this trauma also seems to have come from his interactions with the Incandenza family specifically. This is revealed through his cautious words about James's mental breakdown and Orin's tendency to lie. This last fact is especially important considering that Steeply seems to have been relying on Orin as a key source of information.*



*Overall it is difficult to ascertain if the book is fair in its judgment of Avril. On the one hand, Avril does exhibit qualities of an overprotective, smothering, and perhaps disturbed mother. Of course, her most serious offence is that she is sexually involved with a student, a fact that should seriously cast doubt on her parenting abilities. Yet at the same time, it is worth noting that James is not blamed in the same way for his children's issues, despite the fact that he was also a terrible parent.*



*The disciplinary procedure whereby the Big Buddies absorb harsher punishments on behalf of their Little Buddies is intriguing. In a sense, this is one way in which E.T.A. imitates the structure of a family (where usually, though of course not always, older kids receive harsher punishments than younger kids). The mention of James's belongings, along with the microwave and cartridges, remind us of the dark "underworld" of E.T.A. hidden beneath the prestigious exterior of the institution. (Especially as the microwave evokes James's suicide and the cartridges the Entertainment.)*



*It is not clear what the younger generation of characters think about the political situation in which they live. Do they find it odd that they are part of a super-nation, or is it normal to them because they were still young when O.N.A.N. was formed? Are they frightened of the Great Concavity? It seems like the answer is no, given their desire to find the toxic feral hamsters.*



The boys discover a fridge and at the same time smell something horrible. At first they accuse each other of farting, but then they realize the smell seems to be coming from the fridge. Inside, they discover a jar of mayonnaise with maggots crawling in it. Horrified, they flee the tunnel as fast as possible. Meanwhile, above ground there is a tie between Hal and Stice. DeLint has left, and Thierry Poutrincourt has come to sit next to Steeply instead. She explains that E.T.A. staff might seem unfriendly because they are protective of their students, who she calls their *étoiles* (stars).

Steeply reiterates that she is profiling Orin, not a current E.T.A. student. DeLint returns, and Steeply offers to switch to French; Poutrincourt shrugs, unimpressed, but continues in Quebecois. The two of them discuss competitive sport and the difficult transition from promising junior to adult player. Poutrincourt also talks about the challenges and pressures of professional tennis. DeLint interrupts to say that E.T.A.'s best player is John Wayne, and that Helen can see him play tomorrow. Helen casually mentions James's filmmaking, but no one seems to notice.

## CHAPTER 63

14 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Michael Pemulis's brother, a 23-year-old sex worker named Matty Pemulis, is eating soup in a restaurant in Cambridge, MA, between Inman and Central Squares. He spots Poor Tony Krause, who looks terrible, "less alive than undead." Matty's father raped him from the age of 10 years old. His father eventually died of cirrhosis and acute pancreatitis, choking on his own blood in front of his son. When Matty drinks he raises his first shot to his father's "final memory."

## CHAPTER 64

11 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Something went very wrong in Hal's game against Stice, and now Stice's name is 2nd on the rankings, where Hal's used to be. Hal is feeling down, and watches many of James's cartridges in a row. One called *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* features a bureaucrat who is an excellent worker but struggles to get up in the morning and thus is always late. His boss threatens that if he is late one more time he will be fired. A dramatic scene ensues in which the bureaucrat desperately tries to make it to work in time and accidentally bumps into a small child, who asks if the bureaucrat is Jesus. It is Mario's favorite of James's films.

Again, when it comes to taking care of children the border between protectiveness and cruelty is shown to be thin. Avril is also accused of being overly protective of her children, but it's ambiguous if this is really the right way to think about her (and the other E.T.A. staff's) behavior. After all, E.T.A. staff can actually be quite neglectful and oblivious of problems that exist among the student population.



Overall Steeply's visit to E.T.A. has not been a success. While on the one hand s/he has at least not been discovered as an undercover operative, the ruse of the magazine profile of Orin has not proven to be an effective way of getting information about the Entertainment. This is perhaps due to the fact that people at E.T.A. have little interest in Orin, who in turn has little to do with the Entertainment (supposedly).



Although Matty only appears for a brief moment in the novel, his tragic story gives more context to his brother Michael, a more prominent character. While at E.T.A. Michael is popular and carefree, he—like seemingly every other student there—harbors dark, traumatic secrets about his past.



The film Hal watches recalls the sparse, surreal stories of Franz Kafka, which often focus on the theme of bureaucracy. In James's film, the bureaucrat is successful because he is willing to work hard and submit himself totally to the institution for which he works. Yet he is guilty of a kind of self-sabotage, as his job is threatened by his own inability to be on time. The film thus touches on the novel's broader themes of free will, self-destruction, and submission.



## CHAPTER 65

14 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Following his seizure, Poor Tony had awoken in an ambulance feeling wonderful. He'd even flirted with the paramedic. Back in the day, Tony and a group of others did a job for Bertraund Antitoui in exchange for drugs. They dressed up in the same all-red outfit of an androgynous Quebecker separatist, acting as decoys when the separatist threw acid in the face of the Canadian Minister of Inter-O.N.A.N. Trade. Now, Poor Tony considers stealing the purses of two women walking ahead of him. He is concentrating on this decision so intently that he does not even see "Mad" Matty Pemulis, his old crewmate.

At Ennet House, Geoffrey Day is surprised to find himself missing Randy Lenz. Meanwhile, Kate, like many psychiatric patients, knows that there are different kinds of depression. There's anhedonia, the alarming experience of everything in the world becoming completely meaningless—a kind of abstraction effect. Many young E.T.A. students think James committed suicide as a result of anhedonia. However, this is a mistaken interpretation, based in the fact that these students are still immersed in a highly competitive juvenile world where rankings are everything. They cannot yet understand the reality that superficial achievements have nothing to do with "interior worth."

This illusion is actually a nice way to live, because it creates a clear and constant desire for a particular goal. Hal knows that anhedonia wasn't the cause of James's suicide (although he does not know the real reason either). He hasn't had an interior emotion in years. This disposition is seen as cool in contemporary American culture. In typically American style, Hal fears what he secretly wants: a sense of self, including the sentimentality and need that this inherently involves.

Hal doesn't know it yet, but anhedonia isn't the worst kind of depression. The worst is called clinical depression or "unipolar dysphoria." It is an active feeling, a form of absolute torment that Kate simply thinks of as "It." *It* is a psychic horror so painful that it is literally unbearable, and the loneliest feeling in the world. Kate suffers from psychotic depression, which is even lonelier because it involves delusion and thus isolates and disconnects her from the world.

Again, the enormous map of characters is shown to be more interwoven than the reader might have assumed. Through the odd jobs he did for Bertraund in exchange for drugs, Poor Tony is linked to the A.F.R. Meanwhile, his association with Matty Pemulis also means he has a connection to E.T.A. Finally, the fact that he is a drug user means he will have many connections to Ennet House residents.



E.T.A. students seem to assume that James developed anhedonia because his career as a filmmaker never took off. They believe that James's failures caused him to feel that everything was meaningless because the meaning in their own lives is entirely dependent on their success in junior tennis. However, the novel implies that this belief cannot last long; they will eventually grow out of it (and find other, more profound reasons to be depressed).



*Infinite Jest* may not be set at the time Wallace was writing (or in the real future that followed it), but this reflection on "cool" speaks directly to the culture in which Wallace was immersed. Indeed, Wallace himself has been accused of propagating a "cool" style of writing through irony, highly complex prose, and intellectual showmanship. At the same time, he was deeply concerned with the issue of sincerity and avoiding the kind of irony that leads to total disconnection. In *Infinite Jest*, this is shown in the tension between the novel's own highly-intellectual style and its engagement with the seemingly banal but sincere clichés that end up helping so many addicts and athletes.



Rather than emptiness, clinical depression takes the form of an active presence, which is part of what makes it so horrifying. Clinical depression can be conceptualized as a kind of pain that is comparable to physical pain. Yet unlike physical pain, clinical depression also makes the sufferer feel totally alone. Passages like this feel especially poignant considering that Wallace himself dealt with severe depression like Kate's.



Back at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, Kate befriended another psychotically depressed patient, a civil engineer who enjoyed model trains. His psychotic depression began 17 years before they met, when he had slipped, fallen on his head, and woken up “depressed beyond all human endurance.” He craved death but did not attempt suicide because his wife was a devout Catholic. Eventually the man underwent experimental psychosurgery, though Kate never learned the outcome of this. All the man wanted was anhedonia, but she never found out if he got it.

*Mental illness, addictions, maladies, and disabilities are rife within Infinite Jest. Another trope is characters having terrible accidents through which they find themselves deformed, disabled, or mentally ill. We might not usually think of depression as being caused by an accident, but physical injuries can indeed result in neurological and psychological conditions.*



## CHAPTER 66

*14 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Ruth van Cleve is walking near Inman Square with Kate, chatting away. She is a recovering crystal meth addict, and Kate finds her unbearable to be around. Ruth was sent to Ennet House after her newborn baby was discovered abandoned in an alley. The baby is now in a hospital in an incubator; its father is in prison for running a pharmaceutical business without a license. The women are headed to an NA meeting. Behind them, Poor Tony Krause eyes their purses.

*Before getting clean, Ruth and Kate themselves were in Poor Tony's position. Although they may not have actually been robbing people in the street, they were still stuck in the constant psychological cycle of trying to score drugs. Now that they are in recovery, Tony perceives them as secure and wealthy enough to steal from.*



Hal is watching a cartridge called *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun* when two girls, Bridge Boone and Frances L. Unwin, come in uninvited and join him. He tells them that he is trying to be alone, and they reply that it is “a public room, for everybody.” Another girl, Jennie Bash, tells Hal that there is an enormous lady wandering around E.T.A. looking for Hal. *Blood Sister*, a “shocksplotation” cartridge, is one of very few James Incandenza films that saw commercial success.

