





The Unfinished

David Foster Wallace's struggle to surpass "Infinite Jest."

by [D. T. Max](#) March 9, 2009

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The writer David Foster Wallace committed suicide on September 12th of last year. His wife, Karen Green, came home to find that he had hanged himself on the patio of their house, in Claremont, California. For many months, Wallace had been in a deep depression. The condition had first been diagnosed when he was an undergraduate at Amherst College, in the early eighties; ever since, he had taken medication to manage its symptoms. During this time, he produced two long novels, three collections of short stories, two books of essays and reporting, and “Everything and More,” a history of infinity. Depression often figured in his work. In “The Depressed Person,” a short story about an unhappy narcissistic young woman—included in Wallace’s 1999 collection, “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men”—he wrote, “Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Tofranil, Wellbutrin, Elavil, Metrazol in combination with unilateral ECT (during a two-week voluntary in-patient course of treatment at a regional Mood Disorders clinic), Parnate both with and without lithium salts, Nardil both with and without Xanax. None had delivered any significant relief from the pain and feelings of emotional isolation that rendered the depressed person’s every waking hour an indescribable hell on earth.” He never published a word about his own mental illness.

Wallace’s death was followed by four public memorial services, celebrations of his work in newspapers and magazines, and tributes on the Web. He was only forty-six when he killed himself, which helped explain the sense of loss readers and critics felt. There was also Wallace’s outsized passion for the printed word at a time when it looked like it needed champions. His novels were overstuffed with facts, humor, digressions, silence, and sadness. He conjured the world in two-hundred-word sentences that mixed formal diction and street slang, technicalese and plain speech; his prose slid forward with a controlled lack of control that mimed thought itself. “What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant,” he wrote in “Good Old Neon,” a story from 2001. Riffs that did not fit into his narrative he sent to footnotes and endnotes, which he liked, he once said, because they were “almost like having a second voice in your head.”

The sadness over Wallace’s death was also connected to a feeling that, for all his outpouring of words, he died with his work incomplete. Wallace, at least, never felt that he had hit his target. His goal had been to show readers how to live a fulfilled, meaningful life. “Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being,” he once said. Good writing should help readers to “become less alone inside.” Wallace’s desire to write “morally passionate, passionately moral fiction,” as he put it in a 1996 essay on Dostoyevsky, presented him with a number of problems. For one thing, he did not feel comfortable with any of the dominant literary styles. He could not be a realist. The approach was “too familiar and anesthetic,” he once explained. Anything comforting put him on guard. “It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most ‘familiarity’ is mediated and delusive,” he said in a long 1991 interview with Larry McCaffery, an English professor at San Diego State. The default for Wallace would have been irony—the prevailing tone of his generation. But, as Wallace saw it, irony could critique but it couldn’t nourish or redeem. He told McCaffery, “Look, man, we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?”



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So Wallace's project required him to invent a language and a stance of his own. "I want to author things that both restructure worlds and make living people feel stuff," he wrote to his editor Michael Pietsch while he was working on his second novel, "Infinite Jest," which Little, Brown published in 1996. He knew that such proclamations made him seem a holy fool. In the interview with McCaffery, he said, "It seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies . . . in be[ing] willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. Even now I'm scared about how sappy this'll look in print, saying this. And the effort to actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don't seem to have yet." He also said, "All the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can't be for your benefit; it's got to be for hers."

One of the great pleasures in reading Wallace is to watch him struggle to give the reader her due. His first novel, "The Broom of the System," published in 1987, tells of a young woman who worries that she might exist only as a character in a story. The book suggests that the world should not be taken too seriously: life is an intellectual game, and words are the pieces on the board. The problem for Wallace, as he reflected after its publication, was that "Broom" offered an analysis but derided even the idea of a solution. In a 1989 letter to the novelist Jonathan Franzen, a friend, Wallace said that "Broom" felt as if it had been written by "a very smart fourteen-year-old."

"Infinite Jest," which came out almost a decade after "Broom," was a vast investigation into America as the land of addictions: to television, to drugs, to loneliness. The book comes to center on a halfway-house supervisor named Don Gately, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, who, with great effort, resists these enticements. "What's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all," Gately thinks near the end. "But he could choose not to listen." Through the example of Gately, "Infinite Jest" offered readers an oblique form of counsel, but Wallace had mixed feelings about the book. The critic James Wood cited "Infinite Jest" as representative of the kind of fiction dedicated to the "pursuit of vitality at all costs." At times, Wallace felt the same way. "I'm sad and empty as I always am, when I finish something long," Wallace wrote to Franzen, shortly before the book's publication. "I don't think it's very good—some clipping called a published excerpt feverish and not entirely satisfying, which goes a long way toward describing the experience of writing the thing."

Wallace began to doubt the aspect of his work that many readers admired most: his self-consciously maximalist style. He was known for endlessly fracturing narratives and for stem-winding sentences adorned with footnotes that were themselves stem-winders. Such techniques originally had been his way of reclaiming language from banality, while at the same time representing all the caveats, micro-thoughts, meta-moments, and other flickers of his hyperactive mind. Wallace's approach reminded the reader that what he was reading was invented—the final work of constructing a moral world was his. But after “Infinite Jest” Wallace came to feel that his prose was too often arch and arid. Without capitulating to realism, he wanted to tell his stories in a more straightforward way.

From 1997 on, Wallace worked on a third novel, which he never finished—the “Long Thing,” as he referred to it with Michael Pietsch. His drafts, which his wife found in their garage after his death, amount to several hundred thousand words, and tell of a group of employees at an Internal Revenue Service center in Illinois, and how they deal with the tediousness of their work. The partial manuscript—which Little, Brown plans to publish next year—expands on the virtues of mindfulness and sustained concentration. Properly handled, boredom can be an antidote to our national dependence on entertainment, the book suggests. As Wallace noted at a 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, true freedom “means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.” By then, Wallace had become convinced that the literary contortions for which he was known had become an impediment to this message. Franzen says of Wallace, “There was a certain kind of effulgent writing that he just wasn't interested in doing anymore.” In the new novel, a character comments, “Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain, because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from.”

Wallace was trying to write differently, but the path was not evident to him. “I think he didn't want to do the old tricks people expected of him,” Karen Green, his wife, says. “But he had no idea what the new tricks would be.” The problem went beyond technique. The central issue for Wallace remained, as he told McCaffery, how to give “CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness.” He added, “Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.”

In the late eighties, doctors had prescribed Nardil for Wallace's depression. Nardil, an antidepressant developed in the late fifties, is a monoamine oxidase inhibitor that is rarely given for long periods of time, because of its side effects, which include low blood pressure and bloating. Nardil can also interact badly with many foods. One day in the spring of 2007, when Wallace was feeling stymied by the Long Thing, he ate at a Persian restaurant in Claremont, and afterward he went home ill. A doctor thought that Nardil might be responsible. For some time, Wallace had come to suspect that the drug was also interfering with his creative evolution. He worried that it muted his emotions, blocking the leap he was trying to make as a writer. He thought that removing the scrim of Nardil might help him see a way out of his creative impasse. Of course, as he recognized even then, maybe the drug wasn't the problem; maybe he simply *was* distant, or maybe boredom was too hard a subject. He wondered if the novel was the right medium for what he was trying to say, and worried that he had lost the passion necessary to complete it.

