White Noise

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DON DELILLO

Don DeLillo was born to an Italian-American family in the Bronx in 1936, the eldest of eleven children. The family lived in close quarters and spoke a mixture of Italian and English, often combining the two. A child content with playing for hours in the streets, it wasn't until DeLillo was in his late teens that he began writing, and even then he was not particularly serious about the craft. Nonetheless, he slowly became a voracious reader, a habit that consumed him throughout his 20s and into his 30s. Unable to find a job in publishing, he worked as a copywriter at an advertising agency in Midtown, a position he eventually left because he no longer found it interesting. At this point, he began writing novels, and although his first efforts won him praise in the literary community, it was only after the publication of *White Noise* that his books began to reach wider audiences. He has now published 17 novels, numerous short stories and essays, five plays, and one screenplay.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *White Noise* predominantly avoids making direct references to actual historical events, its concern with contamination and toxic chemicals embodies the growing awareness and paranoia in the 1980s surrounding the dangers of manmade materials. Published just one year before the infamous nuclear accident in Chernobyl—which had terrible lingering effects that plagued the health of many people living nearby—*White Noise*'s deft conception of deadly airborne contaminants is hauntingly prescient and indicative of the decade's concern. In the 1960s, nuclear power—originally stumbled upon during the construction of devastating bombs in World War II—was being used commercially to create efficient energy. As such, deadly materials were put to use as everyday resources, essentially forcing Americans to come to terms with the idea of harmful agents coursing just beneath the surface of domestic life. By the 1980s, though, Americans had witnessed or heard about enough toxic disasters—spills, explosions, contaminations—that it was difficult to ignore the deadliness of the chemicals surrounding them. This unease sets the stage for *White Noise*, a book that dwells in the paranoia of quotidian life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Whereas DeLillo's previous books were all either highly literary and conceptual or (in one case) straightforwardly commercial, *White Noise* marks the author's first success in writing an accessible yet substantial novel. With its hyper-attention to consumer consciousness, its wide-ranging and episodic plot structure, and its capacity to satirize itself, *White Noise* is typically hailed as postmodern, putting DeLillo and his novel in a canon both widely praised and heavily criticized. The literary critic James Wood, for instance, placed DeLillo alongside authors like Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace in an attempt to illustrate what Wood refers to as "hysterical realism," or the postmodern novelistic tendency to overinflate plots with references, subplots, and other absurdities standing in the way of conveying true human feeling. And to be fair, *White Noise* certainly does follow in the tradition of a postmodern book like, to name just one example, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, which similarly parodies modern American culture while following a bizarre and unresolved plotline. At the same time, it would be reductive to speak of this novel only in terms of other pieces of literature. In fact, *White Noise* takes many cues from the non-literary commodities of consumer culture and marketing, like, for example, Coca-Cola's 1980 slogan "Coke is it," which appears directly in the text. The greatest influence on *White Noise*, then, is not postmodernism or other pieces of literature, but the rampant commercialism of the 1980s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** White Noise
- **When Published:** January 21, 1985
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Postmodernism, realism
- **Setting:** American suburbia
- **Climax:** Having finally tracked down the man who slept with his wife and gave her experimental medication, Jack shoots Willie Mink twice in the stomach and, in turn, is shot in the wrist.
- **Antagonist:** Willie Mink, the creator of Dylar, is the most straightforwardly sinister character in *White Noise*, but even more antagonistic are the various ominous forces that work to destabilize Jack throughout the novel. As such, consumerism and the fear of death emerge as the primary forms of antagonism.
- **Point of View:** First-person from Jack Gladney's point of view.

EXTRA CREDIT

National Book Award. Known for his reticence regarding media attention, when DeLillo won the National Book Award in 1985 for *White Noise*, he approached the podium, accepted the award, and said, "I'm sorry I couldn't be here tonight, but I thank

you all for coming," before leaving the stage.

Panasonic. DeLillo's original title for *White Noise* was *Panasonic*, but the company by the same name objected, forcing him to change it.

PLOT SUMMARY

College professor Jack Gladney watches a long procession of station wagons drive through the campus of College-on-the-Hill in the town of Blacksmith. Observing the vibrant and healthy young students as they unpack their parents' cars for yet another school year, Jack takes note of the wealthy confidence surrounding these people as they handle various junk foods, pieces of technology, and medications. Jack is the head of the **Hitler** Studies department—a field he founded—and he has made a point of watching the students arrive on campus each Fall for the past 21 years. After taking in the spectacle, he returns home to tell his wife Babette that she has once again missed the fantastic parade. As he describes to her the mannerisms of the rich parents he watched, she remarks, "I have trouble imagining death at that income level," a remark that inspires a conversation about the impact of riches on one's perception of mortality.

Jack and Babette live in a house at the end of a peaceful street that overlooks an expressway in the distance. Four children "by previous marriages" live with them: Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder. As such, children and teenagers alike drift through the house, tuning into the radio, answering the phone, watching **TV**, or engaging in conversations ranging from the health concerns of Babette's diet to the effects of various chemicals on lab rats. Jack and Babette take part in these conversations, often verbally sparring with their children and finding themselves intellectually challenged by their rhetoric. They also have deep private conversations in their bedroom at night. As they lie in bed, they often wonder who will die first, arguing over which of them would be more traumatized by losing the other.

Since Hitler Studies shares its offices with the popular culture department—called "American Environments" at the College-on-the-Hill—Jack becomes close friends with Murray, a visiting professor and former sportswriter. Murray is obsessed with the way Americans consume popular culture, marketing, and anything that seems to stand for something significant in the eyes of the consumer. He speaks at length about these topics, exuding an intellectual style mixed with a certain slyness.

Jack finds Babette at the high school stadium as she runs up and down the steps, which is part of her exercise routine. He embraces her, feeling a deep and affectionate attraction to her as she stands there in her sweat suit. That night, the entire family sits down to eat dinner in front of the TV, a Friday night ritual they've established because of Babette's belief that indulging the children's desire to watch TV will successfully "de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport."

Throughout the text, DeLillo frequently intersperses short lists of product or company names, such as: "The Airport Marriot, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center." Television and radio snippets also jut into the narrative, weaving their way into the background noise of Jack's world; "After dinner, on my way upstairs, I heard the TV say: 'Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines.'"

Babette and Jack run into Murray at **the supermarket**, a place he loves. Moving through the aisles, Murray waxes poetic about the various forms of packaging on the shelves. He also speaks eagerly to Babette, whom he's just met for the first time and to whom he is clearly attracted, commenting to Jack that her hair is "a living wonder." Excitedly sniffing the products in Jack's and Babette's shopping basket, he walks outside with the couple before they drive him home.

As the semester progresses, Jack continues to see Murray, with whom he has long and wide-ranging conversations inspired by relatively ordinary events, like grocery shopping. Meanwhile, the elementary school that Steffie and Denise attend is evacuated because of a chemical contamination causing students to experience a battery of physical ailments. While Steffie and Denise stay home, a team tests the school, measuring for various chemicals. However, because their suits are made of Mylex, which is itself "a suspect material," the final results of their tests are inconclusive, and they are forced to re-inspect.

Once again, Babette and Jack find Murray at the supermarket. While Murray follows Babette down an aisle—speaking rapturously about the "psychic data" projected onto the consumer by all the colorful packaging and brand advertisements on the grocery store shelves—Steffie takes the opportunity to tell Jack (her biological father) that Denise (her stepsister) is worried about Babette's use of a certain unknown medication. Jack admits he hadn't known she was taking anything at all. Later, as they traverse the parking lot, they hear that one of the men in Mylex "collapsed and died" while doing a sweep of the elementary school.

In the kitchen at home, Denise chastises her mother for chewing gum that causes cancer in laboratory animals. Babette insists that this habit is harmless and that she only chews two pieces per day, an assertion Denise and Steffie don't believe. They argue that Babette is so forgetful she wouldn't even be capable of remembering how many pieces of gum she chews, to which Babette responds, "What do I forget?" Later, Babette asks Jack if her forgetfulness is as noticeable as Denise made it sound. Jack tries to reassure her that everybody forgets things, saying that these days "'forgetfulness has gotten into the air and water.'" When she wonders if the gum she's chewing is

causing her memory to fail, Jack brings up the medication Denise mentioned. Babette claims that, to the best of her knowledge, she isn't taking anything. At the same time, though, she concedes that—if her memory is truly bad—she might be taking something and then forgetting about it. "'Either I'm taking something and I don't remember or I'm not taking something and I don't remember,'" she says.

Between the fall and spring semesters, a train carrying deadly chemicals derails not far from Jack's house. The chemical—eventually identified as Nyodene D.—rushes out in huge amounts. In the attic, Heinrich watches this disaster through binoculars as Jack periodically comes up to trade information with him about the disaster. Soon they are instructed to evacuate. The family gets in the car and joins a mass exodus as everybody in their part of town heads for an emergency-ready Boy Scout camp. On the way, Jack pulls over at a gas station and refuels the car's empty tank.

At the Boy Scout camp, Blacksmith citizens gather in huddles, passing information back and forth. Since Jack possibly exposed himself to Nyodene D. while refueling the car, he stands in line to speak with a technician who works for a program called SIUMVAC, an evacuation simulation. The technician takes down several particulars regarding Jack's medical history, typing them into a small computer. "'You're generating big numbers,'" he says, telling Jack that the computer is showing "bracketed numbers with pulsing stars." In the vaguest possible terms, he informs Jack that he certainly has a "situation" on his hands, but that they won't know more for another fifteen years—that is, if Jack is still alive. "'If you're still alive at the time, we'll know that much more than we do now,'" the technician tells Jack.

In the middle of the night, the Gladneys are woken up by an announcement that everybody needs to evacuate the Boy Scout camp because of a wind change: the toxic cloud is now headed directly in their direction. The family scrambles into the car and once more joins the mass chaos of drivers trying to escape. Jack does everything he can to stay away from the cloud, even driving through a snowy field before finally reaching Iron City, a nearby metropolis, at dawn.

After spending nine days in a karate studio in Iron City, the Gladneys can return home. One night not long after the Spring semester begins, Jack finds a medication bottle taped to the underside of the radiator. The pills he finds are called Dylar and are unlisted in Denise's *Physician's Desk Reference*, so Jack takes one of them to the College-on-the-Hill to be analyzed by a brilliant young science professor, Winnie Richards. He also tries asking Babette—who has been acting uncharacteristically withdrawn—about the medication, but she feigns ignorance and distracts Jack by telling him she wants to hop into bed with him. When Winnie finishes analyzing the Dylar, all she can tell Jack is that the pills are exquisitely constructed. Regarding their medical use, though, she has no insight to offer.

In bed one night, Jack finally forces Babette to talk to him about the Dylar. She tells him that she had been going through what she thought was a phase, but she eventually came to see it as a condition. It becomes clear that this condition she's referring to is an acute fear of death. She tells him that she saw an advertisement in a newspaper calling for volunteers for secret research. After a number of screenings and preliminary considerations, she was chosen as a test subject for Dylar, a drug that eliminates an individual's fear of death. Because Dylar has so many side effects, though, the trial was stopped and the research company's support was revoked. But Babette was desperate to continue, so she struck a deal with one of the head researchers, to whom she refers by the pseudonym "Mr. Gray." In exchange for Dylar, she had sex with Mr. Gray in a motel on a regular basis. The medication, however, failed to work.

Babette refuses to tell Jack the researcher's actual name, for fear that he will succumb to the male impulse toward violent rage and seek revenge on Mr. Gray. She also won't allow him to get ahold of some Dylar for himself, which he begins to yearn for with great intensity, claiming that *he's* the one who has always feared death. At around that same time, Babette's renegade father arrives for an unannounced visit and privately gives Jack a handgun.

During a long walk around campus, Murray and Jack talk about his fear of death. Winding through many highly obtuse theories and philosophies, Murray eventually suggests, hypothetically, that if Jack killed somebody, he would be released from his fear. Not long after this conversation, Jack starts carrying the handgun around, feeling its power and heft as it sits hidden in his pocket. When Winnie tells him she found a scientific article about Dylar that anonymously reveals Babette's story, he is pleased to finally learn the location of Mr. Gray's motel.

Shortly thereafter, Jack steals his neighbor's car from their driveway and drives to the old German section of Iron City, where he knew Mr. Gray's motel would be. When he arrives in Gray's room, the man is watching TV. His real name is Willie Mink, and he acts very strange, often throwing whole fistfuls of Dylar into his mouth. He answers Jack's questions about Dylar disjointedly and distractedly, frequently reciting lines from past TV or radio shows with no apparent ability to separate real life from the media he has consumed. Eventually Jack corners him in the bathroom, reveling in the power he feels at having freed himself of his fear. He shoots Willie twice in the stomach. Then he sets to work putting the pistol in Willie's hand, to make the death look like a suicide. When he's not paying attention, though, Willie unsteadily shoots Jack in the wrist. The bullet eviscerates the power and elation Jack has been feeling, and he suddenly sees Willie for what feels like the first time. After using a handkerchief to slow his own bleeding, he sets to work helping Willie, dragging him across the motel room floor and loading him into his car, all the while feeling like a proud savior.

After driving around Iron City with the wounded Willie Mink in the backseat, Jack finds a hospital in a Pentecostal church staffed by nuns. Luckily, Willie doesn't remember what happened, so Jack is able to convince him that he—Willie—shot Jack and then turned the gun on himself. After a nun—who tells Jack she doesn't believe in God—patches up his wrist, he leaves Willie at the hospital and drives home, parking the car back in his neighbor's driveway despite the fact that the interior is covered in blood. At home he climbs into bed with Babette but can't sleep, so he goes downstairs and has a cup of coffee at the kitchen table.

Later that same day, Babette's young son Wilder ventures away from the house with his tricycle, winding up at the expressway, which he then purposefully crosses despite the zooming traffic. Cars careen by, but he pedals steadily to the other side, where he then gently falls off the low shoulder and begins to cry. The book concludes with Jack and Babette realizing disconcertingly that the supermarket shelves have all be rearranged.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jack Gladney – Jack is the protagonist and narrator of *White Noise*. A middle-aged professor at the College-on-the-Hill and a multi-divorcé, he is intelligent and unimposing, a curious man willing to engage in thoughtful conversation. He is a notable figure in Hitler Studies, an academic field he founded in the '60s when he suggested that the college build an entire department around the life and history of **Hitler**. Despite his thorough knowledge of Nazi Germany, though, he does not speak German, a shameful secret he hopes his colleagues will never discover. In fact, Jack's entire campus persona is markedly different than the easygoing air he adopts at home, where he lives with his wife Babette and four children, two of whom (Heinrich and Steffie) are his own. On campus Jack is powerful and authoritative, making sure to wear thick, dark glasses and affecting a professorial austerity. Despite his even-keeled temperament and powerful presence, though, he harbors strong existential anxieties, the most prominent of which is an acute fear of death. This fear is only exacerbated by his exposure to a potentially toxic chemical and the battery of medical testing he must undergo in the aftermath, as well as his discovery that his wife Babette is *also* irrationally afraid of dying, a topic they jointly obsess over during long late-night conversations in their bedroom.

Babette – Jack's fourth and current wife. Like Jack, Babette has been married multiple times and has retained custody of two children, Denise and Wilder. She is intelligent while projecting a pragmatic and wholesome sensibility. In addition to attending to the young Wilder, of whom she is protective, she reads to the blind (in particular, an old man named Mr. Treadwell) and teaches a twice-weekly class about correct posture to adults in the basement of a church. Beneath her confident, good-natured personality, though, she is desperately afraid of dying. This fear leads her to participate in an experimental trial of Dylar, a medication that supposedly eliminates one's fear of death, and to engage in an affair to keep on getting Dylar from Willie Mink, the head researcher of the drug. Contrary to the seemingly honest nature of their marriage, Babette conceals all this from Jack until he finally finds a bottle of the pills and confronts her.

Murray Jay Siskin – Jack's colleague at the College-on-the-Hill. An ex-sportswriter, Murray works in the American Environments (or popular culture) department and hopes to corner the market on Elvis Studies, just like Jack has done with **Hitler** Studies. Murray is extremely intellectual and pedantic, liable at any moment to excitedly launch into convoluted diatribes about the messages embedded in consumer culture, a phenomenon he refers to as "psychic data." Hailing from New York City, which he fled in order to "'be free of cities and sexual entanglements,'" he is charmed by the quaint city of Blacksmith and very obviously attracted to Babette, a fact that doesn't seem to bother Jack.

Heinrich – Jack's fourteen-year-old son, and the oldest of the children living with the family. Heinrich is an eclectic know-it-all determined to confound his father by intelligently employing obscure knowledge that distorts simple logic. Armed with esoteric facts, rhetorical finesse, and strange fascinations, he is constantly ready and willing to refute common knowledge. His friends are severe: one, Tommy Roy Foster, is a prisoner convicted of murder with whom Heinrich plays chess by mail; another, Orest Mercator, is an older boy training to beat the Guinness World Record for the length of time spent in a cage with poisonous snakes. As evidenced by these friends with warped interests and pasts, Heinrich is drawn to calamity and is brought to life by disastrous events, ultimately coming into his own while lecturing a group of panicked evacuees about the airborne toxic event.

Willie Mink (Mr. Gray) – The head researcher in the development of Dylar, a medication that eliminates the fear of death. He tests Babette and deems her suitable for trial treatment, but because of the dangerous side-effects of Dylar, he is soon abandoned by his research team. Nonetheless, he carries on in secret, striking an arrangement with Babette that, if she periodically visits him to have sex in his motel in Iron City, he will go on giving her Dylar. To protect Willie from harm, Babette shields his identity by calling him Mr. Gray when telling Jack about Dylar. This precaution ultimately fails, and Jack tracks Willie down in his motel in Iron City. There, Willie has become nearly incoherent and incapable of differentiating his own speech from the slogans and phrases he randomly spews during conversation, all the while taking massive amounts of Dylar. Jack shoots Willie twice in the stomach, and Willie

shoots Jack in the wrist, which makes Jack come to his senses and take Willie to the hospital, saving his life after having decided—and attempted—to kill him.

Denise – Babette's smart and exacting eleven-year-old daughter, whose father is Bob Pardee. Denise is obsessed with monitoring her mother's health, playing close attention to what Babette eats and never hesitating to inform her of a product's health risks. It is because of her careful scrutiny that Jack finds out about Babette's Dylar use, as she tells him that her mother has been secretly taking pills.

Wilder – Babette's son, and the youngest of the children living with her and Jack. Wilder, who behaves like a good-natured toddler, can't speak more than twenty-five words, a fact that both worries and pleases Jack. Both he and Babette delight in spending time with the effectively nonverbal child, finding his innocence and curiosity infectious and soothing. Murray is particularly interested in Wilder's impressionable age and the fact that the boy is growing up awash in consumerism.