*The name “shocksplotation” positions the film within the exploitation genre. Exploitation films are generally poor-quality films that achieve cult popularity through their deployment of shocking topical content. “Shocksplotation” is thus somewhat redundant as a term.*



In the film, a tough nun rescues a drug-addicted, abused girl from the streets of Toronto. The nun herself was once an abused girl living on the streets who was in turn saved by a tough nun—as are all the other nuns in her order. Although Hal and the girls do not realize this, this order of nuns could easily be an analogy for AA. Meanwhile, to her surprise, Joelle is beginning to find her trips to the NA-spinoff Cocaine Anonymous useful. She has developed a problematic attachment to Gately, however. (An endnote clarifies that it's problematic because Ennet House discourages residents from forming “sentimental attachments” to staffers of the opposite sex.)

*Throughout the novel, characters rebel against the rules of the institution to which they belong. However, in Joelle's case, rebelling against the Ennet House rules could be a matter of life or death. If she is kicked out, she might relapse and kill herself for real—either intentionally or unintentionally. Of course, this does not mean that it is any easier to follow the rules, particularly when they conflict with her own feelings.*



At that day's CA meeting, a man talks about how he used all his family's money on crack, leaving his pregnant wife and child to starve, and became haunted by the image of his little girl's hungry face. The man has a powerful storytelling style, and for the first time Joelle feels committed to staying clean no matter what happens. The man says that he still doesn't know if he will ever see his family again, but that he at least has a new family now in the form of the CA members.

*This passage provides a clear example of how recovery programs work by bonding people together in a community. Joelle wants to stay clean not only because she knows that relapsing would ruin (and possibly end) her life, but also because she feels a sense of responsibility to the recovery communities she is in.*



In *Blood Sister*, the girl Blood Sister thought she had saved ends up dying of an overdose. It transpires that the girl was murdered by the Mother Superior. The final part of the film involves an "orgy of retribution" in which dark truths about the order are revealed. In a massive climactic fight scene, Blood Sister has a chance to kill the Mother Superior but instead walks away into the nighttime streets. It is unclear whether she is going to relapse or remain "saved." Hal finds the whole last part of the film cringe-inducingly heavy-handed.

*It is significant that Hal finds the ending of the film heavy-handed considering that it concludes on a note of ambiguity. Usually, one might think of an ending as being heavy-handed if it has an artificial sense of closure or obvious lesson. Yet the very fact that nothing conclusive happens strikes Hal as embarrassing.*



Kate and Ruth's purchases have been snatched. A bearded man wearing an army coat tells them that he saw the whole thing, declaring: "I'm a witness!" Kate can barely see him, though, as she has been hit in the head and is struggling to keep her eyes open. The strap of Ruth's bag snapped easily, but Kate's hadn't, and she found herself being dragged along with her bag until she banged right into a lamppost and fell to the ground.

*This scene confirms the sense that everything that happens in *Infinite Jest* is slightly more violent, gruesome, and spectacular than it might be in real life. Rather than just having her bag snatched, Kate finds herself being dragged straight into a dramatic and painful collision with a lamppost.*



## CHAPTER 67

14 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Randy Lenz, freezing cold and high on cocaine, is following two Chinese women up Mass Ave between Harvard and Central Squares. Lenz believes that "Orientoid types" carry their entire personal wealth with them wherever they go. Adrenaline builds until he runs up and snatches their purses with ease. The A.F.R., meanwhile, are considering two methods of locating James's master copy of **the Entertainment**. They could track down James's family members and Joelle and torture them if necessary, or just search for the master copy directly themselves. They are prepared to try both options, and this is why they are currently in the Antitois' shop, attempting the second.

*In a strange coincidence, on the same day that Poor Tony steals the purses of Ruth and Kate, Lenz robs two Chinese women just in the adjacent neighborhood. The word "Orientoid" is deeply racist, and this passage raises further questions about whether the book's substantial depiction of racism should be forgiven because it is done through the perspective of particular racist characters. After all, it is possible to revel too much in portraying the thoughts and words of racists.*



## CHAPTER 68

14 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Poor Tony did not expect that his victims would chase him, and is now struggling to run in his heels. Ruth, who is following him, has evidently chased people before. She manages to get her fingers around Tony's wig while Tony dashes into an alley. Meanwhile, the A.F.R.'s leader Fortier has overseen a thorough search of the Antiois' shop that has taken place over the course of multiple days. The A.F.R. believe that if they unleash **the Entertainment** on the U.S., Canada will not just allow but *force* Quebec to secede in order to "face the wrath" of a U.S. felled by its own appetite for pleasure.

DuPlessis had original copies of **the Entertainment** and appeared to have obtained them via a relative who was an athlete (Orin). Steeply has been "clinging to this person like a bad odor." Fortier notices that the U.S. treats people who use wheelchairs with patronizing deference.

## CHAPTER 69

14 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Joelle suddenly starts worrying about her teeth and the terrible effect that years of freebasing cocaine has had on them. Some people in Ennet House have black teeth, and some no teeth at all. Joelle fantasizes about Gately as a dentist tending to her teeth. Back at the Antiois' shop, Fortier and his team finally find the cartridge that had once belonged to DuPlessis. Unfortunately, in the process two of the team members (Desjardins and Joubet) are lost to **the Entertainment**. Even more unfortunately, the team soon discovers that the cartridge is read-only. They decide to remain positive and treat this as a sign that they are one step closer to obtaining the master copy.

The A.F.R. now have the entire Incandenza family under surveillance, and are close to tracking down Joelle, having discovered that she was Madame Psychosis. They have kidnapped and tortured the WYYY engineer, forcing him to tell them everything he knew about Joelle's whereabouts. They have exposed their first "test **Subject**" to **the Entertainment**, telling the Subject that he could repeat the film if he agreed to saw off one of his own fingers for each repeat play. The A.F.R. are currently rolling the streets of Boston looking for more test Subjects.

The explanation for why the A.F.R. think the Entertainment will trigger the secession of Quebec is a little odd. While it is possible that the rest of Canada might want Quebec to take the blame for the damage caused by the Entertainment, there is no guarantee that the U.S. will accept these terms. Indeed, the American government might well wish to punish all of Canada as more of a "lesson."



This passage seems to confirm the earlier indication that Orin has been distributing copies of the Entertainment, meaning that he is probably in possession of the master copy.



For Joelle, teeth are a sign of health and longevity. Whereas for years she abused and neglected her body through her drug addiction, the fact that she is now clean means that she wants to try and preserve it. Of course, this newfound desire to take care of herself is quickly becoming inseparable from her desire for Gately, as shown by the slightly strange fantasy she has of him as her dentist.



The capitalization of "subject" here is revealing, as it links the people the A.F.R. are testing the Entertainment on to the women Orin sleeps with. The phrase "test Subject" implies that in both cases, the people being referred to are treated as experiments or means to an end, rather than as true "subjects" (as opposed to objects) in themselves.



Randy Lenz has successfully seized the bags of the Chinese women and escaped. Unbeknownst to him, he passes Poor Tony and Ruth in the alley. He also passes a group of young crack dealers, one of whom throws a rock at him and misses. He then passes a “sexless” figure lying on the ground wearing two different shoes, hair covering their face, smelling of “rot.” Lenz keeps walking.

*Lenz’s indifference as he passes the unidentifiable figure on the ground is an example of the way in which people cruelly dehumanize each other. It recalls the moment when Poor Tony was riding the T and realized that he was the kind of person people moved away from.*



Rémy Marathe is sitting in Ennet House wearing a veil. It is hot and crowded in the room, and he feels nauseous. Almost everyone is smoking. Two women are comparing their experiences of having been members of cults. Before “*La Culte du Prochain Train*,” Marathe had use of all his limbs. (An endnote here describes E.T.A. student James Struck Jr. conducting research on the A.F.R. for his History of Canadian Unpleasantness course. He reads about the A.F.R.’s various activities, which include placing “large reflective devices” on U.S. highways to confuse drivers and assassinating Canadian politicians.)

*The title of the “History of Canadian Unpleasantness” course is hilarious due to the total lack of attempt to hide its political bias. Of course, in reality American education is heavily influenced by political bias (even if it is not always made so obvious by the titles of courses). While the U.S. itself is often portrayed as a paragon of good values, other parts of the world are sometimes presented in a largely negative light.*



(In the same endnote, Struck reads that *La Culte du Prochain Train* means “The Cult of the Next Train” and refers to a game played in Quebec wherein miners’ sons would lie down on train tracks and compete over who would be the last to scramble away before the approach of an express train. Those who remain on the tracks have their legs severed off; several of these boys go on to found A.F.R. In the whole history of the game, only one person has not jumped: John Wayne’s father Bernard.)

*Finally the background behind the fact that A.F.R. consists entirely of people who use wheelchairs is revealed. Because *La Culte du Prochain Train* is essentially a way of demonstrating one’s capacity for reckless, courageous self-sacrifice, it is the ideal test for potential members of a terrorist cell. The mention of John Wayne’s father proves that John has a connection to the A.F.R. and could well have been planted at E.T.A. by them.*



Back in the main narrative, a man approaches Marathe and asks if he is “real.” Confused, Marathe insists that he is Swiss. The man warns Marathe that most of the other E.T.A. residents aren’t real—that they are made of metal—but that he can tell Marathe is real. He adds that you can tell other people are fake because if you get close to them you can hear a faint mechanical whirring. The man replies in an increasingly nonsensical, paranoid fashion, and eventually Marathe bids him goodnight.

*This passage considers questions of inner subjectivity and authenticity. Counterintuitively, it seems as if Marathe’s veil may have persuaded this unhinged man that he is “real” whereas the others are fake. Of course, in reality Marathe is fake—he is not really Swiss (or an addict) and is using the veil to hide his true identity.*



Joelle has rediscovered a love for cleaning that has nothing to do with getting high. When she and Orin lived together as young lovers, she would put anxiety at bay by cleaning, which gave her a sense of independence and control. Before meeting Gately, Joelle had not been thinking much of the Incandenzas, who are the “second-saddest” family she’s ever met. Orin once told her that while James just stared at him blankly, Avril told him she loved him roughly one hundred times each day.

