

It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the
Father without Knowing Him (I)
David Foster Wallace

1 APRIL — YEAR OF THE TUCKS MEDICATED PAD

'ALL I KNOW is my Dad said to come here.'

'Come right in. You'll see a chair to your immediate left.'

'So I'm here.'

'That's just fine. 7-Up? Maybe some lemon soda?'

'I guess not, thanks. I'm just here, is all, and I'm kind of wondering why my Dad sent me down, you know. Your door there doesn't have anything on it, and I was just at the dentist last week, and so I'm wondering why I'm here, exactly, is all. That's why I'm not sitting down yet.'

'You're how old, Hal, fourteen?'

'I'll be thirteen in June. Are you like a dentist? Is this like a dental consult?'

'You're here to converse.'

'Converse?'

'Yes. Pardon me while I key in this age-correction. Your father had listed you as fourteen, for some reason.'

'Converse as in with you?'

'You're here to converse with me, Hal, yes. I'm almost going to have to implore you to have a lemon soda. Your mouth is making those dry sticky inadequate-saliva sounds.'

'Dr. Zegarelli says that's one reason for all the caries, is that I have low salivary output.'

'Those dry sticky salivaless sounds which can be death to a good conversation.'

'I rode my bike all the way up here against the wind just to converse with you? Is the conversation supposed to start with me asking why?'

'I'll begin by asking if you know the meaning of *implore*, Hal.'

'Probably I'll go ahead and take a 7-Up, then, if you're going to implore.'

'I'll ask you again whether you know *implore*, young sir.'

'Young sir?'

'You're wearing that bow tie, after all. Isn't that rather an invitation to a *young sir*?'

'*Implore*'s a regular verb, transitive: to call upon, or for, in supplication; to pray to, or for, earnestly; to beseech; to entreat. Weak synonym: urge. Strong synonym: beg. Etymology unmixed: from Latin *implorare*, *im* meaning in, *plorare* meaning in this context to cry aloud. *O.E.D. Condensed* Volume Six page 1387 column twelve and a little bit of thirteen, lines 95 and 96 and one and a smidgeon of two.'

'Good lord she didn't exaggerate did she?'

'I tend to get beat up, sometimes, at the Academy, for stuff like that. Does this bear on why I'm here? That I'm a nationally-ranked junior tennis player who can also recite great chunks of the dictionary, verbatim, at will, and tends to get beat up, and wears a bow tie? Are you like a specialist for gifted kids? Does this mean they think I'm gifted?'

SPFFFT. 'Here you are. Drink up.'

'Thanks. SHULGSHULGSPAHHH. . . . Whew. Ah.'

'You were thirsty.'

'So then if I sit down you'll fill me in?'

'. . . professional conversationalist knows his mucous membranes, after all.'

'I might have to burp a little bit in a second, from the soda. I'm alerting you ahead of time.'

'Hal, you are here because I am a professional conversationalist, and your father has made an appointment with me, for you, to converse.'

'MYURP. Excuse me.'

Tap tap tap tap.

'SHULGSPAHHH.'

Tap tap tap tap.

'You're a professional conversationalist?'

'I am, yes, as I believe I just stated, a professional conversationalist.'

'Don't start looking at your watch, as if I'm taking up valuable time of yours. If Himself made the appointment and paid for it, the time's supposed to be mine, right? Not yours. And then but what's that supposed to mean, professional conversationalist. A conversationalist is just one who converses much. You actually charge a fee to converse much?'

'A conversationalist is also one who, I'm sure you'll recall, "excels in conversation."''

'That's *Webster's Seventh*. That's not the *O.E.D.*.'

Tap tap.

'I'm an *O.E.D.* man, doctor. If that's what you are. Are you a doctor? Do you have a doctorate? Most people like to put their diplomas up, I notice, if they have credentials. And *Webster's Seventh* isn't even up to date. *Webster's Eighth* amends to "one who converses with much enthusiasm."'

'Another 7-Up?'

'Is Himself still having this hallucination I never speak? Is that why he put the Moms up to having me bike up here? Himself is my Dad. We call him Himself. As in "the man Himself." As it were. We call my mother the Moms. My brother coined the term. I understand this isn't unusual. I understand most more or less normal families address each other internally by means of pet names and terms and monikers. Don't even think about asking me what my little internal moniker is.'

Tap tap tap.

'But Himself hallucinates, sometimes, lately, you ought to be apprised, is the thrust. I'm wondering why the Moms let him send me pedalling up here uphill against the wind when I've got a challenge match at 3:00 to converse with an enthusiast with a blank door and no diplomas anywhere in view.'

'I, in my small way, would like to think it had as much to do with me as with you. That my reputation preceded me.'

'Isn't that usually a pejorative clause?'

'I am wonderful fun to talk to. I'm a consummate professional. People leave my parlor in states. You are here. It's conversation-time. Shall we discuss Byzantine erotica?'

'How did you know I was interested in Byzantine erotica?'