That summer, Wallace went off the antidepressant. He hoped to be as drug free as Don Gately, and as calm. Wallace would finish the Long Thing with a clean brain. He entered this new period of life with what Franzen calls “a sense of optimism and a sense of terrible fear.” He hoped to be a different person and a different writer. “That's what created the tension,” Franzen recalls. “And he didn't make it.”

David Wallace was born in 1962, in Ithaca, New York. His father, James, was a graduate student in philosophy. When David was three, his father took a job at the University of Illinois, in Urbana. His mother, Sally, was an English teacher. Wallace and his sister, Amy, who was two years younger, grew up in a home with language at its center. On a car trip when David was four, the family agreed to substitute “3.14159” for every mention of the word “pie” in their conversation. If there was no word for a thing, Sally Wallace invented it: “greebles” meant little bits of lint, especially those which feet brought into bed; “twanger” was the word for something whose name you don’t know or can’t remember.

Wallace was encouraged and pushed by his parents. “This was the kind of family where the mother would bring home the Encyclopædia Britannica for the family to read through,” the novelist Mark Costello, who roomed with Wallace at Amherst, says. When Wallace was twelve, he was one of two winners of a local poetry contest. “Did you know that rats breed there? / That garbage is their favorite lair,” David wrote of a polluted creek nearby. He used the fifty-dollar prize to help pay for tennis camp. He was an awkward child but competitive, and he became a very good tennis player, ranked in the junior Midwest division. One summer, he taught children in the Urbana Parks program. The penalty for botching shots was that Wallace would recount chapters from his life. They were all made up.

His family and teachers realized that David was exceptional. “He was just going to Hoover everything,” his mother said. But he was soon struggling with mental and emotional difficulties. In his senior year of high school, he began carrying a towel around with him to wipe away the perspiration from anxiety attacks, and a tennis racquet, so that no one commented on the towel. “He was purposely hiding the attacks, I think,” his father says. “He was very ashamed of it.” During this time, David applied to Amherst, where his father had gone, and was accepted. Before Wallace left for college, he took a long walk through the cornfields, to say goodbye to the Midwest.

At Amherst, he was soon drawn to math and philosophy. He relished the “special sort of buzz” that they provided, as he later told McCaffery: “These moments appeared in proof-completions, or maybe algorithms. Or like a gorgeously simple solution to a problem you suddenly see after half a notebook with gnarly attempted solutions.” Wallace joined the debate and glee clubs, and smoked a lot of pot with friends. One day, though, toward the end of his sophomore year, Costello walked into their dorm room to find Wallace sitting alone, slumped over, his gray Samsonite suitcase between his legs, a Chicago Bears cap on his head. “I have to go home,” he told Costello. “Something’s wrong with me.”

His family was surprised by his return. “We didn’t press him,” his mother says. “We figured if he wanted to talk about it he’d talk about it.” For a short time, he drove a school bus. He also found a psychiatrist and began taking antidepressants. During this time, he traced his breakdown to his not really wanting to be a philosopher. “I had kind of a midlife crisis at twenty, which probably doesn’t augur well for my longevity,” he later told McCaffery.

He began to write fiction. Until then, Wallace had seen novels primarily as a pleasurable way to get information. (Even in later years, he admired the novels of Tom Clancy for their ability to pack in facts.) But he realized that fiction could order experience as well as philosophy could, and also provide some of the same comfort. During this time, he wrote several short stories, one of which was published. “The Planet Trillaphon” appeared in the *Amherst Review* in 1984. The autobiographical story captures the intense pain of the depression he suffered:

I’m not incredibly glib, but I’ll tell what I think the Bad Thing is like. . . . Imagine that every single atom in every single cell in your body is sick . . . intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom . . . swollen and throbbing, off-color, sick, with just no chance of throwing up to relieve the feeling. Every electron is sick, here, twirling offbalance and all erratic in these funhouse orbitals that

are just thick and swirling with mottled yellow and purple poison gases, everything off balance and woozy. Quarks and neutrinos out of their minds and bouncing sick all over the place.

When he returned to school, Wallace took his first creative-writing class, and began aggressively reading contemporary fiction. He was drawn to the postmodernists, whose affection for puzzles and mirrors-within-mirrors sensibility reflected his own enthusiasm for math and philosophy. Costello remembers, “Junior year, David and I were sitting around talking about magical realists—I think it was ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’—and someone said, ‘Pynchon’s much cooler.’ We said ‘Who?’ He threw a copy of ‘Lot 49’ at us. For Dave, that was like Bob Dylan finding Woody Guthrie.” Wallace also loved Don DeLillo’s “White Noise,” which came out when he was a senior.

That same year, Wallace began his novel “The Broom of the System.” A remark from an old girlfriend had stuck in his mind. He later wrote to Gerald Howard, the book’s editor, that “she said that she would rather be a character in a piece of fiction than a real person. I got to wondering just what the difference was.”

Wallace wrote most of the nearly five hundred pages of “Broom” during the second semester. He took his deadpan dialogue from DeLillo and his character names and attitude of paranoia from Pynchon. His protagonist is Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman; her boyfriend is Rick Vigorous, an Amherst graduate and the director of the publishing firm Frequent & Vigorous. Beadsman’s great-grandmother, a disciple of Wittgenstein, has mysteriously disappeared from her nursing home. The atmosphere of ontological uncertainty that pervades the book is Wallace’s dramatization of the ideas of Wittgenstein. Yet there was a tumble and urgency to his writing that broke free of this philosophical anchor. Rick Vigorous thinks about Lenore’s great-grandmother:

Apparently she was some sort of phenomenon in college and won a place in graduate study at Cambridge . . . but in any event there she studied . . . under a mad crackpot . . . who believed that everything was words. Really. If your car would not start, it was apparently to be understood as a language problem. If you were unable to love, you were lost in language. Being constipated equaled being clogged with linguistic sediment.

In September, 1985, Wallace mailed a chapter of “Broom” to a literary agency in San Francisco. In a cover letter, he noted coyly that he was roughly the same age as Bret Easton Ellis and David Leavitt —“whose fiction has done well partly because of readers’ understandable interest in new, young writing.” A new associate at the agency, Bonnie Nadell, loved the chapter, and took Wallace on as her first client. Three months later, she sold the manuscript to Gerald Howard, of Penguin Books, which had started a line of contemporary novels in paperback. In a letter to Howard, Wallace explained that “Broom” wasn’t “realistic, and it is not metafiction; if it’s anything, it’s meta-the-difference-between-the-two.” In the McCaffery interview, he described “Broom” as covert autobiography, “the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who’s just had this midlife crisis that’s moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction . . . which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6°F calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct.”