Winnie Richards – A colleague of Jack's at the College-on-the-hill. Winnie is a relatively young neuro-chemist whom everybody on campus regards as brilliant, an assessment that makes her sheepish and reclusive. When Jack finds Babette's stash of Dylar, he tracks down Winnie, who is hard to find because of her wish to slink around unnoticed. When Winnie first analyzes the pill, her tests are inconclusive regarding Dylar's purpose, but she later finds and shares a scholarly article with Jack that outlines not only the drug's intended use, but also the controversial story of Willie Mink and his anonymous test subject, whom Jack knows to be Babette.

SIMUVAC Technician – A man working for an organization that stages simulated evacuation drills. Jack talks to this technician during the Airborne Toxic Event, telling him the details of his exposure to Nyodene D. The technician also explains to Jack that SIMUVAC is using the real-life catastrophe of the Airborne Toxic Event as practice for future simulations, arguing that the reality of the situation poses certain frustrating variables that prevent them from rehearsing a flawless simulation. This technician also says that Jack's exposure to Nyodene D. is cause for concern but that they won't know more for another fifteen years—that is, if Jack is still alive at that time. This vague diagnosis unsettles Jack, who is put ill-at-ease by this blend of bad news and uncertainty.

Vernon Dickey – Babette's father, who visits unannounced in the middle of the night and stays for several days. Vernon is a gruff man who appreciates manual labor and is highly intelligent in a more pragmatic, working class manner than the sorts of people Jack and Babette normally entertain. A man who likes to stay up late and wake up early, he insists on giving Jack a gun during a late-night conversation.

Howard Dunlop – Jack's German teacher. Dunlop lives in the same boarding house as Murray, but is reclusive and private. At times, he has also taught Greek, Latin, ocean sailing, and meteorology. Once Murray describes Dunlop as someone who might be sexually attracted to corpses, Jack is creeped out—less by the moral insinuations than by the notion that someone might find death alluring instead of terrifying—and he discontinues his German lessons.

Sister Hermann Marie – The German nun who treats Jack's bullet wound in the Pentecostal hospital in Iron City. In the course of tending to his wrist, she reveals to Jack that she doesn't actually believe in God, arguing that it is enough for others to *think* that she believes so that they don't have to do so themselves.

Old Man Treadwell – A blind man Babette reads to on a weekly basis. The old man has a taste for tabloid magazines like the *National Enquirer* and the *National Examiner*, which tout conspiracy theories and rumors. He and his sister go missing for several days, and they're found stuck in a shopping mall, completely overwhelmed by the saturation of consumerism that they don't understand.

Bob Pardee – Denise's biological father. A glad-hander and natural schmoozer, he is often down on his luck and unreliably searching for new opportunities. When he arrives at Jack and Babette's house, it is clear that he is in yet another transition period, something Denise is able to discern almost right away with an exasperated, jaded air.

Bee – One of Jack's daughters. Bee, who comes from Jack's marriage to Tweedy Browner, does not live with Jack and Babette. Because of Tweedy's insistence that it is good for children to travel, Bee travels from Indonesia—where she was staying with her stepfather, the undercover spy Malcom Hunt—to visit Jack for Christmas. Bee's adult mannerisms unnerve Jack and make him feel observed and judged.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Steffie – Jack's seven-year-old daughter and the offspring of his marriage to CIA operative Dana Breedlove. In contrast to her half-brother Heinrich's taste for disaster and his eagerness to intellectually dupe others, Steffie is emotionally sensitive, often feeling "embarrassed on other people's behalf."

Sundar Chakravarty – Jack's doctor. Initially surprised by Jack's sudden desire to schedule frequent physicals, Chakravarty confides that he's glad Jack is taking his role as a patient seriously. Despite this appreciation, though, he is evasive and withholding in his assessment of Jack's health.

Orest Mercator – Heinrich's nineteen-year-old friend who is training to set the record for the longest amount of time spent in a cage with deadly snakes. Heinrich clearly admires him, while Jack is puzzled by the boy's disregard for death—a carelessness he comes to envy and admire.

Gladys Treadwell – Old Man Treadwell's elderly sister, who

dies of "lingering dread" after she and her brother are stuck at the shopping mall for four days straight.

Tweedy Browner – Bee's mother and one of Jack's ex-wives. High-strung and independent, she is married to Malcolm Hunt, whom she feels she doesn't truly know. Bee suggests that Tweedy would benefit from focusing on her own problems, rather than obsessing over the mystery of her husband.

Malcolm Hunt – Tweedy Browner's current husband and Bee's stepfather. Malcolm is a "high-level jungle operative" who often goes undercover.

Janet Savory – Heinrich's mother and yet another of Jack's ex-wives. A former foreign-currency analyst who carried out research for secret theorists, Janet now goes by the name "Mother Devi" and lives on an ashram, or a place of religious retreat modeled on monastic Hindu communities.

Dana Breedlove – Jack's ex-wife, whom he married twice. Dana works as a CIA operative who carries money from place to place and reviews books the organization sends her. She is Steffie and Mary Alice's mother.

Mary Alice – Jack's oldest child and the daughter of Dana Breedlove. She is nineteen, lives in Hawaii, and works with whales.

Alfonse Stampanato – The head of the American Environments department at the College-on-the-Hill. Alfonse knows four languages, has a photographic memory, and collects prewar soda bottle caps. Like the rest of his department, he is a New York émigré.

Dimitrios Cotsakis – A New York émigré in the American Environments department. The former bodyguard of the musician Little Richard, he dies between the Fall and Spring semesters while surfing, an event that unsettles Jack and Murray because of its suddenness.

Elliot Lasher – One of the New York émigrés in the American Environments department who enjoys having odd, spirited discussions about popular culture, trivia, and circumstantial memories with Murray, Jack, and his other colleagues at lunch.

Nicholas Grappa – Yet another of the New York émigrés in the American Environments department who engages Murray and Jack in odd lunchtime conversations.

Hookstratten – Babette's doctor, whom Jack calls at home to ask about Dylar.

Tommy Roy Foster – A man in prison for murder. Heinrich plays chess with Tommy in the mail.

Adele T. – A psychic whom the Blacksmith police consult when they need to find a missing person. Although Adele's visions never lead the police to what they were looking for, she invariably helps them discover and solve some other unknown crime.

SIMUVAC Leader – A man leading the simulated evacuation drill in which Steffie and Heinrich take part. Jack overhears this leader tell the volunteer victims, "The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we'll be from the real thing."

Eugene Babette's son from a previous marriage who is growing up in Australia, and who does not have a **TV**.

THEMES

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

FEAR, DEATH, AND CONTROL

White Noise, a book about the influence of fear on human life, focuses on small everyday worries, as well as deep, existential crises. The novel's most prominent manifestation of fear is the characters' hopeless quest to control their own mortality: frightfully obsessing over their health, jogging up and down stadium steps, reading food labels with a dire sense of dread, and carefully considering the physical effects of chemicals with which they may have come into contact. In this way, life seems fragile. The inevitability of death looms large, treated as "some inert element in the air," a pervasive entity that the characters "breathe."

Despite Jack and Babette's understanding that death is inescapable, they remain unable to accept it. This accounts for their interest in Dylar, a drug that lessens a person's terror of death. Though Dylar does not delay death, it makes them feel proactive and, thus, ever so slightly less helpless in the face of death. Jack's desperation makes clear his need for control over his life and death, indicating that the root of his fear has less to do with death itself and more to do with his inability to control or affect its arrival. That death is everywhere only increases his feelings of helplessness in the face of a powerful, un-addressable phenomenon. He becomes, in essence, afraid of fear itself—the only thing he might be able to change.

Jack and Babette also reveal their fear of death and their desire to control their health by incessantly lying to doctors. Worried sick after his exposure to Nyodene D., Jack schedules multiple check-ups with his physician. But when Dr. Chakravarty asks if he has any reason to believe he's been exposed to harmful chemicals, Jack lies. He does this because he's terrified of how Chakravarty might respond if he tells the truth. Though he knows that lying to Chakravarty won't keep him alive, he seems to think that keeping Chakravarty from giving him bad news will suppress his own fear.

Though Jack initially seems aware that conquering his fear of death will not change his fate, by the end of the book he begins to convince himself that by getting rid of fear, he might avoid

death, too. "It's almost as though our fear is what brings it on," he tells Murray. "If we could learn not to be afraid, we could live forever." This exaltation of a clearly untrue theory shows that Jack's intellectual approach to death easily leads him to false conclusions. Thus, DeLillo uses Jack's reaction to death as a way of revealing the human tendency to use analysis as a way of over-compensating for fear. The characters in *White Noise* commit themselves so wholeheartedly to flawed logic that they appear willing to abandon fact—that is, as long as their theories are rhetorically (not factually) sound. By formulating such strongly intellectual arguments, they therefore feel more in control of their circumstances.

UNCERTAINTY AND AUTHORITY

White Noise is awash in uncertainty. Even the name evokes a nonspecific quality, white noise being an indistinct, indescribable stream of sound. Jack's deepest fear is of his own death, and this fear is shown to center on the uncertainty of death—not knowing what death will be like and when it will come. In fact, Jack is so uncomfortable with uncertainty that, when his son Heinrich wants to get a rise out of him, all he needs to do is draw his father into a conversation that shows him how little he knows about everyday objects, processes, and technologies. Throughout *White Noise*, Jack and others grasp at certitude in many different ways, trying to attain it however they can, whether through alternative theories, authority, or willful ignorance.

In *White Noise*, uncertainty often invites long, freewheeling academic ruminations, which lead to absurd theories. The intellectual babble streaming back and forth between Murray and his colleagues strives to answer various questions, but their extensive theorizing rarely gets to the heart of the matter, instead spinning into outlandish conclusions. The uncertainty of death, for example, eventually drives Murray to suggest—"in theory"—that Jack should kill somebody. DeLillo seems to enjoy poking affectionate fun at the ways in which academic philosophizing can work itself into strange circuitous places, often resulting in abstract ideas that are held together only very loosely, since they're based on highly speculative postulations. Desperate to minimize life's uncertainty, Jack and Murray only obfuscate the very ideas they aim to clarify. The more they talk, the further away they get from decisive answers. Uncertainty, then, engenders more uncertainty, and Jack is caught in this loop.

Ironically enough, Murray seems somewhat cognizant of the fact that Jack is caught in a loop of uncertainty. Seeming to recognize that all their theoretical musings have done nothing to help him, he suggests that Jack take practical action. By killing somebody, Jack would at least break out of this useless cycle of intellectual conjecturing, which only leads to further uncertainty. The problem with this suggestion, though, is that it is the very *result* of that useless cycle, meaning that it is just another far-fetched idea the two men have hatched in order to create the illusion that they have any control at all over death. Killing somebody else could only solve a philosophical problem of their own making, doing nothing to answer Jack's questions about when, how, or where he will die.

Beyond the question of death and its influence, DeLillo is interested in exploring the nature of uncertainty in times of crisis, particularly when there is a vacuum of authority. The story Jack hears about a plane almost crashing illustrates the relationship between authority and uncertainty. After the pilot incites panic in the cabin by admitting over the loudspeaker that the plane is "falling out of the sky," a shrewd flight attendant wrests control by suggesting that they would actually be "crash landing." The difference between a "crash" and a "crash landing" is semantic, but Jack notes the psychological effect of the flight attendant's reframing: the added word enabled the passengers to "maintain a grip on the future," since giving them an event for which they could prepare gave them a sense of control and eliminated a margin of uncertainty.

Notably, the flight attendant wasn't exactly telling the truth—his or her power came from providing a narrative of certainty at an uncertain time. "In a crisis," Jack thinks, "the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one's knowledge is less secure than your own." There is a comfort, then, in receiving information—true or untrue—from somebody else, especially if that person is in a position of relative power, since "what people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving [them] in charge of [their] own chaos."

Health (and the desire to control it) surfaces as another locus of uncertainty in *White Noise*. The results of Jack's exposure to Nyodene D., for example, are vague; when Jack tries to obtain information about how the chemical will affect his life, the SIMUVAC technician says, "We'll know more in fifteen years," and when Jack asks if he's going to die, the man responds, "Not as such." Thus, concrete answers prove hard to come by. However, Even though Jack appears to go in search of answers regarding his health and death, he also tends to shy away from such information when on the verge of receiving it. For instance, when he goes to a new doctor for a battery of tests, he asks when the results will be ready, giving the impression that he is eager to receive them. But when the doctor tells him the results are available immediately, Jack backs off, saying, "I'm not sure I'm ready." By seeking out information about his health, he indulges an illusion of control, but when he must face the hard facts, he is forced to realize that such data will only render him even more helpless. Therefore, he opts to remain in a nervous state of uncertainty. In other words, Jack's fear of uncertainty is so strong and illogical that it leads him into yet another loop, choosing one kind of uncertainty over another, a

paradox that reveals the futility and emptiness of his quest for certainty in the first place.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND IDENTITY

By associating moments of transcendence with trivial and vapid artifacts of popular culture, DeLillo blurs the line between spiritual existence and consumer culture. When Jack hears Steffie mutter *Toyota Celica* in her sleep, he admits: "The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky […]. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence." As such, DeLillo sanctifies consumer culture. But he also presents it as trivial, often allowing **TV** and radio programs to cut into the narrative at unexpected moments to say out-of-context phrases like, "Hog futures have declined in sympathy, adding bearishness to that market." In doing so, he depicts TV, radio, and marketing as suspicious media capable of strongly influencing human identity. Although *White Noise* does not fully condemn consumer culture, it does critically examine how humans receive this kind of information and entertainment, a process DeLillo sees as emotionally charged and potentially harmful to the psyche.

DeLillo often refers to "psychic data" throughout the novel, a term that attempts to explain the ways in which consumer culture appeals to humans. "Psychic data" encompasses the messages embedded in advertisements and labels, which the brain picks up on either consciously or subconsciously. In **the supermarket**, for example, the psychic data come from the "bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials." According to Murray, psychic data is always "radiating" out of TV and other media that transmit consumer culture, creating an "aura" of signs and symbols that consumers live in. The language DeLillo uses to describe consumer culture, then, is both clinical and spiritual. The word "radiation" evokes an ease of transmittance, in addition to suggesting a risk of harmful exposure. An "aura," on the other hand, brings to mind a religious glow, thereby sanctifying the possible toxic messages emitted by consumerism.

In addition to emphasizing the ambiguous duality of consumer culture (its potential for both transcendence and corruption), psychic data also captivates the characters, sometimes inspiring them to search for consumerism's hidden significance. Murray, for example, believes that psychic data—the products and advertisements in the supermarket—contain hidden symbolism and meanings that he can discern. "It is just a question of deciphering," he says, "rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability." This description intentionally invokes hermeneutics, or the practice of interpreting the minutiae of religious texts to discern esoteric spiritual meanings. However, Murray then doubles back on his glowing endorsement of the supermarket, saying "Not that we would want to [decipher the symbols], not that any useful purpose would be served." As such, DeLillo praises consumer culture, while maintaining suspicion about whether consumerism is capable of revealing any important message about humanity beyond the existence of an innate desire to passively consume. DeLillo, then, refuses to decisively weigh in on the meaning of consumer culture, instead positing that its inexplicable blend of the spiritual with the vapid and banal compels people to worship and interpret popular culture as an end in itself. Consumer culture, in other words, is self-propelled, and it derives its power from a combination of mystery and ubiquity.

Despite its unknowability, DeLillo posits that psychic data has a profound significance for human identity. According to Jack, identity is an amalgamation of data; he even tells Babette, "We are the sum total of our data." This provides insight into why the messages of consumer culture are given such high importance in *White Noise*; if the construction of human identity is dependent on the "sum total" of "data," then the "psychic data" transmitted from TVs, radios, and products are the building blocks of an individual's personality. The most extreme example of human identity as an amalgamation of consumerism's psychic data comes in the form of Willie Mink, the creator of Dylar. Willie is so immersed in consumer culture that he randomly quotes TV slogans and dialogue, as if there's no difference between who he is and what he consumes. He has allowed too much unmitigated "psychic data" into the construction of his identity, making him the human manifestation of gluttonous cultural consumption. To Jack—and to readers, too—he is an example of what people can become if they rely too heavily on the media and other vapid distractions to allay fear, insecurity, or other naturally human existential misgivings. Willie's presence in *White Noise* is the closest DeLillo comes to condemning consumerism and issuing a warning of its negative side effects.

PLOTS AND HISTORY

Jack is fascinated by history and conspiracy and the relationship of both to death. Through these fascinations with plots and history, he seeks new ways to clarify, define, and eke meaning out of his existence, hoping to alleviate the banal but overwhelming existential anxiety from which he suffers.

When a student asks him in class about the plot to kill **Hitler**, he says, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots." In somewhat reductive terms, he means that to plot is to plan, and planning involves projecting oneself into the future. At the end of that future—no matter what—lies death, the only thing a person can fully count on. Thus, to plot is to project and propel a person towards death. "Plot" also evokes the idea of narrative—the story a person can tell about his or her own life. Because he fears death so much, Jack obviously doesn't want to reach the end of his narrative. As such, he condemns the act of

plotting. As *White Noise* progresses, he grows increasingly disdainful of plotting, as if by refusing to engage in the act, he can avoid its inevitable end.

Murray, on the other hand, believes that to plot is to live. According to him, plotting is to "seek shape and control." By striving toward something, he believes, people can "advance the art of human consciousness." Murray's outlook is much more optimistic than Jack's, and the stark contrast between the two illuminates the fact that, while Jack resentfully tries to avoid his life's story, Murray celebrates his own personal agency by taking an active role in plotting his life. However, Murray's philosophy about plotting is shown to be no more coherent than Jack's when he suggests that Jack plot and carry out a murder as a way of relieving his fear of death. Murray, then, suggests a dangerous, immoral, and absurd plot as a way for Jack to feel control over his life, which is just as ludicrous as Jack's insistence on avoiding death through a refusal to actively engage.

In addition to plot, Jack turns to history—or his idea of it—when considering death. Despite his best efforts, he seems to have constructed a self-image based on the belief that he is weak. He compares himself to the leaders of history, like Attila the Hun, the great 5th century leader who died in his forties. Jack imagines Attila dying in a tent, "wrapped in animal skins" while saying "brave cruel things to his aides." He imagines "no weakening of the spirit" and that the fearless man was not "ineffably sad" at the fact that he knew he was destined to die. This mentality stands in direct opposition to Jack's own unwillingness to accept the cold hard facts of mortality.

History also figures into Jack's conception of his own identity. When the SIMUVAC technician tells Jack that he "tapped into [his] history" in order to arrive at the numbers indicating the danger of Jack's exposure to Nyodene D., Jack is disconcerted; "I wondered what he meant when he said he'd tapped into my history. Where was it located exactly?" In keeping with his skittishness when it comes to uncertainty, Jack is troubled by not feeling in command of his own personal history. He becomes afraid of himself because of the possibility that the details of his personal history will have negative repercussions on his present wellbeing. History, then, presents yet another threat to Jack's conflicted desire to live in a willfully ignorant present, a mentality that keeps him from looking both backwards and forwards.

