

PART III

THEY LOST NEARLY ALL

The fifteen stories in this group tell of alcoholism at its miserable worst.

Many tried everything—hospitals, special treatments, sanitariums, asylums, and jails. Nothing worked. Loneliness, great physical and mental agony—these were the common lot. Most had taken shattering losses on nearly every front of life. Some went on trying to live with alcohol. Others wanted to die.

Alcoholism had respected nobody, neither rich nor poor, learned nor unlettered. All found themselves headed for the same destruction, and it seemed they could do nothing whatever to stop it.

Now sober for years, they tell us how they got well. They prove to almost anyone's satisfaction that it's never too late to try Alcoholics Anonymous.

(1)

MY BOTTLE, MY RESENTMENTS,
AND ME

From childhood trauma to skid row drunk, this hobo finally found a Higher Power, bringing sobriety and a long-lost family.

WHEN I RODE into a small mountain town in an empty freight car, my matted beard and filthy hair would have reached nearly to my belt, if I'd had a belt. I wore a lice-infested, grimy Mexican poncho over a reeking pajama top, and a ragged pair of jeans stuffed into cowboy boots with no heels. I carried a knife in one boot and a .38 revolver in the other. For six years I'd been fighting for survival on skid rows and riding across the country in freights. I hadn't eaten in a long time, so was half starved and down to 130 pounds. I was mean and I was drunk.

But, I'm ahead of myself. I believe my alcoholism really began when I was eleven years old and my mother was brutally murdered. Until then my life had been much the same as any of the other boys who lived in a small town during that period.

One night my mother failed to return home from her job at a car manufacturing plant. The next morning there was still no sign of her or any clue to why she had disappeared; with great apprehension the police were called. Since I was a mama's boy, this was especially traumatic for me. And to make matters

unbelievably worse, a few days later the police came and arrested my father. They had found mom's mutilated body in a field outside of town and wanted to question him. In that instant the family life I knew was destroyed! My father was soon returned because the police had found a pair of glasses that did not belong to him at the murder scene. This clue led to the man who had so brutally killed my mother.

At school the gossip was vicious. At home there was chaos and no one would tell me what was happening, so I withdrew and began to block out the reality around me. If I could pretend it didn't exist, it might go away. I became extremely lonely and defiant. The confusion, pain, and grief had begun to subside when an article appeared in a murder mystery magazine about my family's misfortune. The children at school started the gossip and scrutiny all over again. I retreated further and became angrier and more withdrawn. It was easier that way, because people would leave me alone if I acted disturbed even before they tried to inquire.

Because my father was unable to care for all nine of us, the family had to be split up. About a year later he remarried, and my oldest brother offered to take me in. He and his new wife tried to help me, but I was just so defensive there was little they or anyone else could do. Finally, I took a job after school sorting soda bottles in a grocery store, where I found I could forget if I worked hard enough. In addition, it was a good place to steal beer and be a big guy with the other kids in school. That's the way my drinking began, as a way to make the pain go away.

After several years of semidelinquent adolescence, I

was old enough to join the marines. Leaving behind the origin of my bitterness, I thought my life would be better and the drinking not so bad. However, during boot camp, I recognized that this was not the answer. The discipline, the authority, the tight schedule went against my very nature, but it was a two-year stint, so there had to be a way to function in spite of the anger and now hatred that seethed through me. Every night found me at a bar drinking until they threw me out. That got me through the week; on weekends we went to a club nearby. This place was managed by people who drank as much as or more than I did. I became a constant customer. Arguments and fights were a regular occurrence.

I managed to complete the two years, was given an honorable discharge, and was sent on my way. Leaving the marine base behind and feeling homesick for my old environs, I hitchhiked back to my old hometown and returned to my brother's home. I soon found work as a painter for a construction company in town. By now drinking had become a constant part of my life.

Through some friends I met a woman I really cared for and soon we were married. A year later our daughter was born, and eventually two boys. Oh, how I loved my brood! This nice little family should have settled me down, but instead my drinking progressed. It finally reached the point where I was intolerable to live with, and my wife filed for divorce. I just went berserk, and the sheriff ordered me to leave town. I knew if I stayed, my anger at my wife for taking those children away from me would get me into more trouble than even I could handle, so once again I set off.