The editing went smoothly. In a letter to Howard, Wallace had promised to be “neurotic and obsessive” but “not too intransigent or defensive.” But they disagreed on how “Broom” should end. Howard felt that the text called for some sort of resolution; Wallace did not think so. Howard urged him to keep in mind “the physics of reading”—or, as Wallace came to understand the phrase, “a whole set of readers’ values and tolerances and capacities and patience-levels to take into account when the gritty business of writing stuff for others to read is undertaken.” In other words, a reader who got through a long novel like “Broom” deserved a satisfying ending. Wallace was not so confident a writer as to simply ignore Howard’s suggestion; as he wrote to Howard, he didn’t want his novel to be like “Kafka’s

'Investigations of a Dog' . . . Ayn Rand or late Günter Grass, or Pynchon at his rare worst"—books that gave pleasure only to their authors. Yet when he tried to write a proper conclusion, "in which geriatrics emerge, revelations revelationize, things are cleared up," the words felt wrong to him. "I am young and confused and obsessed with certain problems that I think right now distill the experience of being human," he wrote to Howard. Reality was fragmented, and so his book must be, too. In the end, he broke the novel off midsentence: "I'm a man of my"

Howard was won over by Wallace's ending, and felt that "Broom" was remarkable, a "portent for the future of American fiction." He says, "It wasn't just a style but a feeling he was expressing, one of playful exuberance . . . tinged with a self-conscious self-consciousness." The dominant style of the time was the minimalism of writers such as Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie. Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney—chroniclers of disaffected youth—were an offshoot of this group. These writers were smart but withholding, their characters often bored with being bored. Wallace's voice was different. It projected, in Howard's words, "the sheer joy of a talent realizing itself." There was optimism in its despair, elation in its anomie.

"Broom" received varied reviews. Caryn James, in the *Times*, called the book "a manic human flawed extravaganza," and said that it reminded her of Pynchon's "V." But where James saw homage others saw derivativeness. They thought that Wallace was too eager to show how smart he was. They disliked the lack of an ending. Each negative review surprised and hurt Wallace. After reading a review from *Publishers Weekly*, Wallace wrote Howard, "The guy seemed downright angry at having been made to read the thing."

Yet "Broom" found an audience, selling almost twenty thousand paperback copies in its first year. Moreover, the book showed other writers that there was a space between the taut hermeticism of the minimalists and the postmodern trickery of John Barth and Robert Coover, whose main interest was in uncovering the struts and bolts of narrative fiction. From "Broom" would come a new strain of meta-the-difference writing—books such as Dave Eggers's "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" and Zadie Smith's "White Teeth."

"Broom" was published while Wallace was in the second year of an M.F.A. program at the University of Arizona. Whereas he had once dressed like a Midwestern square, he now grew his hair long and wrapped his head in a bandanna. At Arizona, where realists dominated the faculty, Wallace found himself and his style unpopular. The day after he handed out copies of "Broom," he was upset to find one at the secondhand bookstore. All the same, he wrote easily, quickly finishing many of the stories for his first collection, "Girl with Curious Hair" (1989). The stories were more narrowly postmodern than "Broom," concerned with reality and the distorting effects of television and movies. "My Appearance" was about an actress who was nervous about going on David Letterman's show. "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" was a parodic homage to John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse." Wallace came to feel that his professors at Arizona had been right—the stories were brittle and irritatingly clever. But at the time he was happy with them, and caught up in the pleasure of artistic creation. "Writing fiction takes me out of time," he said in his first interview, in *Arrival*, published when he was in Tucson. "That's probably as close to immortal as we'll ever get."

In the summer of 1987, Wallace finished his M.F.A. and moved into an apartment on the edge of Tucson. His mood worsened. "Curious Hair" was largely done, and he did not know what was next. "I think he was always afraid that the last thing he wrote would be the last thing he wrote," Amy Wallace, who is now a public defender, says. In late 1987, Wallace took a temporary job teaching creative writing at Amherst. He wrote to Bonnie Nadell that he was drinking a lot and, like Rick Vigorous, wandering around the campus "remembering disasters." He returned to Tucson; one day, he called home and said he was thinking of hurting himself. His mother flew to Tucson and helped him close up his apartment. They rented a U-Haul and took turns driving and reading aloud a Dean Koontz novel

during the sixteen-hundred-mile trip home.

Back in Urbana, Wallace felt like a failure. “A lot of the trouble has to do with writing, but none of it with having stuff to send you, publications, or careers,” he wrote to Nadell. “Nothing to do, really, with anything exterior to me.” In another letter, he wrote, “My ambitions at this point are modest and mostly surround staying alive.” One night, he and Amy watched “The Karen Carpenter Story,” a maudlin TV movie about the singer, who died of a heart attack brought on by anorexia. When it was over, Wallace’s sister, who was working on her own M.F.A., at the University of Virginia, told David that she had to drive back to Virginia. David asked her not to go. After she went, he tried to commit suicide with pills. He survived, and checked himself in to a psychiatric ward in Urbana, where he was given a course of electroconvulsive therapy. The experience horrified him, but he thought it helped. Wallace’s mother remembers that David emerged as delicate as a child. “He would ask, ‘How do you make small talk?’ ” his mother remembers. “ ‘How can you know which frying pan to pick out of the cupboard?’ ”

Wallace had decided that writing was not worth the risk to his mental health. He applied and was accepted as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. Philosophy was the only thing that had meant as much to him as writing. It, too, could trigger epiphanies. Harvard had offered him a scholarship, and academia would give him a more stable life, with health insurance.

At the time, Mark Costello was beginning a job as a lawyer in Boston. Wallace suggested that they rent an apartment together. In the spring of 1989, they moved into a dilapidated house in Somerville. “Boston is fun,” Wallace wrote to Nadell in May, 1989, inviting her to visit. “We’ll have laughs, listen to rap and James Brown.” He was rebelling against the expectations that people had of him, drinking heavily and smoking a lot of marijuana.

“Girl with Curious Hair” came out in August, 1989, to mixed reviews and little attention. Wallace was heartbroken. “He thought he’d written a better book than ‘Broom,’ and then the publication was this big fat zero,” Nadell recalls. And when Wallace began his studies at Harvard that fall, he was immediately disappointed. “The students did their professors’ laundry and clustered around them, and he thought that was just ridiculous,” James Wallace remembers. “He was a published author and expected to be treated as an equal.” About a year after he had his breakdown in Tucson, Wallace called Costello from the psychiatric-services unit at Harvard, telling him that he had to go to the hospital again. An ambulance took Wallace to McLean, the psychiatric facility in nearby Belmont. There he was prescribed the drug Nardil for the first time. “We had a brief, maybe three-minute audience with the psychopharmacologist,” his mother told *Rolling Stone*.

