

CRASH OF '69

by David Foster Wallace

KARRIER

It's great. I'm always wrong. It's great.

Ask anybody except my agent if it's great. He'll be in checks and Weejuns, pointing binoculars at narrow horses hung with satin as they're led toward their boxes.

Mr. Diggs will say it's great. He holds his racing form a certain way. He folds both sides together, to compare possibilities.

He'll say So what about Rusty Hull in the Fourth, kid.

And I'll say A winner, so sure a thing it's almost boring, money in the account of our choice, Mr. Diggs.

He'll put the forms side by side and feel the square of hair on his chin and say So then what about Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket, Karrier? Does Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket have a chance here in the Fourth?

I'll say Mr. Diggs sir, no way. As in no chance. As in I feel in my chest, bowels the absence of even one slim snowball's chance for Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket.

The form trembles a certain way in his hands as he trains the glasses on a certain horse, from here a tiny hull atop legs.

But are you sure Karrier.

I feel it, Mr. D. It's that feeling, with the tight hide and velvet lips. That no-way certainty.

THE WOMAN WHO'S GOING TO BE HIS LOVER

I'll take Father's arm and we'll take our constitutional together through the dawning halls of the Federal Reserve, to the sound of the click of my heels and the squeak of his chair, as the fire in the East window yellows. He says We can't live like this, child. A whole nation has lost the cool side of the pillow. First thing every morning I taste in my mouth the human potential for evil.

His neck's slow tic sends his head around over his shoulder. It has ceased to be great. The only brilliance he sees is over his shoulder, now.

KARRIER

And, since it's great, it ends up great, like always Mr. Diggs will have collected our winnings, we'll be on our way through the Throughway back downstate, drinking some liquor out

of the back seat's bar and tossing nuts at the back of the chauffeur's little distant head, in its cap.

How's this for a year, then, Mr Diggs will say, inspecting, unwrapping linen from a bottle's body, Have a try, boyo. He'll pour, blowing off the heads.

I'll have a try.

A terrible year. Bluck. This is awful. Bluck. Patooley.

Good enough, he'll say.

If I hate it, it's good enough for Mr. Diggs. Because I'm always wrong.

THAT WOMAN

My Father, behind his toothless breakfast pap and the paper that's the room's fifth wall: Have a look at this: According to this boy a giant gravity of the truth's greatness bends light around the whole circumference of the planet, allowing the kid's agent to see the back of his own head.

His own sunflower head whips at the sun. The back of Father's head has a strange phrenological jut, as if his skull were trying to exit. His newspaper is in his yogurt. A spare man, late in Term, in doubt, his bones are his beauty, now.

MR. DIGGS

I don't know the driver's who talked to the Journal? Try a cashew on for size, driver! Clunk! Right in the noggin. See that, Karrier? Clunk!

KARRIER

My Dad was always wrong. It was great.

He worked on Wall Street. He was Wall Street. He analyzed the market. Always wrongly. He was always wrong for a big firm that kept him high in a corner office with drawn shades and a bare bulb. He was the worst.

He was the worst, your old man, the former retired market analysts will say to me, in admiration, no rancor, their faces recessed and protruding, eyes redly milky, at the anniversary of the Crash.

I'll disagree.

He was the worst, they'll insist, shaking their manes, raising snifters of superior sherry.

Yadley here remembers the time he went in to your old man and he said Karrier he said he said Karrier, gone over the material yet on this newfangled Eastman Kodak outfit? and your old man he said, Yadley, no. As in not even a fraction of a chance. Meaning a bare zero potential for growth. He pleaded with Yadley, Yadley did he plead or did he plead? he said You gotta

believe me. Trust me on this one. A dead bird. Stillborn. A loser. A dink. A dead bird, spiralling out of the sky. I'm imploring here, he said. He said grab Mr. Lynch by the lapels. Get Mr. Merrill in a headlock if you have to. Not a cent into this dry sponge. This commode for funds. My gut is crying out on this one.

Yadley has a snapshot of the whole thing, he'll say.
He was great, they'll say.

