

GENTLE: That would be a no on the pitch, then.

VEALS: Could this all be moved along up to at least a canter, guys?

TINE: Perhaps it's the distinctive high pitch that sometimes precedes your getting ready to announce some seminal, visionary insight you've achieved into the previously intractable Triple Bind, sir.

GENTLE: Babe, Rod, again a direct hit. Gentlemen: have a gander at these restaurant exhibits of the Sino-epithetic calendrical scheme.

TINE: Meaning of course these placemats right here, bearing directly on the president's revenue vision.

GENTLE: Gentlemen, as you all know I've just returned, at extremely high speeds, burping up the taste of wieners I'm pretty sure were just crawling with every sort of microbe that makes publicly vended concessions a scourge and menace that —

TINE: [Ixnayish hand-signal]

GENTLE: But so gentlemen I'm fresh back from a goodwill appearance at a post-collegiate bowl game. At which I ingested the pre-mentioned franks. But the real point is: do any of you guys happen to know the *name* of that collegiate bowl game?

SEC. H.U.D.: We thought you'd said it was the Forsythia Bowl, Chief.

GENTLE: That, Mr. Sivnik, is because that's what I was thinking its name in fact was, en route, when we'd all interfaced on the old scrambler. That's what the name was when I did the anthem there in '91.

LURIA P—— [Holding up zodiacalized placemat with a slight grease-corona'd spot of Hot and Sour Soup in the upper left corner]: Perhaps you would care now to tell your cabinet what ze contest of football calls itself, M. Président.

GENTLE [With a showmanlike look at VEALS, who's probing the gap between his mammoth incisors with the business cards of the CEOs of Pillsbury and Pepsico]: Boys, I heard punts, burped redhots, smelled beer-foam and recoiled from public urinals at the Ken-L-Ration-Magnavox-Kemper-Insurance-Forsythia Bowl.



YEAR OF THE DEPEND ADULT UNDERGARMENT

On a White Flag Group Commitment to the Tough Shirt But You Still Can't Drink Group down in Braintree this past July, Don G., up at the podium, revealed publicly about how he was ashamed that he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power. It's suggested in the 3rd of

Boston AA's 12 Steps that you to turn your Diseased will over to the direction and love of 'God as you understand Him.' It's supposed to be one of AA's major selling points that you get to choose your own God. You get to make up your own understanding of God or a Higher Power or Whom-/Whatever. But Gately, at like ten months clean, at the TSBYSCD podium in Braintree, opines that at this juncture he's so totally clueless and lost he's thinking that he'd maybe rather have the White Flag Crocodiles just grab him by the lapels and just tell him what AA God to have an understanding of, and give him totally blunt and dogmatic orders about how to turn over his Diseased will to whatever this Higher Power is. He notes how he's observed already that some Catholics and Fundamentalists now in AA had a childhood understanding of a Stern and Punishing-type God, and Gately's heard them express incredible Gratitude that AA let them at long last let go and change over to an understanding of a Loving, Forgiving, Nurturing-type God. But at least these folks started out with *some* idea of Him/Her/It, whether fucked up or no. You might think it'd be easier if you Came In with 0 in the way of denominational background or preconceptions, you might think it'd be easier to sort of invent a Higher-Powerish God from scratch and then like erect an understanding, but Don Gately complains that this has not been his experience thus far. His sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA's very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he's talking to Anything/body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean. This, after ten months of ear-smoking concentration and reflection, is still all he feels like he 'understands' about the 'God angle.' Publicly, in front of a very tough and hard-ass-looking AA crowd, he sort of simultaneously confesses and complains that he feels like a rat that's learned one route in the maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot. W/ the God thing being the cheese in the metaphor. Gately still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture. He feels about the ritualistic daily *Please* and *Thank You* prayers rather like like a hitter that's on a hitting streak and doesn't change his jock or socks or pre-game routine for as long as he's on the streak. W/ sobriety being the hitting streak and whatnot, he explains. The whole church basement is literally blue with smoke. Gately says he feels like this is a pretty limp and lame understanding of a Higher Power: a cheese-easement or unwashed athletic supporter. He says but when he tries to go beyond the very basic rote automatic get-me-through-this-day-please stuff, when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing — not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with. He says he doesn't know if any of this is coming through or making any sense or if it's all just still symptomatic of a thoroughlygoingly Diseased will and quote 'spirit.' He finds himself