SYMBOLS

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

THE SUPERMARKET

In *White Noise*, the supermarket represents the myriad influences of consumerism on American culture. Portrayed by Murray as a "gateway or pathway" to spiritually charged levels of consciousness, the supermarket embodies the alluring quality of contemporary marketing and the power of the "psychic data" it projects onto the consumer. The shelves of products are full of this data, densely populated by branded labels, brightly colored packages, fine print, and loud product names. While Jack and his family visit this place to satisfy the simple necessity of buying groceries, their trips seem to also give them something more deeply existential, as if the supermarket has become a secular church, a place fraught with cultural significance. In one of his first monologues, Murray stands in the grocery store and delivers a monologue about the Tibetan notion of death as an art. "Here we don't die, we shop," he says, walking through the dairy aisle. In this way, the act of shopping becomes a life-affirming endeavor, something to stave off death. It's no wonder, then, that Jack is drawn throughout the novel to the supermarket, which is the setting for many important conversations, including his first indication that Babette is taking Dylar. The supermarket is a place of conversation and revelation, a hub of interaction and connection to both people and the material world.

TELEVISION

TV is the most immediate means by which consumer culture is transmitted into Jack and his family's lives. Whereas the supermarket allows the Gladneys to physically enter and interact with their culture's psychic data, the TV passively ensnares their attention, distracting them from their own lives. When the Gladneys congregate around the TV, they hardly talk, choosing instead to fixate all their attention on the screen. At the same time, Murray makes clear that this form of entertainment shouldn't be written off as base or destructive; instead, he argues that TV has a nuanced way of projecting messages and symbols—psychic data—and it can be productive and important if viewers know to actively search for these hidden screeds. Murray appears to value the innate hunger children harbor for the medium, believing that Wilder's wide-eyed, unquestioning consumption denotes an understanding of the cultural underpinnings embodied by the various programs he watches. However, most of the characters seem not to treat the TV as a medium requiring inquiry and interpretation; Jack frequently hears programs and advertisements emanating from some other room, disembodied manifestations of the marketing, product placements, and perpetual entertainment making up the world around him. The TV, then, is a constant undertone of white noise in his life, rather than a stream of important messages. To Alfonse Stampanato, this explains the widespread attraction to

TV footage of catastrophes. Since most viewers of TV consume it passively and uncritically, catastrophes become orienting events that cause people to snap to attention and seek meaning and emotion from an otherwise ignorable medium. Similar to how the supermarket is rife with psychic data, the omnipotent TV radiates a wide-ranging spectrum of information, leaving the viewer to sift through the various messages in search of meaning, an endeavor that is both futile and never-ending, though also—according to Murray—worthwhile.

HITLER

More than any other figure in the book, Hitler stands for authority in Jack's eyes. For one thing, his stature as the most feared man in history lends him a gravitas toward which Jack aspires, somehow finding a way to disregard questions of good and evil in the interest of focusing solely on the idea of power. Furthermore, Hitler represents stability for Jack, since his life existed in the past. By building his career on studying this long-deceased dictator, then, Jack creates a constant in his own life; when Tweedy Browner asks, "How is Hitler?" he responds, "Fine, solid, dependable." As such, Hitler comes to symbolize one of the few things Jack feels he can actually count on in a life of uncertain anxieties. At the same time, Hitler also stands for Jack's insecurities, since, despite his dominance over the study of this particular historical figure, he remains unable to speak German, rendering his knowledge of Hitler's life incomplete. He finds himself ashamed of this intellectual shortcoming, a feeling that makes him feel fraudulent and inauthentic. This is the same kind of obsession with authority and control that makes him change his name to J. A. K Gladney and gain weight in order to "'grow out' into Hitler." Just as Jack invests himself in Hitler's image rather than his horrific actions, he throws himself into his own outward appearance in order to compensate for his insecurities and shortcomings.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *White Noise* published in 2009.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Babette and I do our talking in the kitchen. The kitchen and the bedroom are the major chambers around here, the power haunts, the sources. She and I are alike in this, that we regard the rest of the house as storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages. Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In describing the house he lives in, Jack evokes the clutter surrounding him and Babette. They are both clearly affected by the vestiges of their past lives, as evidenced by his remark that the objects of previous marriages and different family configurations carry "sorrowful weight." These old possessions remind him of the person he used to be, highlighting the changing nature of life. As somebody who naturally resists change because of the uncertainty it produces, Jack is depressed and even a little frightened by the "darkness attached" to objects that remind him that his life—and even his identity—are in a state of constant flux, forever open to change. The uncertainty his personal history presents—embodied by "things" and "boxes" left lying around the house—is foreboding because it suggests that he has little control over his own existence.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Who will die first?

This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys. It ends a sentence, prolongs a glance between us. I wonder if the thought itself is part of the nature of physical love, a reverse Darwinism that awards sadness and fear to the survivor. Or is it some inert element in the air we breathe, a rare thing like neon, with a melting point, an atomic weight?

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Jack's conversations with Babette about which one of them will die first prompt him to consider the nature of "physical love." In referencing Darwinism, Jack gives rise to the notion of natural selection, which is an evolutionary process whereby the animals best adapted to their environments survive and produce more offspring than lesser-equipped animals. By calling his and Babette's conversation a form of reverse Darwinism, then, Jack recognizes that their mutual desire to die first runs contrary to evolution; furthermore, in this model of thinking, whoever survives the other person's death will not carry on life-enhancing qualities, but will rather take "sadness and fear" with them—two things he believes run contrary to survival.

Seeming perhaps unsatisfied by this overly-intellectual line of reasoning, Jack wonders if the question "Who will die first?" is "some inert element in the air," as if uncertainty regarding death is an inherent part of the environment they live in. This conception is in keeping, of course, with *White Noise*'s fixation on inescapable toxic contaminations that dominate everyday living conditions.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems?

Related Characters: Heinrich (speaker), Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Heinrich says this to Jack in an attempt to fluster him by forcing him into a position of uncertainty. This is effective because, as Heinrich knows, uncertainty is perhaps the most upsetting thing in the world to Jack, who is obsessed with control, authority, and the possession of knowledge. Heinrich's argument that human senses are an inherently flawed way of perceiving of the world ultimately foreshadows Jack's discomfort with the fact that he can't actually feel the effects of Nyodene D. in his body. If "nothing is what it seems," then Jack has no hope of being able to control even his own perceptions. This, of course, makes him feel helpless when it comes to having power over what he thinks, therefore rendering his fear of death essentially untouchable and, as such, just as inescapable as death itself.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Most of her students are old. It isn't clear to me why they want to improve their posture. We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming. Sometimes I go with my wife to the church basement and watch her stand, turn, assume various heroic poses, gesture gracefully. She makes references to yoga, kendo, trance-walking. She talks of Sufi dervishes, Sherpa mountaineers. The old folks nod and listen. Nothing is foreign, nothing too remote to apply. I am always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness of their belief. Nothing is too doubtful to be of use to them as they seek to redeem their bodies from a lifetime of bad posture. It is the end of skepticism.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Jack thinks this in relation to Babette's class on posture, the purpose of which he has trouble understanding. At the same time, he recognizes the impulse to "ward off death by following rules of good grooming" because he himself is interested in finding practical ways of keeping death psychologically at bay. Jack portrays Babette's elderly students as somewhat desperate, perhaps seeing in them a future version of himself; having gone through a life of bad posture, they're willing to try anything to "redeem their bodies." When he says that this represents the "end of skepticism," he seems to both admire and condescend to these students' eagerness to try anything that might help them. Though Jack is afraid of death and willing to explore ways of addressing this fear, he sees himself as an intellectual and he therefore takes pride in his inquisitive skepticism. At the same time, though, he recognizes the "sweetness" related to simply accepting new theories without pessimistic judgment, a disposition he will eventually grow into as he becomes more and more obsessed with Dylar, a drug he has no reason to believe actually works.

Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection. Babette and I have turned our lives for each other's thoughtful regard, turned them in the moonlight in our pale hands, spoken deep into the night about fathers and mothers, childhood, friendships, awakenings, old loves, old fears (except fear of death). No detail must be left out, not even a dog with ticks or a neighbor's boy who ate an insect on a dare.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack frames his relationship with Babette as incredibly open and honest. He portrays love as something that can overcome peoples' insecurities, enabling them to become vulnerable. When he says that love allows people to be "placed in another's care and protection," he puts his relationship with Babette into a context of safety and security. His marriage is something he seeks refuge in and it is clearly something upon which he greatly depends. Of course, this makes it all the more devastating when he later discovers that Babette has neglected to tell him about her fear of death, though it is interesting that even at this early stage he is cognizant of the fact that the fear of death is the only thing they can't soothe in one another. It's as if at this point he thinks he's the only one who fears death, and—even though he won't share his own fear with her—he assumes that, if Babette truly harbored the same fear, she would express it to him.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served.

Related Characters: Murray Jay Siskin (speaker), Babette, Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Murray says this about the vast collection of "symbolism" contained in the supermarket, a place he views as a mecca of cultural and spiritual information. His wide-ranging list of what the building contains contributes a sense of profundity to the supermarket as a whole; "all the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases," he says. The repeated use of "all" is significant in this moment, as it gives an impression of the supermarket's totality, building it up as a place capable of containing the full "spectrum" of life. By using such sweeping language, DeLillo subtly prepares the reader to accept Murray's leap from the banal to the spiritual, as he moves from talking about ordinary things like sliding doors to talking about abstractly spiritual ideas, calling the speech of passing shoppers "ceremonial." As such, the supermarket is exalted to a higher plane of intellectual thought, though Murray self-consciously undermines these epic pronouncements in a rare moment of non-academic level-headedness, saying, "Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served." Still, though, readers get the sense that Murray truly believes everything he said about the supermarket's fantastic mystery and symbolism—its "psychic data—and the ideas therefore begin to generate throughout the rest of *White Noise*.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? [...] It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire. Isn't that why Tommy Roy killed those people?

Related Characters: Heinrich (speaker), Janet Savory, Tommy Roy Foster, Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Heinrich gives this speech as a way of sidestepping his father's question regarding whether or not he wants to visit Janet Savory, his mother who now goes by Mother Devi and lives on an ashram in Montana. Once again, Heinrich attacks the notion of philosophical certainty, which he knows his father is so desperate to maintain. By debunking the idea of free will, he argues that humans are subject to the influence of neurochemical reactions, reactions that happen involuntarily. Jack, of course, hates to hear this: if everything he does is the result of "electrical energy in [his] cortex," he has no hope of controlling even his own decisions.

When Heinrich suggests that Tommy Roy—with whom he plays chess via the postal service—went through with murder simply because neurons in his brain misfired, he foreshadows Babette's later assertion that all men have homicidal rage imbedded in their very biology. In turn, both of these statements foreshadow Jack's actual attempt to murder Willie Mink.

❝ In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. [...] The system was invisible, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In deriving such pleasure from the fact that his account balance accords with his estimates, Jack recognizes the influence of the ATM on his own self-perception. Struggling in so many other areas of his life to attain certainty and to comfortably establish a sense of identity, he looks to "the system" for existential support. And it provides him with this support by validating his estimations. In other words, he feels that his identity is "authenticated and confirmed" by "the networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies." It's worth noting that in this latter phrase Jack begins by listing tangible entities—"the networks," "the circuits"—but ends with the word "harmonies," which bears with it a hint of spiritual magnificence and rejoicing. In the same way that Murray believes TV and the supermarket radiate sanctified messages, in this moment Jack invests himself in the notion that a simple machine can reaffirm him in his quest for certainty, accepting his identity in almost spiritual terms.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ [...] I've been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience, let me tell you. Close to mystical. [...] I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way.

Related Characters: Murray Jay Siskin (speaker), Babette, Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50-1

Explanation and Analysis

Murray says this to Jack and Babette while they eat dinner in his tiny boarding house room. By equating TV to myth-making, Murray further explores his previous idea that there are important messages buried deep in the media he consumes. When he watches TV "into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes," he's mining these "sealed-off" messages. He notes that TV is a "primal force in the American home," a statement confirmed by Jack and Babette's own family rituals, such as their weekly Friday-night TV binges, which captivate them and the children and, ultimately, usurp the role of conversation and face-to-face interaction that might otherwise take place at the dinner table. In the same way that he speaks about the supermarket using lofty terms, Murray conflates TV with a certain "timeless" quality, thereby giving the impression that the messages he's trying to decode have been innately woven throughout all of human history, rendering the process of watching TV one in which people tap into "dreamlike and preconscious" states of existence.

Chapter 14 Quotes

All this time she'd been turned away from me. There were plot potentials in this situation, chances for people to make devious maneuvers, secret plans.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette, Denise

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Jack thinks this while Denise and he are talking about Babette's mysterious use of Dylar. This is, of course, a meta-fictional statement, since Jack himself exists in a novel and is part of a plot. As such, DeLillo slyly comments on the very process he uses to shape *White Noise*'s narrative, lightly making fun of the novelist's tendency to see "plot potentials" in even the smallest, most everyday things. This sort of meta-commentary is characteristic of postmodern fiction, which as a genre is self-conscious and eager to transcend the rigid narrative rules put in place by past literary movements. At the same time, Jack himself is interested in plots because of the fact that he told his students that all plots move "deathward," a statement he appears to still be teasing out and trying to understand, even in a conversation with his eleven-year-old stepdaughter.

[...] it's not a question of greatness. It's not a question of good and evil. I don't know what it is. Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Denise, Babette

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This is something Jack says to Denise when she asks him why he's so interested in Hitler and the Germans. She points out that Hitler and the Germans lost World War II, so they can't have been that great. Jack's response has everything to do with his preoccupation with power, even admitting that his "obsessions dwell" in the realm of "uniform[s]" that make people feel "bigger, stronger, safer." This statement is significant because Jack himself wears a uniform; when he puts on his academic robe and his thick dark glasses, he apparently feels the same kind of relief he's interested in studying. This, of course, is the relief that comes from feeling powerful, authoritative, and in control. What Jack isn't interested in is the immorality of Hitler and the Nazis. For him, "it's not a question of good and evil," since that's a question that might invite subjectivity (although, the Nazis are about as close to a black-and-white moral situation as it gets). Instead, Jack prefers to study the aspect of Hitler that he finds personally therapeutic, which subtly undercuts his own airs of intellectualism.

Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves what it gets. Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone warrants their doom.

Related Characters: Alfonse Stampanato (speaker), Murray Jay Siskin, Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the chairman of the American Environments department, Alfonse Stampanato, explains to Jack why disaster footage is so compelling even to kind, good-hearted people. The first sentence here is particularly noteworthy, as it helps define the kind of messaging Murray believes humans are constantly receiving from TV and other products of consumerist culture. Once again, DeLillo begins with tangible entities ("words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics") and then moves to less easily-recognizable phenomena ("specks, waves, particles, motes"). This emphasizes the vastness of the "psychic data" humans must sift through in order to find meaning. Catastrophe, then, is strong enough to cut through all of these indeterminate elements, capable of shocking viewers out of an information-induced stupor. What's more, the suffering

of other people is framed as something that can help shape and define the viewer's life, enabling him or her to more thoroughly appreciate his or her fortunate circumstances. This helps make sense of Murray's later assertion to Jack in regards to the fact that Jack is likely dying: "Better you than me."

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ We looked at each other. Behind that dopey countenance, a complex intelligence operated. […] The inconsolable crying went on. I let it wash over me, like rain in sheets. I entered it, in a sense. I let it fall and tumble across my face and chest. I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility. I let it break across my body. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit here for four more hours, with the motor running and the heater on, listening to this uniform lament.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Wilder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack observes Wilder, who has been crying for hours on end with no signs of stopping. As he does with most things, Jack looks for meaning and significance in Wilder's "inconsolable" sobbing, letting it "wash over [him]" and delighting in its raw and nearly mystical effect. This experience recalls the idea of white noise, an indiscriminate sound that can almost become meditative, just like the steady hum of the expressway below Jack and Babette's bedroom window at night.

For somebody so obsessed with being in control—of his identity, of his fears, of his body—Jack exhibits a rare desire to relinquish his self-possession; he wants to let go of himself, joining Wilder in some "lost and suspended place." The fact that he refers to a "reckless wonder of intelligibility" indicates his desire to access a different plane and his simultaneous belief that to do so would be careless ("reckless"), for it would mean giving up his hold on reality, ultimately surrendering all sense of control.

❝ We were halfway home when the crying stopped. It stopped suddenly, without a change in tone and intensity. Babette said nothing, I kept my eyes on the road. He sat between us, looking into the radio. I waited for Babette to glance at me behind his back, over his head, to show relief, happiness, hopeful suspense. I didn't know how I felt and wanted a clue. But she looked straight ahead as if fearful that any change in the sensitive texture of sound, movement, expression would cause the crying to break out again.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Babette, Wilder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Wilder's state of being after his prolific crying stint is, in this passage, perceived by Jack as extremely delicate. He senses Babette's belief that even the slightest movement could send the child back into hysterics while also seeming to adopt a similar sensitivity as the boy himself, as illustrated by his confession, "I didn't know how I felt and wanted a clue." This statement shows the extent to which Jack depends on Babette; confounded by Wilder's sudden silence, he looks to Babette to tell him how he should feel, exhibiting a dependency first observable in his earlier statement that he has allowed himself to be placed in her "care and protection." Wilder's impressive bout of desperation seems to have undone something in Jack, rendering him even more delicate and in need of love than before.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Certain elements in the crew had decided to pretend that it was not a crash but a crash landing that was seconds away. After all, the difference between the two is only one word. Didn't this suggest that the two forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? How much could one word matter? An encouraging question under the circumstances, if you didn't think about it too long, and there was no time to think right now. The basic difference between a crash and a crash landing seemed to be that you could sensibly prepare for a crash landing, which is exactly what they were trying to do.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains the events of a near-plane crash, as narrated by Jack, who learned the information secondhand from one of the passengers. Jack notes the ways in which language can seem as if it is capable of changing reality. When he argues that the question of the difference between the phrases "crash" and "crash landing" is an "encouraging" one given the dire circumstances, he reveals his belief that semantics give people something to cling to in times of extreme danger and duress. When he faces his fear of death, it is exactly this kind of "encouraging" logic he'd like to evoke. Of course, he also admits that this idea doesn't hold up if one thinks about it too much, thereby acknowledging the flawed logic inherent in this attempt to linguistically snatch control of an otherwise immutable reality.

Chapter 21 Quotes

It seems that danger assigns to public voices the responsibility of a rhythm, as if in metrical units there is a coherence we can use to balance whatever senseless and furious event is about to come rushing around our heads. [...] What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

When a fire captain drives by the Gladneys' house during the airborne toxic event and announces that everybody in the area must evacuate, Jack pauses to consider the nuances of public speech in times of disaster. The idea that public voices assume "the responsibility of a rhythm" indicates Jack's belief that whoever is in charge must give listeners the impression that everything is organized and under control, an idea that can be conveyed through "metrical units," as if there is "a coherence" between the speaker's cadence and the situation at hand. Authority, then, becomes a chiefly linguistic matter, a matter of giving the illusion of safety regardless of the actual circumstances at play.