*While Orin’s relationship with Joelle appears to have had a significant effect on him, the same does not seem to be true for Joelle herself. She admits here that she doesn’t think of the Incandenzas often, and Orin does not appear to have played a significant role in her (decidedly tumultuous) life.*



Orin had predicted that James would want to cast Joelle in his films because of her extraordinary beauty, and it was painfully clear that he hoped he would get closer to his father through her. Joelle found James's work "amateurish," yet also felt that there were barely-noticeable flickers of promise within it. Orin was only the second boy to ever approach her romantically, and Joelle remembers him confessing his crush on her. (An endnote explains that both Orin and Joelle recall that it was the other one who made the first approach.)

After they became close, James confessed to Joelle that he didn't know how to talk to Orin or Hal. Orin used to cry about his nonfunctional relationship with James. Avril always crept out Joelle, and Joelle was convinced that Avril "wished her ill." She remembers a particularly traumatizing Thanksgiving dinner during which all the Incandenzas (and Avril herself) seemed to be wearing the same fake smile.

At Ennet House, Marathe has a meeting with Pat Montesian. He claims to be a Swiss "resident alien" heroin addict named Henri. Pat proudly states that Ennet House is one of the only houses in the region that is accessible to people with disabilities. Through A.F.R.-overseen research, Marathe has concluded that American drug and alcohol recovery is a "paramilitary" affair. He claims that he lost his legs due to an overdose in Bern. Pat seems totally convinced by his fake account of addiction. She permits Marathe to sleep on a sofa bed in the rear office.

Marathe is unsure if he should accept Pat's offer and stay here, thereby preserving the illusion of his fake identity, or if he should leave immediately and inform the A.F.R. that the master copy of **the Entertainment** is likely in this very house. Or, perhaps, he should do neither and summon Steeply and the O.U.S. forces to Ennet House instead. He tries to envision which would create the best outcome for his comatose wife, Gertraude. At that moment, Marathe hears Pat ask Johnette to put on a cartridge for the residents, saying that Clenette brought some donated ones over from E.T.A. that afternoon.

*While Orin and Joelle are different in many ways, the endnote mentioned in this section shows that they are both proud people who are capable of self-delusion. Of course, one of them likely has the correct interpretation of the story, yet it is telling that it is important to both of them to think that the other made the first move.*



*It should not come as much of a surprise at this point that Avril had hostile feelings toward Joelle. Avril is obviously deeply attached to and protective of her sons, and would therefore be jealous of any girl they brought home.*



*The use of the term "paramilitary" creates a comparison between Marathe's insurgent activities and drug and alcohol recovery. While on one level little about the repetitive, banal way of life in Ennet House seems "paramilitary," the absolute strictness with which rules are enforced does suggest that recovery programs' response to addiction is akin to a merciless and efficient military operation.*



*As this passage shows, Marathe has still not decided whether he is ultimately a triple or quadruple agent. Indeed, his indecision here is surprising, considering how hard and determinedly he and the rest of the A.F.R. have worked to reach this moment. It becomes clear that Marathe's loyalty to his wife far exceeds any loyalty he has to Quebec or the A.F.R. He only thinks of what is best for her.*



## CHAPTER 70

11 November *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*. Mario is making a documentary about E.T.A., and has taken to walking around campus with a camera that James made called the Bolex H32 strapped to his head. He goes into Schtitt's room and finds the coach asleep in his chair, with Wagner blaring. Mario films him for a while and then leaves, falling over twice as he does, yet without waking Schtitt. Mario then goes to the third-floor dorms, which mostly house boys under 14. He films LaMont Chu, who asks if he should say something "for posterity" and then can't think of anything to say.

LaMont then asks that Mario put the camera aside so they can discuss the mysterious meeting Hal and Pemulis had in Charles's office, which Hal left totally white-faced. LaMont wants Mario to find out what happened from Hal, and although Mario agrees, it seems that he doesn't entirely understand the request. Mario then goes to Avril's office, where his mother greets him joyfully and immediately abandons her phone call. Mario tells her that he saw her light on and wondered what she was doing in her office so late. She invites him to join her and Charles for dinner.

Mario says that he's heard about the journalist who's looking for Hal. He tries to question Avril about Charles and Hal and the Eschaton punishment, but she asks him about his day instead. Avril says that she won't bug Hal about what happened in the aftermath of Eschaton but will instead patiently wait for him to tell her himself. Mario says he's spent the day wondering how you can tell if someone is sad. Avril offers signs such as crying or being unusually quiet. Mario asks how you can tell if the person's acting normal. Avril asks if Mario is talking about Hal, but he insists he's just asking in general.

Avril and Mario discuss dissociation; Avril says that some people are "deeply afraid of their own emotions." She tells Mario about her father and grandfather's struggles with depression and alcohol. Avril is 56 and is still as beautiful as she was when she was young. Mario was incontinent into his early teens, and Hal and James would always happily change his diapers without a hint of sadness or disgust. Avril, however, was always too upset to do it. Avril asks if Mario is trying to tell her that *he* is sad, saying that "the sun would leave my sky" if she realized she couldn't intuit such a thing herself.

Mario has a somewhat hapless style of filmmaking, shooting random, uninteresting scenes and being rather clumsy as he does so. Yet perhaps Mario's innocent, unscrupulous eye is exactly what is needed to capture the reality of life at E.T.A. Because they do not feel intimidated by his presence, people may act naturally around him and his camera.



LaMont's intense curiosity about what happened to Hal in the meeting suggests that Hal's behavior has been disturbing the other E.T.A. students, perhaps especially the younger ones who look up to him and see him as a model of success. In a boarding school environment free of parents, relationships to older students become very important.



Avril's confidence that Hal will tell her what happened at Charles's office and if anything is wrong may appear to contradict her image as an overly intense mother. Perhaps she is more laid back and "hands-off" than it first appeared. On the other hand, she seems to believe that she has such an absolutely close and honest relationship with Hal that he would never lie to her—which we know to be completely false.



This passage confirms the sense that Avril's over-attachment to her sons actually inhibits her ability to be a good mother. Because she is so emotionally overinvested in them, she can't actually take care of them, as shown by the fact that she won't ask Hal what's wrong and used to be unable to change Mario's diaper. In this sense, a level of disconnection is sometimes necessary to being a good parent.



It is early morning, before dawn, and Hal tells Mario that he just had a terrible dream. Mario says that Hal kept repeating “Thank you sir may I have another” in his sleep. Mario says he’s found someone who has old tapes of Madame Psychosis’s show, but he needs Hal’s help in asking if it’s okay to listen to them. Hal says he dreamed that his teeth splintered and crumbled out of his mouth. Mario says everyone’s been wondering what happened with Hal’s urine test, and that he promised LaMont Chu he would find out for him. Hal asks if Mario remembers S. Johnson, and says he can’t stop thinking about how Orin lied to Avril about S. Johnson’s death.

Hal tells Mario that the man from O.N.A.N.T.A. didn’t actually take urine samples from him and the other boys, because Pemulis persuaded him to conduct the test in a month’s time. Mario suggests that they call Orin and ask him to come to WhataBurger. Hal discusses different types of lies, even sorting them into subtypes. He stresses that no one would be able to detect every single lie, as some types are just too convincing. Hal recalls his childhood fear of monsters, and says he now feels that the only real monsters are people who lie so well that it’s impossible to know that they aren’t telling the truth.

Rémy Marathe is speaking to Kate, who expresses disbelief that she is drinking. They are sitting in Ryle’s Jazz Club in Inman Square, where Kate sought refuge after being mugged. Marathe tells her that she resembles his dying wife. Kate seems euphoric, claiming that this is the first time she’s felt okay in nine weeks. Marathe shares that he lost his legs as a teenager when they were run over by a train. He begins talking about the tensions between “Swiss” people and their geographic neighbors.

Marathe talks about a time in his life when he was suicidal, completely despondent and immersed in his own pain. However, one day he saw a woman about to be hit by a truck and risked his life to save her. The woman, Gertraude, became his wife, and Marathe was able to overcome his suicidal thoughts through his empathy for someone else. He explains that Gertraude had no skull as a result of being born near a toxic area in “Switzerland.” At first he didn’t think he loved her and briefly left her, but he found that as soon as he did, his suicidal depression returned.

*After the previous passage in which it was made clear that Avril is unable to connect with and properly parent her sons, this scene is a moving moment in which Hal and Mario are open, honest, and vulnerable with one another. Previously, Hal seemed to feel more loyal to and protective of Orin (as shown by the fact that he claimed his phone conversation with Orin was with someone Mario didn’t know). Here, however, he admits to being disturbed by his older brother.*



*Considering that Hal is such a private, secretive, and thus fundamentally dishonest person himself, it is surprising that he is so upset by the issue of dishonesty. On the other hand, maybe his conclusion that convincing liars are “monsters” comes from a place of self-hatred. Perhaps he feels horrified and isolated by how much he lies to others and how little they actually know about his life.*



*Both Kate and Marathe are engaged in seriously dangerous behavior. Kate is relapsing, and although she feels amazing in this moment, this feeling will not last when she comes to terms with the fact that she has jeopardized her recovery and thus her life. Marathe’s drunken flirtation and misremembering of his fake backstory also spells trouble.*



*Marathe’s story about Gertraude might superficially seem romantic. Yet actually, the fact that he only stays with her because she alleviates his depression is rather concerning. This is particularly true considering that Gertraude has severe disabilities, and is even in a coma. Marathe treats her as a source of inspiration and a “cure” for his mental illness rather than a person in her own right.*



It was at this point that Marathe realized he *did* love Gertraude. Kate objects to this twist in the story, saying that she does not believe that this is what love is. Gertraude is certain to die imminently unless she receives the Jaarvik IX Exterior Artificial Heart, although even with the heart she will still be “in a comatose and vegetated state.” Marathe admits that he is betraying his friends and country in order to secure the heart for her. Kate is adamant that Marathe is wrong to think of this as love, and he accuses her of just being drunk.