I left with my hatred, resentment, and the clothes on my back. This time for good.

In the largest city close by I could be found, dead broke, drinking myself into oblivion on skid row. At first a day-labor job provided for rent and food, but before long all the money had to go for booze. I found a mission where someone in need could sleep and eat free. But the bugs were so bad, the food so terrible, and people were such thieves, I decided that it was easier to just sleep outside and that I really didn't need to eat so often. So I found that hobo jungles, parked cars, and abandoned houses made nice places for my bottle, my resentments, and me. No one dared to bother me! I was utterly bewildered at where life had taken me.

Other hobos I met taught me the safest way to hop on a moving freight train and how to protect myself. They told me who were the easiest people to get a handout from and how to scam them. My biggest problem at that time was to find a way to get enough to drink to keep the reality of my life at bay. I was consumed by hate! For the next six years I went from skid row to skid row. One boxcar headed in any direction was as good as another. I had no place to go. One thing about it, I never got lost, because I never cared where I was! I crossed the United States three times, with no plan, no reason, not eating half the time. I hung out with other misfits like myself. Someone would say they were hiring in Florida, or New York, or Wyoming, and off we'd go. But by the time we would finally get there, they would say they were not hiring anymore. That was all right, because we didn't want to work anyway.

One scorching day, when I was in a desert town drinking, something unusual happened. I felt as though I had reached the point where I couldn't go on. To get away from everyone I managed to find some booze and started walking out into the desert, thinking, I'll just go until I die. Soon, so drunk I couldn't walk another step, I fell to the ground and moaned, "Oh, God! Please help me." I must have passed out because, hours later, I came to and found my way back to town. At the time I had no idea what made me change my mind about death. Today I know it was that my Higher Power took over my life.

By this time I was so wild-eyed and filthy, people would shy away from me. I hated the look of fear on their faces when they saw me. They looked at me as if I were not human, and maybe I wasn't. In one large city I took to sleeping on the grates with a piece of plastic over me so I wouldn't freeze. One night I found a clothing drop box I could get into; it made a nice warm place to sleep and I could get new clothes in the morning. In the middle of the night someone threw in more clothes. I opened the top, looked out, and shouted, "Thanks!" That woman threw up her hands and ran away screaming, "Lordy, Lordy!" She jumped into her car and screeched off.

I was just about as sad a figure of a man as is possible when I jumped off that freight. I found an empty refrigerator car sitting on a siding and took up residence in it. Here you could get welfare very easily, so off I went to apply. Now I could eat! It was my third time in this town, so I headed straight for my favorite bar. Here I met a barmaid who drank like a fish and was as mean a woman as I had ever seen, but she had

a place to live, so I moved in. And thus began the romance of a lifetime!

I finally had a roof over my head, sheets, and food! All we did was drink and fight, but she worked at the bar so it kept us going. With just enough cash for booze, we drank continuously for several months. Then, on my way to find a drink, I ran into one of my old hobo buddies, an older man. I remembered him as an excessive drinker, an “alcoholic.” And here he was walking toward me down the street in a white shirt, tie, and suit, looking marvelous! With a big smile on his face, he told me he’d quit drinking, and how he’d managed to do it, and how much better he felt. My first thought was If he can do that, I can do that—and much better, because I’m only thirty-three.

He took me down to this club where there were some other recovered alcoholics. I drank coffee while they all told me how they had changed. It looked like they might have something here! If they could do this, maybe, just maybe, I could too. Their enthusiasm was catching. I began to feel excitement inside but had no idea why. I rushed off to tell my new girlfriend about what had happened and how great it would be if we quit drinking. “You’re nuts!” she yelled at me. “You can just drag your rear back to your refrigerator car; I’ve got parties to go to!” Although I seemed unable to transmit my excitement, I told her more.