telling the Tough Shit But You Still Can't Drink audience dark doubtful thoughts he wouldn't have fucking ever dared tell Ferocious Francis man to man. He can't even look at F.F. in the Crocodile's row as he says that at this point the God-understanding stuff kind of makes him want to puke, from fear. Something you can't see or hear or touch or smell: OK. All right. But something you can't even *feel*? Because that's what he feels when he tries to understand something to really sincerely pray to. Nothingness. He says when he tries to pray he gets this like image in his mind's eye of the brain-waves or whatever of his prayers going out and out, with nothing to stop them, going, going, radiating out into like space and outliving him and still going and never hitting Anything out there, much less Something with an ear. Much *much* less Something with an ear that could possibly give a rat's ass. He's both pissed off and ashamed to be talking about this instead of how just completely good it is to just be getting through the day without ingesting a Substance, but there it is. This is what's going on. He's no closer to carrying out the suggestion of the 3rd Step than the day the Probie drove him over to his halfway house from Peabody Holding. The idea of this whole God thing makes him puke, still. And he is afraid.

And the same fucking thing happens again. The tough chain-smoking TSBYSCD Group all stands and applauds and the men give two-finger whistles, and people come up at the raffle-break to pump his big hand and even sometimes try and hug on him.

It seems like every time he forgets himself and publicizes how he's fucking up in sobriety Boston AAs fall all over themselves to tell him how good it was to hear him and to for God's sake Keep Coming, for them if not for himself, whatever the fuck that means.

The Tough Shit But You Still Can't Drink Group seems to be over 50% bikers and biker-chicks, meaning your standard leather vests and 10-cm. boot heels, belt-buckles with little spade-shaped knives that come out of a slot in the side, tattoos that are more like murals, serious tits in cotton halters, big beards, Harleywear, wooden matches in mouth-corners and so forth. After the Our Father, as Gately and the other White Flag speakers are clustered smoking outside the door to the church basement, the sound of high-cc. hawks being kick-started is enough to rattle your fillings. Gately can't even start to guess what it would be like to be a sober and drug-free biker. It's like what would be the point. He imagines these people polishing the hell out of their leather and like playing a lot of really precise pool.

This one sober biker that can't be much older than Gately and is nearly Gately's size — though with a really small head and a tapered jaw that makes him look kind of like a handsome mantis — as they're massed around the door he brings a car-length chopper up alongside Gately. Says it was good to hear him. Shakes his hand in the complex way of Niggers and Harleyheads. He introduces his name as Robert F., though on the lapel of

his leather vest it says BOB DEATH. A biker-chick's got her arms around his waist from behind, as is SOP. He tells Gately it was good to hear somebody new share from the heart about his struggles with the God-component. It's weird to hear a biker use the Boston AA word *share*, much less, *component* or *heart*.

The other White Flaggers have stopped talking and are watching the two men sort of just awkwardly stand there, the biker embraced from behind and straddling his throbbing hawg. The guy's got on leather spats and a leather vest with no shirt, and Gately notices the guy's got a jailhouse tatt of AA's weird little insignia of a triangle inside a circle on one big shoulder.

Robert F./Bob Death asks Gately if by any chance he's heard the one about the fish. Glenn K. in his fucking robe overhears, and of course he's got to put his own oar in, and breaks in and asks them all if they've heard the one. What did the blind man say as he passed by the Quincy Market fish-stall, and without waiting says He goes 'Evening, Ladies.' A couple male White Flaggers fall about, and Tamara N. slaps at the back of Glenn K.'s head's pointy hood, but without real heat, as in like what are you going to do with this sick fuck.