Kate becomes increasingly coherent; she mocks Marathe’s accent and admits that she’s only had sex twice. Eventually she stops responding to him at all. Back at E.T.A., Mario tells Hal that he seems sad, and Hal confesses to his secret marijuana use in the pump room. He tells Mario about Pemulis’s urine-selling business, and says that no one suspects he or Axford having been taking **Substances**. Rather, they are sure to blame Pemulis and expel him from E.T.A. by the end of the term. Furthermore, Pemulis secured the extra month before the urine test for *Hal*, not himself.

Hal seems petrified of the prospect of “flunk[ing] a urine” and wonders what the consequences will be. He thinks that something awful will happen to Avril if she discovers he’s been keeping a huge secret from her. He says he understands that Mario is hurt by this information, too, but Mario responds that he is actually “zero percent hurt.” This angers Hal, who tells Mario that he has to get mad sometimes. He admits that he’s abstained from marijuana for 40 hours and is already going crazy. Hal asks Mario what he should do, and Mario replies “I think you just did it.”

## CHAPTER 71

17 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Don Gately is on medical leave from Ennet House. Someone knocks on the door, and Johnette opens it to find an “upscale kid” requesting a private conversation with anyone in a position of authority. The kid—presumably Hal—speaks with the “oversalivated quality” of someone who has just stopped smoking weed. He explains that he has considered going to a meeting for addicts but that he doesn’t know where any are; he only knows about Ennet House.

*Kate may be drunk, but her repudiation of Marathe’s claim to truly love Gertraude is apt. While it may be true that Marathe is engaging in great personal self-sacrifice in order to help his wife, this doesn’t truly count as self-sacrifice if he is with his wife in order to save his own life. From this perspective, his actions are in fact ultimately self-serving.*



*This passage marks a major shift, as Hal finally feels able to reveal his most protected secret to Mario. This decision perhaps emerges out of desperation and guilt, as Hal confronts the possibility that Pemulis will be kicked out in order to save Hal.*



*While Hal is angry with Mario’s reaction in this passage, once again Mario is actually shown to be one of the wisest characters in the novel. Hal is convinced that Mario will take his secrecy personally and be hurt by it, but in reality Mario knows that it is not a personal insult, which is why he is “zero percent hurt.” Meanwhile, he also realizes how much progress Hal has made simply by having the courage to be honest.*



*The “oversalivated quality” of Hal’s speech links back to the scenes at the beginning of the novel in which Hal was a child and already spoke with dry-mouth sounds. Indeed, this suggests that Hal had some kind of need for marijuana even before he started smoking it, which we can interpret as a metaphor for how substances fill existing holes in a person’s life.*



(An endnote describes the boys' locker room at E.T.A. on the same day, 17 November. Possalthrowite is having a breakdown over being unable to trust his family and Pemulis assures him that everything will be okay.) Back in the main narrative, Molly Notkin is being interrogated by O.U.S. operatives about **the Entertainment**. Molly says that the Entertainment—whose title, “*Infinite Jest* (V) or (VI)”, is mentioned for the first time here—stars Madame Psychosis as a maternal version of Death. Her face is obscured, and she is naked and pregnant. She delivers a monologue about “death-cosmology” to the audience.

Molly also says that Madame Psychosis's real mother killed herself using a garbage disposal on Thanksgiving. **The Entertainment** was made using a Bolex H32 with a peculiar lens. Molly explains that Madame Psychosis only had a sexual relationship with Orin, not James, and that she hadn't attended James's funeral. Madame Psychosis has never seen the Entertainment and struggles to believe that it is “lethally entertaining.” Molly asks why the O.U.S. never went to Avril directly to ask about the master copy, and there is no response.

Molly says that Madame Psychosis was able to get James to stop drinking, and that he'd been sober for months by the time of his suicide. She believes that Madame Psychosis's **Substance** abuse problems stem from her guilt over James's suicide, which itself has nothing to do with **the Entertainment**. She also thinks that Avril planted the bottle of Wild Turkey whisky near James's dead body because she resented that she herself had never been able to make him stop drinking, but Madame Psychosis had.

Molly explains that Madame Psychosis had always been very close to her own father, a chemist from Kentucky. When Madame Psychosis was a teenager, her father seemed to develop a strange sort of denial that she was growing up and treated her more and more like a child. Once in college, she realized how creepy this was. It reached a horrible climax when she brought Orin home for Thanksgiving and her father started mashing up her turkey into puree. She confronted her father, and he replied by confessing that he was in love with her. He claimed that it had been easy to repress his desire for her when she was a child but that it was more difficult now, and that this is why he continued to treat her like an infant.

“*Infinite Jest*” is a phrase from Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), a play upon which the novel is loosely based. (Hal is Prince Hamlet, James is Hamlet's dead father who appears as a ghost, and Avril is Hamlet's treacherous mother Gertrude. Charles is King Claudius, who in the play is the deceased King Hamlet's brother but in the novel is Avril's stepbrother, adding a more explicitly incestuous dynamic to the story.) This important endnote thus brings together many of the threads of the story.



While the A.F.R. have tortured the WYYY engineer to try and find the location of the master copy of the Entertainment, the O.U.S. have been interrogating Molly. In this way, both organizations are closing in on the master copy, yet neither have actually secured it. Moreover, although these interrogations provide useful contextual information about the film, they do not necessarily point to where the master copy actually is.



This passage provides a crucial twist in the story, which paints Avril in an even more unflattering light. If James was sober at the time of his suicide, then his decision to kill himself was not a rash, drunken decision nor perhaps even a response to his addiction at all. Avril's supposed planting of the whisky bottle indicates that she did not really care about James, only about herself.



This highly disturbing twist in Joelle's backstory reveals that she, like Orin, has also been traumatized by the inappropriate behavior of one of her parents—though in this case it is much more severe than anything Orin endured. Depending on one's perspective, the amount of incest, abuse, and sexual neurosis in *Infinite Jest* might seem exaggerated and grotesque—or perhaps it is just a grim portrayal of reality.



Madame Psychosis's mother suddenly freaked out, announcing that she and her husband had not once had sex since their daughter reached puberty, although she'd never known why. She then confessed that she and her sister had been molested by their own father. She then ran down to her husband's chemical lab to throw acid on herself. Madame Psychosis, her father, and Orin all ran after her, though not before the mother had drastically disfigured herself with the acid. Molly adds that Madame Psychosis's real name is Lucille Duquette. After disfiguring herself, Lucille's mother hurled the flask of acid at her husband, who ducked, allowing the flask to hit and disfigure Lucille instead.

(An endnote describes Pemulis, deLint, Nwangi, and Watson sitting in deLint's office. DeLint asks Pemulis to explain what happened with Wayne, and Pemulis begins speaking, but soon realizes that the truth has basically already come out. Wayne had taken amphetamines and started going berserk, terrorizing Lateral Alice. Troeltsch then encouraged Wayne to use the intercom system in Alice's office to issue "public castigations of his various peers and instructors." DeLint reads out some of the (rather humorous) insults Wayne issued. This includes the statement that Hal is "addicted to everything that is not tied down, cannot outrun him, and is fittable in the mouth.")

(In the same endnote, Pemulis asks how this will affect his chances of attending WhataBurger, and adds that he has something important he needs to speak about with Avril. DeLint tells Pemulis that E.T.A. believes he dosed Wayne with stimulants against his knowledge. Pemulis will be allowed to finish the term for credit if he wants, but after that point he will be expelled and will not receive any good references. To the shock of everyone present, Pemulis again asks how this will affect his chances of attending WhataBurger.)

After class, Hal travels to an NA meeting all the way out in Natick. He feels silly for going. He thinks about the etymology of the word "anonymous" and practices introducing himself as Mike. The meeting has already started when Hal walks in. The group leader, who is addressing the meeting, uses the phrase "inner child" while another man in the audience named Kevin weeps. To his astonishment, Hal sees that some of the men are holding teddy bears. Kevin cries even more and the leader, Harv, encourages the group to express support for Kevin. The men tell Kevin that they love him, and Hal feels uncomfortable.

*According to Molly, Joelle/Madam Psychosis/Lucille has not only had at least three separate names but two physical appearances (before and after her disfigurement in the acid attack). In a sense, these constant reinventions suggest that she is (at least) three different people. At the same time, this story is second-hand and might not be true. It's possible Joelle invented it to give herself an excuse to wear a veil, because her beauty is so extreme that it actually has a negative impact on her life. The novel never resolves this ambiguity.*



*In literature and film set in high schools, there exists a trope wherein a certain character breaks down and reveals all the secrets and lies that have been circulating within the community. (Think of the moment in "Mean Girls" when the slanderous "Burn Book" is photocopied and distributed across the school.) This revelation is chaotic, but also creates a moment of catharsis, as the community is finally forced to confront the issues that it was previously brushing under the carpet.*



*As Hal predicted, Pemulis is being made to serve as a scapegoat; all the blame for the substance abuse problem at E.T.A. is being placed on his shoulders. Pemulis's calm demeanor in this passage is likely because he can use his knowledge about Avril and John Wayne's affair in order to blackmail Avril into not expelling him.*



*Here is yet another example of a character using multiple identities. Hal's insistence on calling himself Mike shows just how anxious he is about people discovering his addiction issues. After all, it is highly unlikely that anyone at this far-away meeting will know who he is, and the whole point of NA and other anonymous recovery programs is precisely their anonymity. Yet Hal remains deeply paranoid.*



Harv asks Kevin to share why he is crying, and Kevin explains that his inner infant is experiencing abandonment. He gives details of his life story, and at this point Hal suddenly realizes that he is Kevin Bain, Marlon Bain's older brother. Hal had heard that after getting his M.B.A., Kevin made a lot of money in the "pre-Subsidized-Time Simulated Reality craze." Hal could never have imagined Kevin having the slightest interest in recreational substances. He has never seen someone cry as much as Kevin is crying right now. The men in the group are chanting in support of him. Kevin ends up crawling across the floor as a way of reaching out for love himself.