The next day we both quit drinking. There are no words to explain why it happened or how it happened; it just did. It was a miracle! Every day we were able to stay sober was another gift from a Higher Power I had given up on many long years before.

The next year we took a job managing a camp out-

side of town where drunks were sent to get dried out and sobered up. It was our responsibility to see that they had food and stayed out of trouble. Both tasks were almost impossible at times, but we kept trying. With some support from oldtimers in A.A., we lasted a year. This was a volunteer job and we had little money for ourselves. When the year was up, I went over the list of drunks who had been through the place, 178 in all. I exclaimed to my partner, "Not a single one of them is sober today!" "Yeah," she replied, "but you and I are!" And so, on that happy note, we were then married.

My sponsor told me if I wanted to form a relationship with my Higher Power, it would be necessary for me to change. At a meeting one night a member said, "It's not how much you drink, it's what drinking does to you." That statement changed my whole attitude. Of course I had to surrender and accept I was an alcoholic. I had a hard time giving up the anger at my ex-wife for taking my kids, at the man who murdered my mother, and at my father for what I felt was deserting me. But these resentments eased with time as I began to comprehend my own defects of character. I became acquainted with some monks in a nearby monastery who listened to my story with some amazement and were able to help me understand myself. At the same time my sponsor and other oldtimers who had taken us under their wings loved us back to rejoin society.

Gradually the ice that was my heart melted and I changed as my relationship with my Higher Power grew. Life began to take on a whole new meaning. I made what amends were possible but knew I would

have to return to my childhood home to clear up that part of my past. But we were busy with our own paint contracting company now, and as the years passed by, the opportunity to go back home just did not come.

As the months following the day we quit drinking have turned into years, I have become increasingly more devoted to this program that saved not only my life, but my wife's also. Eventually I became involved in A.A. service and helped get a central office started for our groups. We both became active in general service and began traveling all over the state going to meetings. To my surprise, both of us were given the opportunity to serve as delegates to the General Service Conference. What joy we found in this! One of my most memorable moments was when at the opening of the conference the chairman of A.A.'s General Service Board said: "We are all gathered here tonight, not as individuals, but for the betterment of Alcoholics Anonymous all over the world." The years flashed back to when I was on the grates outside that very hotel, frantically trying to keep from freezing. I was overwhelmed by God's grace just to be there!

One day a friend of mine who writes for a living asked if he could write the story of my life for a magazine. He assured me there would be no anonymity problems, so I agreed. I had been sober for almost twenty-five years at this time and had no idea what God, as I understand him, was about to do for me. My oldest brother, the one who had taken me in, just happened to subscribe to this magazine and just happened to read the article. Thus began an amazing chain of events that has altered not only our lives, but the lives of my family and many others. It is noth-

ing short of a modern-day miracle. God has done for me what I could not do for myself!

The article gave the name of the town I live in, so after my brother and sister-in-law finished reading the story, they called directory assistance and phoned me—the first time we had spoken in more than thirty years. I burst into tears, and so did they. They told me that after my disappearance following the divorce, my family had tried repeatedly to locate me. They were concerned because someone had told them I was either dead or had left the country. I felt bad that I had worried them like that, but in my self-centeredness it had simply never occurred to me that they cared that much. One by one I talked to all my brothers and sisters in the next twenty-four hours. My brother gave me the phone number of my own daughter, whom I hadn't seen for twenty-seven years, and I called her. Next I talked to both my sons. Oh, God, what an experience! I was so overwhelmed by all the memories and the lost years that it was difficult for me even to speak. I spent several weeks crying as all the old hurts rose to the surface and were healed.

Later we had a big family reunion back in my hometown. It was a happy day for all of us to be together for the first time since we were split up. My father had passed away, but all his children were there with their families—a large and joyous crowd. Finally, after all those years of wondering about my family, my Higher Power had acted through my friend to undo the tangled circumstances and allow me to make amends to the people who had been hurt by my bitterness.

I believe that I am living proof of the A.A. saying “Don't give up until the miracle happens.”