And he was great. He was wrong about Coca Cola. Frozen OJ. Ford. ITT. CBS. AT&T. Radio. Nabisco. Xerox. He put himself squarely behind The Dumont Network; washboards; the Calvin Coolidge Charm School; the Fatty Arbuckle kid's doll. An automatic icepick concern out of Sag Harbor. The future of chipped beef. Teapot Dome Petroleum. Lead paint. Streudle; scones; the Ritz- as opposed to, the Marx-, brothers.

He was Wall Street. His big firm reacted negatively off his every call. And got so big they became Wall Street, for a while. They relied on him. He was their weapon. This was what was great: he was always wrong.

LOVER, DAUGHTER, WOMAN

So when Father falls into the doubts that surround this whole fiscal policy of economic aggression, fighting guns with butter, and I bring him to trusted Billy G., Billy G. says to him Don't be so naive, Father, about this thing. This democracy and freedom of choice issue. You cannot let those people hold an election and then turn around and elect what means no more elections. Can you let them vote for no more voting? Can you underwrite their freedom of speech to utter commands for silence? He joins the apostle who sings as he completes Billy's pedicure, the Gregorian he's come to love:

Quod fervet tanto circum te, Christe, tumultu
Non hoc ira maris, Christe, sed ambitio est
Haec illa ambitio est hoc tanto te rogat ore,
Possit ut ad monitus, Christe, tacere tuos.

But Father vacillates. Who is to be trusted to be more than just sincere? Everyone is right from their own perspective: the Left, State, the Right, War. We laugh, across the table: can you vote for no more voting?

KARRIER

Though Mr. Diggs, long as the honest day, will disagree:

MR. DIGGS

The key was to always be wrong. Karrier, Karrier's old man, they were always wrong. Infallibly wrong. Which when you get down to tacks is as good as right. Right? Am I right? I get input on a matter from Karrier here, I know for sure the input's wrong-- Karrier here's basically in his way telling me what's right. Right? He's magic. He's like a pointer, that points with the back of his head. So what if the SEC's got the kid barred from the market? We've got him consulting to some very gigantic names in entertainment and games of chance: L.A. and A.C. and L.V. Casinos. Horses and greyhounds. He gives out input for Nielsen on the potential of certain elements of entertainment, TV pilots, certain performers, which stars will mean which market shares for which year, which scripts and songs spell Blockbuster, with a B. We've got feelers from political guys. Candidates, who don't mind how he has to stay behind the scenes in shadows. Also alternative energy industries. Coal. Certain foreign governmental bodies. Currency traders. There's a galaxy of markets for infallible error out there. We're rolling in it. The kid's a mine, under certain conditions. I just keep him happy: he keeps being wrong.

THAT WOMAN WHO WILL SHAPE EVENTS

And, in the way of the sincerely tortured, Father is right. Whom to trust? Anyone with enough critical distance on his best-held convictions to know? We all put our heads together.

Billy G. nominates God, over sherry. But Allen G. dabs angrily with his napkin. God? By 1969 God is operating on a marginal utility of 0, in terms of trust. Billy G. settles back into a patient smile and the professional waft of his frond-waver. Really, he inquires, a nautilus-shaped bit of scone at a lip's corner.

If Allen G. is right about this intuition, this prediction-of-now, that the public reality they all rent space in is fundamentally textual, then God, the big nom-de-plume, is either a sadist or a dyslexic. His reality wants to revolve off contradictions--straight lines are curved; I am both subject and object; Billy G. is unattractively attractive; Father's best chance at immortality is to die in Term; I both love and hate my Father. Fine. But then why invest us with mental schemata in which contradictions are either lacunae or lunatic, the Pale to be Beyond? Why write us as rational when our very faith in the penman's efficacy requires an arational leap? Why invest us with a compulsion for Romance and then make our genitals look as they do?

Allen G. is wrong. Father is Wracked by policy questions that have become bigger than all of us. He needs the practical, the directive. He complains Allen diddles while Diem burns.