*Hal's disbelief that Kevin Bain would be the kind of person to use recreational substances shows that, despite being a drug user himself, he subscribes to stereotypical ideas about what substance abuse looks like. Indeed, perhaps Hal's belief in these stereotypes is part of what has stopped him from admitting to his addiction and seeking help before now.*



Gately is lying in the Trauma Wing of St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Tiny Ewell is there with him, talking about his personal life, explaining how he first developed a taste for "embezzlement" as a child. He goes on and on, despite the fact that Gately is making no kind of response. Suddenly Gately remembers that he had been offered Demerol by doctors who didn't read the note in his file reading that he has a history of narcotics dependency and thus shouldn't be given any. During the emergency surgery he'd had the night before, he was given Toradol-IM, a non-narcotic that does not help much against the pain.

*In his semi-comatose state, Gately becomes the perfect "therapist" for the Ennet House residents who come to visit him. Like Kate—who was too depressed to walk away or respond to people talking at her—Gately is forced by his physical condition to lie still and listen to whatever Tiny Ewell says. This suggests that when people want someone to talk to, they do not require much interaction and perhaps even prefer non-responsiveness.*



After surgery Gately remembers hearing his doctor telling someone, possibly Pat, that he has a severe infection. Ewell keeps talking, saying that he feels dissatisfied and dismayed by the life he has ended up with and doesn't know what to do. Gately wants to tell Ewell that he identifies with him but isn't able to make himself speak. Instead, Gately falls into half-sleep and dreams that he is on the beach in Beverly, MA, while a storm rages and his mother gets beaten up by a man. He ends up in deep water and tries to call to his mother to come to him. When he wakes up, Ewell is gone.

*Even in his rather desperate condition, Gately remains committed to the practice of recovery, as shown by the fact that he wants to tell Tiny Ewell that he identifies with his story. As mentioned above, Ewell does not even seem to be seeking such affirmation. Rather, he is simply happy to talk at Gately, despite the fact that Gately is incapable of showing that he is even listening.*



Someone, possibly Joelle, is sponging Gately's face with a cold washcloth. Later Pat comes in and assures him that everything in the house is all right. Gately is surprised the police haven't come already. Pat expresses admiration for Gately's total refusal of narcotic medication. Strangely, at the end of their conversation she bursts into tears. Gately has more dreams and then sees Joelle for real. He tries to "ask his heart" if accepting codeine would count as a relapse, but gets no answer.

*The struggle Gately faces in this part of the novel is a very real one. If injured, narcotics addicts face an impossible choice between attempting to endure unbearable pain or risking possible relapse. The fact that Gately is considering taking codeine shows how impossible this dilemma is, considering his total commitment to sobriety.*



Calvin Thrust is in the hospital room now, providing more information on what happened in the aftermath of the fight. Calvin had told Lenz that he would need to submit a urine test on the spot or else voluntarily check himself out of Ennet House for good. It turned out that Pat took Gately to the hospital herself, and that she and Calvin have spoken to the police about the incident. Gately feels annoyed that Calvin turned Lenz out into the night, leaving Gately squarely to blame for whatever injuries or even deaths the Canadians suffered.

Charlotte Treat is embroidering a get-well message for Gately. Calvin says the biggest problem they're facing is that the gun Gately was shot with is missing. Green says he seized it from one of the Canadians and then dropped it on the lawn. Calvin believes finding the gun will determine whether or not Gately is ruled to have acted in self-defense. Again Gately asks if he killed anyone, and again he receives no answer. When Gately next wakes up Day is there, also giving a lengthy monologue about himself.

Gately keeps having a recurring nightmare about an acne-scarred "Oriental" woman. In another dream, Gately is visited by a "wraith" who explains that it comes from a different dimension. Words appear in Gately's mind that he does not know or understand, from "alembic" to "chiaroscuro" to "chronaxie" to "de sica neo-real crane dolly." Gately wonders if the wraith represents his personal understanding of God, or else if it is a manifestation of his addiction. Gately thinks about the TV shows he used to watch in childhood. The wraith says that when it was "animate" it had made film cartridges itself. The wraith speaks with an incredibly complex vocabulary.

The wraith talks about its son, and then mentions its addiction to Wild Turkey. At this point it is clear that the wraith is James Incandenza. The wraith explains that it had always wanted to get through to its youngest son (Hal), and that it had been traumatized by Hal's muteness. It had also begun to worry that Hal was using **Substances**. In desperation, the wraith committed itself to sobriety and spent the last 90 days of its life making a film (**the Entertainment**) that it hoped would be a way to communicate with Hal.

*Another dilemma: while Lenz's breach of the no-substance policy means that he should categorically be kicked out of Ennet House, this means he could simply escape blame for the fight and leave Gately to be targeted by the police. This is even more cruel and irresponsible considering that Gately intervened in the fight to save Lenz in the first place.*



*Ennet House members express their sympathy and care for Gately in different ways, most of which are self-serving to some extent. Charlotte's get-well message is sweet but perhaps just an excuse to spend more time with her needles, whereas Ewell and Day's monologues are rather self-indulgent. Yet these expressions of support manage to be moving nonetheless.*



*Infinite Jest is less a fantastic novel than a surreal one, although there are supernatural and even spiritual elements (such as when Lucien Antitoui's soul is described as flying home to Quebec after his death). The unfamiliar vocabulary that enters Gately's mind is made up of technical terms related to filmmaking. This is an indication that the wraith is the spirit of James Incandenza.*



*Considering that the Entertainment has now become a weapon of mass destruction on the brink of use by terrorists, it is surprising that it was originally developed as a (rather bizarre) gesture of familial love and care. James may have been mentally ill, but his love for Hal was desperately sincere.*



The wraith/James hoped that **the Entertainment** would be so compelling that it would force Hal out of his anhedonia, like a “magically entertaining toy.” The wraith hoped that the Entertainment would be a way of saying “I’M SORRY” to Hal. Gately thinks of his grim relationship with his own father, but the wraith dramatically interrupts to insist that any communication between a father and son is better than none. Gately wonders why the wraith is there, paying so much attention to someone it doesn’t know. He thinks it’s possible that the wraith doesn’t exist at all, and that its appearance is a manifestation of his addiction.

*The wraith/James’s hope that the Entertainment would free Hal from his muteness and depression seems counterintuitive. The Entertainment inspires total passivity in viewers, which seems like an odd method of trying to inspire life and feeling in a person. On the other hand, if we believe that the wraith is responsible for giving Hal DMZ to counteract the mold he ate as a child, then this also works via a similarly counterintuitive logic. Perhaps the Entertainment kills everyone except for Hal, who is its true intended viewer—just like the DMZ could leave Hal incomprehensible to everyone but his father’s spirit.*



Gately is still deeply traumatized by the memories of his mother being beaten up by her boyfriend. Three men from White Flag who Gately doesn’t even know that well come to visit; they try to cheer him up by telling dark jokes, making fun of Al-Anon. Gately feels a surge of blinding pain.

*Al-Anon is a support group for the loved ones of alcoholics. The fact that the White Flag members make fun of it reinforces the impression of AA as cliquy, with an “us v. them” mentality.*



## CHAPTER 72

*19 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* Marathe and the other A.F.R. members cannot track down Joelle. They decide it won’t be possible to commit a “direct assault” on E.T.A., and thus plan to “intercept” a team of young tennis players traveling to WhataBurger from Quebec and replace them with members of the A.F.R. (those whose legs still function). In the hospital, Gately has a sensual dream about Joelle. He thinks about an elderly woman who lived in his neighborhood as a child called Mrs. Waite, who the other children feared because she resembled a witch. In the end she committed suicide by hanging herself.

*At this point it feels as if the winding, non-chronological narrative may be reaching some kind of climactic conclusion centered around the WhataBurger tournament. While it is still not totally clear how the A.F.R. think that intercepting the Quebecois junior tennis team will allow them to secure the master copy of the Entertainment, we can imagine the carnage that will ensue through this plan.*



Shortly before this, Mrs. Waite had saved up her money to buy Gately a birthday cake, which no one ate and which Gately’s mom threw in the trash. Gately knows that Mrs. Waite could never have known it was not eaten, and yet it is still unbearably sad that this incident happened so soon before her suicide. The dream about Joelle takes place in Mrs. Waite’s kitchen, and Mrs. Waite and Joelle are somehow one figure who is also at the same time “Death incarnate.” This figure explains that Death is female and thus maternal, and that mothers are “so obsessively loving” because they are trying to “make amends” for their role in death.

*Perhaps through his visitation from James in wraith form, Gately appears to “see” some version of the Entertainment in his dream. In this way, we gain details about what happens in the film without access to any of the people who have actually seen (and thus been killed by) it. Like the novel itself, the film seems to be fixated with the vilification of mothers as the root cause of both life itself and also chaos and suffering.*



## CHAPTER 73

20 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment Gaudeamus Igitur. Hal dreams that he is in a zoo. When he wakes up, Mario is still asleep in his bed. Every year, E.T.A. hosts a “semipublic exhibition meet” between Interdependence Day and WhataBurger. E.T.A. donors and alumni attend matches followed by a “semiformal” fundraising gala in the dining hall. This year extremely strong winds are blowing, and it seems unlikely that any flights will be able to land at Logan Airport.