(2)

HE LIVED ONLY TO DRINK

“I had been preached to, analyzed, cursed, and counseled, but no one had ever said, ‘I identify with what’s going on with you. It happened to me and this is what I did about it.’”

ON LOOKING BACK at my life, I can’t see anything that would have warned me or my family of the devastation that alcoholism had in store for us. To our collective memory there was no drinking on either side of the family. We were from a long Southern Missionary Baptist tradition. My father was a minister, and I attended his church every Sunday with the rest of the family and, like them, was very active in religious work. My parents were also educators; my father was principal of the school I attended, and my mother taught there. They were both champions of community outreach and well respected. There was caring and togetherness among us. My maternal grandmother, herself a deeply religious woman who lived with us, helped raise me and was a living example of unconditional love.

Early on, the values of morality and learning were impressed on me. I was taught that if you were well educated and morally upstanding, there was nothing that could stand in the way of your success in this life or hereafter. As a child and young man, I was evangelical—literally drunk with moral zeal and intellec-

tual ambition. I excelled in school and dreamed of a career in teaching and helping others.

It was not until I was an adult, away from the family and doing graduate work at a prestigious East Coast university, that I had my first real drink of alcohol. I had tasted beer and a little wine before that and long since decided that fruit juice tasted better. I had never been inside a bar until one evening some fellow students persuaded me to go with them to a local cocktail lounge. I was fascinated. I still remember the hazy, smoky atmosphere, the hushed voices, the tinkle of ice in the glasses. It was pure sophistication. But most of all I remember that first sensation of the warm whiskey radiating through my body.

I drank so much that night that nobody believed I hadn't been drinking all the time, and I didn't get drunk, although there were parts of the evening that I didn't remember the next day. But more important than anything else that night, I belonged. I was at home in the universe; I was comfortable with people. Despite my active church and school life as a child, I had never felt really comfortable; I was actually very nervous and insecure around people and most of the time forced myself to be outgoing like my parents because I thought it was my duty. But this night in the bar was like no other time in my life. Not only was I completely at ease, but I actually loved all the strangers around me and they loved me in return, I thought, all because of this magic potion, alcohol. What a discovery. What a revelation!

The following year I began my career as a teacher. My first job was at a college fifty miles from my hometown. Before the school year ended, I had been asked

to resign because of my drinking. Within that short space of time, drinking had become an accepted way of life. I loved booze. I loved people who drank and the places where they drank. At that time in my life, although I had lost my first job and embarrassed my family, it never occurred to me that alcohol could be a problem. From that first night at the bar a year earlier, I had made a profound decision that was to direct my life for many years to come: Alcohol was my friend and I would follow it to the ends of the earth.

After that first job there were many more that I lost, all because of my drinking. I taught in many schools and in different states. I was no longer the moral young man who had seen his destiny in helping people live better. I was loud and arrogant, angry, abusive, always blaming and confronting others. I was getting arrested and beaten up. I had developed a foul mouth and was frequently drunk in classes and in public places. Finally my teaching career ended in total dishonor. My family could not understand what was happening to me, nor could I. In moments of clarity, I was full of shame, guilt, and remorse; I had become an embarrassment to all who had had faith in me; to others I had become a joke. I wanted to die. Now alcohol had become the only friend I had.

I wound up in an insane asylum, which probably saved my life. I do not remember how I got there; I do know that I had become suicidal. I became comfortable there, and months later I cried when I was dismissed. I knew by that time that I could not make it in the world. I was safe behind the barred hospital windows and wanted to stay there for the rest of my life. I could not drink there, but tranquilizers and

other drugs abounded and I helped myself to them. The word *alcoholic* was never mentioned. I do not believe the doctors knew much more about alcoholism than I did.

