

8 NOVEMBER
YEAR OF THE DEPEND ADULT UNDERGARMENT
INTERDEPENDENCE DAY
GAUDEAMUS IGITUR

Boston AA is like AA nowhere else on this planet. Just like AA everywhere else, Boston AA is divided into numerous individual AA Groups, and each Group has its particular Group name like the Reality Group or the Allston Group or the Clean and Sober Group, and each Group holds its regular meeting once a week. But almost all Boston Groups' meetings are speaker meetings. That means that at the meetings there are recovering alcoholic speakers who stand up in front of everybody at an amplified podium and 'share their experience, strength, and hope.'¹³¹ And the singular thing is that these speakers are not ever members of the Group that's holding the meeting, in Boston. The speakers at one certain Group's weekly speaker meeting are always from some other certain Boston AA Group. The people from the other Group who are here at like your Group speaking are here on something called a Commitment. Commitments are where some members of one Group commit to hit the road and travel to another Group's meeting to speak publicly from the podium. Then a bunch of people from the host Group hit the opposite lane of the same road on some other night and go to the visiting Group's meeting, to speak. Groups always trade Commitments: you come speak to us and we'll come speak to you. It can seem bizarre. You always go elsewhere to speak. At your own Group's meeting you're a host; you just sit there and listen as hard as you can, and you make coffee in 60-cup urns and stack polystyrene cups in big ziggurats and sell raffle tickets and make sandwiches, and you empty ashtrays and scrub out urns and sweep floors when the other Group's speakers are through. You never share your experience, strength, and hope on-stage behind a fiberboard podium with its cheap nondigital PA system's mike except in front of some *other* metro Boston Group.¹³² Every night in Boston, bumper-stickered cars full of totally sober people, wall-eyed from caffeine and trying to read illegibly scrawled directions by the dashboard lights, crisscross the city, heading for the church basements or bingo halls or nursing-home cafeterias of other AA Groups, to put on Commitments. Being an active member of a Boston AA Group is probably a little bit like being a serious musician or like athlete, in terms of constant travel.

The White Flag Group of Enfield MA, in metropolitan Boston, meets Sundays in the cafeteria of the Provident Nursing Home on Hanneman Street, off Commonwealth Avenue a couple blocks west of Enfield Tennis Academy's flat-topped hill. Tonight the White Flag Group is hosting a Commitment from the Advanced Basics Group of Concord, a suburb of Boston. The Advanced Basics people have driven almost an hour to get here, plus

there's always the problem of signless urban streets and directions given over the phone. On this coming Friday night, a small horde of White Flaggers will drive out to Concord to put on a reciprocal Commitment for the Advanced Basics Group. Travelling long distances on signless streets trying to parse directions like 'Take the second left off the rotary by the driveway to the chiropractor's' and getting lost and shooting your whole evening after a long day just to speak for like six minutes at a plywood podium is called 'Getting Active With Your Group'; the speaking itself is known as '12th-Step Work' or 'Giving It Away.' Giving It Away is a cardinal Boston AA principle. The term's derived from an epigrammatic description of recovery in Boston AA: 'You give it up to get it back to give it away.' Sobriety in Boston is regarded as less a gift than a sort of cosmic loan. You can't pay the loan back, but you can pay it *forward*, by spreading the message that despite all appearances AA works, spreading this message to the next new guy who's tottered in to a meeting and is sitting in the back row unable to hold his cup of coffee. The only way to hang onto sobriety is to give it away, and even just 24 hours of sobriety is worth doing anything for, a sober day being nothing short of a daily miracle if you've got the Disease like he's got the Disease, says the Advanced Basics member who's chairing this evening's Commitment, saying just a couple public words to the hall before he opens the meeting and retires to a stool next to the podium and calls his Group's speakers by random lot. The chairperson says he didn't used to be able to go 24 lousy *minutes* without a nip, before he Came In. 'Coming In' means admitting that your personal ass is kicked and tottering into Boston AA, ready to go to any lengths to stop the shit-storm. The Advanced Basics chairperson looks like a perfect cross between pictures of Dick Cavett and Truman Capote¹³³ except this guy's also like totally, almost flamboyantly bald, and to top it off he's wearing a bright-black country-western shirt with baroque curlicues of white Nodie-piping across the chest and shoulders, and a string tie, plus sharp-toed boots of some sort of weirdly imbricate reptile skin, and overall he's riveting to look at, grotesque in that riveting way that flaunts its grotesquerie. There are more cheap metal ashtrays and Styrofoam cups in this broad hall than you'll see anywhere else ever on earth. Gately's sitting right up front in the first row, so close to the podium he can see the tailor's notch in the chairperson's outsized incisors, but he enjoys twisting around and watching everybody come in and mill around shaking water off their outerwear, trying to find empty seats. Even on the night of the I.-Day holiday, the Provident's cafeteria is packed by 2000h. AA does not take holidays any more than the Disease does. This is the big established Sunday P.M. meeting for AAs in Enfield and Allston and Brighton. Regulars come every week from Watertown and East Newton, too, often, unless they're out on Commitments with their own Groups. The Provident cafeteria walls, painted an indecisive green, are tonight bedecked with portable felt banners emblazoned with AA slogans in Cub-Scoutish blue and gold. The slogans on

them appear way too insipid even to mention what they are. E.g. 'ONE DAY AT A TIME,' for one. The effete western-dressed guy concludes his opening exhortation, leads the opening Moment of Silence, reads the AA Preamble, pulls a random name out of the Crested Beak cowboy hat he's holding, makes a squinty show of reading it, says he'd like to call Advanced Basics' first random speaker of the evening, and asks if his fellow Group-member John L. is in the house, here, tonight.

John L. gets up to the podium and says, 'That is a question I did not used to be able to answer.' This gets a laugh, and everybody's posture gets subtly more relaxed, because it's clear that John L. has some sober time in and isn't going to be one of those AA speakers who's so wracked with self-conscious nerves he makes the empathetic audience nervous too. Everybody in the audience is aiming for total empathy with the speaker; that way they'll be able to receive the AA message he's here to carry. Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification.

Then John L. says his first name and what he is, and everybody calls Hello.

White Flag is one of the area AA meetings Ennet House requires its residents to attend. You have to be seen at a designated AA or NA meeting every single night of the week or out you go, discharged. A House Staff member has to accompany the residents when they go to the designated meetings, so they can be officially seen there.¹³⁴ The residents' House counselors suggest that they sit right up at the front of the hall where they can see the pores in the speaker's nose and try to Identify instead of Compare. Again, *Identify* means empathize. Identifying, unless you've got a stake in Comparing, isn't very hard to do, here. Because if you sit up front and listen hard, all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own: fun with the Substance, then very gradually less fun, then significantly less fun because of like blackouts you suddenly come out of on the highway going 145 kph with companions you do not know, nights you awake from in unfamiliar bedding next to somebody who doesn't even resemble any known sort of mammal, three-day blackouts you come out of and have to buy a newspaper to even know what town you're in; yes gradually less and less actual fun but with some physical need for the Substance, now, instead of the former voluntary fun; then at some point suddenly just very little fun at all, combined with terrible daily hand-trembling need, then dread, anxiety, irrational phobias, dim siren-like memories of fun, trouble with assorted authorities, knee-buckling headaches, mild seizures, and the litany of what Boston AA calls Losses —

'Then come the day I lost my job to drinking.' Concord's John L. has a huge hanging gut and just no ass at all, the way some big older guys' asses seem to get sucked into their body and reappear out front as gut. Gately, in sobriety, does nightly sit-ups out of fear this'll all of a sudden happen to

him, as age thirty approaches. Gately is so huge no one sits behind him for several rows. John L. has the biggest bunch of keys Gately's ever seen. They're on one of those pull-outable-wire janitor's keychains that clips to a belt loop, and the speaker jangles them absently, unaware, his one tip of the hat to public nerves. He's also wearing gray janitor's pants. 'Lost my damn job,' he says. 'I mean to say I still knew where it was and whatnot. I just went in as usual one day and there was some other fellow doing it,' which gets another laugh.

— then more Losses, with the Substance seeming like the only consolation against the pain of the mounting Losses, and of course you're in Denial about it being the Substance that's causing the very Losses it's consoling you about —

'Alcohol destroys *slowly* but *thoroughly* is what a fellow said to me the first night I Come In, up in Concord, and that fellow ended up becoming my sponsor.'

— then less mild seizures, D.T.s during attempts to taper off too fast, introduction to subjective bugs and rodents, then one more binge and more formicative bugs; then eventually a terrible acknowledgment that some line has been undeniably crossed, and fist-at-the-sky, as-God-is-my-witness vows to buckle down and lick this thing for good, to quit for all time, then maybe a few white-knuckled days of initial success, then a slip, then more pledges, clock-watching, baroque self-regulations, repeated slips back into the Substance's relief after like two days' abstinence, ghastly hangovers, head-flattening guilt and self-disgust, superstructures of additional self-regulations (e.g. not before 0900h. not on a worknight, only when the moon is waxing, only in the company of Swedes) which also fail —

'When I was drunk I wanted to get sober and when I was sober I wanted to get drunk,' John L. says; 'I lived that way for years, and I submit to you that's not livin', that's a fuckin death-in-life.'

— then unbelievable psychic pain, a kind of peritonitis of the soul, psychic agony, fear of impending insanity (why can't I quit if I so want to quit, unless I'm insane?), appearances at hospital detoxes and rehabs, domestic strife, financial free-fall, eventual domestic Losses —

'And then I lost my wife to drinking. I mean I still knew where she was and whatnot. I just went in one day and there was some other fellow doing it,' at which there's not all that much laughter, lots of pained nods: it's often the same all over, in terms of domestic Losses.

— then vocational ultimatums, unemployability, financial ruin, pancreatitis, overwhelming guilt, bloody vomiting, cirrhotic neuralgia, incontinence, neuropathy, nephritis, black depressions, searing pain, with the Substance affording increasingly brief periods of relief; then, finally, no relief available anywhere at all; finally it's impossible to get high enough to freeze what you feel like, being this way; and now you hate the Substance,

hate it, but you still find yourself unable to stop doing it, the Substance, you find you finally want to stop more than anything on earth and it's no fun doing it anymore and you can't believe you ever liked doing it and but you *still* can't stop, it's like you're totally fucking bats, it's like there's two yous; and when you'd sell your own dear Mum to stop and still, you find, can't stop, then the last layer of jolly friendly mask comes off your old friend the Substance, it's midnight now and all masks come off, and you all of a sudden see the Substance as it really is, for the first time you see the Disease as it really is, really has been all this time, you look in the mirror at midnight and see what owns you, what's become what you are —

'A fuckin livin death, I tell you it's not being near alive, by the end I was undead, not alive, and I tell you the idea of dyin was nothing compared to the idea of livin like that for another five or ten years and only *then* dyin,' with audience heads nodding in rows like a wind-swept meadow; *boy* can they ever Identify.

