

comforter and mattress, holding my glasses in place, completely distracted from the minor-D shriek of the vacuum below. It occurred to me that the movement of the amputated knob perfectly schematized what it would look like for someone to try to turn somersaults with one hand nailed to the floor. This was how I first became interested in the possibilities of annulation.

The night after the chilly and sort of awkward joint Interdependence Day picnic for Enfield's Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, Somerville's Phoenix House, and Dorchester's grim New Choice juvenile rehab, Ennet House staffer Johnette Foltz took Ken Erdedy and Kate Gompert along with her to this one NA Beginners' Discussion Meeting where the focus was always marijuana: how every addict at the meeting had gotten in terrible addictive trouble with it right from the first duBois, or else how they'd been strung out on harder drugs and had tried switching to grass to get off the original drugs and but then had gotten in even terribler trouble with grass than they'd been in with the original hard stuff. This was supposedly the only NA meeting in metro Boston explicitly devoted to marijuana. Johnette Foltz said she wanted Erdedy and Gompert to see how completely nonunique and unalone they were in terms of the Substance that had brought them both down.

There were about maybe two dozen beginning recovering addicts there in the anechoic vestry of an upscale church in what Erdedy figured had to be either west Belmont or east Waltham. The chairs were arranged in NA's traditional huge circle, with no tables to sit at and everybody balancing ashtrays on their knees and accidentally kicking over their cups of coffee. Everybody who raised their hand to share concurred on the insidious ways marijuana had ravaged their bodies, minds, and spirits: marijuana destroys *slowly* but *thoroughly* was the consensus. Ken Erdedy's joggling foot knocked over his coffee not once but twice as the NAs took turns concurring on the hideous psychic fallout they'd all endured both in active marijuana-dependency and then in marijuana-detox: the social isolation, anxious lassitude, and the hyperself-consciousness that then reinforced the withdrawal and anxiety — the increasing emotional abstraction, poverty of affect, and then total emotional catalepsy — the obsessive analyzing, finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implications of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch — and then the endless symptomatic gauntlet of Withdrawal from delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol: i.e. pot-detox: the loss of appetite, the mania and insomnia, the chronic fatigue and nightmares, the impotence and cessation of menses and lactation, the circadian arrhythmia, the sudden sauna-

type sweats and mental confusion and fine-motor tremors, the particularly nasty excess production of saliva — several beginners still holding institutional drool-cups just under their chins — the generalized anxiety and foreboding and dread, and the shame of feeling like neither M.D.s nor the hard-drug NAs themselves showed much empathy or compassion for the ‘addict’ brought down by what was supposed to be nature’s humblest buzz, the benignest Substance around.

Ken Erdedy noticed that nobody came right out and used the terms *melancholy* or *anhedonia* or *depression*, much less *clinical depression*; but this worst of symptoms, this logarithm of all suffering, seemed, though unmentioned, to hang fog-like just over the room’s heads, to drift between the peristyle columns and over the decorative astrolabes and candles on long prickets and medieval knockoffs and framed Knights of Columbus charters, a gassy plasm so dreaded no beginner could bear to look up and name it. Kate Gompert kept staring at the floor and making a revolver of her forefinger and thumb and shooting herself in the temple and then blowing pretend-cordite off the barrel’s tip until Johnette Foltz whispered to her to knock it off.

As was his custom at meetings, Ken Erdedy said nothing and observed everybody else very closely, cracking his knuckles and joggling his foot. Since an NA ‘Beginner’ is technically anybody with under a year clean, there were varying degrees of denial and distress and general cluelessness in this plush upscale vestry. The meeting had the usual broad demographic cross-section, but the bulk of these grass-ravaged people looked to him urban and tough and busted-up and dressed without any color-sense at all, people you could easily imagine smacking their kid in a supermarket or lurking with a homemade sap in the dark of a downtown alley. Same as AA. Motley disrespectability was like the room norm, along with glazed eyes and excess spittle. A couple of the beginners still had the milky plastic I.D. bracelets from psych wards they’d forgotten to cut off, or else hadn’t yet gotten up the drive to do it.