When I was released from the asylum, I moved to a large city to make a new beginning. My life had become a series of new beginnings. In time I picked up the drink, got good jobs, and lost them as I had in the past. All the fear and remorse and terrible depression returned tenfold. It still did not register that the drinking might be the cause of all this misery. I sold my blood. I prostituted myself; I drank more. I became homeless and slept in the bus and train terminals. I scrounged cigarette butts off the sidewalks and drank from a common wine bottle with other drunks. I drank my way to the men's municipal shelter and made it my home. I panhandled. By this time I lived only to drink. I did not bathe or change clothes; I stank; I became thin and ill; I had begun to hear voices and accepted them as death omens. I was frightened, arrogant, enraged, and resentful of man, God, and the universe. There was nothing else to live for, but I was too frightened to die.

It was at this point that a woman who was a social worker on skid row and a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous sat me down in her office and told me her story—how she drank, what happened, and how she got sober. No one had ever done this before. I had been preached to, analyzed, cursed, and counseled, but no one had ever said, “I identify with what’s going on with you. It happened to me, and this is what I did about it.” She got me to my first A.A. meeting that same evening.

The people at the meetings gathered around me in kindness in those early days, and I did not drink. But the spiritual demons of withdrawal descended on me. I was black, and these people were white. What did they know about suffering? What could they tell me? I was black and bright, and the world had consistently rejected me for it. I hated this world, its people, and its punishing God. Yet I believed the people in A.A. were sincere and whatever they believed in was working for them. I just did not believe that A.A. would work for me as a black drunk.

I genuinely believed that I was different until much later, when I had what I now know to be my first spiritual awakening: that I was an alcoholic and I didn't have to drink! I also learned that alcoholism, as an equal opportunity illness, does not discriminate—is not restricted to race, creed, or geography. At last I was released from the bondage of my uniqueness.

In early sobriety I had to continue to live in a flophouse filled with active drunks. Not drinking, I became acutely aware of my surroundings—the foul smells, the noise, the hostility and physical danger. My resentments mounted at the realization that I had flushed a career down the drain, disgraced and alienated my family, and been relegated to the meanest of institutions, a skid row shelter. But I was also able to realize that this bonfire of resentment and rage was beckoning me to pick up a drink and plunge in to my death. Then I realized that I had to separate my sobriety from everything else that was going on in my life. No matter what happened or didn't happen, I couldn't drink. In fact, none of these things that I was going through had anything to do with my sobriety;

the tides of life flow endlessly for better or worse, both good and bad, and I cannot allow my sobriety to become dependent on these ups and downs of living. Sobriety must live a life of its own.

More important, I came to believe that I cannot do this alone. From childhood, despite the love I experienced, I had never let people, even those closest to me, inside my life. All my life I had lived the deepest of lies, not sharing with anyone my true thoughts and feelings. I thought I had a direct line to God, and I built a wall of distrust around myself. In A.A. I faced the pervasive “we” of the Twelve Steps and gradually realized that I can separate and protect my sobriety from outside hazards only inasmuch as I rely on the sober experience of other A.A. members and share their journey through the steps to recovery.

The rewards of sobriety are bountiful and as progressive as the disease they counteract. Certainly among these rewards for me are release from the prison of uniqueness, and the realization that participation in the A.A. way of life is a blessing and a privilege beyond estimate—a blessing to live a life free from the pain and degradation of drinking and filled with the joy of useful, sober living, and a privilege to grow in sobriety one day at a time and bring the message of hope as it was brought to me.

(3)

SAFE HAVEN

This A.A. found that the process of discovering who he really was began with knowing who he didn't want to be.

PRISON. What a wonderful life it is. Here I am, sitting in a cell waiting for my hotpot to heat up so I can have a cup of instant coffee and reminisce. As I ponder my current circumstance, I reflect on the undeniable fact that I am well into my fourth year of incarceration. I still wake up some mornings wishing it were all a bad dream.

I didn't grow up in a home that used alcohol, but when I took my first drink at the age of thirteen, I knew I would drink again. Being raised in a home founded on high moral standards didn't seem to instill any fear of consequences once I took a drink of booze. Sometimes as I rode my bicycle around the neighborhood, I would spy a grown-up in his yard drinking beer. Returning later, when I knew he was not at home, I would break into his home to steal the golden beverage from the refrigerator.