— and then you're in serious trouble, very serious trouble, and you know it, finally, deadly serious trouble, because this Substance you thought was your one true friend, that you gave up all for, gladly, that for so long gave you relief from the pain of the Losses your love of that relief caused, your mother and lover and god and compadre, has finally removed its smily-face mask to reveal centerless eyes and a ravening maw, and canines down to here, it's the Face In The Floor, the grinning root-white face of your worst nightmares, and the face is your own face in the mirror, now, it's *you*, the Substance has devoured or replaced and become *you*, and the puke-, drool- and Substance-crust T-shirt you've both worn for weeks now gets torn off and you stand there looking and in the root-white chest where your heart (given away to It) should be beating, in its exposed chest's center and centerless eyes is just a lightless hole, more teeth, and a beckoning taloned hand dangling something irresistible, and now you see you've been had, screwed royal, stripped and fucked and tossed to the side like some stuffed toy to lie for all time in the posture you land in. You see now that It's your enemy and your worst personal nightmare and the trouble It's gotten you into is undeniable and you *still* can't stop. Doing the Substance now is like attending Black Mass but you still can't stop, even though the Substance no longer gets you high. You are, as they say, Finished. You cannot get drunk and you cannot get sober; you cannot get high and you cannot get straight. You are behind bars; you are in a cage and can see only bars in every direction. You are in the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around. You are at a fork in the road that Boston AA calls you *Bottom*, though the term is misleading, because everybody here agrees it's more like someplace very high and unsupported: you're on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward. . . .

If you listen for the similarities, all these speakers' Substance-careers

seem to terminate at the same cliff's edge. You are now Finished, as a Substance-user. It's the jumping-off place. You now have two choices. You can either eliminate your own map for keeps — blades are the best, or else pills, or there's always quietly sucking off the exhaust pipe of your repossessable car in the bank-owned garage of your familyless home. Something whimpery instead of banging. Better clean and quiet and (since your whole career's been one long futile flight from pain) painless. Though of the alcoholics and drug addicts who compose over 70% of a given year's suicides, some try to go out with a last great garish Balaclavan gesture: one longtime member of the White Flag Group is a prognathous lady named Louise B. who tried to take a map-eliminating dive off the old Hancock Building downtown in B.S. '81 but got caught in the gust of a rising thermal only six flights off the roof and got blown cartwheeling back up and in through the smoked-glass window of an arbitrage firm's suite on the thirty-fourth floor, ending up sprawled prone on a high-gloss conference table with only lacerations and a compound of the collarbone and an experience of willed self-annihilation and external intervention that has left her rabidly Christian — rabidly, as in foam — so that she's comparatively ignored and avoided, though her AA story, being just like everybody else's but more spectacular, has become metro Boston AA myth. But so when you get to this jumping-off place at the Finish of your Substance-career you can either take up the Luger or blade and eliminate your own personal map — this can be at age sixty, or twenty-seven, or seventeen — or you can get out the very beginning of the Yellow Pages or InterNet Psych-Svce File and make a blubbering 0200h. phone call and admit to a gentle grandparentish voice that you're in trouble, deadly serious trouble, and the voice will try to soothe you into hanging on until a couple hours go by and two pleasantly earnest, weirdly calm guys in conservative attire appear smiling at your door sometime before dawn and speak quietly to you for hours and leave you not remembering anything from what they said except the sense that they used to be eerily like you, just where you are, utterly fucked, and but now somehow aren't anymore, fucked like you, at least they didn't seem like they were, unless the whole thing's some incredibly involved scam, this AA thing, and so but anyway you sit there on what's left of your furniture in the lavender dawnlight and realize that by now you literally have no other choices besides trying this AA thing or else eliminating your map, so you spend the day killing every last bit of every Substance you've got in one last joyless bitter farewell binge and resolve, the next day, to go ahead and swallow your pride and maybe your common sense too and try these meetings of this 'Program' that at best is probably just Unitarian happy horseshit and at worst is a cover for some glazed and canny cult-type thing where they'll keep you sober by making you spend twenty hours a day selling cellophane cones of artificial flowers on the median strips of heavy-flow roads. And

what defines this cliffish nexus of exactly two total choices, this miserable road-fork Boston AA calls your Bottom, is that at this point you feel like maybe selling flowers on median strips might not be so bad, not compared to what you've got going, personally, at this juncture. And this, at root, is what unites Boston AA: it turns out this same resigned, miserable, brainwash-and-exploit-me-if-that's-what-it-takes-type desperation has been the jumping-off place for just about every AA you meet, it emerges, once you've actually gotten it up to stop darting in and out of the big meetings and start walking up with your wet hand out and trying to actually personally meet some Boston AAs. As the one particular tough old guy or lady you're always particularly scared of and drawn to says, nobody ever Comes In because things were going really well and they just wanted to round out their P.M. social calendar. Everybody, but *everybody* Comes In dead-eyed and puke-white and with their face hanging down around their knees and with a well-thumbed firearm-and-ordnance mail-order catalogue kept safe and available at home, map-wise, for when this last desperate resort of hugs and clichés turns out to be just happy horseshit, for you. You are not unique, they'll say: this initial hopelessness unites every soul in this broad cold salad-bar'd hall. They are like Hindenburg-survivors. Every meeting is a reunion, once you've been in for a while.

And then the palsied newcomers who totter in desperate and miserable enough to Hang In and keep coming and start feebly to scratch beneath the unlikely insipid surface of the thing, Don Gately's found, then get united by a second common experience. The shocking discovery that the thing actually does seem to work. Does keep you Substance-free. It's improbable and shocking. When Gately finally snapped to the fact, one day about four months into his Ennet House residency, that quite a few days seemed to have gone by without his playing with the usual idea of slipping over to Unit #7 and getting loaded in some nonuremic way the courts couldn't prove, that several days had gone without his even *thinking* of oral narcotics or a tightly rolled duBois or a cold foamer on a hot day . . . when he realized that the various Substances he didn't used to be able to go a day without absorbing hadn't even like *occurred* to him in almost a week, Gately hadn't felt so much grateful or joyful as just plain shocked. The idea that AA might actually somehow *work* unnerved him. He suspected some sort of trap. Some new sort of trap. At this stage he and the other Ennet residents who were still there and starting to snap to the fact that AA might work began to sit around together late at night going batshit together because it seemed to be impossible to figure out just *how* AA worked. It did, yes, tentatively seem maybe actually to be working, but Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody's ever been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality. And the folks with

serious time in AA are infuriating about questions starting with *How*. You ask the scary old guys How AA Works and they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story. The newcomers who abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously, after a while, share this sense of deep shock and possible trap; about newer Boston AAs with like six months clean you can see this look of glazed suspicion instead of beatific glee, an expression like that of bug-eyed natives confronted suddenly with a Zippo lighter. And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing — so unlikely and unpromising, so much the inverse of what they'd come too much to love — might really be able to keep the lover's toothy maw at bay. The process is the neat reverse of what brought you down and In here: Substances start out being so magically great, so much the interior jigsaw's missing piece, that at the start you just know, deep in your gut, that they'll never let you down; you just know it. But they do. And then this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee is so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons . . . and then Gately seems to find out AA turns out to be the very loyal friend he thought he'd had and then lost, when you Came In. And so you Hang In and stay sober and straight, and out of sheer hand-burned-on-hot-stove terror you heed the improbable-sounding warnings not to stop pounding out the nightly meetings even after the Substance-cravings have left and you feel like you've got a grip on the thing at last and can now go it alone, you still don't try to go it alone, you heed the improbable warnings because by now you have no faith in your own sense of what's really improbable and what isn't, since AA seems, improbably enough, to be working, and with no faith in your own senses you're confused, flummoxed, and when people with AA time strongly advise you to keep coming you nod robotically and keep coming, and you sweep floors and scrub out ashtrays and fill stained steel urns with hideous coffee, and you keep getting ritually down on your big knees every morning and night asking for help from a sky that still seems a burnished shield against all who would ask aid of it — how can you pray to a 'God' you believe only morons believe in, still? — but the old guys say it doesn't yet matter what you believe or don't believe, Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you're told, you keep coming and coming, nightly, and now you take pains not to get booted out of the squalid halfway house you'd at first tried so hard to get discharged from, you Hang In and Hang In, meeting after meeting, warm day after cold day . . . ; and not only does the urge to get high stay more or less away, but more general life-quality-type things —

just as improbably promised, at first, when you'd Come In — things seem to get progressively somehow better, inside, for a while, then worse, then even better, then for a while worse in a way that's still somehow better, realer, you feel weirdly unblinded, which is good, even though a lot of the things you now see about yourself and how you've lived are horrible to have to see — and by this time the whole thing is so improbable and unparsable that you're so flummoxed you're convinced you're maybe brain-damaged, still, at this point, from all the years of Substances, and you figure you'd better Hang In in this Boston AA where older guys who seem to be less damaged — or at least less flummoxed by their damage — will tell you in terse simple imperative clauses exactly what to do, and where and when to do it (though never How or Why); and at this point you've started to have an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys, a Blind Faith in them born not of zealotry or even belief but just of a chilled conviction that you have no faith whatsoever left in yourself;¹³⁵ and now if the older guys say Jump you ask them to hold their hand at the desired height, and now they've got you, and you're free.

Another Advanced Basics Group speaker, whose first name Gately loses in the crowd's big Hello but whose last initial is E., an even bigger guy than John L., a green-card Irishman in a skallycap and Sinn Féin sweatshirt, with a belly like a swinging sack of meal and a thoroughly visible ass to back it up, is sharing his hope's experience by listing the gifts that have followed his decision to Come In and put the plug in the jug and the cap on the phentermine-hydrochloride bottle¹³⁶ and stop driving long-haul truck routes in unbroken 96-hour metal-pedalled states of chemical psychosis. The rewards of his abstinence, he stresses, have been more than just spiritual. Only in Boston AA can you hear a fifty-year-old immigrant wax lyrical about his first solid bowel movement in adult life.