He needs Someone in Whom to Believe. Billy G., who has become his beseecher, beseeches the Fed's barrel vaults.

Though later we'll both laugh, together, across yards of

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breakfast nook, the Journal: new Nietzsche: God is Dyslexic, as Father scans the racing form.

KARRIER

I'm pretty unhappy. I live in a watch-towered uptown condominium I was sure I'd hate when Mr. Diggs put down the deposit. It's up-to-the-minute, metal and deco glass, and the glass and metal windows are just so much more art; they make me feel empty, outside them. Though the price is sure right.

I tend to be dour. I'm overweight and asthmatic. My chest twitters when I breathe. My lips are wet all the time. I've got a kind of dent in my forehead, as if I'd been creamed with a shovel. My skull juts in back. I waddle and sweat. I have retrograde ejaculations and unpleasant breath. My wife is a beautiful girl whose love for me I doubt. I see the hate behind her smile. I feel the restraint of black urges behind every neck massage.

And the baby. Don't even ask about the fat white baby with its little dent and empty Halloween grin.

It's great to always be wrong, though. Just thank God I found Mr. D. there next to me on that bridge that night. He explained how he'd pulled over when he saw me balancing my weight between the weight and the rope. He asked me Why, kid, why. Give it here he said. I gave it there. Cars were going across the bridge. I could see his eyes, they were the color of skin in the light of his Day-Glo tie. Those ties were the rage. I trusted him. It was an instinctive thing. I tend to be ruled by instinct. I refused to even consider going back to his Agency's office with him. In his car I told him several lies.

In his Agency's offices Mr. Diggs tested my claims at length.

The Edsel, kid? he asked, eating tuna with his fingers from a can on a desk in an office off the docks, near the bridge.

I had Edsel-instincts.

All the way. A national phenom. Sell the farm. Run don't walk to your nearest Edsel dealer.

This Elvis boy?

All hips and lips. Dirty, derivative, dark, doomed to die, thin as a rail, destitute. In detention. Morals charges.

He ran his finger around the inside of the can.

I feel stuff like this I said. It's like I feel it, inside me.

He looked at the empty can of fish. Your destiny? he said.

I began to wish I could see the noosed braid of the bridge's lights across the docks and unlit Sound. To try to follow in my Dad's footsteps, I said, and to fail. To miss every print in the snow.

I began not to sob. I insisted it had nothing to do with Dad, or the blur of banker's vest and teller's visor, the dead bird's spiral into the Manhattan sidewalk.

'26. He'd been right. He begged his firm not to invest in its own stock. No more valueless paper he'd cried, at the

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breakfast table. The market's running on sheer hunger he said. Illustrating messily with a muffin. Hunger everywhere, that results in a Consuming Panic. Analogous to a dying animal, running. It's all of a sudden all investment and profit-taking and prediction and no production or insight or making do. I feel it, he told Mr. Lynch, falling into itself. In the future.

But word got out, even with drawn shades. They all rushed to invest in themselves.

But he was right, in '26. It crashed inward. Lynch went down. Merrill slapped Dad around, under the office's bare bulb. From the dusty hall Yadley the analyst could hear Dad being slapped, called a fallible fraud who'd brought everything down, for Merrill.

The market was a rabid starving Ursine Bull.

Dad said he watched out the shaded window as captains of industry and investment held their noses and jumped from their holes all up and down Wall Street's grey canyon. It rained bankers in blue vests and captains of industry. The air hung with plummeting well-dressed forms. It was a seminal day. Magritte painted the plummeting forms. A Rorschach conceptualized the Rorschach test from his little analyst's office overlooking the sidewalk.

And the sidewalk. We found a note in Dad's vest pocket, spread out all over. It said he found the axis-tilting embarrassment of fallible fallibility too much to bear, though he was sure, deep inside, he'd find a way to get through it emotionally.