I recall too well the morning when another guy and I stole my dad's credit card and pickup truck so we could run off to California to become movie stars. We had a pistol so we could rob stores when the time came to stock up on beer, cash, and cigarettes. Before the first day of travel was over, however, I told my

friend I couldn't go on any longer and needed to return home. I knew my mom and dad were climbing the walls with worry by now. My friend refused to turn back, so I let him out of the truck; I never saw him again. My parents may have recognized my behavior as some serious adolescent rebellion, but they had no idea it was fueled by the disease of alcoholism.

At age sixteen I got a part-time job as a disc jockey for a local radio station. Those in a position to know observed that I had a knack for this kind of work, so I dropped out of high school and started spinning records full time. Drinking and partying went hand in hand with this job. Soon, a pattern began that lasted for many years. When the alcoholism became obvious to my employers and began to affect my job performance, I would simply resign and seek employment with another broadcasting company.

I recall one day when I was doing a midday show, I realized I could not go another minute without a drink. I put on an album and quietly walked out of the radio station unnoticed. I drove to a liquor store and bought a bottle of whiskey, got back in my car, turned on the radio, and started drinking. As I sat there listening to song after song, the album eventually came to an end, and all you could hear was the needle scratching against the turntable. Someone at the station finally realized I was no longer in the control room and put on another record.

During my years in the broadcast industry, I worked from time to time as a radio storm chaser. It was my job to use radar information to follow the storm and spot tornados, hail, flooding, and storm-related hazards or damage. I would then use a cellular phone in

my vehicle to give live reports over the radio while chasing the storm. One night the storm was extremely turbulent. Our listening audience was larger than ever as I gave my live report, sounding as if I were on the front lines of a war zone.

The following day a newspaper honored our station with a nice article about the professional job we did on weather coverage. But what no one knew was that all of those “professional” storm reports were called in from the safety of my back patio as I ad-libbed a little better with each fresh glass of bourbon and cola.

Periodically I worked as a broadcast journalist and reported many news stories on location. I regularly drank on the job and was frequently loaded when calls came in about alcohol-related automobile accidents. There I was with microphone in one hand and flask in the other as I jumped into the news van and rushed to the scene of an accident, just as drunk or more so than the one who caused it. It was inevitable that I would one day *become* the news, rather than just report it, by causing a serious accident as a result of my drinking.

I had experienced run-ins with the law several times—for not paying fines, public intoxication, fighting, and driving while intoxicated. But nothing could compare with the time the police asked me to come downtown for questioning concerning a murder. I had been drinking the night before and had gotten involved in a dangerous incident. I knew I hadn’t committed a murder, but here I was being considered a prime suspect. An hour or two into questioning it was determined that I had not committed the crime, and I

was released. This was quite enough to get my full attention though.

I went home and called a friend I had seen at the local mall a week earlier. I hadn't talked to her for a couple of years, but I had noticed how different she looked and behaved. As we spoke, she said she hadn't had a drink for over a year. She told me about a group of friends who were helping her stay sober. I lied to her and claimed I hadn't had a drink myself for quite some time. I don't think she believed me, but she gave me her phone number and encouraged me to call if I would like to meet her friends. Later, when I worked up the nerve to call her, I admitted that I had a drinking problem and wanted to stop. She picked me up and took me to my first A.A. meeting.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, I knew I had found a protective haven. But during the ensuing 4½ years I fell into the category known, in A.A. parlance, as a "chronic slipper." I might get a good six months of sobriety under my belt, but then I would get a bottle to celebrate.

I did all the things that were suggested for me not to do. Within my first year around A.A., I made some major decisions, like getting married, renting the most expensive apartment I could find, not using my sponsor, avoiding the steps, hanging around old haunts with my old drinking pals, and talking more than listening during meetings. In short, I wasn't responding to the miracle of A.A. My disease progressed and I became a regular patient in detox hospitals, intensive care units, and treatment centers. Permanent insanity was drawing near, and the gates of death were in view.

There is a saying that alcoholics either get sobered

up, locked up, or covered up. Since I was not genuinely willing to do what it took to get sobered up, I had the other options to face. I never dreamed it would happen so quickly.