'd been a conformed bowl-splatterer for yars b'yond contin'. 'd been barred from t'facilities at o't' troock stops twixt hair'n Nork for yars. T'wallpaper in de loo a t'ome hoong in t'ese carled sheets from t'wall, ay till yo. But now woon dey . . . ay'll remaember t'alwys. T'were a wake to t'day after ay stewed oop for me ninety-dey chip. Ay were tray moents sobber. Ay were thar on t'throne a't'ome, yo new. No't'put too fain a point'on it, ay prodooed as er uzhal and . . . and ay war soo amazed as to no't'belaven' me yairs. 'Twas a sone so wonefamiliar at t'first ay tought ay'd droped me wallet in t'loo, do yo new. Ay tought ay'd droped me wallet in t'loo as Good is me wetness. So doan ay bend twixt m'knays and ad a luke in t'dim o't'loo, and codn't belave me'yize. So gud paple ay do then ay drope to m'knays by t'loo an't'ad a rail luke. A loaver's luke, d'yo new. And friends t'were loavely past me pur poewers t'say. T'were a *tard* in t'loo. A *rail tard*. T'were farm an' teppered an' aiver so jaintly aitched. T'luked . . . *conestroocted* instaid've sprayed. T'luked as ay felt'in me 'eart Good

'imsailf maint a tard t'luke. Me friends, this tard'o'mine practically had a poolse. Ay sted doan own m'knays an tanked me Har Par, which ay choose t'call me Har Par Good, an' ay been tankin me Har Par own m'knays aiver sin, marnin and natetime an in t'loo's'well, aiver sin.' The man's red-leather face radiant throughout. Gately and the other White Flaggers fall about, laugh from the gut, a turd that practically had a pulse, an ode to a solid dump; but the lightless eyes of certain palsied back-row newcomers widen with a very private Identification and possible hope, hardly daring to imagine. . . . A certain Message has been Carried.

Gately's biggest asset as an Ennet House live-in Staffer — besides the size thing, which is not to be discounted when order has to be maintained in a place where guys come in fresh from detox still in Withdrawal with their eyes rolling like palsied cattle and an earring in their eyelid and a tattoo that says BORN TO BE UNPLEASANT — besides the fact that his upper arms are the size of cuts of beef you rarely see off hooks, his big plus is he has this ability to convey his own experience about at first hating AA to new House residents who hate AA and resent being forced to go and sit up in nose-pore-range and listen to such limply improbable clichéd drivell night after night. Limp AA looks, at first, and actually limp it sometimes really is, Gately tells the new residents, and he says no way he'd expect them to believe on just his say-so that the thing'll work if they're miserable and desperate enough to Hang In against common sense for a while. But he says he'll clue them in on a truly great thing about AA: *they can't kick you out*. You're In if you say you're In. Nobody can get kicked out, not for any reason. Which means you can say *anything* in here. Talk about solid turds all you want. The molecular integrity of shit is small potatoes. Gately says he defies the new Ennet House residents to try and shock the smiles off these Boston AAs' faces. Can't be done, he says. These folks have literally heard it all. Enuresis. Impotence. Priapism. Onanism. Projectile-incontinence. Autocastration. Elaborate paranoid delusions, the grandiosest megalomania, Communism, fringe-Birchism, National-Socialist-Bundism, psychotic breaks, sodomy, bestiality, daughter-diddling, exposures at every conceivable level of indecency. Coprophilia and -phagia. Four-year White Flagger Glenn K.'s personally chosen Higher Power is *Satan*, for fuck's sake. Granted, nobody in White Flag much likes Glenn K., and the thing with the hooded cape and makeup and the candelabrum he carries around draw some mutters, but Glenn K. is a member for exactly as long as he cares to Hang In.

So say anything you want, Gately invites them. Go to the Beginner Meeting at 1930h. and raise your shaky mitt and tell the unlacquered truth. Free-associate. Run with it. Gately this morning, just after required A.M. meditation, Gately was telling the tatt-obsessed little new lawyer guy Ewell, with the hypertensive flush and little white beard, telling him how he, Gately, had perked up considerably at 30 days clean when he found he could raise his

big mitt in Beginner Meetings and say publicly just how much he hates this limp AA drivel about gratitude and humility and miracles and how he hates it and thinks it's horseshit and hates the AAs and how they all seem like limp smug moronic self-satisfied shit-eating pricks with their lobotomized smiles and goopy sentiment and how he wishes them all violent technicolor harm in the worst way, new Gately sitting there spraying vitriol, wet-lipped and red-eared, *trying* to get kicked out, purposely *trying* to outrage the AAs into giving him the boot so he could quick-march back to Ennet House and tell crippled Pat Montesian and his counselor Gene M. how he'd been given the boot at AA, how they'd pleaded for honest sharing of innermost feelings and OK he'd honestly shared his deepest feelings on the matter of *them* and the grinning hypocrites had shaken their fists and told him to screw . . . and but so in the meetings the poison would leap and spurt from him, and how but he found out all that these veteran White Flaggers would do as a Group when he like vocally wished them harm was nod furiously in empathetic Identification and shout with maddening cheer 'Keep Coming!' and one or two Flaggers with medium amounts of sober time would come up to him after the meeting and say how it was so good to hear him share and holy *mackerel* could they ever Identify with the deeply honest feelings he'd shared and how he'd done them the service of giving them the gift of a real 'Remember-When'-type experience because they could now remember feeling just exactly the same way as Gately, when they first Came In, only they confess not then having the spine to honestly share it with the Group, and so in a bizarre improbable twist they'd have Gately ending up standing there feeling like some sort of AA hero, a prodigy of vitriolic spine, both frustrated and elated, and before they bid him orevwar and told him to come back they'd make sure to give him their phone numbers on the back of their little raffle tickets, phone numbers Gately wouldn't dream of actually calling up (to say *what*, for chrissakes?) but which he found he rather liked having in his wallet, to just carry around, just in case of whq knew what; and then plus maybe one of these old Enfield-native White Flag guys with geologic amounts of sober time in AA and a twisted ruined old body and clear bright-white eyes would hobble sideways like a crab slowly up to Gately after a meeting in which he'd spewed vitriol and reach way up to clap him on his big sweaty shoulder and say in their fremitic smoker's croak that Well you at least seem like a ballsy little bastard, all full of piss and vinegar and whatnot, and that just maybe you'll be OK, Don G., just maybe, just Keep Coming, and, if you'd care for a spot of advice from somebody who, likely spilled more booze in his day than you've even consumed in yours, you might try to just simply sit down at meetings and relax and take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth and shut the fuck up and just listen, for the first time perhaps in your life really *listen*, and maybe you'll end up OK; and they don't offer their phone numbers, not the really old

guys, Gately knows he'd have to eat his pride raw and actually *request* the numbers of the old ruined grim calm longtimers in White Flag, 'The Crocodiles' the less senior White Flaggers call them, because the old twisted guys all tend to sit clustered together with hideous turd-like cigars in one corner of the Provident cafeteria under a 16 X 20 framed glossy of crocodiles or alligators sunning themselves on some verdant riverbank somewhere, with the maybe-joke legend OLD-TIMERS CORNER somebody had magisculed across the bottom of the photo, and these old guys cluster together under it, rotating their green cigars in their misshapen fingers and discussing completely mysterious long-sober matters out of the sides of their mouths. Gately sort of fears these old AA guys with their varicose noses and flannel shirts and white crew cuts and brown teeth and coolly amused looks of appraisal, feels like a kind of low-rank tribal knucklehead in the presence of stone-faced chieftains who rule by some unspoken shamanistic fiat,¹³⁷ and so of course he hates them, the Crocodiles, for making him feel like he fears them, but oddly he also ends up looking forward a little to sitting in the same big nursing-home cafeteria with them and facing the same direction they face, every Sunday, and a little later finds he even enjoys riding at 30 kph tops in their perfectly maintained 25-year-old sedans when he starts going along on White Flag Commitments to other Boston AA Groups. He eventually heeds a terse suggestion and starts going out and telling his grisly personal story publicly from the podium with other members of White Flag, the Group he gave in and finally officially joined. This is what you do if you're new and have what's called The Gift of Desperation and are willing to go to any excruciating lengths to stay straight, you officially join a Group and put your name and sobriety-date down on the Group secretary's official roster, and you make it your business to start to get to know other members of the Group on a personal basis, and you carry their numbers talismanically in your wallet; and, most important, you get Active With Your Group, which here in Gately's Boston AA *Active* means not just sweeping the footprinty floor after the Lord's Prayer and making coffee and emptying ashtrays of gasper-butts and ghastly spit-wet cigar ends but also showing up regularly at specified P.M. times at the White Flag Group's regular haunt, the Elit (the final e's neon's ballast's out) Diner next to Steve's Donuts in Enfield Center, showing up and pounding down tooth-loosening amounts of coffee and then getting in well-maintained Crocodilian sedans whose suspensions' springs Gately's mass makes sag and getting driven, wall-eyed with caffeine and cigar fumes and general public-speaking angst, to like Lowell's Joy of Living Group or Charlestown's Plug In The Jug Group or Bridgewater State Detox or Concord Honor Farm with these guys, and except for one or two other pale wall-eyed newcomers with The Gift of utter Desperation it's mostly Crocodiles with geologic sober time in these cars, it's mostly the guys that've stayed sober in White Flag for decades who still go on every single

booked Commitment, they go every time, dependable as death, even when the Celtics are on Spontaneous-Dis they hit the old Commitment trail, they remain rabidly Active With Their Group; and the Crocodiles in the car invite Gately to see the coincidence of long-term contented sobriety and rabidly tireless AA Activity as not a coincidence at all. The backs of their necks are complexly creased. The Crocodiles up front look into the rearview mirror and narrow their baggy bright-white eyes at Gately in the sagging backseat with the other new guys, and the Crocodiles say they can't even begin to say how many new guys they've seen Come In and then get sucked back Out There, Come In to AA for a while and Hang In and put together a little sober time and have things start to get better, head-wise and life-quality-wise, and after a while the new guys get cocky, they decide they've gotten 'Well,' and they get really busy at the new job sobriety's allowed them to get, or maybe they buy season Celtics tickets, or they rediscover pussy and start chasing pussy (these withered gnarled toothless totally post-sexual old fuckers actually say *pussy*), but one way or another these poor cocky clueless new bastards start gradually drifting away from rabid Activity In The Group, and then away from their Group itself, and then little by little gradually drift away from any AA meetings at all, and then, without the protection of meetings or a Group, in time — oh there's always plenty of time, the Disease is fiendishly patient — how in time they forget what it was like, the ones that've cockily drifted, they forget who and what they are, they forget about the Disease; until like one day they're at like maybe a Celtics-Sixers game, and the good old Fleet/First Interstate Center's hot, and they think what could just one cold foamer hurt, after all this sober time, now that they've gotten 'Well.' Just one cold one. What could it hurt. And after that one it's like they'd never stopped, if they've got the Disease. And how in a month or six months or a year they have to Come Back In, back to the Boston AA halls and their old Group, tottering, DiT.ing, with their faces hanging down around their knees all over again, or maybe it's five or ten years before they can get it up to get back In, beaten to shit again, or else their system isn't ready for the recurred abuse again after some sober time and they die Out There — the Crocodiles are always talking in hushed, 'Nam-like tones about *Out There* — or else, worse, maybe they kill somebody in a blackout and spend the rest of their lives in MCI-Walpole drinking raisin jack fermented in the seatless toilet and trying to recall what they did to get in there, Out There; or else, worst of all, these cocky new guys drift back Out There and have nothing sufficiently horrible to Finish them happen at all, just go back to drinking 24/7/365, to not-living, behind bars, undead, back in the Disease's cage all over again. The Crocodiles talk about how they can't count the number of guys that've Come In for a while and drifted away and gone back Out There and died, or not gotten to die. They even point some of these guys out — gaunt gray spectral men reeling on

sidewalks with all that they own in a trashbag — as the White Flaggers drive slowly by in their well-maintained cars. Old emphysemic Francis G. in particular likes to slow his LeSabre down at a corner in front of some jack-legged loose-faced homeless fuck who'd once been in AA and drifted cockily out and roll down his window and yell 'Live it up!'