MR. DIGGS

But except I'm wondering lately how long the kid can keep it up, this wrongness. He's been at it, what, six years? And this mistaken belief that his old man died in '29. Of course his old man agreed. Kid asks him Are you the dead one, what's a guy that's always wrong going to say? You have to be very careful with this type of commodity what you ask them. The old guy's still up there convinced he's lying there, dead. They even rigged a kind of crypt in the office. You want to go to a crypt for financial advice? Some chicken-insides, some-earth fumes, a little old wine too? This year is what year?

The whole thing's getting less great, I'm thinking.

KARRIER

I talk with Dad's enduring and inextinguishable spirit quite a bit. We're closer than just about anyone else and I. We visit Mom's grave. He gives me advice about Mr. Diggs, which I take, since it's wrong. The whole thing tends to be spiritual, dream-like, near the grave.

The whole thing, to tell the truth, is--while of course still great--dream-like. Every morning I wake up, tasting a kind

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of evil that needs to be spit, and I'm facing my smiling wife's smile, and the bars of the crib beyond that. And I feel now like I'm saving this spiritual kind of dream-like quality from a kind of near-disaster every morning.

At work the whole thing has the quality of speechlessness in a dream, too. An inability to speak when there's something so important to speak about that it makes you unable. I don't feel like I ever speak, now.

WHO WILL LOVE HIM

I'm going to get on a train. D.C. will retreat, chugging. West Virginia will be dingy and clotted, Pennsylvania lush and Dutch, Philadelphia a lume against its own umbrella of soot.

The Bronx will be blasted, lunar, craggy, recessive. When I disembark it'll be afternoon, autumn, the sun a bloody nugget past the blasted watching sky. The streets will be nothing like canyons. Paper flutters with the soft synchronicity of doves in all the gutters. A van's snout bears a spare tire like a shield.

I see all this.

I'll hail a cab. The driver will be one of those New York cab drivers, born past time, who lock your doors and then chatter. He'll sound out every syllable of 'interesting' and will pronounce 'especially' 'expecially.' I ask for the financial district, a term which in timeless-New-York-cab-driverese seems to mean 'Please give me your opinion on every issue facing collective man, making reference whenever possible to your own life and experience.'

I narrow the request to Wall Street. But we're at Cuba, the Berlin Wall, and I begin to doubt my own arrival.

KARRIER

I think maybe I'm being followed. It's maybe the girl in the taxi. The taxi is behind me wherever we go. The cabbie has a donkey-shaped face and wears a regulation cap and keeps talking in the mirror to the possible girl, gesturing with his left hand. I'm going to mention it to Mr. Diggs so he'll assure me I'm wrong.

I'm pretty sure it's a girl.

She also follows me wherever I go on foot, wearing sunglasses much like Jackie O. She walks slowly, but doesn't skulk, or pretend to be at all interested in store windows when I turn to try to face her, as she possibly tails me.

When I think I'm looking, she just looks at me and smiles, chewing at her lips. It is easy to both smile and chew your lips. I've never tried, but this girl and possible follower chews her lips in a kind of meaningful way, it's something like the way an elephant chews its leaves: very slow, centered totally inward. She reminds me of a slim attractive sunglasses-wearing elephant, delicately picking food off a branch and centering inward to

her mouth, as she smiles beside the store window. There is a kind of slow, elephantish, inevitable grace to her way of possibly following me. I'm not sure about it. And I like that, somehow.

MR. DIGGS

Except now you have to watch what you ask the kid. All of a sudden you need your basic yes-or-no type situation. You need a situation where you can go Karrier, I got this option right here, or on the other hand I got this option over there, is all I've got to choose from. 50-50 you say. Then if you can give him two options he'll murder the right one by pleading for the other. He'll show you what you want by pointing the other way.

But yes I admit we're facing possible trouble on the wider options out there on the market that keep getting wider and more numerous every day. Things can get misleading now. Now if you ask the kid 2+2, he'll give you any answer but 4. So OK, don't get me wrong, I'm not looking at horse-mouths, he's still wrong. But is he infallible? Because how are you supposed to know from exactly 4 out of maybe 6, or 19, or 3000, or any-answer-but-4 he'll always give you now. See? That's not great, now. He used to be able to name the anything-but, he used to be able to say anything but 4 Mr. Diggs, just steer way clear of 4. Now maybe he'll say 6, or 19. Now he can say anything but 4, but he doesn't say Anything But 4.