In December, Wallace was released and sent to a halfway house in Brighton, a run-down section of Boston. “It is a grim place, and I am grimly resolved to go there,” he wrote to Nadell. He became serious about fighting his addictions. He participated in alcohol and narcotic rehabilitation programs. He replaced pot with cigarettes and, ultimately, with chewing tobacco, which he unsuccessfully tried to quit. Before his collapse, he had written observations in notebooks. He took this up again; Amy Wallace remembers him writing in one with a Care Bears cover. But he found that he had lost his commitment to fiction. He was becoming healthy, but felt adrift. In May, 1990, he wrote to Jonathan Franzen, with whom he had recently become friends, “Right now, I am a pathetic and very confused young man, a failed writer at 28 who is so jealous, so sickly searingly envious of you and [William] Vollmann and Mark Leyner and even David fuckwad Leavitt and any young man who is right now producing pages with which he can live, and even approving them off some base clause of conviction about the enterprise’s meaning and end.” He added that he considered suicide “a reasonable if not at this point a desirable option with respect to the whole wretched problem.”

Slowly, normality and a pleasure in writing fiction returned to Wallace. Like all the residents of the house, he had a job. One day, he was supposed to be editing the house rules, but instead he played

hooky, holing up in a Brighton library with “Flight of Fear,” a teen adventure novel. “I found it a ripping good read,” he wrote Franzen. He added, “I think back with much saliva to times in 1984, 85, 86, 87 when I’d sit down and look up and it would be hours later and there’d be this mess of filled up notebook paper and I just felt wrung out and well fucked and well blessed.” He wasn’t sure all those filled notebooks had been worth it, though; he now saw himself as having been driven by a “basically vapid urge to be avant-garde and post structural and linguistically calisthenic. This is why I get very spiny when I think someone’s suggesting this may be my root motive and character because I’m afraid it might be.”

At the halfway house, Wallace got to know people with radically different backgrounds. “Mr. Howard,” he wrote his editor, “everyone here has a tattoo or a criminal record or both!” The halfway house also showed him that less intellectual people were often better at dealing with life. They found catchphrases such as “One day at a time” genuinely helpful. To his surprise, so did he. As he later told *Salon*, “The idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting—which for me meant you pass over it for the interesting, complex stuff—can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic, pomo stuff can’t, that seems to me to be important.”

Wallace picked up stories at treatment sessions, including his own. Former addicts loved to talk—part of their therapy was to talk. Eventually, Wallace was released to a quarter-way house, and then to a house with one other ex-addict. Wallace taught at Emerson College for a time. “I’ve had to educate myself about people like Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton,” he wrote Franzen in October, 1991. “Actually that’s been a blast. I had no idea they were so good. I remember reading them a little in high school and mostly wondering when they would get done so I could go eat something sugary and then masturbate.” He added that “the last thin patina of rebelliousness has fallen off.”

By then, he had started working on “the Project”—his name for his second novel. In March, 1991, he informed Nadell that he was now writing “daily on a schedule.” Roughly a year later, he promised her that he was “going to shoot for having at least 100 pages (roughly probably a sixth or seventh) of this long document in your hands by April.” When the pages were ready, he wanted them to go to Gerald Howard, with “the voluminous notes of explanation and defense I’ll doubtless enclose.” He was still interested in the warping power of media culture. And he had a new appreciation of addiction and its lethality: it gave him something to warn against. He created a character named Hal Incandenza, who bridged two worlds Wallace knew well—Incandenza is a pothead and a talented high-school tennis player. He goes to an academy run by his family, which his older brother, Orin, also attended. Their father, James, a filmmaker, committed suicide after making a short movie called “Infinite Jest,” recorded in a format called a “cartridge,” which is so engrossing that anyone who watches it loses all desire. Wallace writes of one viewer, “He has rewound to the beginning several times and then configured for a recursive loop. He sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching at 0020h, having now wet both his pants and the special recliner.” The action is set in the near future: a Québécois separatist group tries to get hold of “Infinite Jest,” copies of which are extremely rare, to use as a terrorist weapon.

Wallace worked quickly in the house that he shared. He filled page after page of grade-school notebooks and then typed what he’d written with two fingers on an old computer. In a letter to Nadell, he had made a promise: “I will be a fiction writer again or die trying.”

In June, 1992, Wallace set out for Syracuse. The rents were cheap, and Wallace wanted to put the traumas of Boston behind him. He found a room to work in, opposite the food co-op. It was so small, he told friends, that his own body heat would keep it warm enough. He returned to the Project; the writing continued to go well, and he stayed focussed. Around town, Wallace was a familiar sight in his T-shirt, granny glasses, shorts, and bandanna. (He told *Rolling Stone* that he wore it to keep his head from exploding.) The poet Mary Karr, who taught at Syracuse and dated Wallace, recalls him filling his

five-and-dime notebooks with “that fastidious little spider hand.” If he was working well, he would make sure to use the same pen the next day; he’d call it his “orgasm pen.” Costello, who visited him at Syracuse, recalls, “He would walk around with a notebook, sit down, cross his legs, and start writing. Desperate as his life was, he was working.”

By May, 1992, he had sent two hundred pages of “Infinite Jest” to Howard, who read them with amazement. He now saw Wallace’s addiction, descent, and recovery as “a ceremony of purification.” Michael Pietsch, an editor at Little, Brown who had become friends with Wallace, also read the pages. “I want to do this book more than I want to breathe,” he told Bonnie Nadell. Pietsch, who had a reputation for publishing innovative fiction, outbid Howard with an eighty-thousand-dollar offer, and Wallace changed publishers.

Wallace was pushing himself to get beyond the facile skepticism of “Broom.” In 1993, he told *Whiskey Island*, a literary magazine, “This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it’s our job to make them up.” He detected a pervasive sadness in the country. “It manifests itself as a kind of lostness,” he told *Salon*, in an interview after the book was published.

“Infinite Jest” is a story of people in pain. Near the book’s opening, Hal Incandenza is rushed to an emergency room in the midst of a breakdown:

It will start in the E.R., at the intake desk . . . or in the green-tiled room after the room with the invasive-digital machines; or, given this special M.D.-supplied ambulance, maybe on the ride itself: some blue-jawed M.D. scrubbed to an antiseptic glow with his name sewn in cursive on his white coat’s breast pocket and a quality desk-set pen, wanting gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method, ordered and point-by-point. There are, by the O.E.D. VI’s count, nineteen nonarchaic synonyms for *unresponsive*, of which nine are Latinate and four Saxonian. . . . It will be someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably—a nurse’s aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban orderly who addresses me as *jou*—who will, looking down in the middle of some kind of bustling task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask So yo then man what’s *your* story?

The passage held out a hope rarely signalled in his earlier work: the possibility that telling a story could lead to redemption. The idea had been central to the sobriety sessions he had attended. As he told *Salon*, “I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early 30s, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values. Probably the A.A. model isn’t the only way to do it, but it seems to me to be one of the more vigorous.”

His relationship with Mary Karr was volatile. She inspired a character in the novel—a radio host named Madame Psychosis who ends up in the halfway house. Wallace got a tattoo of a heart with Mary’s name on it. He signed his letters to her “Young Werther.” He proposed to her. They fought. “Someone you get sober with is like someone you were in Vietnam with,” Karr remembers. They split up. One day, according to Karr, he broke her coffee table. She billed him a hundred dollars. He paid her and said that the remains of the table were now his. Karr told him that she’d used them for firewood, and that all he’d bought was “the brokenness.”