Of course — the Crocodiles dig at each other with their knobby elbows and guffaw and wheeze — they say when they tell Gately to either Hang In AA and get rabidly Active or else die in slime of course it's only a *suggestion*. They howl and choke and slap their knees at this. It's your classic in-type joke. There are, by ratified tradition, no 'musts' in Boston AA. No doctrine or dogma or rules. They can't kick you out. You don't have to do what they say. Do exactly as you please — if you still trust what seems to please you. The Crocodiles roar and wheeze and pound on the dash and bob in the front seat in abject AA mirth.

Boston AA's take on itself is that it's a benign anarchy, that any order to the thing is a function of Miracle. No regs, no musts, only love and support and the occasional humble suggestion born of shared experience. A non-authoritarian, dogma-free movement. Normally a gifted cynic, with a keen bullshit-antenna, Gately needed over a year to pinpoint the ways in which he feels like Boston AA really is actually sub-rosa dogmatic. You're not supposed to pick up any sort of altering Substance, of course; that goes without saying; but the Fellowship's official line is that if you do slip or drift or fuck up or forget and go Out There for a night and absorb a Substance and get all your Disease's triggers pulled again they want you to know they not only invite but urge you to come on back to meetings as quickly as possible. They're pretty sincere about this, since a lot of new people slip and slide a bit, total-abstinence-wise, in the beginning. Nobody's supposed to judge you or snub you for slipping. Everybody's here to help. Everybody knows that the returning slippee has punished himself enough just being Out There, and that it takes incredible desperation and humility to eat your pride and wobble back In and put the Substance down again after you've fucked up the first time and the Substance is calling to you all over again. There's the sort of sincere compassion about fucking up that empathy makes possible, although some of the AAs will nod smugly when they find out the slippee didn't take some of the basic suggestions. Even newcomers who can't even start to quit yet and show up with suspicious flask-sized bulges in their coat pockets and list progressively to starboard as the meeting progresses are urged to keep coming, Hang In, stay, as long as they're not too disruptive. Inebriates are discouraged from driving themselves home after the Lord's Prayer, but nobody's going to wrestle your keys away. Boston AA stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member. Please say and do whatever you wish. Of course there are about a dozen basic suggestions,¹³⁸ and of course people who cockily decide they don't wish to abide

by the basic suggestions are constantly going back Out There and then wobbling back in with their faces around their knees and confessing from the podium that they didn't take the suggestions and have paid full price for their willful arrogance and have learned the hard way and but now they're back, by God, and this time they're going to follow the suggestions to the bloody *letter* just see if they don't. Gately's sponsor Francis ('Ferocious Francis') G., the Crocodile that Gately finally got up the juice to ask to be his sponsor, compares the totally optional basic suggestions in Boston AA to, say for instance if you're going to jump out of an airplane, they 'suggest' you wear a parachute: But of course you do what you want. Then he starts laughing until he's coughing so bad he has to sit down.

The bitch of the thing is you have to *want* to. If you don't *want* to do as you're told — I mean as it's suggested you do — it means that your own personal will is still in control, and Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It's now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience's term for the Disease is: *The Spider*.¹³⁹ You have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will. This is why most people will Come In and Hang In only after their own entangled will has just about killed them. You have to want to surrender your will to people who know how to Starve The Spider. You have to want to take the suggestions, want to abide by the traditions of anonymity, humility, surrender to the Group conscience. If you don't obey, nobody will kick you out. They won't have to. You'll end up kicking *yourself* out, if you steer by your own sick will. This is maybe why just about everybody in the White Flag Group tries so hard to be so disgustingly humble, kind, helpful, tactful, cheerful, nonjudgmental, tidy, energetic, sanguine, modest, generous, fair, orderly, patient, tolerant, attentive, truthful. It isn't like the Group makes them do it. It's more like that the only people who end up able to hang for serious time in AA are the ones who willingly try to be these things. This is why, to the cynical newcomer or fresh Ennet House resident, serious AAs look like these weird combinations of Gandhi and Mr. Rogers with tattoos and enlarged livers and no teeth who used to beat wives and diddle daughters and now rhapsodize about their bowel movements. It's all optional; do it or die.

So but like e.g. Gately puzzled for quite some time about why these AA meetings where nobody kept order seemed so orderly. No interrupting, fist-cuffery, no heckled invectives, no poisonous gossip or beefs over the tray's last Oreos. Where was the hard-ass Sergeant at Arms who enforced these principles they guaranteed would save your ass? Pat Montesian and Eugenio Martinez and Ferocious Francis the Crocodile wouldn't answer Gately's questions about where's the enforcement. They just all smiled coy smiles

and said to Keep Coming, an apothegm Gately found just as trite as 'Easy Does It!' 'Live and Let Live!'

How do trite things get to be trite? Why is the truth usually not just un- but *anti*-interesting? Because every one of the seminal little mini-epiphanies you have in early AA is always polyesterishly banal, Gately admits to residents. He'll tell how, as a resident, right after that one Harvard Square industrial-grunge post-punk, this guy whose name was Bernard but insisted on being called Plasmatron-7, right after old Plasmatron-7 drank nine bottles of NyQuil in the men's upstairs head and pitched forward face-first into his instant spuds at supper and got discharged on the spot, and got fireman-carried by Calvin Thrust right out to Comm. Ave.'s Green Line T-stop, and Gately got moved up from the newest guys' 5-Man room to take Plasmatron-7's old bunk in the less-new guys' 3-Man room, Gately had an epiphanic AA-related nocturnal dream he'll be the first to admit was banally trite.¹⁴⁰ In the dream Gately and row after row of totally average and non-unique U.S. citizens were kneeling on their knees on polyester cushions in a crummy low-rent church basement. The basement was your average low-rent church basement except for this dream-church's basement walls were of like this weird thin clean clear glass. Everybody was kneeling on these cheap but comfortable cushions, and it was weird because nobody seemed to have any clear idea why they were all on their knees, and there was like no tier-boss or sergeant-at-arms-type figure around coercing them into kneeling, and yet there was this sense of some compelling unspoken reason why they were all kneeling. It was one of those dream things where it didn't make sense but did. And but then some lady over to Gately's left got off her knees and all of a sudden stood up, just like to stretch, and the minute she stood up she was all of a sudden yanked backward with terrible force and sucked out through one of the clear glass walls of the basement, and Gately had winced to get ready for the sound of serious glass, but the glass wall didn't shatter so much as just let the cartwheeling lady sort of melt right through, and healed back over where she'd melted through, and she was gone. Her cushion and then Gately notices a couple other polyester cushions in some of the rows here and there were empty. And it was then, as he was looking around, that Gately in his dream looked slowly up overhead at the ceiling's exposed pipes and could now all of a sudden see, rotating slow and silent through the basement a meter above the different-shaped and -colored heads of the kneeling assembly, he could see a long plain hooked stick, like the crook of a giant shepherd, like the hook that appears from stage-left and drags bad acts out of tomato-range, moving slowly above them in French-curved circles, almost demurely, as if quietly scanning; and when a mild-faced guy in a cardigan happened to stand up and was hooked by the hooked stick and pulled ass-over-teakettle out through the soundless glass membrane Gately turned his big head as far as he could without leaving the

cushion and could see, now, just outside the wall's clean pane, trolling with the big stick, an extraordinarily snappily dressed and authoritative figure manipulating the giant shepherd's crook with one hand and coolly examining the nails of his other hand from behind a mask that was simply the plain yellow-smiley-face circle that accompanied invitations to have a nice day. The figure was so impressive and trustworthy and casually self-assured as to be both soothing and compelling. The authoritative figure radiated good cheer and abundant charm and limitless patience. It manipulated the big stick in the coolly purposeful way of the sort of angler who you know isn't going to throw back anything he catches. The slow silent stick with the hook he held was what kept them all kneeling below the baroque little circumferences of its movement overhead.

One of Ennet House's live-in Staffers' rotating P.M. job's is to be awake and on-call in the front office all night for Dream Duty — people in early recovery from Substances often get hit with real horror-show dreams, or else traumatically seductive Substance-dreams, and sometimes trite but important epiphanic dreams, and the Staffer on Dream Duty is required to be up doing paperwork or sit-ups or staring out the broad bay window in the front office downstairs, ready to make coffee and listen to the residents' dreams and offer the odd practical upbeat Boston-AA-type insight into possible implications for the dreamer's progress in recovery — but Gately had no need to clomp downstairs for a Staffer's feedback on this one, since it was so powerfully, tritely obvious. It had come clear to Gately that Boston AA had the planet's most remorselessly hard-ass and efficient sergeant at arms. Gately lay there, overhanging all four sides of his bunk, his broad square forehead beaded with revelation: Boston AA's Sergeant at Arms stood *outside* the orderly meeting halls, in that much-invoked Out There where exciting clubs full of good cheer throbbed gaily below lit signs with neon bottles endlessly pouring. AA's patient enforcer was always and everywhere Out There: it stood casually checking its cuticles in the astringent fluorescence of pharmacies that took forged Talwin scrips for a hefty surcharge, in the onionlight through paper shades in the furnished rooms of strung-out nurses who financed their own 'cages' maintenance with stolen pharmaceutical samples, in the isopropyl reek of the storefront offices of stooped old chain-smoking MD's whose scrip-pads were always out and who needed only to hear 'pain' and see cash. In the home of a snot-strangled Canadian VIP and the office of an implacable Revere A.D.A. whose wife has opted for dentures at thirty-five. AA's disciplinarian looked damn good and smelled even better and dressed to impress and his blank black-on-yellow smile never faltered as he sincerely urged you to have a nice day. Just one more last nice day. Just one.