In Gately’s hospital room, in what he now realizes is an “apparently real nondream,” Joelle holds two brownies and tries to make him laugh. She tells him she can’t stay too long because she has to get back in time for Ennet House’s morning meditation meeting. She tells him news from the house and offers to come back to the hospital after the meeting, bringing anything or anyone he wants. She talks about all the times she tried to get clean only to relapse within days or weeks. She shows Gately a picture of her father, whom she calls “my own personal Daddy.”

Like most recovering addicts, Gately has a problem with an extreme, hasty desire for attachment, and fantasizes about a lifetime of love and commitment with Joelle. In Boston AA, seducing new members is seriously frowned upon because newcomers are so vulnerable. Gately feels disgusted with himself.

The next passage is narrated in the first person. The narrator, Hal, describes walking through E.T.A. and running into Ortho Stice in the boys’ bathroom. Stice remarks that Hal is up early and then observes that Hal is crying, which Hal denies. Stice tells Hal a joke about statisticians who go duck-hunting, but Hal cannot bring himself to laugh. Stice reveals that he has been sitting there with his forehead pressed against the window for hours, and that his forehead is in fact now stuck there, unable to move. He’d woken up at 1 am unable to sleep, and decided to watch the snow falling through the window. He’s been stuck ever since.

Hal tells Stice to prepare himself, because Hal’s going to attempt to un-stick him. Stice admits that he saw the presence of some person or thing and asks if Hal believes in paranormal activity. Stice then felt someone bite him, though of course he couldn’t turn his head to see who it was. Hal says he doesn’t know what to believe regarding paranormal activity; Mario has claimed to see ghosts, and Mario always tells the truth. Hal attempts to remove Stice, but only causes Stice enormous pain. To Stice’s embarrassment and annoyance, Troeltsch arrives, and Hal explains that Stice is completely stuck to the window.

Like the A.F.R.’s plot to intercept WhataBurger, the upcoming exhibition meet builds further suspense, creating the impression that the novel is coming to a climactic conclusion. The dramatic storm further intensifies this atmospheric buildup.



Joelle’s bizarre nickname for her father recalls the nicknames the Incandenza children have for their parents. While Avril is “the Moms,” James is “Himself,” “The Mad Stork,” or “The Sad Stork.” (Joelle also nicknames James “Infinite Jim.”) James Jr. is revealed to have also called his father “Himself,” as did James Sr., suggesting the nicknames speak to the way familiar dysfunction repeats across generations.



Here Gately must battle between his feelings and his belief in the importance of submitting to institutional control. Though Gately perhaps doesn’t realize, Joelle is facing the exact same dilemma.



It is funny that Stice attempts to tell Hal a joke when he himself is in an absurdly comic, joke-type situation of being stuck to the window. The comedy factor is increased by the fact that Stice appears to have gotten stuck during a contemplative, melancholy moment. This reflects the way in which humor in the novel is amplified by its constant juxtaposition with the grim and disturbing side of reality. Note also that Hal is now crying without realizing it—some kind of transformation has begun in him, eventually leading to his total inability to communicate in the novel’s first chapter.



This passage could be interpreted as a meta-level reflection on the recent scene in which the ghostlike “wraith” visited Gately. Hal’s uncertainty corresponds to the uncertainty we feel as readers over whether we should interpret Gately’s encounter with wraith-James as a dream, vision, or something else entirely.



It emerges that Troeltsch has spent the night in Axford's room, which astonishes and horrifies Hal, but he says nothing about it. Hal fetches the janitors, Kenkle and Brandt. Kenkle is an African-American genius from Roxbury Crossing who finished his PhD in low-temperature physics at 21 and worked as a researcher for the Navy before being dishonorably discharged two years later. E.T.A. students guess he is either hypomaniac or an amphetamine addict (or both). Hal finds him and Brandt and requests their help in setting Stice free.

*Kenkle is another example of a failed prodigy: someone who failed to live up to their early promise and ended up falling from grace. As is often the case in the novel's presentation of these figures, mental illness and substance abuse are presumably factors in this trajectory. The novel implies that something about prodigious success generally leads to these problems.*



## CHAPTER 74

*Partial Transcript of Weather-Delayed Meeting Between: (1) Mr. Rodney Tine Sr., Chief of Unspecified Services & White House Adviser on Interdependent Relations; (2) Ms. Maureen Hooley, Vice-President for Children's Entertainment, Interlace Telentertainment, Inc.; (3) Mr. Carl E. ("Buster") Yee, Director of Marketing and Product-Perception, Glad Flaccid Receptacle Corporation; (4) Mr. R. Tine Jr., Deputy Regional Coordinator, U.S. Office of Unspecified Services; and (5) Mr. P. Tom Veals, Viney and Veals Advertising, Unltd. 8th Floor State House Annex Boston MA, U.S.A. 20 November – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.* The meeting participants listed in the chapter title discuss a target demographic of white, English-speaking children aged 4-12 who come from middle-to-upper income families. They note that their attention span for advertisements is 13-16 seconds and review their existing efforts to convey a message to these children. The message warns them not to open "unlabeled or suspicious cartridges." Various methods of presenting the warning have been tested, with many dismissed for being "uncool" or ineffective. They consider showing an evil cartridge-character and then warning viewers that the cartridge is "wicked" and "lying."

*Although it is not at first clear what is happening, over the course of this passage it becomes obvious that the meeting participants are constructing a plan to avoid children getting killed by the Entertainment. This involves a kind of reverse advertising, wherein children are persuaded not to watch the Entertainment if they come across it. Unsurprisingly, it is shown to be difficult to find an effective way to get this message across, especially considering the nature of advertising itself.*



The group also discusses the distribution of a message telling children what to do if they find their parents "sitting in one position in front of the home's viewer for an unusually long period of time" or otherwise acting strangely "with respect to an entertainment."

*These warnings recall public service announcements related to nuclear bombs during the Cold War, and thus have a distinctly apocalyptic air.*



Gately is half asleep again. Joelle is gone, and a nurse comes in and gives Gately a notebook and pen he requested. Gately's sponsor "Ferocious" Francis is there, and Gately tries to write the word "YO!" on the notebook. However, it comes out as a largely indecipherable scribble. Francis observes that Lenz had been "going around cutting up people's pets," and that this is how the fight with the Canadians all began. Gately wants to tell Francis about how he has learned to endure unimaginable pain without narcotics, but he still can't speak. Francis has misunderstood some of the details about the fight, and believes that the other men involved were Hawaiian, not Canadian.

*Different pieces of the story are coming together in this moment, but inevitably certain parts are getting lost in translation, which could end up causing serious problems. Indeed, Francis's misunderstanding of details of the fight compounds Gately's frustrations about being unable to communicate. If a doctor experiences a corresponding misunderstanding and gives Gately Demerol, his life could be ruined.*



Gately desperately tries to write a question asking if any of the Canadians were killed, but at this moment his doctor enters the room. The doctor says he's gone ahead and given Gately a narcotic called Dilaudid, and Gately panics. The doctor says he wants to respect Gately's preferences but that he himself is Muslim, and if he was in great pain, he knows that God would not mind him taking addictive substances in order to ease his own suffering. Gately tries to draw AA on his notebook and is now desperately gesturing at it. He wants Francis to intervene, but Francis does nothing.

The doctor says that Gately's pain will get worse and that he wants to give him many further narcotics. The doctor advises Gately to "surrender your courageous fear of dependence and let us do our profession." Gately knows that if the doctor offers Demerol, he won't say no—he won't be able to. He convinces himself that it doesn't count as a relapse. If it did, Francis would say something. At this point, Francis says he's going to leave until this "bullshit" is sorted out and return later. The doctor addresses Francis as Mr. Gately Sr. and asks for his input, and Francis says that it's not his business, and Gately must decide for himself.

In desperation, Gately yanks the doctor's testicles. The doctor screams. The pain of this gesture is so intense that it knocks Gately out, and when he wakes up a nurse is tending to him. Gately first took Demerol when he was 23 in Salem, MA. Ennet House residents McDade and Diehl come to visit and tell Gately that the gun used to shoot him still hasn't shown up, and that it is now believed that Lenz ran off with it. However, Lenz may have been spotted blind drunk somewhere near Kenmore Square. They tell Gately general news about Ennet House and then give him a shoplifted and unsigned Get Well Soon card.

Gately suddenly feels hugely sorry for himself and resentful at the AA concept of a loving God. The nurse comes back in and McDade and Diehl leave to give Gately privacy. The nurse tells Gately to turn over, and he feels a wave of humiliation.

Back at E.T.A., Hal suddenly experiences a surge of "unexplained panic." There is something he enjoys about this feeling because it brings a heightened awareness of one's surroundings. Yet there is also something horrible about it. He is suddenly overwhelmed by how many mundane, repeated actions he has already completed in life and how many more are to come. He lies down in the Viewing Room (V.R.) and thinks about his family, about E.T.A., and about random facts, such as that no one knows the etymology of the word "blizzard."

*Gately is trapped in a nightmare. The issue is not only that he is unable to speak or write coherently, but that even the message he is managing to convey gets misinterpreted by the seemingly well-meaning but clueless doctor. Meanwhile, Francis is strangely, painfully inept at acting on Gately's behalf just when he needs it the most.*



*In this passage the level of misunderstanding gets even worse. The doctor's demand that Gately "surrender [his] courageous fear of dependence" doesn't make sense, particularly in light of AA's own demands of surrender, which are seen as vital to recovery. Francis, meanwhile, fails to comprehend that Gately is actually incapable of communication, misinterpreting Gately as being indecisive.*



*As time goes on, it becomes more and more disturbing that people are happy to talk at Gately but oblivious and unconcerned about the fact that Gately is incapable of replying. While it is kind of McDade and Diehl to give Gately the card and update him on the latest developments regarding the fight, they (and everyone else) seem uninterested in how Gately himself is actually doing.*



*Gately finds himself more isolated than he has been since quitting drugs. It is precisely this kind of loneliness and despair that puts people at risk of relapse.*



*Up until this point, Hal has managed to turn the intensely pressurized and challenging environment in which he has grown up into something that spurs on his success; this is demonstrated by his affection for the feeling of panic and the lucidity it brings. Yet Hal also seems to be at some kind of breaking point, overwhelmed by emotion now that he does not have the option of numbing himself with marijuana.*



Hal has realized that if forced to choose between tennis and weed, he really doesn't know which one he would pick. He and James used to have an odd issue around communication; whenever they would speak to each other, James would think that Hal was not speaking, whereas Hal would think that he was. Charles is Avril's stepbrother. Avril's father was a binge drinker who would disappear for weeks at a time, and once returned with a new wife—Charles' mother, who had already given birth to Charles. Charles and Avril's lack of blood relation has never been discussed, and they have always seemed incredibly close.

