

## "The Nice Man's Anger" & "Enough Already"

As you may have noticed in the previous two chapters ("Mountaintop Removal" and "Womanland"), the 2004 section of the book ushers in a slow shift away from the dysfunction of the Berglund family and a focus on contemporary American history, environmental issues, politics and capitalism.

In these two chapters, Franzen continues to depict America's deep sense of pride and moral fortitude, and he often does this through the character of Walter.

1

## The Nice Man's Anger

### REPEATED WORDS, SYMBOLS,& IMAGES:

- Birds
- Trees
- Alcohol
- Cars
- Rage
- Time
- "Good"

We can start by discussing the title:

As this chapter focuses on Walter (who Patty refers to in her autobiography as a "genuinely nice person") we can rightly presume he is the titular 'Nice Man'.

As we read, we learn that it seems the nicest man of all, Walter, is not as nice or "good" as we are made to believe-- We see him seething with road rage, moral outrage and internalized rage at himself after years of passively putting up with life--including consistently having to move the goal post/compromising his own ideologies to succeed.

The moments of introspection we get from Walter in the chapter ebb and flow between his deeply pessimistic view of how the United States is handling everything--from the Iraq War to the climate crisis to economic inflation (don't forget we are only four years away from the housing market crash the devastated the economy)--to his conflicting feelings about Lalitha that makes him question his fidelity and moral acuity.

In his moment of internal conflict about sleeping with Lalitha, he think about the nature of his love for Patty, the narrator noting, "[Walter] loved Patty in some wholly other way, some larger and more abstract but nevertheless essential way that was about a lifetime of responsibility; about being a good person" (323).

**But is Walter really "good," or does he just want to be seen that way?**

In order to answer that question, you would have to define what makes a "good" or "bad" person-- which, as I've learned from teaching this novel, is HIGHLY subjective. However, for the first chapter of this book, Walter usually earns the place of "good" (if not "best") person in terms of his moral and ethical choices. However this chapter tests Walter's "goodness" on all fronts as he faces a crisis of confidence in his project (The Cerulean Mountain Trust), a marital crisis, and a crisis of consciousness. On page 325, we get an internal spiral surrounding the steak-house menu, in which Walter can only see the massive ecological effects of the process of bringing beef or pork to the American table before saying "Fuck it...I'll have the rib-eye".

His misery about his romantic entanglement is as abject as his misery about the project, the fate of the planet, and his inability to deal with ordinary people without ultimately unleashing "the nice man's anger"...

**CLOSE READING OBSERVATION:** Prior to this point In the novel, we didn't see the neurosis and ticks that appear when Walter is under a great deal of pressure. This chapter reveals that when Walter is stressed, he has long internal monologues that list off the environmental issues in slowly shrinking time frames:

in the last six months, 90 days, two and a half weeks, etc. – by the end of the chapter he's down to fractions of an hour:

*"To pass the time, Walter did mental tallies of what had gone wrong in the world il the hours since he'd awakened...The tallies, which he recalculated as the hour grew even later, brought him a strange spiteful satisfaction. There are days so bad that only their worsening, only a descent into an outright orgy of badness, can redeem them" (364).*

**What do you make of this chapter? How does this observation help the characterization of Walter?**



2

## ENOUGH ALREADY

"Enough Already" circles back to focus on Richard Katz, who goes to Washington D.C. to have a meeting about Walter's zero-population growth project (and maybe see Patty too?). The chapter has already contained intimations of mortality even before Richard gets to Washington – death is mentioned at least twice – and the idea isn't going away.

Perhaps even more disturbing to Richard, is the self-absorbed and rude behavior of the younger generation, which resulted in a case of "bus rage" (to match Walter's perpetual road rage whenever he drives) when a young woman discards her wet ice-cream container on his feet--so it's no surprise he has little interest in Jessica when he arrives in D.C.

To salvage something – and because he has always intended to make what might be the final decisive move on her – he goes to Patty's room. Twice. The second time, she agrees to talk to him, and he realises she's telling the truth when she describes how much of a fuck-up she's been in the three years since their brief moment in the lakeside house. Franzen has been making coy references to Richard's penis in this chapter – the prophet in his pants, the witness in his pants, that sort of thing – and it's going to have to go home disappointed this time. All she's given him to take him through the night is a copy of "Mistakes Were Made...."

By the next morning he's decided that the main message of Patty's autobiography is that she was right to choose Walter, and he leaves. On the way to the airport it briefly looks as though his story ends here as he contemplates jumping from a high bridge (another allusion to death). But he goes home instead, spring-cleans his apartment and makes moves to get his life back together.

End of chapter, we think... until Patty arrives. Richard's parting gesture had been to leave Mistakes Were Made on Walter's desk, and it looks as though Walter has understood it differently: he has never been the one to press Patty's buttons, not like Richard does. The occupant of Richard's pants – Franzen is ready to call it 'his dick' at last – is pleased. He tells us it's the only part of him that is.

## KEY PASSAGE ALERT!

During a think tank meeting with Walter, Richard, Lalitha and Jessica, we get this great scene in Jessica brings up what she calls **the cigarette analogy**:

*"People with money can get Zolof and Xanax. So when you tax cigarettes, and alcohol too, you're hitting poor people the hardest. You're making the cheap drugs more expensive" (382).*

Walter chimes in, adding religion to the list of "drugs" that appeal to people who are financially oppressed. Then Jessica adds guns to the list. When Lalitha and Richard balk, Walter attempts to explain:

*"It's all circling around the same problem of personal liberties. People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to" (383).*

This seems to be a crucial moment of defining "freedom" in the book...but more specifically the potentially warped perception of the concept of freedom in America. **In thinking about all the conversations currently about the idea of freedom and personal liberties (especially during this pandemic), how to you perceive the message in this scene? Did this ring true to you? Can you connect this to the idea of a universal truth?**