And that was the first night that cynical Gately willingly took the basic suggestion to get down on his big knees by his undersized spring-shot Ennet

House bunk and Ask For Help from something he still didn't believe in, ask for his own sick Spider-bit will to be taken from him and fumigated and squished.

But and plus in Boston AA there is, unfortunately, dogma, too, it turns out; and some of it is both dated and smug. And there's an off-putting jargon in the Fellowship, a psychobabble dialect that's damn near impossible to follow at first, says Ken Erdedy, the college-boy ad exec semi-new at Ennet House, complaining to Gately at the White Flag meeting's raffle-break. Boston AA meetings are unusually long, an hour and a half instead of the national hour, but here they also have this formal break at about 45 minutes where everybody can grab a sandwich or Oreos and a sixth cup of coffee and stand around and chat, and bond, where people can pull their sponsors aside and confide some trite insight or emotional snafu that the sponsor can swiftly, privately validate but also place in the larger imperative context of the primary need not to absorb a Substance today, just today, no matter what happens. While everybody's bonding and interfacing in a bizarre system of catchphrases, there's also the raffle, another Boston idiosyncrasy: the newest of the White Flag newcomers trying to Get Active In Group Service wobble around with rattan baskets and packs of tickets, one for a buck and three for a fin, and the winner eventually gets announced from the podium and everyone hisses and shouts 'Fix!' and laughs, and the winner wins a Big Book or an *As Bill Sees It* or a *Came To Believe*, which if he's got some sober time in and already owns all the AA literature from winning previous raffles he'll stand up and publicly offer it to any newcomer who wants it, which means any newcomer with enough humble desperation to come up to him and ask for it and risk being given a phone number to carry around in his wallet.

At the White Flag raffle-break Gately usually stands around chain-smoking with the Ennet House residents, so that he's casually available to answer questions and empathize with complaints. He usually waits til after the meeting to do his own complaining to Ferocious Francis, with whom Gately now shares the important duty of 'breaking down the hall,' sweeping floors and emptying ashtrays and wiping down the long cafeteria tables, which F.F.G.'s function is limited because he's on oxygen and his function consists mostly of standing there sucking oxygen and holding an unlit cigar while Gately breaks down the hall. Gately rather likes Ken Erdedy, who came into the House about a month ago from some cushy Belmont rehab. Erdedy's an upscale guy, what Gately's mother would have called a yuppie, an account executive at Viney and Veals Advertising downtown his Intake form said, and though he's about Gately's age he's so softly good-looking in that soft mannequinish way Harvard and Tufts schoolboys have, and looks so smooth and groomed all the time even in jeans and a plain cotton sweater, that Gately thinks of him as much younger, totally un-

grizzled, and refers to him mentally as 'kid.' Erdedy's in the House mainly for 'marijuana addiction,' which Gately has a hard time Identifying with anybody getting in enough trouble with weed to leave his job and condo to bunk in a room full of tattooed guys who smoke in their sleep, and to work like pumping gas (Erdedy just started his nine-month humility job at the Merit station down by North Harvard St. in Allston) for 32 minimum-wage hours a week. Or to have his leg be joggling like that all the time from tensions of Withdrawal: from fucking grass? But it's not Gately's place to say what's bad enough to make somebody Come In and what isn't, not for anybody else but himself, and the shapely but big-time-troubled new girl Kate Gompert — who mostly just stays in her bed in the new women's 5-Woman room when she isn't at meetings, and is on a Suicidality Contract with Pat, and isn't getting the usual pressure to get a humility job, and gets to get some sort of scrip-meds out of the meds locker every morning — Kate Gompert's counselor Danielle S. reported at the last Staff Meeting that Kate had finally opened up and told her she'd mostly Come In for weed, too, and not the lightweight prescription tranqs she'd listed on her Intake form. Gately used to treat weed like tobacco. He wasn't like some other narcotics addicts who smoked weed when they couldn't get anything else; he always smoked weed and could always get something else and simply smoked weed while he did whatever else he could get. Gately doesn't miss weed much. The shocker-type AA Miracle is he doesn't much miss the Demerol, either, today.

A hard November wind is spattering goopy sleet against the broad windows all around the hall. The Provident Nursing Home cafeteria is lit by a checkerboard array of oversized institutional bulbs overhead, a few of which are always low and give off fluttery strobes. The fluttering bulbs are why Pat Montesian and all the other photic-seizure-prone area AAs never go to White Flag, opting for the Freeway Group over in Brookline or the candyass Lake Street meeting up in West Newton on Sunday nights, which Pat M. bizarrely drives all the way up from her home down on the South Shore in Milton to get to, to hear people talk about their analysts and Saabs. There is no way to account for people's taste in AA. The White Flag hall is so brightly lit up all Gately can see out any of the windows is a kind of shiny drooling black against everybody's pale reflection.

Miracle's one of the Boston AA terms Erdedy and the brand-new and very shaky veiled girl resident standing over him complain they find hard to stomach, as in 'We're All Miracles Here' and 'Don't Leave Five Minutes Before The Miracle Happens' and 'To Stay Sober For 24 Hours Is A Miracle.'

Except the brand-new girl, either Joelle V. or Joelle D., who said she'd hit the occasional meeting in the past before her Bottom and had been roundly repelled, and is still pretty much cynical and repelled, she said on the way

down to Provident under Gately's direct new-resident supervision, says she finds even the word *Miracle* preferable to the constant AA talk about 'the Grace of God,' which reminds her of wherever she grew up, where she's indicated places of worship were often aluminum trailers or fiberboard shacks and church-goers played with copperheads in the services to honor something about serpents and tongues.

Gately's also observed how Erdedy's also got that Tufts-Harvard way of speaking without seeming to move his lower jaw.

'It's as if it's its own country or something,' Erdedy complains, legs crossed in maybe a bit of a faggy schoolboy way, looking around at the raffle-break, sitting in Gately's generous shadow. 'The first time I ever talked, over at the St. E's meeting on Wednesday, somebody comes up after the Lord's Prayer and says "Good to hear you, I could really I.D. with that bottom you were sharing about, the isolating, the can't-and-can't, it's the greenest I've felt in months, hearing you." And then gives me this raffle ticket with his phone number that I didn't ask for and says I'm right where I'm supposed to be, which I have to say I found a bit patronizing.'

The best noise Gately produces is his laugh, which booms and reassures, and a certain haunted hardness goes out of his face when he laughs. Like most huge men, Gately has kind of a high hoarse speaking voice; his larynx sounds compressed. 'I still hate that right-where-you're-supposed-to-be thing,' he says, laughing. He likes that Erdedy, sitting, looks right up at him and cocks his head slightly to let Gately know he's got his full attention. Gately doesn't know that this is a requisite for a white-collar job where you have to show you're attending fully to clients who are paying major sums and get to expect an overt display of full attention. Gately is still not yet a good judge of anything about upscale people except where they tend to hide their valuables.

Boston AA, with its emphasis on the Group, is intensely social. The raffle-break goes on and on. An intoxicated street-guy with a venulated nose and missing incisors and electrician's tape wrapped around his shoes is trying to sing 'Volare' up at the empty podium microphone. He is gently, cheerfully induced offstage by a Crocodile with a sandwich and an arm around the shoulders. There's a certain pathos to the Crocodile's kindness, his clean flannel arm around the weatherstained shoulders, which pathos Gately feels and likes being able to feel it, while he says 'But at least the "Good to hear you" I quit minding. It's just what they say when somebody's got done speaking. They can't say like "Good job" or "You spoke well," cause it can't be anybody's place here to judge if anybody else did good or bad or whatnot. You know what I'm saying, Tiny, there?'

Tiny Ewell, in a blue suit and laser chronometer and tiny shoes whose shine you could read by, is sharing a dirty aluminum ashtray with Nell Gunther, who has a glass eye which she amuses herself by usually wearing

so the pupil and iris face in and the dead white and tiny manufacturer's specifications on the back of the eye face out. Both of them are pretending to study the blond false wood of the tabletop, and Ewell makes a bit of a hostile show of not looking up or responding to Gately or entering into the conversation in any way, which is his choice and on him alone, so Gately lets it go. Wade McDade has a Walkman going, which is technically OK at the raffle-break although it's not a real good idea. Chandler Foss is flossing his teeth and pretending to throw the used floss at Jennifer Belbin. Most of the Ennet House residents are mingling satisfactorily. The couple of residents that are black are mingling with other blacks.¹⁴¹ The Diehl kid and Doony Glynn are amusing themselves telling homosexuality jokes to Morris Hanley, who sits smoothing his hair with his fingertips, pretending to not even acknowledge, his left hand still bandaged. Alfonso Parias-Carbo is standing with three Allston Group guys, smiling broadly and nodding, not understanding a word anybody says. Bruce Green has gone downstairs to the men's head and amused Gately by asking his permission first. Gately told him to go knock himself out. Green has good big arms and no gut, even after all the Substances, and Gately suspects he might have played some ball at some point. Kate Gompert is totally by herself at a nonsmoking table over by a window, ignoring her pale reflection and making little cardboard tents out of her raffle tickets and moving them around. Clenette Henderson clutches another black girl and laughs and says 'Girl!' several times. Emil Minty is clutching his head. Geoff Day in his black turtleneck and blazer keeps lurking on the fringes of various groups of people pretending he's part of the conversations. No immediate sign of Burt F. Smith or Charlotte Treat. Randy Lenz, in his cognito white mustache and sideburns, is doubtless at the pay phone in the northeast corner of the Provident lobby downstairs: Lenz spends nearly unacceptable amounts of time either on a phone or trying to get in position to use a phone. 'Cause what I like,' Gately says to Erdedy (Erdedy really is listening, even though there's a compellingly cheap young woman in a brief white skirt and absurd black mesh stockings sitting with her legs nicely crossed — one-strap low-spike black Ferragamos, too — at the periphery of his vision, and the woman is with a large man, which makes her even more compelling; and also the veiled new girl's breasts and her hips' clefs are compelling and distracting, next to him, even in a long baggy loose blue sweater that matches the embroidered selvage around her veil), 'What I think I like is how "It was good to hear you" ends up, like, saying two separate things together.' Gately's also saying this to Joelle, who it's weird but you can tell she's looking at you, even through the linen veil. There's maybe half a dozen or so other veiled people in the White Flag hall tonight; a decent percentage of people in the 11-Step Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed are also in 12-Step fellowships for other issues besides hideous deformity. Most of the room's veiled AAs