As a child, Gately was nicknamed Bim, which stood for Big Indestructible Moron. He had a "jolly ferocity" that tended to frighten away women, but he was never a bully. He was a dedicated football player who first smoked weed at nine and got properly drunk for the first time a few months later. Before getting hooked on narcotics, Gately favored Quaaludes and beer. His alcohol and drug habits did not have a particularly adverse effect on his football playing, partly because he strictly limited his intake during football season. Drugs did have a seriously bad impact on his academic work, however, and this ultimately lost him his place on the football team. Around this time his mother died, and Gately left school forever.

Hal falls asleep in the V.R., and when he wakes up, Pemulis is there, saying they really need to talk. Pemulis asks why there is a strip of human flesh on the window upstairs, and Hal explains about Stice being stuck to the window. Kieran McKenna pops in and mentions that Stice now resembles a piece of pizza with the cheese taken off. Pemulis keeps bringing up the conversation they need to have, but Hal is reluctant to engage. Hal asks Pemulis to retrieve one of James's cartridges from the shelf and cue it up to the last five minutes. Pemulis does so, and Hal sees exactly what he wanted: the protagonist giving his final, dramatic lecture about death as the meaning of life.

Gately didn't start burgling straight away; at first he worked in the underworld gambling world with a Dilaudid addict named Facklemann, taking bets, delivering winnings, and collecting debts. He had to warn customers with outstanding debt but rarely used any kind of severe violence. Many of these gamblers were men who bet in a reckless, "suicidal" manner and would tell Gately wretched stories about their own lives in an attempt to elicit sympathy from him. This was Gately's first exposure to the serious dangers of addiction.

*Again, the juxtaposition between Gately in his hospital bed and Hal reflecting on his communication issues with James makes the parallel between these two situations inescapably obvious. Both Gately and Hal are the children of alcoholics who subsequently developed addiction issues themselves. The allusion to Charles and Avril's incestuous relationship is also important, as we already know that Charles is probably Mario's father.*



*This passage illustrates a well-known fact about substance abuse: even when the abuse itself is not having a directly harmful impact on a person (i.e. by ruining their health or safety), it can indirectly make their life fall apart. For Gately, the negative effect drugs had on his academic performance triggered a chain of events that led to him dropping out of school and stopping football, thereby destroying the structure and purpose within his life.*



*Hal has recently started opening up to people such as Mario and (presumably) the members of the NA meeting. Yet he is unable to communicate with Pemulis, likely because of the guilt he feels over Pemulis becoming the scapegoat for their substance use and getting kicked out of E.T.A. Pemulis is behaving maturely and doesn't seem angry with Hal, but Hal is still too ashamed to talk to him.*



*Because he was a drug user who didn't finish school, Gately's employment options were limited. This pushed him into a dangerous, violent, and likely illegal line of work where he encountered many other addicts. While gambling addiction has not featured into the book until now, it is one of the other most common forms of addiction.*



One New Year's Eve, Gately was making fake IDs for boarding school students when he watched a B.U. football game and unexpectedly began to sob like a child. Eventually, he fell in with two lesbian cocaine addicts who ran a "housecleaning," key-copying, and burglary business. A new doctor is now in the room, as well as a nurse who Gately finds attractive. The nurse introduced herself as Cathy, but Gately prefers to think of her as "the R.N." She tells him she will give him a sponge bath later: news that fills him with horror.

Gately suddenly realizes that he hallucinated Joelle's whole visit and the conversation about her family. Years ago, a severely alcoholic young woman named Pamela Hoffman-Jeep fell in love with Gately simply because he refrained from raping her when he had the chance. The two of them began dating. She was the "single passivest person Gately ever met" and spent almost all of her time lying down and/or unconscious. While they were dating, a man nicknamed Eighties Bill bet \$125,000 on a Brown vs. Yale football game. After a series of complex and confused attempts to fix the game as well as an unexpected protest by a "Feminazi" student group from Brown, Bill won \$137,000.

Facklemann attempted to scam Eighties Bill and Sorkin, the bookmaker who arranged the bet. Gately and Facklemann would take Dilaudid together, and Gately told himself that he was doing it to help Facklemann out and "keep [him] company." In the present, Gately feels a tongue licking his forehead, and realizes it is the wraith. Suddenly the wraith disappears. Gately's fever has intensified, and he dreams that he and a "very sad kid" (presumably Hal) are digging up a head in a graveyard. The head has something extremely important contained inside it. However, once Hal is able to pick it up he nonverbally expresses that it is "Too Late."

Meanwhile, outside the hospital a "grotesquely huge woman" (Steepley) tells Joelle that she is in terrible danger, but Joelle is not surprised by this information.

*Readers are definitely encouraged to sympathize with Gately, who is portrayed as a kind, caring, and brave character doing his best to overcome his troubled past. Yet it is undeniable that he has racist and sexist thoughts. While there is nothing egregiously wrong with thinking of Cathy as "the R.N.," refusing to use her name dehumanizes her.*



*Again, Gately's sexism is not separate from, but rather an integral part of the novel's generally degrading attitude toward women. The portrayal of Pamela completely robs her of agency, rendering her a two-dimensional, pathetic figure. Meanwhile, the use of the term "Feminazi" to describe the feminist student is a rather cheap capitulation to misogynist stereotypes.*



*In between Gately's recollections of his own past, he also has a vision of the future. We know from the beginning of the novel that he and Hal are digging up James's head; the important thing contained inside it is the cartridge James mentions having implanted inside his skull. Assumedly Hal wants to use this to create an antidote to the Entertainment. However, Hal's indication that it is "Too Late" suggests that the implant isn't actually there, perhaps because someone else got to it first (presumably Orin). The image of digging up a head is also another [Hamlet](#) reference—the phrase "infinite jest" itself comes from Hamlet's monologue to a skull that he finds in a graveyard.*



*While Hugh/Helen Steepley is not actually a trans woman but simply an undercover agent in disguise, the gleeful disgust in descriptions of her/him, such as the phrase "grotesquely huge" here, betrays a distinct transmisogynistic orientation. Steepley's warning to Joelle suggests that the A.F.R. are after her now as well.*



Back in Gately's past, he and Facklemann were bingeing Dilaudid to the point that they were "flirting with an O.D." In his extremely high state, the only thing Facklemann could say was "That's a goddamn lie." He and Gately laughed until he pissed his pants. The phone rang, followed by the building's buzzer, but they both ignored it. They eventually ran out of purified water to use for shooting up, so they started to use their own urine. Eventually they heard Pamela's voice on the intercom, drunkenly asking to be let in. Gately passed out.

Joelle responds to questions (presumably posed by Hugh/Helen Steeply) about **the Entertainment**. She describes the only two scenes in which she appears, both of which are very simple. She also explains some of the visual techniques James used in making the film, including techniques to recreate the effect of a baby's vision. She explains that James stayed true to his vow of sobriety, but that he couldn't handle it and that this is what killed him. Joelle thinks it's likely that James never actually finished a Master copy of the Entertainment; she adds that if a finished copy *does* exist, it's probably buried with him.

The narrative switches back to Hal's first-person perspective. Kyle Coyle and Mario are watching an early film by James called *Accomplice!*. They discuss the incident of Ortho Stice's face getting stuck to the window and having to be ripped off. Mario then says that Stice's bed was found bolted to the ceiling in the middle of the night. Coyle explains that Stice thinks he is being haunted by a ghost who wants to teach him about "ordinary objects" and "raise his game to like a supernatural level." Stice has come to believe that he can move objects with his mind, while the other students are disturbed by his apparent mental breakdown.

Cosgrove Watt was one of the only professional actors James cast in his films. He appears in *Accomplice!*, a film about a sadomasochistic sexual encounter between a "sad and beautiful" young male sex worker and a creepy older man. While they have sex, the older man positions a blade such that it cuts into his penis. This eventually kills him, leading the younger man to repeat over and over: "Murderer!" Outside, a snowstorm rages, triggered by the combination of wind from Mexico and the Arctic mingling above the **Great Concavity**.

*The description of Gately and Facklemann's Dilaudid binge is a searing reminder of the ugly horrors of addiction. It is crucial that this reminder comes at this moment in the novel, as Gately is on the brink of relapsing and thus returning to the horrifying trap of addiction. Indeed, his fear of this prospect is likely why he is recalling these memories now.*



*We know with some degree of certainty that Joelle is wrong in asserting that the master copy of the Entertainment is nonexistent or buried with James, as Orin is in possession of it. On the other hand, we also know that James mentioned having a cartridge installed inside his skull, and that Hal and Gately unsuccessfully attempt to retrieve the cartridge as a possible tool for combating the Entertainment.*



*The ghost that is haunting Stice is likely James in wraith form. On the other hand, there also appear to be connections between Lyle and the wraith: after all, the wraith licks Gately, and in this passage appears to be trying to teach Stice the same lessons about "underestimating objects" that Lyle tells him in person.*



*It is rather shocking that this film—which resembles a pornographic snuff film, or a film that supposedly depicts an actual murder—is available to view at E.T.A. It is hard to imagine why Mario would want to see such a film and think about the fact that it was made by his own father (or who he thinks is his father).*



Hal recalls when James's obsession with making films began, shortly after E.T.A. was founded. Avril assumed it was just a phase, and Hal wonders if part of the reason why this "phase" lasted until James's death was because James never really achieved success in filmmaking. Like his father, Hal "had moved serially between obsessions" when he was a child. He remembers walking past a church in their old neighborhood in Weston that displayed a sign reading: "Life is like tennis / those who serve / best usually win."