In the spring of 1993, Wallace submitted to Pietsch the first two-thirds of “Infinite Jest”—some four hundred thousand words. Pietsch, who had edited Rick Moody and Mark Leyner, had no trouble understanding Wallace’s aesthetic. He wrote Wallace, “It’s a novel made up out of shards, almost as if the story were something broken that someone is picking up the pieces of.” He warned Wallace that, at this rate, the finished book would likely “top 1200 pages.”

That same spring, Wallace accepted a teaching job at Illinois State University, in Normal, which had

started a center for contemporary literature. In Illinois, with much of “Infinite Jest” written, he began to settle down. He bought a house, the first he’d owned, on the outskirts of Bloomington, a town that adjoined Normal. He was happy to be back in the Midwest. He got his first dog, Jeeves, at the pound, and began to work at home. He chose a room to write in and painted it black, then filled it with dozens of vintage lamps. He preferred the company of townspeople to academics, and he made a point of being available to his students, especially those in the midst of personal crises. He told most people that he did not use e-mail, but he gave his students an address. Sections of “Infinite Jest” began to appear in magazines, but he downplayed his growing fame as a writer. Doug Hesse, a colleague, made the mistake of praising an essay of Wallace’s. “He did this gesture of wiping the butt with one hand and pointing to his mouth with the other,” Hesse remembers. “I learned really really quickly not to go beyond the equivalent of ‘How’s the weather?’ ”

In Bloomington, Wallace struggled with the size of his book. He hit upon the idea of endnotes to shorten it. In April, 1994, he presented the idea to Pietsch, adding, “I’ve become intensely attached to this strategy and will fight w/all 20 claws to preserve it.” He explained that endnotes “allow . . . me to make the primary-text an easier read while at once 1) allowing a discursive, authorial intrusive style w/o Finneganzing the story, 2) mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence. 3) have a lot more technical/medical verisimilitude 4) allow/make the reader go literally physically ‘back and forth’ in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns . . . 5) feel emotionally like I’m satisfying your request for compression of text without sacrificing enormous amounts of stuff.” He also said, “I pray this is nothing like hypertext, but it seems to be interesting and the best way to get the exfoliating curve-line plot I wanted.” Pietsch countered with an offer of footnotes, which readers would find less cumbersome, but eventually agreed.

Though “Infinite Jest” had begun as a book with Hal Incandenza at its center, as it grew Wallace moved his focus more to the figure of Don Gately—a former Demerol addict and a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, who is now a supervisor at a halfway house down the hill from the tennis academy where Hal plays. Gately, who as a child was nicknamed B.I.M. (for Big Indestructible Moron), is a tender thug. Late in the book, Québécois separatists shoot him in the shoulder while he is trying to protect his charges, and many of the novel’s final hundred pages depict Gately’s thoughts as he lies immobilized in his hospital bed, going over his life in his mind. Because he refuses to take narcotic painkillers, Gately is in agony, but he learns a way to get inside his suffering. “He could do the dextral pain,” he thinks. “No single instant of it was unendurable. . . . He hadn’t quite gotten this before now, how it wasn’t just the matter of riding out the cravings for a Substance: everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news.” Gately is the first character whose distress seems to touch Wallace. He wrote Gately’s reverie quickly; he even sent Jeeves away so that he could work without interruptions. (Talking to Costello, he said that his work was going so well that he “couldn’t feel my ass in the chair.”) “Infinite Jest” ends with Gately, in a haze, imagining a peaceful end, possibly his death: “And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out.”

Wallace sent the remaining six hundred pages of the manuscript to Pietsch in the summer of 1994. Pietsch had not expected Gately to assume such a dominant role. “The ending of the novel, the horror of Gately’s hitting bottom, is gorgeous and very very powerfully sad,” he wrote Wallace in December. He expressed concern, however, over the novel’s many dangling threads. Earlier, he had cautioned Wallace that the reader, after so many pages, would feel entitled to “find out who or how or why.”

Wallace was more certain of his literary approach than he had been when he published “Broom.” He knew what he wanted to resolve and what not. He wrote to Pietsch, “We know exactly what’s

happening to Gately by end, about 50% of what's happened to Hal, and little but hints about Orin. I can give you 5000 words of theoretico-structural argument for this, but let's spare one another, shall we?"

Pietsch suggested extensive cuts, many of which Wallace accepted. Eventually, he learned to erase passages that he liked from his hard drive, in order to keep himself from putting them back in. In all, he delivered seventeen hundred pages, of which Pietsch cut several hundred. The bound galleys went out with a list of corrections that hadn't made the printer's deadline.

"Infinite Jest," published in February, 1996, quickly became a totem for young people. The postmodernist heyday was long past; minimalism was in decline. There was a wide opening for Wallace's opaque sincerity. His "impulse to second-guess every thought and proposition became something like a generational style," as Gerald Howard says. One day, Howard was walking down West Broadway, in Manhattan, and came across a long line of people waiting to hear Wallace read at Rizzoli. "There was this adoration," he remembers. "He had reached people in this highly personal way."

Wallace did not like being the object of so much attention. He wrote to Don DeLillo, with whom he had begun a correspondence, that he had "tried my best to tell the truth and to be kind to reporters who hadn't read the book and wanted only to discuss the 'hype' around the book and seemed willfully to ignore the fact that articles about the hype were themselves the hype (for about a week there it seemed to me that the book became the Most Photographed Barn, everyone tremendously excited over the tremendous excitement surrounding a book that takes over a month of hard labor to read)."

As soon as he could, he finished his book tour and retreated to Bloomington, to his house and to Jeeves and the Drone—a stray who had joined him and Jeeves one day when they were out running. In the wake of "Infinite Jest," he felt anxiety about his writing. Earlier, Wallace had asked DeLillo whether it was normal. DeLillo reassured him, invoking Henry James's words: "Doubt is our passion." He added, "Some writers may have to do 2, 3 books, say in midcareer, before they remember that writing can be fun."

Wallace worked successfully on some stories, later published in the 2004 collection "Oblivion." In "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," a man looking back on his childhood wonders how his father could have endured the boredom of his work as an actuary. "The truth is I have no idea what he thought about, what his internal life might have been like," the son acknowledges. Wallace also began to develop a taste for journalism. He could transmit, in a more straightforward way, his point that America was at once overentertained and sad. He took a trip on a cruise ship out of Florida to sample the packaged hedonism, and chronicled the casual cruelty of the Maine lobster fair. "Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?" he asked.

Yet he felt unfulfilled. When Charlie Rose interviewed him, in 1997, Wallace said, "A lot of my problem right now is I don't really have a brass ring, and I'm kind of open to suggestions about what one chases." He wrote to DeLillo that he thought he knew what was missing to get his fiction moving forward: "I believe I want adult sanity, which seems to me the only unalloyed form of heroism available today."