Could a nine-year-old girl suffer a miscarriage due to the power of suggestion? Would she have to be pregnant first? Could the power of suggestion be strong enough to work backward in this manner, from miscarriage to pregnancy to menstruation to ovulation? Which comes first, menstruation or ovulation? Are we talking about mere symptoms or deeply entrenched conditions? Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?

I turned off the radio, not to help me think but to keep me from thinking.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Steffie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Jack asks himself these questions in the car (while fleeing the airborne toxic event) after Steffie exhibits signs of experiencing *déjà vu*, a possible side effect of exposure to Nyodene D. Again, the power of language comes to the forefront of *White Noise*, this time calling into question the chain of causality inherent between language and feeling. It is typical of Jack, who constantly seeks clarification and certainty, to work himself into a place of doubt over even the most obvious matters—namely, that language can obviously not cause a little girl to have a miscarriage. When he asks himself if a symptom is "a sign or a thing," he gets bogged down by semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols—a hilariously obscure thing to be thinking about while driving away from a deadly toxic cloud. Once again, DeLillo parodies the academic impulse to overanalyze, showing the various perilous rabbit holes to which it can lead. Seeming to also recognize his own over-thinking, Jack turns of the radio, an act that is significant because it shows a connection between media sensationalism and disturbing, illogical thoughts.

Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Jack thinks this while driving away from the toxic cloud and glimpsing its massive power. Inherent in the word "awe" is a feeling of reverence, an idea that is in keeping with *White Noise*'s tendency to approach secular entities—like, for example, TV and the supermarket—with a religious outlook.

At the same time, though, Jack's nearly religious respect for the toxic cloud is undermined by the cloud's manmade origins; "This was death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable." The precision of this form of death is troubling to Jack, who yearns for certainty only when he feels confident he will receive good news. This kind of certainty, though, is out of step with his expectations, for it leaves him in a state of "helplessness," a fact he has difficulty reconciling with the very idea of manmade phenomena, which he clearly believes should only ever clarify and strengthen his own control over life (rather than further rendering him defenseless against death).

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we'll be from the real thing. Life seems to work that way, doesn't it? [...] If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate.

Related Characters: SIMUVAC Leader (speaker), Steffie, Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195-6

Explanation and Analysis

Jack overhears a SIMUVAC leader say this to a group of volunteers during a simulated disaster in which Steffie is taking part. When the leader says, "The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we'll be from the real thing," he presents the simulation not as a way of making sure the town of Blacksmith is ready when disaster strikes, but rather as an actual preventive measure. Here again, reality is put aside in the name of devoting attention to theory. This is a manifestation of Murray and Jack's tendency to spin themselves into ludicrous conclusions when talking about intellectual ideas, for they similarly adopt a myopic mentality that prizes—above all else—the ability to reason in hypothetical situations. These simulations, it seems, are exercises of control, and any outside influence—say, for instance, reality—is merely an intrusion.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ The sense of failed expectations was total. A sadness and emptiness hung over the scene. A dejection, a sorry gloom. We felt it ourselves, my son and I, quietly watching. It was in the room, seeping into the air from pulsing streams of electrons. The reporter seemed at first merely apologetic. But as he continued to discuss the absence of mass graves, he grew increasingly forlorn, gesturing at the diggers, shaking his head, almost ready to plead with us for sympathy and understanding.

I tried not to feel disappointed.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

After two corpses were found in a backyard, a breaking news story developed around the scene as workers went about digging up the entire yard in search of more bodies. In this moment, when the entire yard has been completely excavated, a newscaster reports that there are no more bodies to be found. The "sadness," "dejection," and "gloom" that Jack and Heinrich pick up on is in keeping with Alfonse Stompanato's earlier theory about disaster footage—namely, that people yearn to see catastrophe meted out unto others because it helps define their own lives and gives meaning to their personal safety. The fact that Jack tries to avoid feeling disappointed indicates that he is perhaps a little guilty about the fact that he clearly wanted the workers to find something ghastly in that backyard; if he could muster some disappointment, he wouldn't need to come to terms with the idea that he harbors such sadistic impulses.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ […] I think it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit.

Related Characters: Winnie Richards (speaker), Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Winnie says this to Jack when he tells her that Dylar was designed to rid people of their fear of death. The "sense of definition" she references is in accord with Alfonse's theory of disaster footage, how people need such horrible viewing material in order to define their own lives. It's also in step with Murray's later line, delivered to Jack after talking about death: "Better you than me." Winnie essentially tries to get Jack to see that there is no beauty without horror, and vice versa, because each tacitly implies the other. This is exactly the kind of thinking that Jack ought to adopt, for it would also banish his aversion to uncertainty, allowing him to accept life's inscrutability as just one of the defining elements of existence that makes living a dynamic experience, giving it a "precious texture."

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ We all got in the car and went out to the commercial strip in the no man's land beyond the town boundary. The never-ending neon. I pulled in at a place that specialized in chicken parts and brownies. We decided to eat in the car. The car was sufficient for our needs. We wanted to eat, not look around at other people. We wanted to fill our stomachs and get it over with. We didn't need light and space. We certainly didn't need to face each other across a table as we ate, building a subtle and complex cross-network of signals and codes. We were content to eat facing in the same direction, looking only inches past our hands.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, DeLillo explores the shift of family patterns in the 20th century. Before the mid-1900s, fast-food dining didn't exist, meaning that families ate dinner together every night around the same table. As such, eating was a communal activity, a time set aside for familial bonding. In stark contrast to this model, the Gladneys gorge themselves in this moment, chiefly focused on eating and not wanting to "look around at other people." Instead of eating together in an act of communion, they make a pilgrimage to a "commercial strip," where they ignore each other by gluttonously feasting. They are, in effect, so steeped in commercial culture—awash in the neon light of various advertisements—that they can pretend that they're alone.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ He would be Death, or death's errand-runner, a hollow-eyed technician from the plague era, from the era of inquisitions, endless wars, of bedlams and leporsariums. He would be an aphorist of last thing, giving me the barest glance—civilized, ironic—as he spoke his deft and stylish line about my journey out. I watched for a long time, waiting for him to move a hand. His stillness was commanding. I felt myself getting whiter by the second. What does it mean to become white? How does it feel to see Death in the flesh, come to gather you in? I was scared to the marrow. […] So much remained. Every word and thing a beadwork of bright creation. My own plain hand, crosshatched and whorled in a mesh of expressive lines, a life terrain, might itself be the object of a person's study and wonder for years. A cosmology against the void.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Vernon Dickey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack looks out the window into the backyard and thinks that Vernon Dickey, his father-in-law, is a figure of death who's come to take him away. Looking down at his "own plain hand," he appears to be grappling with his very existence, marveling at the beautiful complexities of life. This appreciation of something as simple as a hand seems to prove Winnie Richard's earlier point that the fear of death lends life a "sense of definition"; if Jack didn't think death was outside his backdoor waiting for him, he wouldn't stop

to appreciate his hand and notice that it's "crosshatched and whorled in a mesh of expressive lines." In short, his fear of death makes him see beauty he would otherwise have ignored.

Chapter 39 Quotes

❝ There was something redemptive here. Dragging him foot-first across the tile, across the medicated carpet, through the door and into the night. Something large and grand and scenic. Is it better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life? I know I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man through the dark and empty street.

Related Characters: Jack Gladney (speaker), Willie Mink (Mr. Gray)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

Jack thinks this while dragging Willie Mink across the floor of the motel and into his car, an attempt to save the man's life after having shot him twice in the stomach. His question, "Is it better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life?" relies on flawed logic, for he ignores the fact that by shooting Willie in the stomach, he has unleashed a trauma unto the poor man. More simply put, he's only thinking of himself and what he can gain from this experience. This line of questioning yet again shows the convoluted machinations of a highly theoretical mind: Jack is more concerned with the philosophical meaning of his actions than with their real-life implications. In addition, he benefits greatly from having caused Willie harm, for now he can act "virtuous[ly]" by saving his victim, allowing himself to feel—yet again—authoritative, powerful, and in control.

❝ Our pretense is dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. [...] Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers.

Related Characters: Sister Hermann Marie (speaker), Jack Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

Sister Hermann Marie says this to Jack after treating the bullet wound in his wrist. Her confession to not believing in the religion she supposedly represents evokes the same fear set forth by Jack during the airborne toxic event, namely that "those in positions of authority" will abandon their roles of responsibility. Sister Hermann Marie appears to recognize this fear, coming to terms with the fact that "there must always be believers" in order for everybody else go on living comfortable lives. However, it is only necessary that these people "appear to believe"; this, it seems, is good enough to keep chaos at bay. Because of his fear of death, Jack would greatly benefit from believing in an afterlife. Unfortunately, he isn't religious, so he depends on her to represent the vague possibility that he could go to heaven. If she is unable to do this for him, then he is truly left to his own devices.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

From his office, Jack Gladney surveys the campus of the College-on-the-Hill, watching a long line of station wagons arriving to drop off students for yet another school year. He watches them unpack their cars, listing the junk foods and technologies they carry with them. The wealthy, confident parents proudly assess their grown children, feeling pleased with their happy lives. Jack has watched this procession every Fall for 21 years, intrigued by the crowd of "the like-minded and the spiritually akin" that the students and parents embody.

Jack's interest in this crowd of students and parents demonstrates his attention to the ways in which people invest themselves in groups as a way of confirming their own identities. As he surveys this crowd of people, he is attuned to their social positions, which to him are indicators of who they are and whether or not they are happy in life.

Leaving his office, Jack walks down the hill and into the town of Blacksmith, which boasts Greek revival and Gothic churches, as well as an old insane asylum. The chairman of the College-on-the-Hill's **Hitler** Studies department, Jack lives in a suburban house at the end of a quiet street with his fourth wife, Babette, and four children, all of whom come from different marriages. In describing the street he lives on, Jack notes that it was once "a wooded area with deep ravines," but now there is an expressway in the distance, stretching out below and beyond their backyard such that their house looks over it. When they sleep, "sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur."

By mentioning that this street used to be a quiet place with "deep ravines," DeLillo emphasizes the elements of the manmade world that surround Jack and his family. The fact that the expressway behind their house drones throughout the night in a "steady murmur" is the novel's first instance of white noise, a sound that represents an ever-present kind of uncertainty that pervades Jack and Babette's lives.

CHAPTER 2

Arriving home after watching the students arrive on campus, Jack tells Babette that she has once again missed the fantastic spectacle. She tells him that she needs reminding. Together they discuss the wealthy parents Jack saw at the college, wondering if such people conceptualize matters of health and death differently than others. At one point, Babette points out that they themselves have a station wagon, but Jack brushes this off, saying that it's ugly and battered.

The fact that this conversation leads to a contemplation of death indicates that, for Jack and Babette, death is never far from the mind. By framing these wealthy parents as immune to death, Jack imagines that if he himself becomes rich, he will be able to avoid death. To preserve this reasoning, Jack denies that he is already wealthy, which casts doubt on the acuity of his class analysis of the students and parents.

Jack and Babette's home is cozily cluttered with toys and "the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children." They spend most of their time in the kitchen or the bedroom, rooms in which they have long discussions. After talking about the procession of station wagons, they are joined by three of their children, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder, and the group sets about quietly preparing their own lunches. Denise, who polices Babette's health, gives her mother a hard time (with Steffie joining in) for buying healthy food and then neglecting to eat it. Jack tries to make his wife feel better by telling her there is an "honesty inherent in bulkiness," but she ignores him because she believes he shelters the people he loves from hard truths. Toward the end of lunch, the smoke alarm upstairs goes off, causing everyone to fall silent as they finish their meals.

The blended nature of the Gladney family lends the fictional world of White Noise *a sense of fraught, complicated history; these are people living in a present made up of past sorrows and former lives that render the current moment fragile and sensitive. Nevertheless, they appear lovingly bound together, a fact illustrated by Jack's eagerness to protect Babette from having her feelings hurt. Despite their familial contentment in this moment, though, the smoke alarm poses a vague threat, the uncertainty of which halts all conversation.*

CHAPTER 3

Jack describes how he and Babette often talk about which one of them will die first. He explains that they both want to be the first to go, so that they don't have to endure the pain of living without the other.

This endearingly melodramatic conversation further illustrates how consumed Jack and Babette are by the notion of death; the fact that this is a frequent subject of discussion speaks to just how prominently mortality figures into their everyday thoughts.

All department heads at the College-on-the-Hill wear academic robes, a formality Jack loves because of the powerful elegance it lends his gestures. Because there is no building dedicated solely to **Hitler** studies, the department shares its offices with the popular culture department, which the college calls American Environments. This department is made up of New York émigrés who are all intensely erudite and liable to engage in long conversations about culture and trivia. This is how Jack meets Murray Jay Siskind, a new visiting lecturer who specializes in studying "living icons." After asking Jack to lunch one day, Murray tells him that he hopes to achieve with Elvis what Jack has with Hitler—namely, he wants to corner the market such that any other Elvis scholar must first defer to him before embarking on an academic treatment of the icon.

Power and authority emerge as desirable traits in the academic context of the College-on-the-Hill. From Jack's calculations of his physical gestures in his robes to Murray's assertion that he wants others to have to go through him before they can study Elvis, it is clear that DeLillo is poking fun at the intellectual world's hidden obsession with dominance. Intellectuals, he shows, are clearly not immune to craving authority. For both Jack and Murray, academia provides a context in which they can build powerful, respectable identities.

Several days after their lunch, Jack and Murray visit a barn outside of Blacksmith that is advertised as THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. Furiously scribbling notes, Murray tells Jack that nobody can truly *see* the barn since everyone is preoccupied by taking pictures of it. He then concludes that the tourists surrounding them are "taking pictures of taking pictures" and that this has created an "aura." "'What was the barn like before it was photographed?'" he asks Jack. "We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura.'"

DeLillo often uses Murray as a way of expressing highly abstract ideas that are thematically important to the book while also making fun of the absurd erudition of a self-obsessed academic. In this moment, Murray advances the idea of an "aura," which can be interpreted in multiple ways, either as a religious glow, a general ambiance, or an ominous warning. That the tourists have created *this aura by taking pictures of the barn indicates DeLillo's idea that consumerist tendencies both draw people to something while simultaneously rendering them unable to fully see or understand what that thing actually is. The aura created by consumerism, then, is both alluring and blinding.*

CHAPTER 4

Later that week, the family sits down for dinner in front of the **TV**—their Friday night ritual. Babette believes that doing this will minimize the children's desire to consume TV, effectively "de-glamoriz[ing]" the medium in their eyes.

In keeping with the idea of consumer culture's aura, Babette seems to understand the alluring quality of TV—at the same time, though, she herself falls prey to its appeal, and her attempt to subvert its influence only draws her and her children closer to its mysterious influence.

Jack describes how, when he founded the **Hitler** Studies department in 1968, his superior (whom he refers to as the "chancellor") advised him to change his appearance in order to command the respect of others. He told Jack that the name Jack Gladney wasn't authoritative enough. Together, they decided that Jack should go by J. A. K. Gladney. The chancellor also told him that he must "grow out" into Hitler, suggesting that Jack gain weight. Jack heeded this advice, also adding a pair of thick dark glasses. Despite his eager acceptance of the chancellor's counsel, Jack admits: "I am the false character that follows the name around."

Yet again, power is coupled with image. Jack initially follows this path of authoritative playacting to gain power, but it leaves him feeling empty and fraudulent despite his considerable success in Hitler studies. It's worth noting that Hitler is depicted as a figure Jack must aspire toward rather than despise or approach warily; as such, Hitler comes to represent unchecked authority and power.

CHAPTER 5

Jack confides that he often wakes up in the middle of the night, seized by terror about the fact that he will someday die. One day after this happens, he and Babette run into Murray at **the supermarket**. Murray shows a clear attraction to Babette and holds forth about the various kinds of symbols and messages embedded in the product packaging surrounding them in the grocery store. Jack notes that Murray—a man who left New York City to escape "sexual entanglements"—has a sneaky, cunning, flirtatious edge to his personality. This, however, doesn't seem to bother Jack, and he and Babette give Murray a ride home to his room in a boarding house near the insane asylum.

For Murray, sexual undertones seem to exist in all elements of life. Even his highfalutin rants are marked by flirtatiousness, a fact that runs parallel to his belief that the products surrounding them in the supermarket project hidden messages. DeLillo toys with this idea of secondary insinuations and undertones, letting it manifest itself not only in what Murray says, but also in how he says it.

CHAPTER 6

While driving his fourteen-year-old son, Heinrich, to school one day, Jack finds himself trapped in a circuitous debate about whether or not it is raining. Heinrich viciously maintains that there is no way for Jack to know with absolute certainty that the raindrops on the windshield indicate that it is raining outside. Exasperated, Jack tries to get his son to stop being such a literalist, but Heinrich tirelessly persists in his argument that truth is relative to the beholder. When he gets out of the car, Heinrich walks slowly to the school's entrance, allowing himself to get drenched in order to further deny the fact that it's raining. Watching this, Jack feels a pang of indescribable love for his strange, hard-headed son.

Heinrich's commitment to literal thinking ironically supports a worldview that champions uncertainty. By accepting only the most rigorously provable facts, he essentially advances the notion that nothing can be known for sure, an opinion that pervades the entirety of White Noise, *both in terms of factual knowledge and in terms of more existential matters, such as death and the uncertainty it poses.*

Later that day, as his students enter the classroom, Jack arranges himself in a pose he thinks communicates professorial authority. Toward the end of the lecture, a student asks about the plot to kill **Hitler**, and Jack finds himself saying, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot." After saying this, he wonders if it's true, why he said it, and what, exactly, it means.

Again, uncertainty takes center stage, this time in relation to authority; in order to fulfill his role as the all-knowing professor, Jack allows himself to conceptualize the meaning of a plot before fully considering what he means. In this moment, then, Jack's own uncertainty leads him to contemplate death, a contemplation that only leads to more uncertainty. It seems that death presents a never-ending loop of indecision for Jack, but this doesn't stop him from trying to gain control over the concept.

CHAPTER 7

One night, after Babette has finished teaching a class on correct posture in a nearby Congregational church, she and Jack lounge in bed, asking each other what they each want sexually. They determine that Babette will read erotic literature aloud to Jack, but in the process of deciding what to read—as well as debating which of them the act is intended to please—they become sidetracked and end up innocently thumbing through a collection of old family photo albums. It is the nature of their marriage, Jack says, to tell one another everything. The chapter ends with the bare statement of the one question that keeps incessantly tugging at both of them: "Who will die first?"

Once more, the fear of death is ever-present. Even during calm, happy moments, Jack can't banish it from his mind. As such, death is framed as both literally and intellectually inescapable. However, though Jack will inevitably die, it isn't necessarily the case that thinking *about this demise is unavoidable. Nonetheless, he conflates the two notions such that death becomes, in effect, a psychological condition.*

CHAPTER 8

Despite the fact that Jack is the head of the **Hitler** Studies department, he doesn't speak a word of German. He is deeply embarrassed about this, especially since students aren't even allowed to major in Hitler Studies without taking at least one year of German classes. Because the College-on-the-Hill is hosting a major Hitler conference during the Spring, though, he is determined to learn the language, knowing that actual Germans will be in attendance. He begins attending private German lessons conducted by a man named Dunlop, a reclusive gentleman Murray refers him to who lives in the board housing near the insane asylum.