Bob Death smiles coolly (South Shore bikers are required to be extremely cool in everything they do) and manipulates a wooden match with his lip and says No, not that fish-one. He has to assume a kind of bar-shout to clear the noise of his idling hawg. He leans in more toward Gately and shouts that the one he was talking about was: This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away. The young biker leans back and smiles at Gately and gives an affable shrug and blatts away, a halter top's tits mashed against his back.

Gately's forehead was wrinkled in emotional pain all the way up Rte. 3 home. They were in the back of Ferocious Francis's old car. Glenn K. was trying to ask what was the difference between a bottle of 15-year-old Hennessy and a human female vagina. Crocodile Dicky N. up riding shotgun told Glenn to try to fucking remember there was ladies present. Ferocious Francis kept moving the toothpick around in his mouth and looking at Gately in the rearview. Gately wanted to both cry and hit somebody. Glenn's cheap pseudo-demonic robes had the faint rank oily smell of a dish towel. There was no smoking in the car. Ferocious Francis had a little oxygen tank he had to carry around and a little thin pale-blue plastic-like tube thing that lay under his nose and was taped there and sent oxygen up his nose. All he'd ever say about the tank and the tube is that they were not his personal will but that he'd submitted to advice and now here he was, still sucking air and staying rabidly Active.

Something they seem to omit to mention in Boston AA when you're new

and out of your skull with desperation and ready to eliminate your map and they tell you how it'll all get better and better as you abstain and recover: they somehow omit to mention that the way it gets better and you get better is through pain. Not around pain, or in spite of it. They leave this out, talking instead about Gratitude and Release from Compulsion. There's serious pain in being sober, though, you find out, after time. Then now that you're clean and don't even much want Substances and feeling like you want to both cry and stomp somebody into goo with pain, these Boston AAs start in on telling you you're right where you're supposed to be and telling you to remember the pointless pain of active addiction and telling you that at least this sober pain now has a purpose. At least this pain means you're going somewhere, they say, instead of the repetitive gerbil-wheel of addictive pain.

They neglect to tell you that after the urge to get high magically vanishes and you've been Substanceless for maybe six or eight months, you'll begin to start to 'Get In Touch' with why it was that you used Substances in the first place. You'll start to feel why it was you got dependent on what was, when you get right down to it, an anesthetic. 'Getting In Touch With Your Feelings' is another quilted-sampler-type cliché that ends up masking something ghastly deep and real, it turns out.¹⁷⁸ It starts to turn out that the vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers.

At the end of his Ennet residency, at like eight months clean and more or less free of any chemical compulsion, going to the Shattuck every A.M. and working the Steps and getting Active and pounding out meetings like a madman, Don Gately suddenly started to remember things he would just as soon not have. Remembered. Actually *remembered's* probably not the best word. It was more like he started to almost reexperience things that he'd barely even been there to experience, in terms of emotionally, in the first place. A lot of it was undramatic little shit, but still somehow painful. E.g. like when he was maybe eleven, pretending to watch TV with his mother and pretending to listen to her P.M. nightly monologue, a litany of complaint and regret whose consonants got mushier and mushier. To the extent it's Gately's place to diagnose anybody else as an alcoholic, his mom was pretty definitely an alcoholic. She drank-Stolichnaya vodka in front of the TV. They weren't cable-ready, for reasons of \$. She drank little thin glasses with cut-up bits of carrot and pepper that she'd drop into the vodka. Her maiden name was Gately. Don's like organic father had been an Estonian immigrant, a wrought-iron worker, which is like sort of a welder with ambition. He'd broken Gately's mother's jaw and left Boston when Gately was in his mother's stomach. Gately had no brothers or sisters. His mother was subsequently involved with a live-in lover, a former Navy M.P. who used to beat her up on a regular schedule, hitting her in the vicinities between groin and breast so that nothing showed. A skill he'd picked up as a brig guard