"The Pale King," the name Wallace gave to the novel that, had he finished it, would have been his third, was one-third complete, by an estimate that he made to Nadell in 2007. The novel continues Wallace's preoccupation with mindfulness. It is about being in the moment and paying attention to the things that matter, and centers on a group of several dozen I.R.S. agents working in the Midwest. Their job is tedious, but dullness, "The Pale King" suggests, ultimately sets them free. A typed note that Wallace left in his papers laid out the novel's idea: "Bliss—a-second-by-second joy and gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (Tax Returns, Televised Golf) and, in waves, a boredom like

you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Instant bliss in every atom." On another draft sheet, Wallace typed a possible epigraph for the book from "Borges and I," a prose poem by Frank Bidart: "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed."

The problem was how to dramatize the idea. As Michael Pietsch points out, in choosing the I.R.S. as a subject Wallace had "posed himself the task that is almost the opposite of how fiction works," which is "leaving out the things that are not of much interest." Wallace's solution was to overwhelm his seemingly inert subject with the full movement of his thought. His characters might be low-level bureaucrats, but the robust sincerity of his writing—his willingness to die for the reader—would keep you from condescending to them.

In one chapter, Wallace narrates the spiritual awakening of a college student named Chris Fogle:

I was by myself, wearing nylon warm-up pants and a black Pink Floyd tee shirt, trying to spin a soccer ball on my finger and watching the CBS soap opera "As The World Turns" on the room's little black-and-white Zenith. . . . There was certainly always reading and studying for finals I could do, but I was being a wastoid. . . . Anyhow, I was sitting there trying to spin the ball on my finger and watching the soap opera . . . and at the end of every commercial break, the show's trademark shot of planet earth as seen from space, turning, would appear, and the CBS daytime network announcer's voice would say, "You're watching 'As the World Turns,'" which he seemed, on this particular day, to say more and more pointedly each time—"You're watching 'As the World Turns'" until the tone began to seem almost incredulous—"You're watching 'As the World Turns'"—until I was suddenly struck by the bare reality of the statement. . . . It was as if the CBS announcer were speaking directly to me, shaking my shoulder or leg as though trying to arouse someone from sleep—"You're watching 'As the World Turns.'" . . . I didn't stand for anything. If I wanted to matter—even just to myself—I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way.

Fogle decides to join the I.R.S., and soon heads off for training in Peoria. He finds that the sustained attentiveness demanded by tax work is not easy to muster. One of Fogle's colleagues, Lane Dean, Jr., finds it especially difficult to push away the outside world. As he processes forms, Dean tries to visualize a sunny beach, as the agency taught him to do during orientation. But he cannot maintain the image—it turns in his mind to a gray expanse covered with "dead kelp like the hair of the drowned." Overcome with boredom, he entertains suicide as a possibility. "He had the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor," Wallace writes.

Other agents are adepts. An agent named Mitchell Drinion is so centered and calm that he levitates as he works. "Drinion is *Happy*," Wallace wrote in one of the notebooks he kept while writing "The Pale King." Another agent can recite a sequence of numbers that takes him into a state of exalted concentration. There is also an anxious young agent who sweated uncontrollably in high school, racing to the bathroom where "the toilet paper disintegrate[s] into little greebles and blobs all over his forehead." He is afraid of thinking about being afraid, lest he suddenly become afraid and break out in a sweat—the victim of "an endless funhouse hall of mirrors of fear." In the quiet study of tax forms he seeks composure.

"The Pale King" does not abandon postmodernism entirely: the novel is structured as a mock memoir. In a chapter called "Author's Foreword," Wallace informs the reader that he was once an employee at the I.R.S. Upon entering the bureaucracy, he reveals, agents are given new Social Security numbers; taking a job there is like being "born again." (The conceit is pure fiction.) In the mid-eighties, Wallace announces, he became "947-04-2012." After being caught selling term papers and suspended from his preppy college, he cast around for something to do, and applied to work at the I.R.S. The agency hired

him as a “wiggler”—the first people to go over returns arriving at the agency. “I arrived for intake processing at Lake James, IL’s I.R.S. POST 047, sometime in mid-May of 1985,” Wallace writes. (A digression follows—a long footnote on the history of Lake James, followed by commentary about the confusion of having an I.R.S. office whose mailing address and building address are in separate towns.) Upon arriving at the intake center, Wallace says, he was given special treatment after being mistaken for another David Wallace—a high-powered accountant transferring to the facility from Rome, New York. For much of the chapter, everyone at the I.R.S. thinks that David Foster Wallace is the other Wallace, giving the author a double to go with his fictional rebirth.

On his undeserved V.I.P. tour, Wallace gets a glimpse of a different world—a calmer one, with a “silence . . . both sensuous and incongruous.” His chatty guide, Ms. Neti-Neti, accidentally opens the wrong door, showing him the room where agents do their silent work. Wallace portrays it as a kind of monastery: “I caught a glimpse of a long room filled with I.R.S. examiners in long rows and columns of strange-looking tables or desks, each of which (desks) had a raised array of trays or baskets clamped to its top, with flexible-necked desk lamps in turn clamped at angles to these fanned-out arrays, so that each of the I.R.S. examiners worked in a small tight circle of light. . . . Row after row, stretching to a kind of vanishing point near the room’s rear wall.” Wallace’s unquiet mind is not yet ready for this paradise. Ms. Neti-Neti quickly spirits him away.

Wallace began the research for “The Pale King” shortly after the publication of “Infinite Jest.” He took accounting classes. He studied I.R.S. publications. “You should have seen him with our accountant,” Karen Green remembers. “It was like, ‘What about the ruling of 920S?’ ” He enjoyed mastering the technicalities of the I.R.S. bureaucracy—its lore, mind-set, vocabulary. He assembled hundreds of pages of research on boredom, trying to understand it at an almost neurological level. He studied the word’s etymology and was intrigued to find that “bore” appeared in the language in 1766, two years before “interesting” came to mean “absorbing.” (He puts this revelation into the mouth of the ghost of an I.R.S. agent who comforts Lane Dean, Jr., when he despairs.)

Wallace began writing “The Pale King” around 2000. A severe critic of his own work, he rarely reported to his friends that anything he was working on was going well. But his complaints about this book struck them as particularly intense. Pietsch remembers being on a car ride with Wallace and hearing him compare writing the novel to “trying to carry a sheet of plywood in a windstorm.” On another occasion, Wallace told him that he had completed “two hundred pages, of which maybe forty are usable.” He had created some good characters, but the shape of the book evaded him. In 2004, he wrote to Jonathan Franzen that to get the book done he would have to write “a 5,000 page manuscript and then winnow it by 90%, the very idea of which makes something in me wither and get really interested in my cuticle, or the angle of the light outside.”