Jack's ignorance of the German language is a tangible manifestation of his insecurity. Beneath his authoritative role as the department chairman lies a feeling of fraudulence and inferiority, as if he is an imposter who doesn't deserve the position he has. This is in keeping with his earlier assertion, "I am the false character that follows the name around."

CHAPTER 9

Because elementary school students start experiencing headaches and eye irritations and begin tasting metal in their mouths, and because a teacher falls to the ground, writhing and speaking in tongues, the school is evacuated. Experts guess at what's causing these unexpected medical problems, conjecturing that something is wrong with the ventilation system or the foam insulation or the chlorinated pool or perhaps "something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things." As Denise and Steffie stay home during the week, men in Mylex suits go throughout the building with special equipment—unfortunately, though, because Mylex itself is a "suspect material," their results prove inconclusive and they are forced to begin again.

The idea that the harmful elements in the grade school might be "woven into the basic state of things" presents the idea that dangerous and life-threatening forces are omnipresent in the contemporary world. This, in turn, gives rise yet again to the unavoidable nature of death. When even the Mylex (a synthetic material of DeLillo's own imagining) used to protect workers from dangerous exposure proves possibly harmful, it becomes clear that nothing can be relied upon to ensure safety.

Jack and Babette go with Denise, Steffie, and Wilder to **the supermarket**. Again, they bump into Murray, who predictably latches onto Babette and sings the praises of the grocery store. Meanwhile, Steffie takes Jack aside and tells him that Denise is worried about Babette's consumption of a certain medication that she can't find in her copy of the *Physicians' Desk Reference*. Jack tells her he knows nothing about Babette taking any kind of medication.

In this moment, mystery and uncertainty creep into the family sphere, confronting Jack in more immediate ways: even Babette, who he is supposedly so close to, begins to stand for something he doesn't fully know or understand.

When Jack and Steffie rejoin Babette and Murray, Murray is excitedly extolling the symbolic virtue of the products surrounding them in the grocery store, using the term "psychic data" to talk about the messages transmitted from the various packaging labels and advertisements. This leads him to speak extensively about death and the Tibetan belief that it is "the end of attachment to things." In America, he argues, people don't die in this way. Instead, they shop. "But the difference is less marked than you think," he says. In the parking lot on their way to the car, they learn that one of the men in Mylex died while working in the elementary school, simply collapsing in one of the classrooms.

By saying that Americans don't die like Tibetans, Murray backhandedly suggests that shopping and engaging in consumer culture is a way of avoiding death. If Tibetan death is an "end of attachment to things," then American shopping prolongs this attachment of the human to the material world. This, of course, is a highly philosophical way of looking at death, a mindset that, in the end, would do nothing to actually affect the bounds of mortality.

CHAPTER 10

Watching her mother open a new pack of gum, Denise informs Babette that what she is about to consume is proven to cause cancer in lab animals. Babette counters by pointing out that the only reason she chews gum is because Denise told her not to smoke. Plus, she maintains, she only chews two pieces per day. Steffie and Denise don't belief this figure, remarking that Babette's memory is so bad, she probably has no idea how many pieces she chews in any given day. This seems to bother Babette, prompting her to ask, "What do I forget?"

Given the fact that Jack and Babette are so attuned to issues of health and death, it is no wonder that Denise—a mere child—pays such close attention to health-related risks. The dangers of the contemporary world, with all of its chemicals and harmful inactive ingredients, are clearly apparent even to a child.

Meanwhile, Jack goes upstairs to find Heinrich deliberating over his next move in a chess game he's playing with an imprisoned murderer, Tommy Roy Foster. He asks his son about Tommy, seeming to do so out of a sense of fatherly obligation, as if he ought to explore the nature of their relationship to ensure that Heinrich isn't getting too wrapped up in a personal relationship with a killer. The conversation quickly takes a turn, though, and Jack finds himself immersed in the drama of Tommy's story, which Heinrich narrates to him in vivid detail. As Heinrich tells him about how Tommy heard voices and murdered five people in Iron City, Jack is unable to resist the impulse to join in, complementing the story with his own hypotheses about the details of Tommy's actions, all of which Heinrich confirms are accurate.

Collaborative storytelling—like the kind Jack engages in here—runs throughout White Noise. *Jack jumps in and becomes an active storyteller even when the story is not his to tell, a process that perhaps speaks both to his wish for control and his discomfort when he is not in a position of authority. The fact that all of his hypotheses regarding the details of Tommy's crime are accurate indicates how fully inundated he has been by the news and other disaster-peddling forms of media; it seems he has heard so many stories about murder that he has internalized a common homicidal narrative and is thus capable of reconstructing it on his own. In other words, he is familiar with the typical shape of a murder plot.*

CHAPTER 11

Jack and Babette go to Murray's boarding room for dinner. Murray tells them that he's interested in studying children because they represent a "true universal," unlike older people who become more and more difficult for advertisers to target. He describes that in lectures he tells his students: "Once you're out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity." This leads Jack to suggest that Murray talk to Babette's son Eugene, who is growing up in Australia without **TV**. Murray says that "TV is a problem only if you've forgotten how to look and listen." He insists that people have to learn to look at TV as if they are children again in order to "find the codes and messages" it has to offer.

The "vast loneliness and dissatisfaction" Murray insists people feel once they lose their "group identity" sets forth the idea that consumer culture shapes identity in what feels like—for contemporary Americans struggling to understand themselves—a meaningful manner. This concept of a "group identity" also relates to Jack's observation that his students and their parents revel in crowding themselves into groups of "the like-minded and the spiritually akin." TV, it seems, is capable of uniting people into such groups, so long as they tune into the deeper messages Murray believes lie embedded in the medium.

On the walk back from having dinner at Murray's, Babette asks Jack if her memory is truly as bad as Denise makes it sound. He tells her that everybody forgets things, saying that "forgetfulness has gotten into the air and water." But then he asks her if she's taking any medication. In response, she says that she doesn't think she's taking anything, but that it's possible she is and simply doesn't remember. "Either I'm taking something and I don't remember or I'm not taking something and I don't remember," she says.

Once again, Jack displays a fear or suspicion of his surroundings, believing that the very elements around him—"air and water"—pose threats to health and psychological wellbeing. Just as toxic elements seem liable to arise at any moment—creeping up, for example, in the elementary school—the deterioration of memory and the mind is framed as an inescapable and ever-present; Jack, it seems, is deathly terrified of the very world he lives in.

CHAPTER 12

Returning from his German lessons, Jack finds Babette's ex-husband, Bob Pardee, in the kitchen. Bob, who is Denise's biological father, wants to take everyone to dinner. Jack drives Babette to Old Man Treadwell's house, where she is supposed to read to the blind man from the tabloids, as she does every week. When they get there, though, Treadwell is missing. Perplexed, they report the disappearance to the police and then go meet Bob Pardee and the rest of the family for dinner at the Dinky Donut outside of town. During the meal, Jack reads from **Hitler**'s autobiography *Mein Kampf* and periodically watches the strained yet affectionate way Babette and Bob interact, understanding from experience the complicated feelings that pass between ex-lovers. The next day, authorities search the river for Treadwell's body.

In this moment, Jack and Babette's fractured and emotionally complex past lives prove themselves capable of careening into the present. Jack appears aware of the deeply-sown personal history that inherently runs between ex-lovers, and the only reason Babette's clear affection for Bob doesn't bother him is because he himself knows—from past divorces—how such feelings come and go without meaning. Like anything else in White Noise, *history and romance present fleeting conundrums that hinge upon emotional uncertainty. This, however, is one of the very few times Jack finds himself capable of existing comfortably in the face of something vague and difficult to understand.*

CHAPTER 13

Babette calls Jack at his office to tell him that Heinrich was down at the river during the search for the Treadwells (Gladys Treadwell, the old man's sister, is also missing) when he heard that the two old-timers had finally been found in an empty kiosk in the Mid-Village Mall. The elderly brother and sister had, apparently, been wandering the mall for two days before finding relative safety in an "abandoned cookie shack," where they spent two more days cowering in fear. Jack suspects that the "vastness and strangeness of the place" discouraged them from asking for help, making them feel "helpless and adrift in a landscape of remote and menacing figures."

The Treadwells' ghastly mall experience is the absurd and comedic epitome of consumer culture's antagonism: its ability to alienate anybody who exists outside its influence. Trapped in a place dedicated to advertising and material consumption, the two old-timers appear unable to interface with the contemporary American world—they are "helpless" and "adrift," unfamiliar with the "remote" "landscape" of the shopping mall. In the face of their own uncertainty—or ignorance, perhaps—regarding consumer culture, they become outsiders in their own country and succumb to fear.

Before finding the Treadwells, Jack explains, the police consulted a local psychic named Adele T., who, after performing various rituals, directed them to a mineral processing plant along the river. When the police arrived, they found a bag containing a handgun and two kilos of heroin. This discovery is in keeping with Adele T.'s track record as a psychic who, when asked to find evidence, always leads police to places where they end up solving unrelated crimes.

Uncertainty once more factors into the logic of White Noise, *propelling police officers to consult a psychic in a desperate attempt to escape the terror of unsolved mysteries. That they continue to use Adele T. despite her inaccuracy illustrates their delight in defeating uncertainty, even if the questions they're answering aren't the ones they set out to answer in the first place. In this way, answers of any kind are valued more than questions.*

CHAPTER 14

One night, Heinrich breathlessly summons everybody to the **TV**, which is playing plane crash footage. This greatly excites the children. On Friday of that same week, the family congregates around the TV and is completely absorbed by footage of floods, earthquakes, mud slides, and volcanic eruptions. The following Monday, Jack has lunch with Murray and a group of the American Environments New York émigrés, who indulge in bizarre intellectual conversation. When Jack asks the department chairman, Alfonse Stampanato, why people are so drawn to tragedy when it's broadcast on TV, Alfonse says, "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information." This leads to a discussion about disaster footage which yields, absurdly, to a highly-detailed, academically-inflected conversation between Grappa, Lasher, and Cotsakis about using their fingers as toothbrushes.

The Gladneys' obsession with disaster footage once more establishes their fascination with death, but Alfonse takes this idea one step further when he argues that people are drawn to calamity because they are searching for a way to "break up the incessant bombardment of information." In keeping with Murray's belief that humans are always receiving "psychic data" and messages, Alfonse frames disaster as a focal point, a way to shape an otherwise formless existence. Death therefore becomes a defining element of life, but only insofar as it pertains to other people; in the context of one's own life, death remains a fearful uncertainty.

CHAPTER 15

Because Murray is having trouble establishing his authority over Elvis in the American Environments department, Jack visits one of his lectures as a way of using his institutional power to help his friend. After listening for a short while, he adds to Murray's lecture, pacing around the classroom as the two of them trade anecdotes about **Hitler** and Elvis's respective mothers. Finally, Murray willingly cedes the floor to Jack, at which point Jack goes on at length about the crowds Hitler attracted, eventually making his way to an examination of death, arguing that "to break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone." At one point, Alfonse and his entire class enters the room to watch the lecture, as if it is some kind of fantastic spectacle. At the end, everybody crowds around Jack, who realizes suddenly that they now constitute a crowd. "Not that I needed a crowd around me now," he notes. "Least of all now. Death [is] strictly a professional matter here."

Jack once again invests himself in the power of crowds to reinforce power and, thus, steel people against the fear of death. When he watched the parents and students on the first day of classes, he felt a strong sense of community amongst them, seeing them as members of an elite crowd. This led him and Babette to think that these people were in some way exempt from the possibility of death. In keeping with this, Jack's lecture puts him at the center of a crowd, thereby pacifying his fear of death so much that he finds himself capable of writing it off as merely a "professional matter."

CHAPTER 16

That day, Wilder starts crying at two in the afternoon and doesn't stop for almost seven hours. He sobs so intensely that Babette, at Jack's suggestion, takes him to the doctor, who tells her to give the child an aspirin and put him to bed. Instead, she and Jack drive to the Congregational church, where Babette teaches her posture class. While she's inside, Jack holds Wilder in front of him and lets the waves of sobbing wash over him, beginning to hear the cries like a "Mideastern lament." He finds himself not wanting Wilder to stop, overcome by the sound and beginning to feel that the boy's crying calls out "nameless things," "touch[ing] him with its depth and richness." When Wilder finally stops crying later at home, everybody acts carefully around him, as if by disturbing him they will set off yet another bout of tears. Jack, for his part, regards the boy as if he has just returned from an ancient journey to some "remote and holy place."

Implicit in Jack's appreciation of Wilder's senseless crying is a reverence for the boy's nonverbal capacity to feel. Jack, for his part, uses language to define and understand his emotions. Constantly examining his fear in this way, though, leads only to painful acknowledgements regarding what awaits him: death. Wilder, on the other hand, is unburdened by the human impulse to linguistically define his feelings and can therefore experience the vast spectrum of human emotion without crippling himself with worry, a capability that renders him—in Jack's eyes—simultaneously profound and ignorant, a state Jack clearly wishes he himself could achieve.

CHAPTER 17

Jack runs into a colleague at the hardware store. Because he isn't on campus, he's not wearing his thick dark glasses, a change in appearance the colleague remarks upon by telling Jack he looks "harmless." This fleeting encounter makes Jack want to shop. With the family in tow, he goes the Mid-Village Mall and spends money without guilt or reservation, even telling the kids—who are in awe of his desire to buy more and more things—that they should pick out their Christmas presents. When they return home, they all retreat to their rooms, each one of them wanting to be alone.

Because his colleague's remark undermines his image as a powerful, authoritative figure, Jack finds himself stripped of the illusion of his own significance. This, in turn, completely disarms him. His desire to shop is therefore an attempt to regain control over his identity: by buying new clothes, he strives to shape his appearance and tailor his image. DeLillo reveals the emptiness of this attempt by showing its lonely aftermath, when the family members feel a clear sense of exhausted meaninglessness, isolating themselves in their rooms.

CHAPTER 18

Jack goes to the airport in Iron City to pick up his daughter Bee, who is visiting for Christmas. Instead of finding her there when he arrives, though, he finds her mother, Tweedy Browner, who tells him that Bee has been in Indonesia with her jungle operative stepfather, Malcolm Hunt. Tweedy has come to say hello to her daughter before leaving for Boston to attend to some family business. Killing time before Bee's arrival, the ex-lovers talk about their current relationships, Tweedy expressing that Malcolm's work as an undercover operative makes it difficult to feel she truly knows him, a problem she's hoping Bee will illuminate by passing along new information about her stepfather.

Once again, the leftover pieces of personal history find their way into Jack's present. Tweedy's uncertainty about Malcolm also reinforces the idea that identity is often an unstable concept, a notion that is perhaps troubling to Jack, who spends so much time and energy crafting his professional persona.

Before Bee's plane lands, a number of passengers from another flight arrive looking haggard and disturbed. When Jack asks what happened, one of the passengers tells him that the plane's engines failed, resulting in a sudden altitude drop of 22,000 feet. The pilot spoke over the loudspeakers and told everybody that they were falling out of the sky, which provoked mass hysteria throughout the entire cabin. Eventually, though, a flight crew regained control of the situation by spreading the false news that they would be "crash landing." Jack notes that the addition of the word "landing" added an element of procedure and control to the otherwise rampant chaos. Then, miraculously, the engines restarted.

Although the flight crew's addition of the word "landing" is merely a semantic difference, it suggests a level of control over an otherwise chaotic deathly situation. This is exactly the sort of linguistic manipulation Jack searches for in his own struggle to conceptualize death. His long intellectual conversations with Murray, for example, all seek to find the right words—the right theories—that will calm his fears and give him a sense of agency in life.

CHAPTER 19

Bee's presence gives the family a certain double-consciousness. Jack feels that he can't help but see the family's routines through her eyes and he assumes that she is quietly judging all of them. He is simultaneously impressed and suspicious of her maturity, not fully knowing how to conceptualize her adult mannerisms. At one point, Bee mentions to him that she doesn't like how Tweedy seems so desperate to understand Malcolm, arguing that her mother needs to get to know herself better rather than focusing on the elusive identity of her partner. Jack doesn't know how to respond, finding it difficult to connect to his daughter and wondering what she wants him to say.

Bee deftly articulates the importance of taking responsibility for one's own identity, which is ultimately the only thing a person can change about him or herself. At the same time, though she doesn't voice her concern, she would surely disapprove of Jack's attempt to overcompensate for his insecurities by throwing himself headlong into a false identity like the one he's cultivated on campus. Perhaps aware of this, Jack is sensitive of Bee's opinion and worries about how she views him.


After Christmas, Jack drops Bee off at the airport again. On his way back, he gets off of the expressway to visit an old cemetery. Far away from the noise of traffic, he walks between the old stones, trying to read them and occasionally straightening the little flags surrounding them in the ground. He stands in the graveyard, ruminating about the nature of death, wondering if there is "a level of energy composed solely of the dead."

Jack frames death in terms of energy, a conceptualization that speaks directly to the novel's interest in auras, waves, radiation, and (of course) white noise. Jack reasons that if such things are seemingly ever-present in life—"psychic data" constantly radiating from TVs, radios, and consumer products—it would make sense if death itself occupied its own level of transmittance.

CHAPTER 20

Reading the obituaries, Jack learns that Gladys Treadwell has died from a case of "lingering dread" after her traumatic experience in the mall kiosk. Jack admits that, when he reads obituaries, he measures himself against them, wondering how long he will live. This leads him to think about the various famous rulers and leaders of history and about how they must have approached death. Attila the Hun, he thinks, must have died stoically without obsessively paying attention the tragedy inherent in knowing that death is coming. He likes to think that Attila was not afraid, that he "accepted death as an experience that flows naturally from life."

Even though Jack recognizes the benefit of accepting death as "an experience that flows naturally from life," he appears unable to let go of his neurotic fears. Thus, history serves as an example he just can't seem to follow. This is somewhat ironic, since he will, in truth, meet the same end as every single human who's ever lived on earth—including Attila the Hun.



Although Jack and Babette constantly volley back and forth in their argument about who should be the one to die first—each insisting that it should be the other—Jack privately admits that he doesn't want to be the first to go. It's true that he doesn't want to be alone, but he would much rather live than die. At the same time, everything he tells Babette about how her death would leave a gaping hole in his life is true.

The fact that Jack bends the truth to Babette in this way shows the depths of his fear. It's not hard to see that Babette is extremely important to him, a fact that ultimately emphasizes the intensity of his desire to live—if he'd rather Babette die than die himself, it's quite evident that his desperation and fear is acute.