'You seem persistently to confuse me with someone who merely hangs out a shingle with the word "Conversationalist" on it, and this operation with a fly-by-night one of chewing gum and twine. You think I have no support staff? Researchers at my beck? You think we don't delve full-bore into the psyches of those for whom we've made appointments to converse? You don't think this fully accredited limited partnership would have an interest in obtaining data on what informs and stimulates our conversees?'

'I know only one person who'd ever use "full-bore" in casual conversation.'

‘There is nothing casual about a professional conversationalist and staff. We delve. We obtain, and then some. Young sir.’

‘Okay, Alexandrian or Constantinian?’

‘You think we haven’t thoroughly researched your own connection with the whole current intra-Provincial crisis in southern Québec?’

‘What intra-Provincial crisis in southern Québec? I thought you wanted to talk racy mosaics.’

‘This is an upscale district of a vital North American metropolis, Hal. Standards here are upscale, and high. A professional conversationalist flat-out full-bore *delves*. Do you for one moment think that a professional plier of the trade of conversation would fail to probe beak-deep into your family’s sordid liaison with the Pan-Canadian Resistance’s notorious M. DuPlessis and his malevolent but come-hitherish amanuensis-cum-operative, Luria P—?’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Do you?’

‘I’m *twelve* for Pete’s sake. I think maybe your appointment calendar’s squares got juggled. I’m the potentially gifted twelve-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 who 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.’

‘. . . of the fact that photos of the aforementioned . . . liaison being leaked to *Der Spiegel* resulted in the bizarre deaths of both an Ottawa paparazzo and a Bavarian international-affairs editor, of a ski-pole through the plexus and an ill-swallowed cocktail onion, respectively?’

‘I just finished *jew’s-ear*. I’m just starting on *jew’s-harp* and the general theory of oral lyres. I’ve never even *skied*.’

‘That you could dare to imagine we’d fail conversationally to countenance certain weekly familial . . . assignations with a certain unnamed bisexual bassoonist in the Albertan Secret Guard’s tactical-bands unit?’

‘Gee, is that the exit over there I see?’

‘ . . . that your blithe inattention to your own sainted grammatical mother’s cavortings with not one not two but over *thirty* near-Eastern medical attachés . . .?’

‘Would it be rude to tell you your mustache is askew?’

‘ . . . that her introduction of esoteric mnemonic steroids, stereochemically not dissimilar to your father’s own daily hypodermic “megavitamin” supplement derived from a certain organic testosterone-regeneration compound distilled by the Jivaro shamen of the South-Central L.A. basin, into your innocent-looking bowl of morning Ralston. . . .’

‘As a matter of fact I’ll go ahead and tell you your whole face is kind of running, sort of, if you want to check. Your nose is pointing at your lap.’

‘That your quote-unquote “complimentary” Dunlop widebody tennis racquets’ super-secret-formulaic composition materials of high-modulus-graphite-reinforced polycarbonate polybutylene resin are organochemically identical I say again *identical* to the gyroscopic balance sensor and *mise-en-scène* appropriation card and priapistic-entertainment cartridge implanted in your very own towering father’s anaplastic cerebrum after his cruel series of detoxifications and convolution-smoothings and gastrectomy and prostatesctomy and pancreatectomy and phalluctomy. . . .’

Tap tap. ‘SHULGSPAHH.’

‘ . . . could possibly escape the combined investigative attention of . . .?’

‘And it strikes me I’ve definitely seen that argyle sweatervest before. That’s Himself’s special Interdependence-Day-celebratory-dinner argyle sweatervest that he makes a point of never having cleaned. I know those stains. I was there for that clot of veal marsala right there. Is this whole appointment a date-connected thing? Is this April Fools, Dad, or do I need to call the Moms and C.T.?’

‘ . . . who requires only daily evidence that you *speak*? That you recognize the occasional vista beyond your own generous Tavis nose’s fleshy tip?’

‘You rented a whole office and face for this, but leave your old unmistakable sweatervest on? And how’d you even get down here before me, with the Mercury up on blocks after you . . . did you fool C.T. into giving you the keys to a functional car?’

‘Who used to pray daily for the day his own dear late father would sit, cough, open that bloody issue of the *Tucson Citizen*, and not turn that newspaper into the room’s fifth wall? And who after all this light and noise has spawned the same silence?’

‘ ’

‘Who’s lived his whole ruddy bloody cruddy life in five-walled rooms?’

‘Dad, I’ve got a duly scheduled challenge match with Schacht in like twelve minutes, wind at my downhill back or no. I’ve got this oral-lyrologist who’s going to be outside Brighton Best Savings wearing a predesignated necktie at straight-up five. I have to mow his lawn for a month for this interview. I can’t just sit here watching you think I’m mute while your fake nose points at the floor. And are you hearing me talking, Dad? It speaks. It accepts soda and defines *implore* and converses with you.’

‘Praying for just one conversation, amateur or no, that does not end in terror? That does not end like all the others: you staring, me swallowing?’

‘ ’

‘Son?’

‘ ’

‘Son?’