He's getting scared, or else cocky. He rebels against the seclusions, the protections, the drawn shades and the 3rd St. brownstone. He wants waves, a family. Says he wants to do more than just misinterpret what is past the window. He has to be handled with care. You have to maneuver him, now, like something you want to think before you point it at something.

Plus don't breathe word one but I live in terror of the day somebody gets the kid to lose faith. To know he's always wrong. Cause if he trusts it, if he says I'm always wrong, either way no way he's still infallibly wrong. Right? It'd be it. He'd be finished. It'd be his old man all over again. It'd be back to blue comics and leather dancers and fish in cans for L. Dempsey Diggs.

THE WOMAN OF KARRIER'S DREAMS

And when I finally climb 'cross, skulk and lie my way into him, high above the street, when I see him, over the card table, in the office, I don't see him: I see against the bulb's bare glare a kind of embryo, wrinkled and cervically pink, floating, its fists to its face, upside-down in an amnion of dirty tungsten light and cleanly dancing error. I feel, inside, that what's been said is true. I deliver Father's greetings, refer to what's been said, up and down the Coast, from Florida dog tracks to the Boston promoters of British musicians.

I sit in the folding chair and open myself to him, whom we

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need. For Father, late in Term, is dying of doubt.
I speak my peace.

KARRIER

Her nipples--it makes me nervous that it's been her shadowing me, so I was right, and right about her being a girl, behind Jackie's horny black glasses, she's a girl because as she undresses with the no-nonsense of a little child her nipples seem sort of to burst from her breasts. (She has breasts.) They tumble, really, as if from those things at Thanksgiving. A...cornucopia of nipple.

A WOMAN WHO HAS AN ALIVE FATHER, OUT OF LOVE FOR WHOM SHE WILL LOVE
KARRIER, AND ALLOW HIM TO SHARE EVENTS, VIA HER

Open, I see what he sees, as he paces with Webster's C's. Here are pin-up thighs, the swirl of a butter-fed belly. An asp of hair at each temple's dent. Unshaded eyes that break what they see.

Is what the driver and writer and Allen G. say about you true. Is the truth great, for you.

KARRIER

The nipples on her breasts seem to point, the way Uncle Sam points, at wherever I am. She keeps folding her gamented districts and looking at the open shade. Maybe waiting for me to draw it. I never draw the shade, it wouldn't be right.

I'm pacing back and forth in front of the powerful government girl who probably reads about me and follows me and who's chewing delicately at her lips, undressed. I begin to doubt Mr. Diggs asked her here. I feel at the back of my skull, which juts.

MISS M. LYNCH, DAUGHTER OF THE 1ST CHAIRMAN OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE
BANK OF THE UNITED STATES, OCTOBER '69:

I have to laugh at the sight of him, moist, girl-shy, touching at the indentation in his forehead, pacing back and forth, refusing to look with the steadfast aversion of the Born Looker.

I ask him whether he's ever had a proposition before.

Gee, he says, nervous beyond account, is that the door I see over there?

But the part of him he looks down on knows what's true. This is not a born liar.

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KARRIER

They want to trust me, so trust me. What happens when his naked nipply chewing daughter spins her glasses around a pink-nailed finger and asks you if it's great to always be wrong: you see yourself as she can't see. The eyes over shiny thighs promise a greatness earned a navigation of options. In her eyes are seismic shudders, spears of monetary infusion. She sees me like a man sees a weapon. Waiting, naked, to promise what to do.

DIGGS

I know the rest. Spare me this Laissez business-cycle shit. Since who'd asked the old man the question in the first place, that brought the whole thing indoors, after all? Not even he'd deny he thinks the whole thing is great.

KARRIER

It's great. It's like a thing I feel. I admit it.