After James's funeral, Avril spent more and more time locked up inside the Headmaster's House. This has accelerated the rate at which she has visually aged. Hal suddenly realizes that he doesn't want to play tennis that afternoon. He considers purposefully hurting himself by falling from a height onto his bad ankle, which would mean that people would treat him with "compassionate sorrow rather than disappointed sorrow." Hal remembers a time when Orin and a group of other E.T.A. students organized a clandestine viewing of some porn cartridges, only to be ratted out by a female student. When James confronted Orin about the plan, Orin immediately "confessed everything."

James told Orin that he wouldn't ban him from watching hardcore porn, but that he would rather he didn't because he was afraid it would give Orin "the wrong idea about having sex." James would prefer for Orin to discover sex with someone he loved. Orin was shocked and moved that his father falsely assumed he was still a virgin. Hal thinks that this conversation is the most "open" James ever was with someone, and he is annoyed that it was "wasted" on Orin. Of all the brothers, Mario had spent the most time around James when he was still alive, and Orin doesn't know how open their conversations were.

Orin thinks that James was still a virgin in his late 30s, when he and Avril met, and also that James's fixation with Joelle was totally non-sexual. Hal suddenly has a "lucid vision" of Avril having sex with John Wayne. He is aware of their ongoing sexual relationship, which began shortly after Wayne arrived at E.T.A., and doesn't know how he feels about it.

*Here the intergenerational similarities between Hal and James emerge most clearly. Both father and son are precocious, talented, and determined to succeed, yet both drift between passions. In addition, both struggle with addiction, which seems related to the obsessive way in which they approach their respective fields.*



*Even when Hal experiences the sudden and decisive realization that he doesn't want to play tennis, he still struggles with the idea of letting down people in his institution (and especially those in positions of authority). Rather than quitting with dignity, Hal considers deliberately injuring himself just to avoid disappointing others. This shows that while in some ways Hal has progressed and matured, many of his old issues continue to have a hold on him.*



*Hal certainly loves Orin, but over the course of the novel it has become more and more obvious that he also resents him. Orin is less intelligent than Hal, and seems to have less of a moral compass than either of his brothers. He is also arguably less like James and Avril than Hal is. This creates a bitterness in Hal in spite of himself.*



*It may come as something of a surprise that Hal knows about Avril and Wayne's affair (and that this is only being mentioned now). Yet as an intensely passive, private, and emotionless person, perhaps it is unsurprising that Hal has seemingly accepted this disturbing situation.*



Joelle plans to ask Pat to put her in quarantine with Clenette and Yolanda in order to protect herself from the A.F.R. A man named Mikey speaks to an AA meeting, telling a story about when he behaved rudely to his sister, prayed about it, and then returned to apologize. Meanwhile, the Assistant District Attorney for Suffolk County's 4th Circuit is talking with Pat Montesian. The A.D.A. attends Phob-Comp-Anon, a program for people who attach themselves to those suffering from severe phobias, compulsions, or both. As part of his Phob-Comp-Anon program, the A.D.A. needs to make amends with Gately, but he has been having a very difficult time bringing himself to do so.

*Phob-Comp-Anon is not a real organization and might seem rather silly (partly because of its name). Yet while it may not be real, it is very similar to actually-existing groups, such as Al-Alon and Obsessive Compulsive Anonymous. Perhaps the fact that Phob-Comp-Anon doesn't exist when there is evidently a kind of need for it is more ridiculous than the idea of the organization in the first place.*



## CHAPTER 75

*20 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment; Immediately Pre-Fundraiser-Exhibition-Fête Gaudeamus Igitur.* At E.T.A., there is a solemn, ritualistic atmosphere as the students prepare to play. The chapter is being narrated in the first person by an E.T.A. student who is not Hal. The narrator describes a kind of curse that afflicts the family members of Barry Loach, one of the trainers at E.T.A. In one manifestation of the curse, Barry's older brother, who was studying to be a Jesuit priest, experienced a sudden and devastating loss of faith in humanity.

*Barry Loach is certainly not the only character whose family appears to be cursed. Indeed, perhaps a family "curse" is really just a way of conceptualizing the manner in which misfortune breeds misfortune, creating cycles of misery where the problems of one family member are passed on to others.*



Barry attempted to prove the existence of human goodness and empathy to his brother by dressing up as a homeless person and asking passersby to touch him. Almost everyone refused, but gave him money instead. Barry ended up making more money through this exercise than he did at his job. His brother was not persuaded by this performance, while Barry himself had his own spiritual crisis due to the fact that absolutely no one would touch him. Eventually, one person chose to enthusiastically shake his hand: Mario Incandenza.

*This sad and profound passage considers the fact that people are more likely to give money to homeless people than they are to interact with them. This shows that dehumanization does not always take the form of shunning or violence; it can take the form of charity and pity. Again, Mario is shown to be the moral compass of the novel, as he is the only person who does not participate in this dehumanization.*



Orin has been imprisoned inside a glass cage by his latest **Subject**, the Swiss hand-model (Luria P—). He has attempted to kick down the glass to escape, but has had no success. Luria stands looking at him from the other side of the glass, accompanied by another person Orin doesn't know, who appears to be sitting down (Fortier in his wheelchair). Orin has been drugged, and still feels nauseous from it. Luria and Fortier demand to know where the master copy of the Entertainment is buried. The two of them release sewer cockroaches into Orin's cage, at which point he starts to scream "Do it to her! Do it to her!" Luria looks at Fortier and rolls her eyes.

*This scene is a reworked version of the final part of George Orwell's [1984](#), in which the main character, Winston Smith, betrays his lover Julia under torture. It is possible that the "her" Orin is referring to is either Luria or Avril (and there is even a controversial theory that Avril and Luria are the same person). Most importantly, the line "Do it to her" indicates that Orin has surrendered to his torturers, and will agree to tell them how to find the master copy. This means that the A.F.R. "win" the battle to get the copy and presumably unleash it on the U.S., although this is never explicitly confirmed in the novel.*



Gately is lying in his hospital bed, feeling the hottest he's ever felt in his life. He keeps trying to explain that he is a Demerol addict, but isn't able to do so. He drifts in and out of surreal dreams. He dreams of what happened after his Dilaudid binge with Facklemann. A group of people including some local thugs entered the apartment, two of them carrying Pamela, who had a grisly shin injury. There were also women dressed in red leather. One of the men present was a "bland corporate guy" who was putting cartridges into a TP's viewer.

The cartridge features Sorkin, a bookie who was scammed by Facklemann in the past. One of Sorkin's henchman, Bobby C, oversees a pharmacist's assistant withdrawing two syringes filled with an unknown liquid. C tells Gately not to worry, as Sorkin doesn't think Gately was part of Facklemann's plan to screw over Sorkin and Eighties Bill. He tells Gately to just relax and watch Facklemann get his due punishment. Managing to speak for the first time, Facklemann asks if anyone would like some Dilaudid. C and the pharmacist's assistant tie up Gately.

The pharmacist's assistant injects Gately with something he calls "pharm-grade Sunshine" (an endnote explains this is the third hardest drug to obtain in Boston, after Vietnamese opium and DMZ). Gately doesn't feel anything as the Sunshine goes into his bloodstream. He watches as other members of the group sew Facklemann's eyes open. They've already given Facklemann Narcan to make sure he felt the pain of the sewing. Most of the other people in the room are now injecting heroin themselves, while the corporate man drops liquid into Facklemann's eyes.

Gately tries to figure out what's going on before the Sunshine kicks in, while he still has some cognitive capacity. The room is chaotic; someone is vomiting, and Facklemann's other eye is being sewn open. Gately has an out-of-body experience; the high from the Sunshine is "obscenely pleasant." The cartridge in the viewer is about "ultraviolence and sadism."

As Gately finally gets high off the Sunshine, the room and everyone in it melt away in a surreal manner. The effect of the drug is "obscenely pleasant"; Gately feels as if his body is disintegrating, but in a nice way. Gately passes out. When he comes to, he is lying on a beach on "freezing sand." It is raining and the tide is out.

Recall that when Poor Tony was employed to dress as a decoy during the Antiois' acid attack on the Canadian Minister of Inter-O.N.A.N. Trade, the attacker and decoys all wore red. While we cannot be sure that these two parts of the story are related, the shared detail of the red outfits reminds readers of how interconnected all the different parts of the story are.



Again, it emerges that Bobby C is likely the same C that died after taking Drano-laced heroin with Poor Tony, and whose body Tony left behind a dumpster. Rather than concluding with a dramatic final scene, the novel curls into itself, braiding together final aspects of the narrative (including the above revelation that the Swiss hand model is Luria P—).



This surreal and horrifying scene has another direct reference to a famous dystopian novel: Anthony Burgess's [A Clockwork Orange](#) (later turned into a film by Stanley Kubrick). In the book, the main character, Alex, is punished for rape and murder by having his eyes clamped open and injected with liquid while he is forced to watch a film featuring sex and violence.



Here the word "ultraviolence" confirms the connection to Burgess's [A Clockwork Orange](#), where the term was first used.



The final scene of the novel featuring Gately on the beach is anti-climactic yet also eerie and rather lovely. At the same time, this is not the true ending of the novel in terms of its chronological narrative, because some parts—including the opening chapter—are set in the years after this final scene takes place. The book is thus "infinite" in the sense that it is not contained by the novel as a frame, but stretches out into the future. This sense of expansiveness is intensified by the fact that it is left up to the reader to piece together what the novel's chronological ending actually is.





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