It was a beautiful September weekend just before Labor Day. I made the decision to buy a case of beer and a bottle of wine. Later in the evening I drank whiskey on top of the beer and wine, blacked out, committed a drunken crime, was arrested, and within ten days was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. I guess an alcoholic death can come in much the same way: I drink, I black out, I die. At least with prison I would have another chance at life somewhere down the line.

I can't start to describe the forced humility that is placed upon an alcoholic who comes to prison. Although I deserved to be in prison, the trauma was horrible. The only encouragement and hope I was able to find was from reading the personal stories in the back of a tattered Big Book I found in my cell. Then one day I heard something that was music to my ears. A correctional officer announced that an A.A. meeting was to be held in the chapel. When I walked into the meeting, I took a seat in the circle of chairs, where I once again found a protective haven.

As I pen this story, 3½ years have passed since that meeting in the chapel. I've moved to a larger prison unit and have remained very active in the awesome program of Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A. has accomplished so many things in my life today. It has given me my sanity and an all-around sense of balance. Now willing to listen and take suggestions, I have found that the process of discovering who I really am begins

with knowing who I really don't want to be. And although the disease of alcoholism inside of me is like gravity, just waiting to pull me down, A.A. and the Twelve Steps are like the power that causes an airplane to become airborne: It only works when the pilot is doing the right things to make it work. So, as I have worked the program, I have grown emotionally and intellectually. I not only have peace *with* God, I have the peace *of* God through an active God consciousness. I have not only recovered from alcoholism, I have become whole in person—body, spirit, soul.

I've had one "God-thing" after another happen to me since submitting myself to the principles of A.A. The trial officials who convicted me and the victims of my crime have all decided to support my early release from prison. Coincidence? I think not. I've received letters from former employers who have heard of my sobriety and have offered me employment again in the radio industry. These are just samples of God doing for me what I couldn't do for myself.

One of the things I have committed to do in return for God's grace is to immediately become active in a correctional committee upon my release. Bringing the A.A. message back into jails and prisons is extremely important to me and my own sobriety today.

From experience, I've realized that I cannot go back and make a brand-new start. But through A.A., I can start from now and make a brand-new end.

(4)

LISTENING TO THE WIND

It took an “angel” to introduce this Native American woman to A.A. and recovery.

I STARTED DRINKING when I was around eleven years old. I stayed with my brother and his wife just outside of Gallup, New Mexico. We were poor. The smell of beans and fresh tortillas symbolized home to me. I slept in a bed with three other children, where we huddled close to keep warm in the freezing winter. The snow was deep around us.

I had a hard time reading and understanding school work, so I skipped school every chance I got. My dad and grandma had told me the old stories about the longhouse and the travels of our people across the deserts and mountains of this country. I met a boy and together we ditched school and stole a truck. We drank tequila and explored the red mesas together. Sometimes we sat in the shade of the trading post directly across the street from the tracks. When the train rumbled through the dusty small town near the reservation, it promised glamorous places far away.

When I was fifteen years old, I arrived alone in San Francisco with a guitar, a small suitcase, and \$30. I went to several taverns and coffeehouses in search of a job singing. I believed I could pursue a career as a performer. Three days later I found myself sleeping in a doorway to stay out of the rain that had fallen all day.

I was broke and cold, and had nowhere else to go. The only thing I had left was my pride, which prevented me from trying to reach my brother by phone or finding my way back to the only people who ever really knew me.

Sometime in the middle of the long, restless night, a kindly middle-aged white man laid his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, young lady," he said. "Let's get you to someplace warm and get you something to eat." The price he asked in return seemed little, considering the cold rainy night behind me. I left his hotel with \$50 in my hand. Thus began a long and somewhat profitable career in prostitution. After working all night, I would drink to forget what I had to do to pay the rent until the sunrise brought sleep. The weeks passed.