are women, though there is this one male veiled U.H.I.D. guy that's an active White Flagger, Tommy S. or F., who years ago nodded out on a stuffed acrylic couch with a bottle of Rémy and a lit Tiparillo — the guy now wears U.H.I.D. veils and a whole spectrum of silk turtlenecks and assorted hats and classy lambskin driving gloves. Gately's had the U.H.I.D.-and-veil philosophy explained to him in passing a couple times but still doesn't much get it, it seems like a gesture of shame and concealment, still, to him, the veil. Pat Montesian had said there's been a few other U.H.I.D.s who'd gone through Ennet House prior to the Year of Dairy Products From the American Heartland, which is when new resident Gately came wobbling in, but this Joelle van Dyne, who Gately feels he has zero handle on yet as a person or how serious she is about putting down Substances and Coming In to really get straight, this Joelle is the first veiled resident Gately's had under him, as a Staffer. This Joelle girl, that wasn't even on the two-month waiting list for Intake, got in overnight under some private arrangement with somebody on the House's Board of Directors, upscale Enfield guys into charity and directing. There'd been no Intake interview with Pat at the House; the girl just showed up two days ago right after supper. She'd been up at Brigham and Women's for five days after some sort of horrific O.D.-type situation said to have included both defib paddles and priests. She'd had real luggage and this like Chinese portable dressing-screen thing with clouds and pop-eyed dragons that even folded lengthwise took both Green and Parias-Carbo to lug upstairs. There's been no talk of a humility job for her, and Pat's counseling the girl personally. Pat's got some sort of privately directed arrangement with the girl; Gately's already seen enough private-type arrangements between certain Staffers and residents to feel like it's maybe kind of a character defect of Ennet House. A girl from the Brookline Young People's Group over in a cheerleader skirt and slut-stockings is ignoring all the ashtrays and putting her extra-long gasper out on the bare tabletop two rows over as she laughs like a seal at something an acne'd guy in a long camelhair car coat he hasn't taken off and sockless leather dance-shoes Gately's never seen at a meeting before says. And he's got his hand on hers as she grinds the gasper out. Something like putting a cigarette out against the wood-grain plastic tabletop, which Gately can already see the ragged black burn-divot that's formed, it's something the rankness of which would never have struck him one way or the other, before, until Gately took on half the break-down-the-hall-and-wipe-down-the-tables job at Ferocious Francis G.'s suggestion, and now he feels sort of proprietary about the Provident's tabletops. But it's not like he can go over and take anybody else's inventory and tell them how to behave. He settles for imagining the girl pinwheeling through the air toward a glass wall.

'When they say it it sort of means like what you said was good for them, it helped them out somehow,' he says, 'but plus now also I like saying it

myself because if you think about it it also means it was good to be *able* to hear you. To really hear.' He's trying subtly to alternate and look at Erdedy and Joelle both, like he's addressing them both. It's not something he's good at. His head's too big to be subtle with. 'Because I remember for like the first sixty days or so I couldn't hear shit. I didn't hear nothing. I'd just sit there and Compare, I'd go to myself, like, "I never rolled a car," "I never lost a wife," "I never bled from the rectum." Gene would tell me to just keep coming for a while and sooner or later I'd start to be able to both listen and hear. He said it's hard to really hear. But he wouldn't say what was the difference between hearing and listening, which pissed me off. But after a while I started to really *hear*. It turns out — and this is just for me, maybe — but it turned out *hearing* the speaker means like all of a sudden hearing how fucking similar the way he felt and the way I felt were, Out There, at the Bottom, before we each Came In. Instead of just sitting here resenting being here and thinking how he bled from the ass and I didn't and how that means I'm not as bad as him yet and I can still be Out There.'

One of the tricks to being of real service to newcomers is not to lecture or give advice but only talk about your own personal experience and what you were told and what you found out personally, and to do it in a casual but positive and encouraging way. Plus you're supposed to try and Identify with the newcomer's feelings as much as possible. Ferocious Francis G. says this is one of the ways guys with just a year or two sober can be most helpful: being able to sincerely ID with the newly Sick and Suffering. Ferocious Francis told Gately as they were wiping down tables that if a Crocodile with decades of sober AA time can still sincerely empathize and Identify with a whacked-out bug-eyed Disease-ridden newcomer then there's something deeply fucked up about that Crocodile's recovery. The Crocodiles, decades sober, live in a totally different spiritual galaxy, inside. One long-timer describes it as he has a whole new unique interior spiritual castle, now, to live in.

Part of this new Joelle girl's pull for Ken Erdedy isn't just the sexual thing of her body, which he finds made way sexier by the way the overlarge blue coffee-stained sweater tries to downplay the body thing without being so hubristic as to try to hide it — sloppy sexiness pulls Erdedy in like a well-groomed moth to a lit window — but it's also the veil, wondering what horrific contrast to the body's allure lies swollen or askew under that veil; it gives the pull a perverse sideways slant that makes it even more distracting, and so Erdedy cocks his head a little more up at Gately and narrows his eyes to make his listening-look terribly intense. He doesn't know that there's an abstract distance in the look that makes it seem like he's studying a real bitch of a 7-iron on the tenth rough or something; the look doesn't communicate what he thinks his audience wants it to.

The raffle-break is winding down as everybody starts to want their own

ashtray. Two more big urns of coffee emerge from the kitchen door over by the literature table. Erdedy is probably the second-biggest leg-and-foot-joggler in present residence, after Geoffrey D. Joelle v. D. now says something very strange. It's a very strange little moment, right at the end of the raffle-break, and Gately later finds it impossible to describe it in his Log entry for the P.M. shift. It is the first time he realizes that Joelle's voice — crisp and rich and oddly empty, her accent just barely Southern and with a strange and it turns out Kentuckian lapse in the pronunciation of all apicals except *s* — is familiar in a faraway way that both makes it familiar and yet lets Gately be sure he's never once met her before, Out There. She inclines the plane of her blue-bordered veil briefly toward the floor's tile (very bad tile, scab-colored, nauseous, worst thing about the big room by far), brings it back up level (unlike Erdedy she's standing, and in flats is nearly Gately's height), and says that she's finding it especially hard to take when these earnest ravaged folks at the lectern say they're 'Here But For the Grace of God,' except that's not the strange thing she says, because when Gately nods hard and starts to interject about 'It was the same for —' and wants to launch into a fairly standard Boston AA agnostic-soothing riff about the 'God' in the slogan being just shorthand for a totally subjective and up-to-you 'Higher Power' and AA being merely spiritual instead of dogmatically religious, a sort of benign anarchy of subjective spirit, Joelle cuts off his interjection and says that but that *her* trouble with it is that 'But For the Grace of God' is a subjunctive, a counterfactual, she says, and can make sense only when introducing a conditional clause, like e.g. 'But For the Grace of God I *would* have died on Molly Notkin's bathroom floor,' so that an indicative transposition like 'I'm here But For the Grace of God' is, she says, literally senseless, and regardless of whether she *hears* it or not it's meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radaranage at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language she has to have Blind Faith in. Gately looks at a rectangular blue-selvaged expanse of clean linen whose gentle rises barely allude to any features below, he looks at her and has no idea whether she's serious or not, or whacked, or trying like Dr. Geoff Day to erect Denial-type fortifications with some kind of intellectualish showing-off, and he doesn't know what to say in reply, he has absolutely nothing in his huge square head to Identify with her with or latch onto or say in encouraging reply, and for an instant the Provident cafeteria seems pin-drop silent, and his own heart grips him like an infant rattling the bars of its playpen, and he feels a greasy wave of an old and almost unfamiliar panic, and for a second it seems inevitable that at some point in his life he's going to get high again and be back in the cage all over again, because for a second the blank white veil levelled at him seems a screen on which might well be

projected a casual and impressive black and yellow smily-face, grinning, and he feels all the muscles in his own face loosen and descend kneeward; and the moment hangs there, distended, until the White Flag raffle coordinator for November, Glenn K., glides up to the podium mike in his scarlet velour caparison and makeup and candelabrum with candles the same color as the floor tile and uses the plastic gavel to formally end the break and bring things back to whatever passes here for order, for the raffle drawing. The Watertown guy with middle-level sober time who wins the Big Book publicly offers it to any newcomer that wants it, and Gately is pleased to see Bruce Green raise a big hand, and decides he'll just turn it over and ask Ferocious Francis G. for feedback on subjunctives and countersexuals, and the infant leaves its playpen alone inside him, and the rivets of the long table his seat's attached to make a brief distressed noise as he sits and settles in for the second half of the meeting, asking silently for help to be determined to try to really hear or die trying.

NNYC's harbor's Liberty Island's gigantic Lady has the sun for a crown and holds what looks like a huge photo album under one iron arm, and the other arm holds aloft a product. The product is changed each 1 Jan. by brave men with pitons and cranes.

But it's funny what they'll find funny, AAs at Boston meetings, listening. The next Advanced Basics guy summoned by their gleamingly bald western-wear chairman to speak is dreadfully, transparently unfunny: painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse and impress them. The guy's got the sort of professional background where he's used to trying to impress gatherings of persons. He's dying to be liked up there. He's performing. The White Flag crowd can see all this. Even the true morons among them see right through the guy. This is not a regular audience. A Boston AA is very sensitive to the presehce of ego. When the new guy introduces himself and makes an ironic gesture and says, 'I'm told I've been given the Gift of Desperation. I'm looking for the exchange window,' it's so clearly unsponataneous, rehearsed — plus commits the subtle but cardinal Message-offense of appearing to deprecate the Program rather than the Self — that just a few polite titters resound, and people shift in their seats with a slight but signal discomfort. The worst punishment Gately's seen inflicted on a Commitment speaker is when the host crowd gets embarrassed for him. Speakers who are accustomed to figuring out what an audience wants to hear and then supplying it

find out quickly that this particular audience does not want to be supplied with what someone else thinks it wants. It's another conundrum Gately finally ran out of cerebral steam on. Part of finally getting comfortable in Boston AA is just finally running out of steam in terms of trying to figure stuff like this out. Because it literally makes no sense. Close to two hundred people all punishing somebody by getting embarrassed for him, killing him by empathetically dying right there with him, for him, up there at the podium. The applause when this guy's done has the relieved feel of a fist unclenching, and their cries of 'Keep Coming!' are so sincere it's almost painful.

