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David Foster Wallace

Short story writer, journalist, and essayist David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) is best known for his over one thousand-page book *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996. Wallace grew up in Chicago, became a writer and a teacher, and was a professor of creative writing at Pomona College in California.

In 2000, he covered the Republican presidential primary and the campaign of John McCain for *Rolling Stone* magazine. He was a frequent writer for *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and other journals. Wallace often wrote on culture, art, and sports and of the irony of the human condition and the healing power of language. He suffered from depression for most of his life and committed suicide in 2008. An unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, was published in 2011.

hierbabuena: mint

abrazos: hugs, embraces

cuentos: stories, tales

The Devil Is a Busy Man

Three weeks ago, I did a nice thing for someone. I can not say more than this, or it will empty what I did of any of its true, ultimate value. I can only say: a nice thing. In a general context, it involved money. It was not a matter of out and out “giving money” to someone. But it was close. It was more classifiable as “diverting” money to someone in “need.” For me, this is as specific as I can be.

It was two weeks, six days, ago that the nice thing I did occurred. I can also mention that I was out of town—meaning, in other words, I was not where I live. Explaining why I was out of town, or where I was, or what the overall situation that was going on was, however, unfortunately, would endanger the value of what I did further. Thus, I was explicit with the lady that the person who would receive the money was to in no way know who had diverted it to them. Steps were explicitly taken so that my namelessness was structured into the arrangement which led to the diversion of the money. (Although the money was, technically, not mine, the secretive arrangement by which I diverted it was properly legal. This may lead one to wonder in what way the money was not “mine,” but, unfortunately, I am unable to explain in detail. It is, however, true.) This is the reason. A lack of namelessness on my part would destroy the ultimate value of the nice act. Meaning, it would infect the “motivation” for my nice gesture—meaning, in other words, that part of my motivation for it would be, not generosity, but desiring gratitude, affection, and approval towards me to result. Despairingly, this selfish motive would empty the nice gesture of any ultimate value, and cause me to once again fail in my efforts to be classifiable as a nice or “good” person.

Thus, I was very intransigent^o about the secrecy of my own name in the arrangement, and the lady, who was the only other person with any knowing part in the arrangement (she, because of her job, could be classified as “the instrument” of the diversion of the money) whatsoever, acquiesced, to the best of my knowledge, in full to this.

Two weeks, five days, later, one of the people I had done the nice thing for (the generous diversion of funds was to two people—more specifically, a common law married couple—but only one of them called) called, and said, “hello,” and that did I, by any possible chance, know anything about who was responsible for _____, because he just wanted to tell that person, “thank you!” and what a God-send

intransigent: inflexible, obstinant

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this _____ dollars that came, seemingly, out of nowhere from the _____ was, etc.

Instantly, having cautiously rehearsed for such a possibility at great lengths, already, I said, coolly, and without emotion, "no," and that they were barking completely up the wrong tree for any knowledge on my part. Internally, however, I was almost dying with temptation. As everyone is well aware, it is so difficult to do something nice for someone and not want them, desperately, to know that the identity of the individual who did it for them was you, and to feel grateful and approving towards you, and to tell myriads^o of other people what you "did" for them, so that you can be widely acknowledged as a "good" person. Like the forces of darkness, evil, and hopelessness in the world at large itself, the temptation of this frequently can overwhelm resistance.

Therefore, impulsively, during the grateful, but inquisitive, call, unprecient^o of any danger, I said, after saying, very coolly, "no," and "the wrong tree," that, although I had no knowledge, I could well imagine that whoever, in fact, was, mysteriously responsible for _____ would be enthusiastic to know how the needed money, which they had received, was going to be utilized—meaning, for example, would they now plan to finally acquire health insurance for their new-born baby, or service the consumer debt in which they were deeply mired, or etc.?

My uttering this, however, was, in a fatal instant, interpreted by the person as an indirect hint from me that I was, despite my prior denials, indeed, the individual responsible for the generous, nice act, and he, throughout the remainder of the call, became lavish in his details on how the money would be applied to their specific needs, underlining what a God-send it was, with the tone of his voice's emotion transmitting both gratitude, approval, and something else (more specifically, something almost hostile, or embarrassed, or both, yet I can not describe the specific tone which brought this emotion to my attention adequately). This flood of emotion, on his part, caused me, sickeningly, too late, to realize, that what I had just done, during the call, was to not only let him know that I was the individual who was responsible for the generous gesture, but to make me do so in a subtle, sly manner that appeared to be, insinuationally,^o euphemistic,^o

myriads: multitudes

unprecient: lacking in foresight or awareness

insinuationally: in a deviously hinting manner

euphemistic: misleadingly mild or indirect

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meaning, employing the euphemism: "whoever was responsible for _____," which, combined together with the interest I revealed in the money's "uses" by them, could fool no one about its implying of me as ultimately responsible, and had the effect, insidiously,^o of insinuating that, not only was I the one who had done such a generous, nice thing, but also, that I was so "nice"—meaning, in other words, "modest," "unselfish," or "untempted by a desire for their gratitude"—a person, that I did not even want them to know that I was who was responsible. And I had, despairingly, in addition, given off these insinuations so "slyly," that not even I, until afterward—meaning, after the call was over—, knew what I had done. Thus, I showed an unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people, which, on the "motivational level," not only completely emptied the generous thing I tried to do of any true value, and caused me to fail, again, in my attempts to sincerely be what someone would classify as truly a "nice" or "good" person, but, despairingly, cast me in a light to myself which could only be classified as "dark," "evil," or "beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good."

[1999]