Murray comes over to talk to Steffie, Denise, and Wilder as part of his fascination with what he calls "the society of kids." When Babette appears on the **TV**, everybody in the room is taken aback. They try to turn up the volume, but there doesn't seem to be any sound coming from the program; Babette is simply there, her face rendered in black and white, teaching her class in the church basement. The class, it seems, is being televised by the local cable station. Though the others are excited, Jack is strangely disconcerted by the image of his wife suddenly appearing out of context like this. Wilder approaches the TV and puts his flat hand on the screen. When the program ends, the other children go downstairs while Wilder sits inches from the screen, crying quietly to himself as Murray takes notes.

Wilder is yet again portrayed as in possession of some sort of deep, unknown wisdom unavailable to the older characters. His uneasiness with the disappearance of his mother on the TV screen seems—according to Jack and Murray—the result of some hidden meaning rather than an expression of simple disappointment. With his frantic note-taking, Murray seems to believe that, just as the agents of consumer culture carry with them hidden messages, Wilder's innocent naïveté is imbued with important connotations. The problem with this, of course, is that whatever knowledge or insight Wilder might possess is shrouded in uncertainty.

CHAPTER 21

Approaching his house on foot one snowy day, Jack sees Heinrich perched on a ledge outside the attic looking east through binoculars. Going up to join him, he learns that a tank car of a passing train derailed and was punctured by something, releasing a heavy black cloud of what looks like smoke. Heinrich says that the cloud looks toxic and explosive, to which Jack says, "It won't come this way." When Heinrich asks how he knows this, Jack doesn't back up his assertion with facts, merely restating that the cloud won't reach them.

Strangely enough, Jack commits himself to confident assurance in this moment of uncertainty. By saying, "It won't come this way," he seems to be trying to use his language to ensure his safety—after all, he probably remembers the flight attendant on the hurtling plane using the same approach when she told everybody that they would be "crash landing." As such, Jack seeks to manipulate the disaster by using the only thing available to him: language.

An hour later—after failing to shovel the walkway, as his father asked him to do—Heinrich is once more in the attic, this time with a radio and a map. He tells Jack that radio broadcasters have started calling the cloud a "feathery plume" and that it is comprised of a highly toxic chemical called Nyodene D., which he knows from school is harmful to rats. He is unsure how it might affect humans. He tells Jack that the radio initially said Nyodene D. would cause skin irritation and sweaty palms, but now the broadcasters are saying that it will lead to nausea, vomiting, and shortness of breath. Once again, Jack voices his belief that the toxic cloud won't come toward the house.

The radio broadcasters' ever-changing vocabulary yet again enforces the notion that, in times of fear and uncertainty, people will often turn to language for a sense of control. Debating semantic differences gives people something to do, giving them the impression that they are not completely helpless.

Tension continues to mount as the family gains new snippets of information about the Nyodene D. release and argues about the correct terms for the cloud of toxic chemicals. Babette hears from a neighbor that the tank car spilled 35,000 gallons. She also tells Jack and Heinrich that Steffie and Denise have been complaining about having sweaty palms. "There's been a correction," Heinrich says. "Tell them they ought to be throwing up." Jack decides to go downstairs to sit in the kitchen and pay some bills.

In this moment, Denise and Steffie find themselves influenced by the power of suggestion, which is yet another example of the effect of language on one's sense of control during a calamity. In this case, though, language further revokes control, since Steffie and Denise are so negatively affected by what others tell them they should be feeling that even their physical wellbeing reflects their fear.

While paying the bills, Jack talks to Denise, who tells him that the emergency responders are using snow blowers to cover the spill with something that will keep it from spreading. Jack wonders when they should eat dinner, and when Denise continues to worry, he tells her that the cloud won't reach them, though again, he provides no basis for thinking this. Babette gets off the phone with their neighbors and says that experts are no longer calling the cloud a "feathery plume," but rather a "black billowing cloud." Jack takes comfort in this, saying, "That's a little more accurate, which means they're coming to grips with the thing. Good." In response, Babette says that there is an approaching air mass that could blow the cloud toward them. Jack brushes this off, asking again when they will eat dinner.

In the same way that he belittles the threat of the toxic cloud by saying it surely won't reach them, Jack tries to control his fear by progressing with his day as if nothing eventful has happened. Focusing on dinner allows him to continue the narrative he's committed himself to—namely, that the cloud of toxic chemicals poses no threat to him or to his family. This is ironic, considering his praise of the new, more ominous terminology for the cloud. While Jack appreciates the experts coming to terms with the situation, he himself cannot do the same.

Jack goes back to the attic and talks to Heinrich, who tells him that the radio is no longer talking about nausea, vomiting, and shortness of breath. Instead, the broadcasters are saying that Nyodene D. causes heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*. Heinrich also informs Jack that the terminology has changed yet again: now the cloud is being referred to as the "airborne toxic event." Jack repeats again that the chemicals won't reach the house, and when Heinrich presses him, he says, "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are."

Lacking sound logic with which to support his confidence, Jack grasps at the one thing that normally grounds him and soothes his fear of death and uncertainty: authority. In other words, he calls upon the powerful identity he has constructed for comfort. Of course, there is also an elitist sentiment at play in his assertion that only people in "the scrubby parts of the county" find themselves in situations that call for evacuation. Jack changes his perception of his own socioeconomic standing as it suits him: at the beginning of the novel, Jack had insisted that he isn't actually very wealthy; now, though, he invests himself in the rather unenlightened notion that bad things don't happen to well-off people, suddenly identifying himself as wealthy.

The family sits down to an early dinner, throughout which Denise periodically rushes to the bathroom, thinking she is about to vomit. She and Steffie ask why they're eating so early, guessing that it is so they can "get it out of the way" in case the airborne toxic event gets worse and they need to leave. Jack and Babette refuse to confirm this logic, and the family goes on eating while a chorus of sirens swirl outside. Finally, they hear the voice of a fire captain coming from a passing car; Heinrich runs to the window to listen more carefully and learns that they are being told to evacuate the area. Jack and Babette try to frame this as a suggestion, but it becomes clear that they must follow these instructions, and within twenty minutes they are all packed into the family station wagon and heading for an abandoned Boy Scout camp where Red Cross volunteers will shelter them and provide coffee and juice.

Jack and Babette's eagerness to frame the fire captain's evacuation call as a suggestion once again evokes the idea that language is the only source of control left to them in times of disaster. Despite their best efforts though, the danger is real, and they are forced to recognize that the comforts provided by semantic interpretation can only go so far.

As the family drives through the snow on a crowded four-lane road, Jack tries to find a radio station that might provide some extra information. He discovers that the newest symptoms are convulsions, comas, and miscarriages. Looking out the windows, the family surveys the scene: cars driving on the road's grassy embankments, people walking across overpasses protectively wrapped in sheets of plastic and pushing shopping carts, shoppers in strip malls unaware of what is going on, deeply confused by the sudden traffic. Heinrich, for his part, seems to have become extra animated in his attention to the situation. And despite the anxiety lurking about them, the family casually talks with one another as if they're still sitting at the dinner table.

Although Jack and Babette seem to have perhaps come to terms with the realization that they can't truly change their circumstances just by choosing new linguistic frames, they still show their faith in the power of language to help get them through emotionally trying times. By talking casually—as if nothing bad is happening—the family once again regains a certain amount of control over their situation, however small.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack sees Babette put something in her mouth. When he asks her what it is, she tells him to keep his eye on the road. He presses her, but she says only that it was a lifesaver, using her tongue to push out her cheek in a lame attempt to create the illusion that she is sucking on candy. Feeling Denise's attention train itself on their conversation, Jack drops the matter, deciding that this is not a good time to invite Denise to question her mother's mysterious medication use.

Amidst the confusion and swirling ambiguity presented by the airborne toxic event, Jack recognizes that Babette's mysterious medication only presents further uncertainties. As such, he retreats from his line of questioning—partly for Denise, but also for his own good; this refusal to examine yet another uncertain situation mirrors his original hesitancy to admit that the toxic cloud would come their way.

Driving by a car crash, Steffie declares that she's seen all of this before, a statement that worries Jack because he was pretty sure she hadn't heard the latest symptoms of Nyodene D. What's more, he isn't sure whether she even knows the meaning of *déjà vu*. This makes him wonder if she is so "open to suggestion" that she can quickly develop symptoms when they are proposed to her. He asks himself if a nine-year-old could experience a miscarriage via the power of suggestion, then turns of the radio, "not to help [him] think but to keep [him] from thinking." Heinrich notices that the car is almost out of gas. Seeing a gas station ahead, Jack pulls over and jumps out to refuel. The snow has turned to rain, and the station's advertising banners crack in the wind.

Yet again, Jack obsesses over the power of language. He knows, of course, that Steffie couldn't possibly have a miscarriage via the power of suggestion, but the thought further reveals his own suggestibility and vulnerability when it comes to language. Because he himself is so easily influenced by language, he must work extra hard to create his own frameworks so that his mind doesn't spin out of control. In keeping with this, he turns off the radio to avoid its impact on his thoughts.

In the barracks of the Boy Scout camp, where many cots are set up for the citizens of Blacksmith, crowds form around people talking about the airborne toxic event, spreading secondhand information and making guesses. Moving from one crowd to the next, Jack is surprised to find Heinrich at the center of one such crowd, talking in great detail about Nyodene D. His listeners are charmed by him and clearly respect his knowledge. Jack feels that he is witnessing his son emerge from his shell and, not wanting to interrupt the important moment, slips away before Heinrich can notice his presence.

The haphazard flow of information through the barracks is a small-scale representation of the media's influence on the citizens of Blacksmith (i.e. the radio broadcasters' control over the townspeople). Consumed by the notion of authority himself, Jack recognizes the importance of power in these huddled groups. In this moment, information is power, a principal Jack has organized his entire life around, both in terms of his role as a professor and in terms of his own existential outlook.

Jack returns to the section of cots his family has claimed. Speaking softly to Babette, he quizzes her about the thing she swallowed in the car, asking her to quickly tell him the flavor—a test she easily passes by saying, "Cherry" without hesitation. When a woman at the front of the barracks makes an announcement urging those who were possibly exposed to Nyodene D. to approach tables staffed by technicians, Denise reminds Jack that he got out of the car to refuel and that the rain could have contained the chemical. Jack waits in line and, when he reaches the technician, asks what the acronym on his armband, SIMUVAC, means. The technician explains that he is part of a program that simulates evacuations and that they are using this real-life event as practice for their simulations. He speaks scornfully about the fact that certain real-life elements are making it hard for them to execute a high-quality simulation.

The technician's ridiculous commitment to simulation once more speaks to the idea of control in moments of chaos and disaster. Similar to how Jack wants to create his own discourse about the airborne toxic event, this technician wishes for a greater sense of control. In the end, both desires ignore the fact that, no matter what they do to conceptualize the disaster, Jack and the technician are at the mercy of reality.

Jack tells the SIMUVAC technician about his medical history, which the technician inputs into a computer. The technician tells him that he is "generating big numbers" and that the results are based not only on how long he was exposed to Nyodene D., but also on his entire medical history. He proceeds to inform Jack that the effects of the chemical are largely unknown, but that there is certainly cause for worry and that they will be able to tell him more about his condition in fifteen years—that is, if Jack is still alive. Nyodene D., apparently, has a life span of thirty years in the human body, meaning that Jack will need to make it into his eighties before he can start to feel comfortable about his health again. Whenever Jack tries to get more decisive information out of the technician, the technician defers to the computer system, telling him that he is "the sum total of [his] data." Feeling unnerved, Jack finds himself wishing he had his academic robe and dark glasses.

In this moment, Jack is forced to relinquish whatever control he has over his health. By inputting his history into a computer, the technician renders him unable to manipulate reality via language—the computer, after all, produces definitive results. The fact that the technician speaks so vaguely only strengthens the power of the computer results over Jack. Unable once again to defer to semantics, Jack turns to his authoritative professorial identity for comfort. Unfortunately, though, this identity exists only on campus and is seemingly inaccessible to him when he needs it most.

When Jack returns to the cots, he sees that Babette is reading to Old Man Treadwell and a group of other blind people. Wanting a distraction, he listens as she reads sensational and far-fetched tabloid articles and absurd predictions of the future. The blind listeners seem unfazed by the ludicrous nature of the stories. Jack and Heinrich fall into a conversation in which Heinrich points out that, despite the advanced society they live in, most people remain totally unaware of how the things around them actually function. He asks Jack what he would tell a group of people from the Stone Age to improve their lives, a question that stumps his father. Eventually, Jack says he would tell them to boil water, a suggestion Heinrich finds very unimpressive.

Heinrich's question forces Jack to come to terms with his own ignorance, essentially exacerbating his feelings of helplessness. Whereas history normally soothes Jack—as evidenced by his obsession with Hitler and his thoughts about Attila the Hun—now it uncovers his ineptitude and vulnerability, showing him that if he were truly on his own, he would not stand a chance at survival.

Deciding to get some air, Jack goes outside, where he finds Murray talking to a group of prostitutes. He tells his friend about what the SIMUVAC technician told him, saying, "It is now official, according to the computer. I've got death inside me." Murray puts his hands on Jack's shoulders, looks him in the eyes, and tells him that he is sorry.

It's worth noting that Jack has seemingly embarked on a downward spiral. Whereas he once seemed capable of using semantic reasoning to remain positive, now he exaggerates the direness of his situation. Although the technician he spoke to was certainly foreboding in his approximate diagnosis, he was also incredibly vague and never actually said that Jack has death "inside" him, a notion Jack seems to have extrapolated himself. It's also of interest that Jack calls this news "official," as if by hearing it from somebody wearing a SIMUVAC armband, the information is irreversible and inescapable.

Jack comes back inside and watches Steffie sleeping, an act that makes him feel reassured and calm. At a certain point, she speaks in her sleep, muttering *Toyota Celica*, a phrase that Jack registers as deeply beautiful, even though he knows it is just the name of a car. In fact, "the truth only amaze[s] [him] more," as if those two banal words have lofted into something mysterious and ancient, indicating a shining moment of "splendid transcendence."

Bereft of his ability to linguistically manipulate reality, Jack finds himself amazed by the simplicity of his sleeping children. When Steffie utters the name of a car, consumer culture comes rushing into an otherwise tender scene. The fact that Jack delights in this reinforces Murray's idea that consumerism carries secret messages that humans need to tap into, a sentiment DeLillo seems to be playfully endorsing in this moment in order to show Jack's utter desperation.

Suddenly, the barracks is full of noise as the displaced citizens of Blacksmith are informed that they must evacuate yet again because the cloud of Nyodene D. is headed directly for the Boy Scout camp due to a change in the wind. The Gladneys pile into the car and once more drive through the commotion of people trying to run from the cloud. Jack spots a truck with a bumper sticker that reads GUN CONTROL IS MIND CONTROL and decides to follow it, figuring that people in "right-wing fringe groups" have "practiced staying alive" and are well equipped to do so. Through the trees, Jack sees the wicked cloud of chemicals as it roars within itself, "generating its own inner storms." Working ever harder to escape, Jack remembers his conversation with the SIMUVAC technician, recalling suddenly that he is "technically dead." Meanwhile, his family yet again carries on the steady conversation of people at ease over dinner plates in the safety of their home.

In calling himself "technically dead," Jack continues to exaggerate his condition. As such, it seems as if he has two modes of linguistic manipulation: either he tries to talk himself into ignoring that which is uncertain or awful, or he finds himself overplaying his own situation with frightful self-pity. In a way, he seeks to comfort himself by thinking that he is "technically dead," for if this were the case, it would carry with it a certainty he yearns for in this otherwise muddled situation.

Driving through a small creek and into a field, Jack notices his family's lack of interest in the entire situation. He wants them to focus on the airborne toxic event and the dire situation at hand. He considers telling them about the death lurking in his body, about the large numbers he generated on the computer, but instead he resigns himself to self-pity, allowing it to "ooze" through his soul and trying "to relax and enjoy it."

Jack's frustration with his family is ironic, since he originally set an example for them when he insisted on focusing on dinner preparation instead of paying attention to the toxic cloud. Now, though, he comes around to the idea of his own death, seeming to revel in it as if it is yet another form of authority or power he can attach to his identity. At this point, he uses self-pity as a means of gaining respect, though this is only a personal sense of respect, since he doesn't voice his thoughts.

The Galdneys arrive in Iron City at dawn and are ushered into an empty karate studio along with other refugees of the airborne toxic event. It is here, where they stay for nine days before returning home, that they catch word that technicians are being lowered by helicopters into the cloud to release microorganisms that will eat the toxic agents of Nyodene D. Jack finds this as confounding and amazing as the absurd articles Babette read the previous night from the tabloids. One day, a man walks through the studio, ranting about the lacking news coverage of the airborne toxic event. Indignant, he asks, "Don't we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn't fear news?" After his listeners clap, he looks at Jack as if stricken, telling him that he's seen him before, has seen Jack's exact look before. When Jack asks, "What look?" he replies: "Haunted, ashen, lost."

Jack's negative reaction to the idea of these microorganisms denotes an inexplicit distrust of scientific ingenuity. This is natural, considering that he has just recently been informed by a man with a computer—in the vaguest possible terms—that he has a deadly chemical in his body. Technology and innovation, then, are cast as suspicious. This relates to Heinrich's critique of his father's ignorance regarding the inventions and science surrounding him; the microorganisms represent yet another thing Jack doesn't understand, something vast and out of his control.

CHAPTER 22

As the second semester begins, life seems to more or less go back to normal, though Jack notices that the sunsets—which were already quite stunning in Blacksmith—have taken on new qualities, have become epically vibrant, and last much longer. He finds Murray in **the supermarket**, who tells him that one of the New York émigrés, Dimitrios Cotsakis, died while surfing during the winter break. The two men trade astonished phrases as they stand in the generic food aisle. Their comments primarily center around the fact that Cotsakis was an enormous man, a trait they can't seem to reconcile with his death. Jack finds himself suddenly and acutely attuned to the "dense environmental texture" of the supermarket, noticing the automatic doors and all of the colors surrounding him.

Faced with the death of an acquaintance, Jack is forced to reckon with the inescapable realness of death, which he seems to have been able to more or less ignore since the airborne toxic event. The fact that he becomes suddenly aware of the supermarket's vibrancy yet again relates to Murray's belief that grocery stores are revitalizing places full of wonder and significance. It also recalls his assertion that Americans don't die, they shop. In this moment of existential upheaval—in which Jack can't avoid thinking about death—it is telling that he throws himself so fully into a place designed for shopping.

Jack decides to not tell Babette about what he learned from the SIMUVAC technician about his Nyodene D. exposure. He believes she would be too distraught. Instead, he begins nestling his head between her breasts at night to feel safe.

At this point, Jack's fear of death seems to have reduced him to silence, leaving him to follow an infantile impulse toward safety. Though he hasn't told her anything, he depends on Babette to help hold his fears at bay.