Wallace’s literary frustrations contrasted with his growing personal happiness. In 2002, he began dating Karen Green, a visual artist. She had asked him for permission to turn his story “The Depressed Person” into a series of illustrated panels. “The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain,” the story begins, “and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror.” Through the course of “The Depressed Person” the unlovable, self-absorbed girl shuttles between friends and therapists, looking for a sympathetic ear. Only with real human contact can she improve. Wallace’s story ends without a resolution. Green wanted to rewrite Wallace, so that in her last panel the depressed person would be cured. Wallace gave her permission. When he saw what she had done, he was happy. He told her that it was now a story that people would want to read.

They fell in love. Wallace put a strikeout through Mary’s name on his tattoo and an asterisk under the heart; farther down he added another asterisk and Karen’s name, turning his arm into a living footnote. In 2004, Wallace and Green were married in Urbana, in front of his parents. Wallace had by then

accepted a new teaching appointment, at Pomona College, in Claremont, California. “I have a lottery-prize-type gig at Pomona,” he bragged to *The Believer* in 2003. “I get to do more or less what I want.”

Green chose a ranch-style house for them in Claremont. Wallace took his large collection of lamps and books on accounting into the garage, and started writing. He did not always stay in his workplace. Green remembers that on days when he was struggling he would go from the garage to the guest room, where there was an extra computer, and on to the family room, to write in longhand with his earplugs in —“scattering debris, intellectual and otherwise.”

Green had a son, a teen-ager named Stirling, from a previous marriage, and he sometimes visited. Wallace, who never felt that he was cut out to be a father, bonded with the boy. They played chess together, with Stirling usually winning. Wallace was growing tired of teaching, but he continued to enjoy the contact with students. One student, Kelly Natoli, remembers Wallace introducing himself on the first day of a creative-writing class: “He said, ‘It’s going to take me, like, two weeks to learn everyone’s name, but by the time I learn your name I’m going to remember your name for the rest of my life. You’re going to forget who I am before I forget who you are.’ ”

Wallace was thrilled that his personal life was in order: he took it as evidence that he had matured. He teased Green about what a good husband he was. She remembers him saying, “I took out the garbage. Did you see that?” and “I put tea on for you when you were driving home.” Green was a good partner for Wallace, too—supportive and literate, but not in awe of her husband. “We used to have this joke about how much can you irritate the reader,” Green recalls. He could be needy. At night, he would beg her not to get sick or die.

At Pomona, Wallace published “Oblivion”; the last story is about a man for whom great art comes so easily he can defecate it. He also wrote essays, published his book on infinity, and went to Wimbledon to write about Roger Federer for the *Times*. To DeLillo he wrote, “I do not know why the comparative ease and pleasure of writing nonfiction always confirms my intuition that fiction is really What I’m Supposed to Do, but it does, and now I’m back here flogging away (in all senses of the word) and feeding my own wastebasket.”

“The Pale King” had many ambitions. It would show people a way to insulate themselves from the toxic freneticism of American life. It had to be emotionally engaged and morally sound, and to narrate boredom while obeying the physics of reading. And it had to put over the point that the kind of personality that conferred grace was exactly the kind that Wallace did not have. In 2005, Wallace wrote in his notebook, “They’re rare, but they’re among us. People able to achieve and sustain a certain steady state of concentration, attention, despite what they’re doing.” It did not escape him that his failing to write the book was rising to a meta level—that he could not write it because he could not himself ignore the noise of modern life.

Wallace made a considerable start, though. He found a style that was amusing and engaging, that captured mindfulness without solemnity. Perhaps someone else reading the novel—Wallace would show it to no one—might have been satisfied. But his own past brilliance stalked him. In his “Author’s Foreword,” he assures the reader, “The very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher.” He also writes, “I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too—at least now that I’m over 30 I do.” And yet there he was, writing about “David Wallace” in long, recursive sentences with footnotes.

“The Pale King” slowly came into being. In one of Wallace’s notebooks, there is a sentence suggesting that he had hit on the framework of a plot: an evil group within the I.R.S. is trying to steal the secrets of an agent who is particularly gifted at maintaining a heightened state of concentration. It was a witty notion, an echo of the Québécois villains in “Infinite Jest.” It is not clear that Wallace followed up on it, but if he did it did not satisfy him. “The individual parts of this book would not be all that hard to

read,” he wrote Bonnie Nadell, in 2007. “It’s more the juxtaposition of them, the number of separate characters, etc.”

At times, Wallace put “The Pale King” aside, then picked it up again. He polished the sentences over and over. A few sections achieved what he was aiming for, or came close. In 2007, he published in this magazine a small part of the novel, which dealt with Lane Dean, Jr.’s earlier decision to have a baby with a woman he was dating. A picture of the infant on his desk comforts Dean when he considers suicide. Another scene, in which an I.R.S. agent’s calm is disturbed by a colleague’s menacing baby, found its way into *Harper’s*, as “The Compliance Branch.”

Wallace was aware that he did not have to keep working on “The Pale King.” He had become a vocal critic of the Bush Administration. “I am, at present, partisan,” he had told *The Believer* in 2003. “Worse than that: I feel such deep, visceral antipathy that I can’t seem to think or speak or write in any kind of fair or nuanced way about the current administration. . . . My own plan for the coming fourteen months is to knock on doors and stuff envelopes. Maybe even to wear a button. To try to accrete with others into a demographically significant mass. To try extra hard to exercise patience, politeness, and imagination on those with whom I disagree. Also to floss more.” Green, in an e-mail, told me that “mostly what he (we) did was rant and give \$, rant and give \$.”

Wallace and Green discussed his quitting writing. “He talked about opening up a dog shelter,” she remembers. “Who knows,” he wrote to Franzen about the idea. “Life sure is short though.” He considered focussing on his nonfiction. The Federer piece had brought him joy. He stopped the nonfiction for a period, to see if it made the fiction come easier—was the magazine work dissipating his ability to finish “The Pale King”? “It just made him crazy to think he had been working on it for so long,” Green remembers.

Wallace tried to keep things in perspective. In July, 2005, he wrote an e-mail to Franzen: “Karen is killing herself rehabbing the house. I sit in the garage with the AC blasting and work very poorly and haltingly and with (some days) great reluctance and ambivalence and pain. I am tired of myself, it seems: tired of my thoughts, associations, syntax, various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic. It’s a dark time workwise, and yet a very light and lovely time in all other respects. So overall I feel I’m ahead and am pretty happy.”

Six months later, in another e-mail to Franzen, he spoke of “many, many pages written, then either tossed or put in a sealed box.” He wrote, “The whole thing is a tornado that won’t hold still long enough for me to see what’s useful and what isn’t,” adding, “I’ve brooded and brooded about all this till my brooder is sore. Maybe the answer is simply that to do what I want to do would take more effort than I am willing to put in. Which would be a bleak reality indeed, if that’s all it is.” In the same note, he says how much he admired Philip Roth, who was enjoying, as he saw it, “a Dostoevskian golden period.”

In his final major interview, given to *Le Nouvel Observateur* in August, 2007, he talked about various writers he admired—St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky among them—and added “what are envied and coveted here seem to me to be qualities of human beings—capacities of spirit—rather than technical abilities or special talents.” He was no longer sure he was the kind of person who could write the novel he wanted to write.