But then in equally paradoxical contrast have a look at the next Advanced Basics speaker — this tall baggy sack of a man, also painfully new, but this poor bastard here completely and openly nerve-racked, wobbling his way up to the front, his face shiny with sweat and his talk full of blank cunctations and disassociated leaps — as the guy speaks with terrible abashed chagrin about trying to hang on to his job Out There as his A.M. hangovers became more and more debilitating until he finally got so shaky and aphasiac he just couldn't bear to even face the customers who'd come knocking on his Department's door — he was, from 0800 to 1600h., the Complaint Department of Filene's Department Store —

— 'What I did finally, Jesus I don't know where I got such a stupid idea from, I brought this hammer in from home and brought it in and kept it right there under my desk, on the floor, and when somebody knocked at the door I'd just . . . I'd sort of *dive* onto the floor and crawl under the desk and grab up the hammer, and I'd start in to pounding on the leg of the desk, real hard-like, whacketa whacketa, like I was fixing something down there. And if they opened the door finally and came in anyhow or came in to bitch about me not opening the door I'd just stay out of sight under there pounding away like hell and I'd yell out I was going to be a moment, just a moment, emergency repairs, be with them momentarily. I guess you can guess how all that pounding felt, you know, under there, what with the big head I had every morning. I'd hide under there and pound and pound with the hammer till they finally gave up and went away, I'd watch from under the desk and tell when they finally went away, from I could see their feet from under the desk.'

— And about how the hiding-under-the-desk-and-pounding thing worked, incredibly enough, for almost the whole last year of his drinking, which ended around this past Labor Day, when one vindictive complainant finally figured out where in Filene's to go to complain about the Complaint Dept. — the White Flaggers all fell about, they were totally pleased and amused, the Crocodiles removed their cigars and roared and wheezed and stomped both feet on the floor and showed scary teeth, everyone roaring with Identification and pleasure. This even though, as the speaker's confu-

sion at their delight openly betrays, the story wasn't meant to be one bit funny: it was just the truth.

Gately's found it's got to be the truth, is the thing. He's trying hard to really hear the speakers — he's stayed in the habit he'd developed as an Ennet resident of sitting right up where he could see dentition and pores, with zero obstructions or heads between him and the podium, so the speaker fills his whole vision, which makes it easier to really hear — trying to concentrate on receiving the Message instead of brooding on that odd old dark moment of aphasiac terror with this veiled like pseudo-intellectual-type girl who was probably just in some sort of complex Denial, or on whatever doubtlessly grim place he feels like he knows that smooth echoless slightly Southern voice from. The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle.

This doesn't mean you can't pay empty or hypocritical lip-service, however. Paradoxically enough. The desperate, newly sober White Flaggers are always encouraged to invoke and pay empty lip-service to slogans they don't yet understand or believe — e.g. 'Easy Does It!' and 'Turn It Over!' and 'One Day At a Time!' It's called 'Fake It Till You Make It,' itself an oft-invoked slogan. Everybody on a Commitment who gets up publicly to speak starts out saying he's an alcoholic, says it whether he believes he is yet or not; then everybody up there says how Grateful he is to be sober today and how great it is to be Active and out on a Commitment with his Group, even if he's not grateful or pleased about it at all. You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it, just like if you ask somebody with serious sober time how long you'll have to keep schlepping to all these goddamn meetings he'll smile that infuriating smile and tell you just until you start to *want* to go to all these goddamn meetings. There are some definite cultish, brainwashy elements to the AA Program (the term *Program* itself resonates darkly, for those who fear getting brainwashed), and Gately tries to be candid with his residents re this issue. But he also shrugs and tells them that by the end of his oral-narcotics and burglary careers he'd sort of decided the old brain needed a good scrub and soak anyway. He says he pretty much held his brain out and told Pat Montesian and Gene M. to go ahead and wash away. But he tells his residents he's thinking now that the Program might be more like deprogramming than actual washing, considering the psychic job the Disease's Spider has done on them all. Gately's most marked progress in turning his life around in sobriety, besides the fact that

he no longer drives off into the night with other people's merchandise, is that he tries to be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times, now, without too much calculation about how a listener's going to feel about what he says. This is harder than it sounds. But so that's why on Commitments, sweating at the podium as only a large man can sweat, his thing is that he always says he's Lucky to be sober today, instead of that he's Grateful today, because he admits that the former is always true, every day, even though a lot of the time he still doesn't feel Grateful, more like shocked that this thing seems to work, plus a lot of the time also ashamed and depressed about how he's spent over half his life, and scared he might be permanently brain-damaged or retarded from Substances, plus also usually without any sort of clue about where he's headed in sobriety or what he's supposed to be doing or about really anything at all except that he's not at all keen to be back Out There behind any bars, again, in a hurry. Ferocious Francis G. likes to punch Gately's shoulder and tell him he's right where he's supposed to be.

So but also know that causal attribution, like irony, is death, speaking-on-Commitments-wise. Crocodiles' temple-veins will actually stand out and pulse with irritation if you start trying to blame your Disease on some cause or other, and everybody with any kind of sober time will pale and writhe in their chair. See e.g. the White Flag audience's discomfort when the skinny hard-faced Advanced Basics girl who gets up to speak next to last posits that she was an eight-bag-a-day dope fiend *because* at sixteen she'd had to become a stripper and semi-whore at the infamous Naked I Club out on Route 1 (a number of male eyes in the audience flash with sudden recognition, and despite all willed restraint automatically do that crawly north-to-south thing down her body, and Gately can see every ashtray on the table shake from the force of Joelle V.'s shudder), and then but that she'd had to become a stripper at sixteen *because* she'd had to run away from her foster home in Saugus MA, and that she'd had to run away from home *because* . . . — here at least some of the room's discomfort is from the fact that the audience can tell the etiology is going to get head-clutchingly prolix and involved; this girl has not yet learned to Keep It Simple — . . . because, well, to begin with, she'd been adopted, and the foster parents also had their own biological daughter, and the biological daughter had, from birth, been totally paralyzed and retarded and catatonic, and the foster mother in the household was — as Joelle V. put it later to Gately — crazy as a Fucking Mud-Bug, and was in total Denial about her biological daughter's being a vegetable, and not only insisted on treating the invertebrate biological daughter like a valid member of the chordate phylum but also insisted that the father and the adopted daughter also treat It as normal and undamaged, and made the adopted daughter share a bedroom with It, bring It along to slumber parties (the speaker uses the term *It* for the invertebrate sister, and

also to tell the truth uses the phrase 'drag It along' rather than 'bring It along,' which Gately wisely doesn't dwell over), and even to school with her, and softball practice, and the hairdresser's, and Campfire Girls, etc., where at whatever place she'd dragged It along to It would lie in a heap, drooling and incontinent under exquisite mother-bought fashions specially altered for atrophy and top-shelf Lancôme cosmetics that looked just *lurid* on It, and with only the whites of Its eyes showing, with fluid dribbling from Its mouth and elsewhere, and making unspeakable gurgly noises, completely pale and moist and stagnant; and then, when the adopted daughter now speaking turned fifteen, the rabidly Catholic wacko foster mother even announced that OK now that the adopted daughter was fifteen she could go out on dates, but only as long as It got to come along too, in other words that the only dates the fifteen-year-old adopted daughter could go out on were double dates with It and whatever submammalian escort the speaker could root up for It; and how this sort of stuff went on and on; and how the nightmarishness of Its continual pale soggy ubiquitousness in her young life would alone be more than sufficient to cause and explain the speaker's later drug addiction, she feels, but that also it so happened that the foster family's quiet smiling patriarch, who worked 0900 to 2100 as a claims processor for Aetna, it turned out that the cheerful smiling foster father actually made the wacko foster mother look like a Doric column of stability by comparison, because there turned out to be things about the biological daughter's utter paralytic pliability and catatonic inability to make anything except unspeakable gurgly noises that the smiling father found greatly to a certain very sick advantage the speaker says she has trouble openly discussing, still, even at thirty-one months sober in AA, being as yet still so retroactively Wounded and Hurting from it; but so in sum that she'd been ultimately forced to run away from the adoptive foster Saugus home and so become a Naked-I stripper and so become a raging dope fiend not, as in so many ununique cases, because she had been incestuously diddled, but because she'd been abusively forced to share a bedroom with a drooling invertebrate who by fourteen was *Itself* getting incestuously diddled on a nightly basis by a smiling biological claims processor of a father who — the speaker pauses to summon courage — who apparently liked to pretend It was Raquel Welch, the former celluloid sex goddess of the father's glandular heyday, and he even called It '*RAQUEL!*' in moments of incestuous extremity; and how, the New England summer the speaker turned fifteen and had to start dragging It along on double dates and then having to make sure to drag It back home again by 2300h. so It had plenty of time to be incestuously diddled, that summer the smiling quiet foster father even bought, had found somewhere, a cheesy rubber Raquel Welch full-head pull-on *mask*, with hair, and would now nightly come in in the dark and lift Its limp soft head up and struggle and lug to get the mask on and the relevant holes aligned for air, and then

would diddle his way to extremity and cry out 'RAQUEL!' and then but he would just clamber out and off and leave the dark bedroom smiling and sated and lots of times leave the mask still *on* It, he'd like forget, or not care, just as he seemed oblivious (But For the Grace of God, in a way) to the fetally curled skinny form of the adopted daughter lying perfectly still in the next bed, in the dark, pretending to sleep, silent, shell-breathing, with her hard skinny wounded pre-addiction face turned to the wall, in the room's next bed, her bed, the one without the collapsible crib-like hospital railings along the sides. . . . The audience is clutching its collective head, by this time only partly in empathy, as the speaker specifies how she was *de facto* emotionally all but like *forced* to flee and strip and swan-dive into the dark spiritual anesthesia of active drug addiction in a dysfunctional attempt to psychologically deal with one particular seminally scarring night of abject horror, the indescribable horror of the way It, the biological daughter, had looked up at her, the speaker, one particular final time on this one particular one of the frequent occasions the speaker had to get out of bed after the father had come and gone and tiptoe over to Its bed and lean over the cold metal hospital railing and remove the rubber Raquel Welch mask and replace it in a bedside drawer under some back issues of *Ramparts* and *Commonweal*, after carefully closing Its splayed legs and pulling down Its variously-stained designer nightie, all of which she made sure to do when the father didn't bother to, at night, so that the wacko foster mother wouldn't come in in the A.M. and find It in a rubber Raquel Welch mask with Its nightie hiked up and Its legs agape and put two and two together and get all kinds of deep Denial shattered about why the foster father always went around the foster house with a silent creepy smile, and flip up and make the invertebrate catatonic's father stop diddling It — because, the speaker figured, if the foster father had to stop diddling It it didn't exactly take Sally Jessy Raphael M.S.W. to figure out who was then probably going to get promoted to the role of Raquel, over in the next bed. The silent smiling claims-processor father never once acknowledged the adopted daughter's little post-incestuous tidyings-up. It's the kind of sick unspoken complicity characteristic of wildly dysfunctional families, confides the speaker, who's also proud she says to be a member of a splinter 12-Step Fellowship, an Adult-Child-type thing called Wounded, Hurting, Inadequately Nurtured but Ever-Recovering Survivors. But so she says it was this one particular night soon after she'd turned sixteen, after the father had come and gone and uncaringly just left Its mask on again, and over to Its bedside the speaker had to creep in the dark, to tidy up, and but this time it turned out there was a problem with the Raquel Welch mask's long auburn horsehair tresses having gotten twisted and knotted into the semi-living strands of Its own elaborately overmoussed coiffure, and the adopted daughter had to activate the perimeter of lights on Its bedside table's many-