Unlike Boston AA, Boston NA has no mid-meeting raffle-break and goes for just an hour. At the close of this Monday Beginners’ Meeting everybody got up and held hands in a circle and recited the NA-Conference-Approved ‘Just For Today,’ then they all recited the Our Father, not exactly in unison. Kate Gompert later swore she distinctly heard the tattered older man beside her say ‘And lead us not into Penn Station’ during the Our Father.

Then, just as in AA, the NA meeting closed with everybody shouting to the air in front of them to ~~Keep~~ Coming Back because It Works.

But then, kind of hortifically, everyone in the room started milling around wildly and hugging each other. It was like somebody’d thrown a switch. There wasn’t even very much conversation. It was just hugging, as far as Erdedy could see. Rampant, indiscriminate hugging, where the point

seemed to be to hug as many people as possible regardless of whether you'd ever seen them before in your life. People went from person to person, arms out and leaning in. Big people stooped and short people got up on tiptoe. Jowls ground into other jowls. Both genders hugged both genders. And the male-to-male hugs were straight embraces, hugs minus the vigorous little thumps on the back that Erdedy'd always seen as somehow requisite for male-to-male hugs. Johnette Foltz was almost a blur. She went from person to person. She was racking up serious numbers of hugs. Kate Gompert had her usual lipless expression of morose distaste, but even she gave and got some hugs. But Erdedy — who'd never particularly liked hugging — moved away back from the throng, over up next to the NA-Conference-Approved-Literature table, and stood there by himself with his hands in his pockets, pretending to study the coffee urn with great interest.

But then a tall heavy Afro-American fellow with a gold incisor and perfect vertical cylinder of Afro-American hairstyle peeled away from a sort of group-hug nearby, he'd spotted Erdedy, and the fellow came over and established himself right in front of Erdedy, spreading the arms of his fatigue jacket for a hug, stooping slightly and leaning in toward Erdedy's personal trunk-region.

Erdedy raised his hands in a benign No Thanks and backed up further so that his bottom was squashed up against the edge of the Conference-Approved-Literature table.

'Thanks, but I don't particularly like to hug,' he said.

The fellow had to sort of pull up out of his pre-hug lean, and stood there awkwardly frozen, with his big arms still out, which Erdedy could see must have been awkward and embarrassing for the fellow. Erdedy found himself trying to calculate just what remote sub-Asian locale would be the maximum possible number of km. away from this exact spot and moment as the fellow just stood there, his arms out and the smile draining from his face.

'Say what?' the fellow said.

Erdedy proffered a hand. 'Ken E., Ennet House, Enfield. How do you do. You are?'

The fellow slowly let his arms down but just looked at Erdedy's proffered hand. A single stypitic blink. 'Roy Tony,' he said.

'Roy, how do you do.'

'What it is,' Roy said. The big fellow now had his handshake-hand behind his neck and was pretending to feel the back of his neck, which Erdedy didn't know was a blatant dis.

'Well Roy, if I may call you Roy, or Mr. Tony, if you prefer, unless it's a compound first name, hyphenated, "Roy-Tony" and then a last name, but well with respect to this hugging thing, Roy, it's nothing personal, rest assured.'

'Assured?'

Erdedy's best helpless smile and an apologetic shrug of the GoreTex anorak. 'I'm afraid I just don't particularly like to hug. Just not a hugger. Never have been. It was something of a joke among my fam—'

Now the ominous finger-pointing of street-aggression, this Roy fellow pointing first at Erdedy's chest and then at his own: 'So man what you say you saying I'm a hugger? You saying you think I go around like to hug?'

Both Erdedy's hands were now up palms-out and wagging in a like bonhommic gesture of heading off all possible misunderstanding: 'No but see the whole point is that I wouldn't presume to call you either a hugger or a nonhugger because I don't know you. I only meant to say it's nothing personal having to do with you as an individual, and I'd be more than happy to shake hands, even one of those intricate multiple-handed ethnic handshakes if you'll bear with my inexperience with that sort of handshake, but I'm simply uncomfortable with the whole idea of hugging.'