Around this time, Wallace wrote Nadell, telling her that he needed “to put some kind of duress/pressure on myself so that I quit futzing around changing my mind about the book twice a week and just actually do it.” He prepared a stack of about a hundred and fifty pages of “Pale King” to send to Pietsch. There were plenty of equally finished pages—among them the story of the levitating Drinion—which, for whatever reason, he did not include. “I could take a couple of years unpaid leave from Pomona and try and finish it,” he wrote to Nadell. When she encouraged him, he responded more

hesitatingly: “Let me noodle hard about it. It may not be until the end of summer that I’d even have a packet together.” In June, he e-mailed Franzen: “I go back and forth between (a) working to assemble a big enough sample to take an advance, and (b) recoiling in despair, thinking . . . I’d pitch everything and start over.”

Meanwhile, Wallace was becoming more convinced that Nardil might be getting in the way of “The Pale King.” The distorting effect of being on antidepressants was something that had long bothered him. In “The Planet Trillaphon,” the story he wrote while at Amherst, his character says, “I’ve been on antidepressants for, what, about a year now, and I suppose I feel as if I’m pretty qualified to tell what they’re like. They’re fine, really, but they’re fine in the same way that, say, living on another planet that was warm and comfortable and had food and fresh water would be fine: it would be fine, but it wouldn’t be good old Earth.”

There were other important reasons to get off Nardil. The drug could create problems with his blood pressure, an increasing worry as he moved into middle age. In the spring of 2007, when he went to the Persian restaurant and left with severe stomach pains, the doctor who told him that Nardil might have interacted badly with his meal added that there were better options now—Nardil was “a dirty drug.”

Wallace saw an opportunity. He told Green that he wanted to try a different antidepressant. “You know what? I’m up for it,” she remembers answering. She knew that the decision was hard for him. “The person who would go off the medications that were possibly keeping him alive was not the person he liked,” she says. “He didn’t want to care about the writing as much as he did.”

Soon after, he stopped the drug. At first, he felt that the process was going well. “I feel a bit ‘peculiar,’ which is the only way to describe it,” he e-mailed Franzen in August. “All this is to be expected (22 years and all), and I am not unduly alarmed.” A month later, he was more concerned: “I’ve been blowing stuff off and then having it slip my mind. This is the harshest phase of the ‘washout process’ so far; it’s a bit like I imagine a course of chemo would be.” He remained “fairly confident it will pass in time.” Three months later, he wrote to Nadell, “Upside: I’ve lost 30 pounds. Downside: I haven’t even thought about work since like September. I’m figuring I get 90 more days before I even remotely expect anything of myself—the shrink/expert says that’s a fairly sane attitude.”

Ever since he ended his addiction, drugs had been anathema to Wallace; Don Gately’s refusal to take narcotic painkillers after he is shot makes him the hero of “Infinite Jest.” At one point after getting off Nardil, Wallace decided he should try to do without any antidepressant. Given his psychiatric history, Green was worried. Her husband, she remembers thinking, would need “a Jungian miracle.” In the fall, Wallace had to be hospitalized for severe depression.

When he came out, doctors prescribed other antidepressants. But, according to Green, he was now too panicked to give them time to work. He took over the job of keeping himself sane, second-guessing doctors and their prescriptions. If he tried a new drug, he would read that a possible side effect was anxiety, and that alone would make him too anxious to stay on the drug. He was in a hall of mirrors of fear.

He continued to write in a notebook, but he rarely returned to his massive manuscript. “The Pale King” had once referred to the I.R.S., or possibly to the state of contentment and focus the book advocated; but now, as he wrote in a notebook, it was a synonym for the depression that tormented him.

Not every day was bad. He taught. He e-mailed friends. He and Green tried to maintain their lives. Always self-critical, Wallace would rate good days as “B-plus” or “cautiously optimistic.” They joked about the unthinkable. Green warned him that if he killed himself she’d be “the Yoko Ono of the literary world, the woman with all the hair who domesticated you and look what happened.” They made a pact that he would not make her guess how he was doing.

During the spring of 2008, a new combination of antidepressants seemed to stabilize him. When *GQ* asked him to write an essay on Obama and rhetoric, he felt almost well enough to do it. The magazine reserved a hotel room for him in Denver. But he cancelled. That June, the annual booksellers' convention was in Los Angeles, and Wallace drove there to have dinner with Pietsch, Nadell, and a few others. Pietsch was amazed at how thin Wallace was. Nadell, at Wallace's request, explained to magazine editors that he had a stomach malady. "It had to be severe enough to explain why he couldn't travel," she remembers.

About ten days after the dinner, Wallace checked in to a motel about ten miles from his home and took an overdose of pills. When he woke up, he called Green, who had been searching for him all night. When she met him at the hospital, he told her that he was glad to be alive. He was sorry that he'd made her look for him. He switched doctors and agreed to try electroconvulsive therapy again. He was terrified at the prospect—in Urbana, it had temporarily taken away his short-term memory—but he underwent twelve sessions. They did not help.

Caring for Wallace was exhausting. For one nine-day period, Green never left their house. In August, her son suffered an athletic injury, and she wanted to be with him. Wallace's parents came to look after David. "It's like they're throwing darts at a dartboard," he complained to them about his doctors. They went with him to an appointment with his psychiatrist; when the doctor suggested a new drug combination, Wallace rolled his eyes. Eventually, Wallace asked to go back on Nardil. But Nardil can take weeks to stabilize a patient, and Green says that he was too agitated to give it time to work. Still, in early September, Nadell spoke with him and thought that he sounded a bit better.

Green believes that she knows when Wallace decided to try again to kill himself. She says of September 6th, "That Saturday was a really good day. Monday and Tuesday were not so good. He started lying to me that Wednesday." He waited two days for an opportunity. In the early evening on Friday, September 12th, Green went to prepare for an opening at her gallery, Beautiful Crap, in the center of Claremont, about ten minutes from their home. She felt comforted by the fact that he'd seen the chiropractor on Monday. "You don't go to the chiropractor if you're going to commit suicide," she says.

After she left, Wallace went into the garage and turned on the lights. He wrote her a two-page note. Then he crossed through the house to the patio, where he climbed onto a chair and hanged himself. When one character dies in "Infinite Jest," he is "catapulted home over . . . glass palisades at desperate speeds, soaring north, sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues."

Green returned home at nine-thirty, and found her husband. In the garage, bathed in light from his many lamps, sat a pile of nearly two hundred pages. He had made some changes in the months since he considered sending them to Little, Brown. The story of "David Wallace" was now first. In his final hours, he had tidied up the manuscript so that his wife could find it. Below it, around it, inside his two computers, on old floppy disks in his drawers were hundreds of other pages—drafts, character sketches, notes to himself, fragments that had evaded his attempt to integrate them into the novel. This was his effort to show the world what it was to be "a fucking human being." He had not completed it to his satisfaction. This was not an ending anyone would have wanted for him, but it was the ending he chose. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: Philip Burke

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