CHAPTER 23

In a dinner conversation about the airborne toxic event and the lingering harmfulness of Nyodene D., Heinrich argues that all the family's talk about toxic spillage only distracts them from the true danger at hand: radiation caused by the radio, **TV**, microwave, and other everyday objects. Taken aback by Heinrich's thorough knowledge of terrifying scientific statistics, Babette asks if this is what people are teaching in school these days, remarking that she, for her part, still remembers the history she was taught as a kid. This inspires her and Jack to go through a list of common knowledge they acquired in school, silencing the children while showcasing the piecemeal nature of the anecdotes they've retained.

This scene appears to ask what kind of knowledge is necessary for leading an enlightened, well-educated life. The gap between what the children know and what Jack and Babette know is quite large, a fact that highlights the time period's shifting concerns; rather than learning basic geographical and historical ideas, Heinrich and his sisters have internalized information about disastrous manmade materials, a stark indication of the most pressing worries in the 1980s.

CHAPTER 24

The next night, as he's trying to fix the radiator, Jack finds a bottle of a medication called Dylar taped to the underside of its lid. He asks Denise what she knows about it, and she tells him that she has already gone to the pharmacy to ask about it, but none of the pharmacists have ever heard of the drug. Out of options, they decide to call Babette's doctor, wanting to catch him at home in order to trick him into telling them about Dylar. Jack tells Dr. Hookstratten that Babette is experiencing memory lapses and that it must be the medication he prescribed her, but Hookstratten says he's never heard of Dylar. When he hangs up, Jack goes to Denise's room and tells her not to worry, that he will take one of the pills to be analyzed by somebody at the College-on-the-Hill

Jack's plan to trick Hookstratten is characteristic of his strange relationship with doctors. Simultaneously dependent on and suspicious of them, he approaches conversations with doctors like a game that can be either won or lost. To be sure, he seems to think of doctor-patient relationships in terms of a struggle for power, a context in which whoever holds the most knowledge or authority ultimately comes out on top.

Walking down the hall, Jack sees Heinrich hanging from a chin-up bar. Heinrich tells him that the bar belongs to his friend, Orest Mercator, who is an older boy training to set the world record for the longest amount of time spent in a cage with deadly snakes. Jack, of course, has a hard time understanding this goal. When he returns to his own bedroom, Babette is standing in front of the window and staring out of it—she seems not to have noticed his absence in bed, and also seems not to notice him as he slips back beneath the covers.

Jack doesn't understand Orest's desire to sit in a cage full of deadly snakes because it is greatly antithetical to everything he believes in. A man who woefully believes he's dying, Jack simply cannot comprehend why somebody would willingly risk his or her life.

CHAPTER 25

Jack takes a Dylar pill to Winnie Richards, a brilliant neurochemist who is difficult to track down because she runs from place to place, hoping to avoid the scrutiny of her colleagues and their oppressive admirations of her intelligence. While they wait for Winnie's assessment, Denise shows impressive restraint by not bringing up the subject. In this period, Jack says that Babette can't "seem to produce a look that [isn't] significant." She starts gazing out of windows and off into the distance in the middle of conversations, exhibiting an indifference that starkly contrasts her usual sharp, pragmatic, and attentive attitude. Unable to resist, Jack asks her what's wrong and, when she denies anything, he tells her that he and Denise found her stash of Dylar. Just when he seems to have cornered her into making a confession, though, she sidetracks him by suggesting that they jump into bed together.

Babette's withdrawn attitude troubles Jack because he seeks comfort and safety in her presence. If she is distracted, then he is left alone with his fear of death—even more alone that he already is, considering the fact that he has only told Murray about his contamination.

Jack catches up to Winnie again after having trouble finding her and chasing her through campus. She tells him that the construction of Dylar is ingenious: through the use of a laser-drilled hole, the pill slowly releases its contents into the body, perfectly timing the delivery of the drug into the system in order to avoid wasteful overdoses and withdrawals. However, she's unable to tell him what Dylar actually does to the body. All she can say is that the medication contains some sort of psychopharmaceutical that is most likely designed to affect part of the human cortex.

Jack no doubt feels a certain amount of uneasiness when he hears that Dylar is ingeniously constructed. Again, he finds himself confronting something he doesn't understand, like the microorganisms that ate the toxic cloud or like his own (possibly) failing health. The fact that even Winnie (who is supposed to be so brilliant) can't even say what the drug is designed to do certainly exacerbates this feeling and contributes to the uncertainty associated with the entire matter.

CHAPTER 26

In bed that night, Jack confronts Babette once more, this time refusing to be sidetracked. She reluctantly tells him that about a year and a half ago she started going through a phase that she thought would pass, but it eventually developed into a condition. Jack asks what the condition is, but she says, "Never mind that for now." Throughout Babette's explanation, Jack fluctuates between gently encouraging her (offering liqueurs and snacks to ease the process along) and bemoaning the fact that she has acted deceitfully—a complaint she refuses to hear, saying that this is *her* story and that he doesn't have the right to overshadow it with his own problems.

Babette's insistence that she be allowed to tell the story in her own way seems an acknowledgement of Jack's tendency to contribute his own narrative to other peoples' stories. As such, he must relinquish any control he has over the situation, which he struggles to do, periodically interrupting her to add what he's thinking. Yet again, Jack shows his discomfort with uncertainty and lack of control.

Continuing with her story, Babette tells Jack that she went searching for a way to understand her problem, visiting libraries, reading magazines, watching **TV**, making lists and charts, calling scientists, visiting a Sikh holy man, and studying the occult. None of these things led her to any answers, so when she saw a tabloid ad that addressed her issue by calling for volunteers to partake in secret research, she eagerly answered. She refers to the company as Gray Research in order to protect the people she met. She calls her contact Mr. Gray—who, she tells Jack, is actually a composite of the many different people she was in touch with—and she says that she was interviewed as part of research into the field of psychobiology. Then she took a battery of psychological and physiological tests and was told she was a finalist to be a test subject in the development of Dylar.

It is noteworthy that, by refusing to reveal what her condition was, Babette keeps Jack in a prolonged state of uncertainty, putting him in a situation he very much dislikes, considering the fact that he is constantly searching for ways to escape uncertainty and gain control over his life. Adding to this uncertainty, she applies the word "gray" to the company and to her nondescript contact, emphasizing the pill's ambiguity and menace.

Dylar, Babette tells Jack, has many related dangers and side effects. Mr. Gray told her that she could die, or perhaps one side of her brain could die while the other side went on living. She could also possibly lose her ability to interpret language, such that if somebody said "speeding bullet," she would take the statement literally and duck for cover. Right as she was about to sign a contract and become a test subject, though, Gray Research backed out, saying that Dylar was too dangerous to test on human subjects. Feeling desperate, though, Babette made a deal with Mr. Gray (at this point in her narration to Jack, she begins to referring to Mr. Gray as one person, no longer a composite of multiple people). The only way she could convince this Mr. Gray to let her take the drug was to have sex with him on a regular basis. Upon hearing this, Jack feels a "sensation of warmth creeping up [his back] and radiating outward across [his] shoulders."

Dylar's possible side effects are in keeping with the novel's interest in exploring products and elements that are harmful to humans. That Babette was willing to take the drug despite the possible related dangers illustrates how desperate she was to address her condition; a desperation made all the more clear by her infidelity.

Babette carries on with her explanation, informing Jack that she went to Mr. Gray's seedy motel and had sex with him in exchange for Dylar. At this point in her narration, the radio randomly turns on because it has a broken auto-timer. When Jack tries to attain information about Mr. Gray, Babette sidesteps his questions, saying that it's better if he knows as little as possible about the man. Finally, she reveals her condition: she is afraid to die, she tells him, weeping. Jack hates hearing this and even tries to talk her out of such an irrational fear, saying, "How can you be sure it is death you fear? Death is so vague. No one knows what it is, what it feels like or looks like." But his skepticism doesn't last long, and he eventually tells her that *he* is the one who fears death.

Yet again, Jack tries to use language to reframe something he doesn't want to believe. The irony here, though, is that the thing he is trying to talk Babette out of is the very thing he is himself unable to ignore: the fear of death. Nonetheless, he clearly thinks if he can convince her that this fear is irrational, perhaps he too will be able to let go of the idea. Unfortunately, he can't talk his way out of uncertainty, telling her that "death is so vague," a statement that speaks directly to his own terrors.

Dylar was designed, Babette explains, to eliminate the human fear of death. She tells Jack that she learned from Mr. Gray that "everything that goes on in your whole life is a result of molecules rushing around somewhere in your brain." Jack recognizes in this statement the same logic by which Heinrich argues that humans are "the sum of [their] chemical impulses," a sentiment he hates, calling it "unbearable to think about." However, the Dylar appears to have not worked, because Babette still fears death. Apparently, her memory lapses have not been the side effect of Dylar, but rather a side effect of her fear. Mr. Gray told her that her memory loss is an "attempt to counteract" the fact that she is so afraid of death. Nonetheless, Dylar failed her. Knowing this, Mr. Gray apologized, telling her that he made a mistake and that she wasn't the right subject for the test.

Jack dislikes the idea that humans are the sum total of their "chemical impulses" because the notion seems to indicate that he has no control over his own identity. If everything in his life is "the result of molecules rushing around" in his brain, there is no way for him to manipulate his reality. Regardless of whether or not he wears dark glasses and an academic robe—no matter if he's a powerful chairman at a prestigious college—he is helpless in the face of biology and chemistry.

Jack takes this opportunity to tell Babette about his exposure to Nyodene D. and the possible harmful effects it had on him. Explaining the way the SIMUVAC technician entered his history into the computer and received an ominous report, Jack says that "we are the sum of our data, […] just as we are the sum total of our chemical impulses." This news deeply upsets Babette, who climbs on top of Jack and sobs loudly into his face, shaking his head in her hands before eventually falling off his body and into a deep sleep. At this point, Jack creeps out of bed and goes to the bathroom, where he opens the radiator to find that the bottle of Dylar is gone.

The notion that humans are the "sum total of [their] data" relates to Murray's theories about the ways consumer culture informs peoples' lives. The "psychic data" that TVs and products radiate—all those messages and cultural codes—end up building the identities people don. This is why he is so interested in children growing up with TV, as their entire worlds will be shaped by the stimuli of this "psychic data."

CHAPTER 27

Jack goes for his second medical examination since the airborne toxic event. On his way back, he comes across an evacuation drill carried out by SIMUVAC. A number of people are lying in the middle of the street, pretending to be victims. Among them, Jack spots Steffie, who apparently volunteered to help with the simulation. He wonders if his daughter, who is only nine-years-old, already has oriented her worldview such that she considers herself a victim. "Is this the future she envisions?" he wonders. At home, he finds Heinrich sitting on the front steps with a clipboard. He too is participating in the simulation—his role is that of a "street captain." Heinrich is accompanied by Orest Mercator, whom Jack curiously questions, asking him about his strange goal to sit in a cage with deadly snakes for days on end. Jack tries to convince him that the snakes will bite him and that the Guinness World Record book is something for which it's not worth risking his life.

Everywhere Jack looks, death confronts him. Whether this is in the hypothetical realm (as represented by the evacuation simulation) or in a more tangible sense (as represented by Orest's dangerous goal), he can't seem to escape the threat of mortality. To make matters worse, Steffie and Orest's interest in death apparently indicates that the younger generation will be even more obsessed with death than he is.

In the kitchen, Jack and Babette treat one another gently, asking one another how they're feeling. This has been their custom since their vulnerable and intense late-night conversation about Dylar. At one point, Jack asks about where the bottle of Dylar went, since it's not under the radiator. She tells him that she has no idea and warns him against trying to take the drug himself, since he hasn't been pre-tested. He denies the fact that he wants to try the medication and asks how he can find Mr. Gray, just in case he wants to sue him. Babette refuses to give him this information. Later, Jack finds Denise, who confesses that she took the Dylar. She tries to reason with her stepfather by telling him that she will give it back if he tells her what it's used for. Unwilling to do so, he spends the next several days trying to figure out how to trick her into giving him the medication.

Despite the fact that his children's generation is clearly very conscious of death—worrying constantly about toxic chemicals and the dangerous ingredients contained in everyday food—Jack tries to protect Denise, refusing to tell her that her mother fears death. He appears to want to protect her innocence and naïveté, though the very idea that he is protecting *her from knowing her mother's fear is, in itself, naïve given her vast exposure to the inescapability of death.*

CHAPTER 28

Life continues for the Gladneys as normal, though Jack's misgivings about Babette's deception continue to affect him. Still, they continue asking each other how they feel, a question that seems to soothe both of them.

By checking in on one another, Jack and Babette each assume the role of a caretaker. Given his penchant for positions of subtle power and authority, it is no surprise that this would provide Jack some emotional relief.

CHAPTER 29

In the grocery store, Babette suggests to Jack that he should schedule a checkup with his doctor. He tells her that he's already had two and that Dr. Chakravarty has detected nothing particularly amiss in his health. In the wake of the airborne toxic event, the town has returned to normal. Jack continues his German lessons and keeps on trying to find the Dylar. He also starts throwing old things away; he discards magazines, books, letters, shoes, socks, gloves, belts.

Jack's grand purge of useless household items is yet another form of gaining control over his life. Throwing away old possessions is, in effect, equivalent to buying new ones: by ridding himself of useless items, he shapes his material existence.

One night on **TV** there is a breaking news segment about a backyard in which two dead bodies are found buried. After digging up the entire yard, though, investigators find nothing else, a fact that leaves Jack feeling strangely disappointed.

The fact that Jack is disappointed that no more bodies are found illustrates the extent to which he craves sensationalist news. Just as Alfonse Stampanato pointed out about the allure of disaster footage, Jack finds himself wanting to view something horrible as a way of punctuating and defining the otherwise meaningless flow of useless information.

CHAPTER 30

In the middle of the night, Jack wakes Babette up and tells her that she must tell him about Mr. Gray. She refuses yet again, saying that Jack will surely succumb to his ingrained male impulse to kill Mr. Gray. She argues that men are subject to a "homicidal rage" that is in simply embedded in their nature. Later the next day, Jack tracks down Winnie Richards and tells her what Dylar does. In his conversation with her, they come to the conclusion that "fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level," and that life wouldn't be the same without it. Winnie also suggests that Dylar is merely a placebo.

If fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level, then Jack appears perfectly content to remain in ontological darkness. The problem, however, is that he harbors a cognitive dissonance wherein he recognizes the importance of fear—its ability to define life in the most beautiful ways—while wanting to banish it forever from his mind.

CHAPTER 31

Time passes. Jack and Babette continue to check in with one another. The family indulges an epic fried chicken binge, sitting in the car and silently gorging in the parking lot.

The Gladneys' eating patterns display a certain solitude. This parking lot fried chicken binge is a markedly 20th century meal, one completely removed from the communal aspect of the traditional dinner table, where everybody faces each other and converses. In this moment—and every Friday when they watch TV over dinner—eating becomes nothing more than a non-communicative feeding frenzy, producing a solitude not unlike the loneliness Jack feels after the family has spent the day furiously shopping at the mall.

CHAPTER 32

Jack and Murray take a walk on campus. They start talking about Jack's German instructor, Dunlop, each of them trying to articulate the "strange air about him" that they sense. Four days later, Murray calls Jack at one in the morning and says, "He looks like a man who finds dead bodies erotic." After that, Jack attends only one more lesson and is profoundly creeped out by Dunlop's eerie manner.

The fact that Murray calls Jack at one in the morning to tell him his assessment of Dunlop is comically in keeping with his tendency to overanalyze even the smallest, most trivial ideas. Furthermore, it's no surprise that Jack is so disconcerted by the idea that Dunlop finds dead bodies sexually attractive; this is something Jack, with his intense fear of death, could never fathom. Suddenly, then, Dunlop becomes yet another incarnation of his fear.

The insane asylum catches fire one night, and Jack and Heinrich go to watch it burn. They find other father-son pairs standing alongside them, making comments about the fire or the firefighters, making predictions about what happened or what will happen. A woman emerges in her nightgown, wildly enflamed. The fathers and sons can tell that she is crazy; Jack finds this spectacle "powerful and real." "How deep a thing [is] madness," he says. A firefighter sprays her with a hose and she collapses on the ground. Murray emerges from across the street, appearing at Jack and Heinrich's sides and silently shaking their hands before leaving again. Soon the blaze begins to give off an intense, acrid smell that dispels the crowd of onlookers. Jack feels as if, in smelling the fire, death has entered his nose and mouth and he wonders how this might affect his soul. At home in bed that night, Jack can't stop thinking about Mr. Gray, imagining the mysterious man having sex with Babette.

Yet again, death is portrayed as something in the air, something that seeps into Jack's body, this time by way of smoke inhalation. It's notable that he calls the woman on fire "powerful and real," since this description couples his desire for power with his fear of death, a conflation he has perhaps never made before, since he's always trying to use any power and authority he might have to avoid death. Here, though, death becomes power—a striking reversal.

CHAPTER 33

While sleeping, Jack senses a presence. He opens his eyes to find Wilder standing inches from his face, staring at him. He gets out of bed and follows the child downstairs, as if Wilder is some sort of ancient guide. The child takes him to a window that overlooks the backyard, where an old white-haired man sits perfectly still in a wicker chair. Jack is seized with terror, believing this figure is death incarnate waiting to take him to the land of the deceased. Wilder, having done his duty, walks back to his bedroom in his little padded booties and gets back into bed. Jack follows him yet again, and when the child falls asleep, he feels uncertain about what to do. He goes back downstairs and looks out at death once more. He wanders the house, thinking about how this figure of death is probably "an aphorist of last things" who will speak a "deft and stylish line about [Jack's] journey out." Before going outside to confront this figure, Jack goes through the house to check on his sleeping loved ones.

Jack imagines the figure of death as something of an academic, somebody who will wield impressive and cutting wit in an authoritative manner. Jack appears to resent the idea that this grim reaper of sorts will speak a "deft and stylish line" before whisking him away, a resentment rooted in his own desire to have the upper hand—if death is capable of "deft" style, Jack's identity as an erudite professor will be undermined, ultimately threatening the only form of power or authority he could possibly possess in this situation.

When he finally ventures outside, Jack discovers that the figure sitting in his backyard is not death, but Vernon Dickey, Babette's wayward father. The two men greet one another and go inside, where they drink coffee until Babette rises, surprised to find her father sitting in her kitchen. Over the next few days, Vernon lurks around the house, making Jack feel guilty for not being more traditionally manly. A man who appreciates pragmatic thinking and working with his hands, Vernon makes Jack feel vaguely inferior.

There is humor in the fact that Jack worried about death making him feel inferior only to find that a much lesser figure could have the same effect on him. Vernon's presence has a similar effect to the effect that Bee's presence had on Jack, causing him to examine himself unfavorably through other peoples' eyes, thus losing control over his self-image.

Denise catches Jack rummaging through her things one night while she's sleeping. She tells him that she knows he's looking for the Dylar. Finally, he tells her what the medication is supposed to do. He also says that he is "eager to be fooled," outlining the fact that it doesn't really matter if the drug works, as long as he thinks it might. "Isn't that a little stupid?" she asks. She then tells him that it is all a moot point, because she threw the bottle into the garbage compactor a week ago.