By the time Johnette Foltz could break away and get over to them, the fellow had Erdedy by his anorak's insulated lapels and was leaning him way back over the edge of the Literature table so that Erdedy's waterproof lodge boots were off the ground, and the fellow's face was right up in Erdedy's face in a show of naked aggression:

'You think I fucking *like* to go around hug on folks? You think *any* of us *like* this *shit*? We fucking do what they tell us. They tell us Hugs Not Drugs in here. We done motherfucking *surrendered* our wills in here,' Roy said. 'You little faggot,' Roy added. He wedged his hand between them to point at himself, which meant he was now holding Erdedy off the ground with just one hand, which fact was not lost on Erdedy's nervous system. 'I done had to give four hugs my first night here and then I gone ran in the fucking can and fucking puked. *Puked*,' he said. 'Not *comfortable*? Who the *fuck* are you? Don't *even* try and tell me I'm coming over feeling *comfortable* about trying to hug on your James-River-Traders-wearing-Calvin-Klein-aftershave-smelling-goofy-ass motherfucking ass.'

Erdedy observed one of the Afro-American women who was looking on clap her hands and shout '*Talk* about it!'

'And now you go and disrespect me in front of my whole clean and sober set just when I gone risk sharing my vulnerability and discomfort with you?'

Johnette Foltz was sort of pawing at the back of Roy Tony's fatigue jacket, shuddering mentally at how the report of an Ennet House resident assaulted at an NA meeting she'd personally brought him to would look written up in the Staff Log.

'*Now*,' Roy said, extracting his free hand and pointing to the vestry floor with a stabbing gesture, '*now*,' he said, 'you gone risk vulnerability and discomfort and hug my ass or do I gone fucking rip your head off and *shit* down your neck?'

Johnette Foltz had hold of the Roy fellow's coat now with both hands

and was trying to pull the fellow off, Keds scrabbling for purchase on the smooth parquet, saying 'Yo Roy T. man, easy there Dude, Man, Esse, Bro, Posse, Crew, Homes, Jim, Brother, he's just new is all'; but by this time Erdedy had both arms around the guy's neck and was hugging him with such vigor Kate Gompert later told Joelle van Dyne it looked like Erdedy was trying to climb him.

'We've lost a couple already,' Steeply admitted. 'During the testing. Not just volunteers. Some idiot intern in Data Analysis yielded to temptation and wanted to see what all the fuss was for and got hold of Flatto's I/O lab's clearance card and went in and viewed.'

'From among the many Read-Only copies of your stock of the Entertainment.'

'No great tragic loss in itself — lose some idiot-child intern. *C'est la guerre*. The real loss was that his supervisor tried to goin after him and pull him out. Our head of Data Analysis himself.'

'Hoyne, Henri or pronouce "Henry," middle initial of F., with the wife, with his adult diabetes he controls.'

'*Did* control. Twenty-year man, Hank. Damn good man. He was a friend. He's in four-point restraints now. Nourishment through a tube. No desire or even basic survival-type will for anything other than more viewing.'

'Of it.'

'I tried to visit.'

'With your sleeveless skirt and different breasts.'

'I couldn't even stand to be in the same room, see him like that. Begging for just even a few seconds — a trailer, a snatch of soundtrack, anything. His eyes wobbling around like some drug-addicted newborn. Break your fucking heart. In the next bed, restrained, the idiot intern: *this* was the sort of undisciplined selfish child you like to talk about, Rémy. But Hank Hoyne was no child. I watched this man put down all sugar and treats when he first got diagnosed. Just put them down and walked away. Not even a whimper or backward glance.'

'A will of steel.'

'An American adult of exemplary self-control and discretion.'

'The *samizdat* is not to be played crazily about with, so. We too have lost persons. It is serious.'

The legs of the constellation of Perseus were amputated by the earth's horizon. Perseus, he wore the hat of a jongleur or pantalone. Hercules' head, this head was square. It was not long to dawn also because at 32° N Pollux and Castor became visible. They were over Marathe's left shoulder,