bulbed vanity mirror to see to try to get the Raquel Welch wig untangled, and when she finally got the mask off, with the vanity mirror still blazing away, the speaker says how she was forced to gaze for the first time on Its lit-up paralytic post-diddle face, and how the expression thereon was most assuredly quite enough to force anybody with an operant limbic system¹⁴² to leg it right out of her dysfunctional foster family's home, nay and the whole community of Saugus MA, now homeless and scarred and forced by dark psychic forces straight to Route 1's infamous gauntlet of neon-lit depravity and addiction, to try and forget, rasa the tabula, wipe the memory totally out, numb it with opiates. Voice trembling, she accepts the chairperson's proffered bandanna-hankie and blows her nose one nostril at a time and says she can almost see It all over again: Its expression: in the vanity's lights only Its eyes' whites showed, and while Its utter catatonia and paralysis prevented the contraction of Its luridly rouged face's circumoral muscles into any conventional human facial-type expression, nevertheless some hideously mobile and expressive layer in the moist regions below real people's expressive facial layer, some slow-twitch layer unique to It, had blindly contracted, somehow, to gather the blank soft cheese of Its face into the sort of pinched gasping look of neurologic concentration that marks a carnal bliss beyond smiles or sighs. Its face looked post-coital sort of the way you'd imagine the vacuole and optica of a protozoan looking post-coital after it's shuddered and shot its mono-cellular load into the cold waters of some really old sea. Its facial expression was, in a word, the speaker says, unspeakably, unforgettably ghastly and horrid and scarring. It was also the exact same expression as the facial expression on the stone-robed lady's face in this one untitled photo of some Catholic statue that hung (the photo) in the dysfunctional household's parlor right above the little teak table where the dysfunctional foster mother kept her beads and Hours and lay breviary, this photo of a statue of a woman whose stone robes were half hiked up and wrinkled in the most godawfully sensually prurient way, the woman reclined against uncut rock, her robes hiked and one stone foot hanging off the rock as her legs hung parted, with a grinning little totally psychotic-looking cherub-type angel standing on the lady's open thighs and pointing a bare arrow at where the stone robe hid her cold tit, the woman's face upturned and cocked and pinched into that exact same shuddering-protozoan look beyond pleasure or pain. The wacko foster mom knelt daily to that photo, in a beaded and worshipful posture, and also required daily that It be hoisted by the adopted daughter from Its never-mentioned wheelchair and held under Its arms and lowered so as to approximate the same knelt devotion to the photo, and while It gurgled and Its head lolled the speaker had gazed at the photo with a nameless revulsion each morning as she held Its dead slumped weight and tried to keep Its chin off Its chest, and now was being forced into seeing by mirror-light the exact same expres-

sion on the face of a catatonic who'd just been incestuously diddled, an expression at once reverent and greedy on a face connected by dead hair to the slack and flapping rubber visage of an old sex goddess's empty face. And to make a long story short (the speaker says, not trying to be funny as far as the Flaggers can see), the traumatically scarred adopted girl had legged it from the bedroom and foster house into the brooding North Shore teen-runaway night, and had stripped and semi-whored and IV-injected her way all the way to that standard two-option addicted cliff-edge, hoping only to Forget. That's what caused it, she says; that's what she's trying to recover from, a Day at a Time, and she's sure grateful to be here with her Group today, sober and courageously remembering, and newcomers should definitely Keep Coming. . . . As she's telling what she sees as etiological truth, even though the monologue seems sincere and unaffected and at least a B+ on the overall AA-story lucidity-scale, faces in the hall are averted and heads clutched and postures uneasily shifted in empathetic distress at the look-what-happened-to-poor-me invitation implicit in the tale, the talk's tone of self-pity itself less offensive (even though plenty of these White Flaggers, Gately knows, had personal childhoods that made this girl's look like a day at Six Flags Over the Poconos) than the subcurrent of explanation, an appeal to exterior *Cause* that can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse* that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished by empathic distress. The *Why* of the Disease is a labyrinth it is strongly suggested all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of *Why Me?* and *Why Not?*, a.k.a. Self-Pity and Denial, two of the smily-faced Sergeant at Arms' more fearsome aides de camp. The Boston AA 'In Here' that protects against a return to 'Out There' is not about explaining what caused your Disease. It's about a goofily simple practical recipe for how to remember you've got the Disease day by day and how to treat the Disease day by day, how to keep the seductive ghost of a bliss long absconded from baiting you and hooking you and pulling you back Out and eating your heart raw and (if you're lucky) eliminating your map for good. So no whys or wherefores allowed. In other words check your head at the door. Though it can't be conventionally enforced, this, Boston AA's real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist. Some ironist who decamped back Out There and left his meager effects to be bagged and tossed by Staff into the Ennet House attic had, all the way back in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, permanently engraved his tribute to AA's real Prime Directive with a rosewood-handled boot-knife in the plastic seat of the 5-Man men's room's commode:

'Do not ask WHY
If you dont want to DIE
Do like your TOLD
If you want to get OLD¹⁴³

30 APRIL / 1 MAY ..
YEAR OF THE DEPEND ADULT UNDERGARMENT

The choreography of interface had settled into the form of Steeply smoking, his bare arms crossed, going up and down slowly on the toes of his high heels, while Marathe hunched slightly in his metal chair, shoulders rounded and head slightly forward in a practiced position that allowed him almost to sleep while still attending to every detail of a conversation or wearisome surveillance. He (Marathe) had drawn his plaid blanket up to his chest. It was increasingly chilly at the altitude of the shelf. They could feel the remains of the U.S.A. Sonora Desert's heat rising past them into the clotted spangle of stars that were above them. The shirt Marathe wore beneath his windbreaker was not of Hawaiian type.

Marathe remained unsure in this time of what exactly it was that Hugh Steeply of U.S.C.U.S. wished to learn from him, or verify, through Marathe's betrayal. Near midnight Steeply had given him the datum that he (Steeply) had been on the personal Marital Leave over his recent divorce, and was now back in the field of duty, wearing prosthetic breasts and woman-journalist credentials, assigned to cultivate some of the Entertainment's alleged filmmaker's relatives and inner circles. Marathe had made gentle fun of the inoriginality of a journalistic cover, then later less gentle fun of Steeply's cover's false name, expressing humored doubts that the meaty electrolysized face of Steeply would be responsible of launching even one ship or vessel.

There'd been that first brutal winter night, early in the O.N.A.N.ite temporo-subsidized era, soon after the InterLace dissemination of *The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass*, that Himself emerged from the sauna and came to Lyle all sloppy-blotto and depressed over the fact that even the bastards in the avant-garde journals were complaining that even in his commercially entertaining stuff Incandenza's fatal Achilles' heel was plot, that Incandenza's efforts had no sort of engaging plot, no movement that sucked you in and drew you along.¹⁴⁴ Mario and Ms. Joelle van Dyne are probably the only people

Montesian, whose paralyzing alcoholic stroke the physician had treated in this very same E.R. almost seven years before, and in whose case he'd also taken a special interest and had followed, such that he was now a personal friend of the sober Pat M.'s and sat honorarily on Ennet House's Board of Directors, so that his call to Pat's home on Saturday night had gotten Joelle into the House on the spot, as of Interdependence Day' A.M.'s discharge from B&W, leap-frogging literally dozens of waiting-list people and putting Joelle into Ennet House's intensive program of residential treatment literally before she even knew what was happening, which in retrospect might have been lucky — if you're this new you're actually not supposed ever to leave the Staffer's sight, though in practice this rule gets suspended when you have to go to the ladies' room and the Staffer's male, or vice versa.

a. Propranolol hydrochloride, Wyeth-Ayerst, a beta-blocking antihypertensive.

135. A conviction common to all who Hang In with AA, after a wifile, and abstracted in the slogan 'My Best Thinking Got Me Here.'

136. Trade-name Fastin, ©SmithKline Beecham Inc., a low-level 'drine not unlike Tenuate, though w/ more associated tooth-grinding.

137. None of these are Don Gately's terms.

138. In e.g. Boston: join Group, get Active, get phone #s, get sponsor, audio-call sponsor daily, hit meetings daily, pray like fiend for release from Disease, don't kid self that you can still buy rodneys in liquor stores or date your dealer's niece or think for a second you can still hang out in bars playing darts and just drinking Millennial Fizzies or vanilla Yoo-Hoos, etc.

139. Volunteer Counselor Eugenio ('Gene') M. favors eritomologic tropes and analogies, which is especially effective with brand-new residents fresh from subjective safaris through the Kingdom of Bugs.

140. Don G.'s North Shore's vulgate signifier for trite/banal is: *limp*.

141. Likewise that his private term for blacks is *niggers*, which is unfortunately still all he knows.

142. The speaker doesn't actually use the terms *thereon*, *most assuredly*, or *operant limbic system*, though she really had, before, said *chordate phylum*.

143. *Sic*.

144. E.g. see Ursula Emrich-Levine (University of California-Irvine), 'Watching Grass Grow While Being Hit Repeatedly Over the Head With a Blunt Object: Fragmentation and Stasis in James O. Incandenza's *Widower*, *Fun with Teeth*, *Zero-Gravity Tea Ceremony*, and *Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*,' *Art Cartridge Quarterly*, vol. III, nos. 1-3, Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken.

145.

TRANSCRIPT-FRAGMENT FROM INTERVIEW SERIES FOR PUTATIVE
MOMENT MAGAZINE SOFT PROFILE ON PHOENIX CARDINAL
PROFESSIONAL PUNTER O. J. INCANDEENZA, BY PUTATIVE MOMENT
MAGAZINE SOFT-PROFILE-WRITER HELEN STEEPLY,
3 NOVEMBER Y.D.A.U.

'Q.'

'Well, there are odd sorts of consolations in having somebody go progressively bats in front of your eyes, such as for example sometimes The Mad Stork would go off on things in sort of a funny way. We always thought he was funny a good bit of the time.

'You've got to remember he came at entertainment more from an interest in lenses and light. Most arty directors I think get more abstract as they go on. With him it was the opposite.' A lot of his funniest stuff was very abstract. Are those earrings real copper? Can you wear real copper?'