Jack's willingness to be fooled by Dylar yet again shows the cognitive dissonance at work on him: he wants to control his fear of death, but feels that he must take medication to do so, thereby putting his faith in something that he has no control over.

Simultaneously disappointed and a bit relieved, Jack leaves Denise's room and goes downstairs to find Vernon sitting at the kitchen table. "Just the man I want to see," Vernon says, and asks Jack to come sit in his car with him, where he gives him a handgun. He tells him that every man should have a gun, that "it's only a question of time as to when [he'll] want to use it." Jack tries to resist, but Vernon won't take back the weapon, so he reluctantly keeps it. The next day, Vernon leaves, but not before telling Babette—in a sly, deadpan way—all the reasons not to worry about him, ultimately making a martyr of himself and leaving her weeping and laughing in his wake. Jack watches this and notices all of his wife's "fears and defenses adrift in the sly history" of Vernon's voice.

Once more, DeLillo shows how influential personal histories can be in his characters' lives, illuminating Babette's vulnerabilities when it comes to her father. The "fears and defenses" that Vernon represents for Babette are, in effect, part and parcel of the "data" Jack refers to as making up a person's identity.

CHAPTER 34

Jack goes to another checkup, and this time Dr. Chakravarty tells him that his potassium levels are quite high, but fails to explain what this might mean. Jack asks him if it could perhaps be due to the fact that he was exposed to harmful chemicals. Chakravarty only replies by asking if this is actually the case. Jack lies immediately, saying he has no reason to think he's experienced this kind of exposure. Still, Chakravarty decides to send his results to a new facility called Autumn Harvest Farms with "gleaming new equipment." When Jack agrees, he also asks if his potassium levels are the only reason he needs to seek further tests. "The less you know, the better," Chakravarty says, instructing Jack to go to Autumn Harvest Farms to have a battery of extensive tests done and to tell them to put the results in a sealed envelope, which Jack will then transport back to Chakravarty.

Jack's desire to control his own conception of his health is apparent in the lies he tells Dr. Chakravarty. The nature of certainty emerges as tenuous in this moment, when Jack demonstrates that he only wants to be fully informed when the knowledge he's receiving is positive in nature. If he senses that he's about to receive bad news, suddenly uncertainty—for once—seems more appealing, and he lies in order to ensure he remains in a state of ignorance.

CHAPTER 35

The days go by. Babette begins wearing her sweat suit at all hours of the day and spending large amounts of time with Wilder, which is the only activity that seems to alleviate her fear of death. Jack can't get his mind off of Mr. Gray, but Babette continues to withhold the man's information. One night, Jack takes Heinrich and Orest out to dinner and quizzes his son's friend yet again about his desire to sit in a cage full of deadly snakes. By the end of the conversation, he harbors a slight admiration for the boy's bravery and willpower.

Jack recognizes in Orest a carefree quality he himself doesn't posses. Fully aware of the fact that his problems stem primarily from his psychological viewpoint—his inability to give himself over to the natural inevitability of death—he finds himself appreciating Orest's utter stupidity, which is the antithesis of everything keeping Jack from happiness.

Three days after a SIMUVAC evacuation for noxious odor, an actual noxious odor comes into town from across the river. The citizens of Blacksmith seem to become nicer during this period, and nobody makes any moves to evacuate. Their nostrils sting and they taste copper on their tongues, but still they resolve to do nothing about the odor. Many claim not to see the irony in the fact that they participated in the SIMUVAC exercise and then refused to evacuate when the actual event occurred. Some people guess that the "absence of technical personnel" means that the situation is not dangerous or serious. Then, without warning, the noxious odor disappears.

Once again, death and danger are presented as more philosophically problematic than actually harmful. In the world of White Noise, *the most important thing is to maintain a strong theoretical grip on the* idea *of danger; DeLillo holds this up—not without a considerable degree of irony—as more crucial than actually living in a safe manner. In other words, thinking is more important than doing. This is, of course, in keeping with the way DeLillo satirizes the heady yet impractical lines of academic thought, which often neglect to address pragmatic concerns.*

CHAPTER 36

In the late spring, the **Hitler** conference takes place. Jack manages to make his opening remarks in stilted German, but he spends the rest of the conference avoiding the Germans for fear of having to actually hold conversation in this foreign language he barely knows. He is intrigued by the people who attend, noting that they are all good-natured and enthusiastic.

Jack's sense of inferiority and shame—his feeling that he is the "false character that follows the name around"—is strengthened by his inability to fully engage at the Hitler conference. At the same time, he clearly takes pleasure in seeing so many people who have made their careers in the field he founded. As such, his delicate ego is somewhat balanced.

Jack goes to Autumn Harvest Farms for his tests. He is seated in front of computer, into which he types "the story of [his] life and death, little by little, each response eliciting further questions." He lies three times and then is taken down the hall to be "scanned and probed in room after room." Afterwards, he speaks with a young man in a white smock, whom he asks when the results will come in. The young man responds by telling him that the results are *already* in, to which Jack replies, "I'm not sure I'm ready."

Again, Jack tiptoes to the edge of certainty by asking for the results of his tests, and again he tries to run from that certainty once it's made available to him—a cycle that seems to have no end. The fact that he types "the story of [his] life and death" into a computer evokes his previous experience with the SIMUVAC technician, an experience that led only to worry and sorrow, which is perhaps why he lies three times on this particular test; yet again, he seeks to control the information he's about to receive.

The young man from Autumn Harvest Farms tells Jack that he will ask him some questions while looking at the printout results of his tests. Jack takes this as some sort of test that he can either pass or fail and, as such, he does everything in his power to pass. He initially feels as if the conversation is going very well, as he is able to (almost) honestly answer all the questions the man poses, and these answers seem to please the man. But when he is asked whether or not he's been exposed to any harmful chemicals, he is taken aback. He asks if the question is normal, calling it a "scheduled question," and the young man tells him that it is not, revealing that the machines picked up trace amounts of Nyodene D. in his bloodstream. In response, Jack pretends to have never heard of the chemical. "What had happened to our tacit agreement to advance smartly through the program without time-consuming and controversial delving?" he wonders to himself.

Jack's use of the word "controversial" speaks directly to the fact that he views doctor-patient relationships as engaging in an oddly competitive rapport; Jack wants to hear one thing, the doctor (or so Jack thinks) wants to hear another. This is why he delights in the "tacit agreement" he believes he has struck with this particular doctor, and why he is consequently so disheartened when he must answer something he doesn't want to talk about. The two men are each vying for control, but the doctor has machine results—certainty—on his side, so Jack finds himself defeated.

CHAPTER 37

Murray and Jack go on a very long walk, focusing their discussion primarily on Jack's fear of death. Murray suggests many things, including that Jack should see his looming death as an opportunity to be treated as somebody with wisdom, somebody with something important to say. Jack asks him how he can avoid his fear of death, and Murray tells him to put his faith in technology, which has already gotten him this far. Alternatively, he suggests taking up a religious faith, but Jack finds this too difficult, given the fact that he doesn't actually believe in any religion. Their walk winds them through **the supermarket**. Eventually, while emphasizing that he is speaking only theoretically, Murray says that if Jack killed somebody, he would be relieved of his fear of death. "In theory," he says, "violence is a form of rebirth. The dier passively succumbs. The killer lives on."

It is fitting that Jack and Murray end up in the supermarket during this prolific discussion of death and the ways Jack might escape his fear of it. After all, the supermarket houses massive amounts of the kind of psychic data Murray believes can essentially ward off death. This time, however, Murray speaks in more concrete—though equally absurd—terms about how to avoid death. He seems to understand that Jack is unable to believe that shopping will prolong his life, which is why he suggests killing somebody else, the only other kind of practical action he can think of. Yet again, DeLillo shows the ways in which academic, theoretical thought can often lead to outlandishly out-of-touch conclusions.

Jack and Murray's discussion of murder as a form of rebirth leads them to examine the nature of plots. "Plot a murder, you're saying," Jack says. "But every plot is a murder in effect. To plot is to die, whether we know it or not." Murray counters this by telling him that "to plot is to live," since humans come into the world in utter chaos, "in babble," and as they grow up, they impose a plan onto the random order of their lives, seeking to "shape and control" their existence. Murray then forces Jack to answer with whether he's a killer or dier, whether he believes—as Babette does—that there is a homicidal element to his identity, something lurking in the depths of his person. Jack concedes that perhaps Murray is right: a dier can become a killer. At the end of their conversation, Murray earnestly remarks that, in the name of camaraderie and total transparency, he's glad it's Jack who's dying rather than himself.

In this moment, Jack's earlier declaration that "all plots tend to move deathward" inches its way toward the truth, since Murray is suggesting that plotting a murder would free him of his fears. Furthermore, it makes sense that Jack takes quickly to Murray's notion that a dier can become a killer because this idea insinuates control, which Jack desperately wants. When Murray says that he's glad Jack is dying instead of himself, he gives rise to the idea that there is a sense of competition among the living.

CHAPTER 38

Jack starts carrying the handgun with him to school. He puts it in his jacket pocket and in the top drawer of his desk. He feels entirely renewed—giddy, even. The gun gives him "a reality [he] could control [and] secretly dominate."

Once more, Jack's need to feel in control of his life is plainly evident. Though he was hesitant to accept the gun when Vernon gave it to him, it's clear his conversation with Murray has allowed him to rid himself of all reservations as he tests out their idea that a dier can become a killer.

Stopping by Heinrich's room, Jack asks if Orest has entered the snake cage yet. Heinrich tells him that "he had to go underground" because nobody would let him officially perform the stunt. Instead, he tried to do it in a hotel, and rather than hundreds of venomous snakes, there were only three, one of which bit him within four minutes. Apparently the snakes weren't even venomous. Heinrich insists that Orest is a "jerk" for failing so miserably. Orest himself is deeply ashamed and has retreated out of sight, unwilling to be seen by anyone.

Heinrich's disdain for Orest's failed attempt is reminiscent of the disappointment Jack felt when investigators were unable to find more bodies in a backyard that had yielded two corpses. Both cases prove anticlimactic and reveal a sadistic side of human nature—the same trait that draws Jack and the rest of the family to disaster footage on TV.

On campus that evening, Jack hears fast footsteps. Skittish, he starts to run. He dashes behind a tree, whipping himself around and pulling out the gun before seeing that his pursuer is only Winnie Richards. Pocketing the pistol, he steps out from behind the tree and greets her. She tells him that she found a scholarly article in a scientific journal that outlines the details of Dylar's production. The brain behind the entire operation, she tells him, is named Willie Mink. The article goes into detail about every aspect of Mink's story, including when he went off the rails, losing the support of his research company but continuing to work with a test subject who visited him in secret, wearing a ski mask to protect her identity. Jack asks what Mink is doing now and Winnie tells him that a reporter tracked the man down, finding him in a motel in the German section of Iron City, behind a foundry.

Babette was the woman in the ski mask. Now that Jack has this information, her assertion that all men harbor a homicidal rage will be put to the test, for there is nothing she can do to protect Willie Mink.

Jack goes home and steals his neighbors' car, which, since the airborne toxic event, they started leaving in the driveway with the keys in the ignition. While driving, he passes through a toll booth without paying. Doing so makes him feel wonderful and powerful; "This must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying," he thinks to himself.

In this moment, Jack associates death with following the rules, equating law-breaking to the feeling of escaping the most fundamental fact of existence: gravity. Drunk on power, he sees himself as unbound by earthly realities—one of which is death.

CHAPTER 39

Upon finding Willie Mink's motel, Jack devises a plan to locate the man, "shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints, place the weapon in the victim's staticky hand, find a crayon or lipstick tube and scrawl a cryptic suicide note on the full-length mirror, take the victim's Dylar tablets," and retreat. As he parks and walks through the motel, this plan shifts slightly—as it does for the rest of the night—but altogether remains more or less the same.

Now Jack is heavily involved in the process of plotting, clearly having given himself over to Murray's idea that to plot is to live. His ever-evolving plan to kill Mink is evidence of this belief; as he moves forward with his plan, he actively shapes and re-shapes it, thereby gaining what he thinks is control over his own life.

Jack locates Mink's motel room and opens the door without knocking. Mink is sitting in a chair in a Hawaiian shirt and Budweiser shorts, watching a **TV** that hangs in a metal case near the ceiling. Before Jack can say anything, the man says, "Are you heartsick or soulsick?" Jack doesn't answer, instead trying to engage in conversation. Mink answers questions rather coherently, but often inserts TV dialogue or slogans at random times, speaking them aloud without context. He periodically flings fistfuls of Dylar into his mouth, appearing to be somewhat removed from the current situation. Nonetheless, he tells Jack that he wasn't always like this, explaining that he used to be doing important work with the development of Dylar. "Death without fear is an everyday thing. You can live with it," he says.

When Mink asks Jack if he's heartsick or soulsick, he seems to have intuitively put his finger on the complicated nature of Jack's arrival. On the one hand, Jack is probably heartsick because of Babette's infidelity—no matter what he says about why he's there, it seems unlikely that his visit has nothing to do with the fact that this man slept with his wife. On the other hand, Jack is there because he is afraid of dying and wants to take Dylar in order to address this problem; in other words, he's soulsick. Despite this surprisingly astute question, though, Mink is the pure embodiment of too much consumerist consumption: unable to separate reality from the TV, he is an overloaded amalgamation of psychic data.

After several minutes of strange and confusing conversation (in which, at various points, Jack asks about the nature of fearing death and Mink admits to his agreement with Babette), Jack says the words "plunging aircraft," remembering that one side effect of Dylar is that it can cause the user interpret certain phrases literally. Mink jumps to the floor. Jack backs him into the bathroom, feeling an increasingly sensational feeling, as if everything is glowing with his power. Once in the bathroom, he shoots Mink twice in the stomach and then tries to put the pistol in his hand, at which point Mink pulls the trigger and a bullet goes into Jack's wrist. Suddenly, his wonderful feeling of power—and a fearlessness of death—dissipates, and Jack realizes what he's done. Feeling remorseful, he uses a handkerchief to slow his own bleeding and then sets to work helping Mink, dragging him out of the motel and into the backseat of the car. As he does this, he feels beneficent and mighty, thinking himself a deeply magnanimous man.

In this scene, Jack moves from one form of authority to another. At first he feels powerful because he's about to kill Mink. Later, though, he assumes yet another position of power by helping save Mink's life. Both roles bolster his sense of self, though they are wildly different in nature. What links these two feelings—other than the sense of authority they give Jack—is the fact that they make him feel in control of life and death.

Once in the car, Mink asks Jack who shot him. "You did," Jack replies. "Who shot you?" asks Mink. "You did. The gun is in your hand," Jack points out. After driving around Iron City in search of a hospital, Jack finds a Pentecostal church with a neon cross above the entrance. Inside, German nuns treat both of their wounds. Jack is cared for by Sister Hermann Marie, to whom he tries to show off his knowledge of the German language, pointing to things and naming them, which seems to please her. When he asks her about heaven, though, she tells him that she doesn't believe in God. She tells him, "The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe." She then makes fun of him for thinking that she would believe in angels, heaven, and God. Jack appears quite troubled by this, saying, "I don't want to hear this. This is terrible."

Even in this moment of extreme duress, Jack exhibits the desire to be on good terms with his doctor. His attempt to impress Sister Hermann Marie with his German is not unlike the effort he put into establishing a "tacit agreement to advance smartly" through the list of questions the doctor asked him at Autumn Harvest Farms. Like that interaction, this conversation with Sister Hermann Marie also devolves into a disagreement, one that clarifies what Jack is looking for in a doctor: someone to take on his burden of worry without sharing any bad news with him. In turn, this renders the nun's admission that she doesn't believe in God even more devastating, for it represents yet another burden she is unwilling to shoulder for him.

Before he leaves, Jack learns from the doctor that Willie Mink will survive. He then drives his neighbors' car home, parking it in their driveway without bothering to clean up the massive amounts of blood coating the upholstery. At home, he watches the children sleeping, then slips into bed fully clothed and finds that he can't sleep. He gets up again and goes downstairs, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and considering the pain in his wrist.

Though Jack stole his neighbors' car and shot a man in the stomach, the thing that is truly important to him seems not to be dealing with the fallout of what happened, but rather considering how he found a way to talk himself into doing it in the first place.

CHAPTER 40

That same day, Jack and Babette learn from two old women who watched it unfold that Wilder took his tricycle beyond the Gladneys' property, past a guard rail, along a walkway, and through abandoned lots before stopping at the top of a twenty-step concrete set of stairs. He then diligently walked his tricycle down the steps, rode at a smart angle down a steep hill, and arrived at the expressway, which he proceeded to slowly pedal across despite the constant speeding traffic. The two old women who witnessed the spectacle were stranded on an overlooking porch, unable to do anything but yell. When Wilder reached the opposite side of the expressway, he fell into the grassy embankment and began to cry. Eventually a passing driver pulled over and safely retrieved him. Jack notes that he, Babette, and Wilder frequently visit the same expressway to climb up the overpass and watch Blacksmith's baroque sunsets.

There is no reason provided for why Wilder rides his bike across the expressway. Above all, it represents the child's state of blissful ignorance regarding death. The action proves that he has no concept of fearing death and, as such, can do whatever he wants. The fact that Jack and Babette have frequently taken him to watch the sunsets from the expressway suggests that the boy was perhaps making his own way toward scenic beauty, an image fraught with meaning considering the fact that the magnificent sunsets in Blacksmith are the result of the airborne toxic event and other poisonous pollutions that help light up the sky at dusk. In all his purity and innocence, then, the boy can appreciate beauty without having to acknowledge that it is inextricably intertwined with terrible, frightening elements.

In the book's final passages, Jack notes that the men in Mylex are still in town "gathering their terrible data, aiming their infrared devices at the earth and sky." Dr. Chakravarty continues to reach out to Jack, wanting him to come in to discuss the results of the Autumn Harvest Farms tests, which Jack never delivered to him. But Jack decides to stay away, afraid of what he might learn. Finally, one day "without warning," **the supermarket** shelves are rearranged. There is a discernable "agitation and panic in the aisles" as customers search desperately for the products they've come to rely on. Nobody can make any sense out of the new organization of goods. Only generically-labeled, store-brand foods have remained in their rightful places on the shelves. Utterly confused and disarmed, the shoppers increase their consumerist scrutiny by reading the fine print on labels and checking for expiration dates. But, Jack says, none of what they do matters, because in the end their products will pass under holographic scanners that interpret the data once and for all; "This is the language of waves and radiation," he says, "or how the dead speak to the living."

White Noise *ends by giving the impression that data will continue to mount, accumulating overwhelmingly and without signs of stopping. Men in Mylex suits will continue taking dire measurements. The supermarkets will continue stocking their shelves with products rife with psychic data. And though the organization of this data may change, as it does when the grocery store is rearranged, Jack and his family will come no closer to understanding what messages are contained therein. For perhaps the first time, Jack appears uninterested in deciphering these messages, content in merely knowing that a deep, spiritually-inflected knowledge lurks within the data surrounding him on all sides.*

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