I started stealing and robbed a gas station and a liquor store. I made very few friends. I had learned to trust no one. One night, around eight o'clock, a car pulled up to the curb just as I had settled myself, half drunk, against the wall of a building. I figured I had met my companion for the evening. We made the appropriate conversation to confirm the deal, and I got into the car. Suddenly I felt a deafening blow to my temple. I was knocked senseless. In a desolate area across town, I was pulled from the car, pistol whipped, and left to die in the mud with rain falling softly upon me. I came to in a hospital room with bars on the windows. I spent seven weeks there, having repeated surgeries and barely recognizing my surroundings each time I woke up. Finally, when I was able to walk around a little, a policewoman came and I was taken to county jail. It was my third arrest in two

months. Nearly two years on the streets had taken its toll.

The judge said I could not be rehabilitated, and I was charged with eighteen counts of felony. I would not see the streets again for nearly twenty-six months. I was seventeen years old. The first few months I would have done just about anything for a drink. I knew I was powerless over the drugs, but I really couldn't see what harm there was in alcohol. In the summer I was released. I wasn't sure where I was going, but a nice cold beer sure sounded like a refreshing celebration of freedom. I bought a six-pack and a bus ticket.

When I got off the bus, I got a waitressing job in a bar. By the end of my first shift, however, I had enough money to get a bottle and a sleazy motel room nearby.

A few weeks later I saw him, the only Indian I had met in a very long time. He was leaning over a pool table when I came to work. I put on my apron, grabbed a tray, and headed straight for him to see if he needed a refill.

"Who let you off the reservation?" he asked. I was furious, humiliated, and embarrassed.

That man became the father of my first-born child. My relationship with him lasted only a few months and was the first of many mutually abusive relationships that would continue over the next few years. I found myself alone, drunk, homeless, and pregnant in a matter of weeks. Afraid that I would wind up back in jail, I went to live with my brother and sister-in-law.

My brother had gotten a very good job and moved to Hawaii. My son was born there, and on the day of

his birth, I found my purpose in life: I was born to be a mom. He was beautiful. Straight black hair and dark eyes. I had never felt like this in my life. I could put my past behind me once again and move forward into a new life with my child.

After a year or so I became bored with my life in the islands and the guy I had been dating. I said goodbye to my waitress job and my family, and moved to California with my one-year-old son.

I needed transportation, but cars cost too much money. Where could I get lots of money? It did not seem appropriate to go back to prostitution in the same town where I was raising my son. I could take the bus to the next town, work all night, and come home in the morning if I could get someone to watch my little boy. The night job paid well. As long as I didn't work close to home where my child would attend school, everything would be fine. Also, I could drink on the job. I kept the welfare, though, because it provided health insurance.

I did quite well financially. After one year I found a beautiful large apartment that had a view of the ocean, bought a new car and a purebred Collie dog. The social workers started getting very nosy. I could not figure out what their problem was. I led a double life. By day I was super-mom, and by night I was a drunken hooker.

I met a wonderful man at the beach, and we fell in love. Everything was like heaven on earth until he asked where I worked! Of course, I lied. I told him I worked for the government and held a top security clearance, which required complete secrecy. That's why I had to work nights, undercover, out of town,

on weekends. Now, maybe he would stop asking so many questions. But instead he proposed.

We moved in together and my working arrangements became nearly impossible to live with. So did my conscience. One night on my way to work, I sat in rush-hour traffic on the freeway. I broke down in tears and felt all the lies of my life burst open inside of me. I hated myself and I wanted to die. I couldn't tell him the truth, but I couldn't continue to lie to him either. Suddenly a great light came on. It was the best idea I had ever had. I got off the freeway at the next ramp, drove home, and told him I got fired! He took it well, and we celebrated with a huge bottle of wine.

It took a lot of booze to cover the nightmares of my past, but I was sure I could get around this small problem before long. I never did. The relationship broke up over my drinking, and I packed my little car and moved myself, my son, our dog, and three cats to the mountains.

This mountain town was a place I had visited as a child with Dad and Grandma. Memories of the stories of my childhood and our Indian people flooded in. I got a job cleaning cabins for a local resort lodge and got back on welfare. Shortly after our move, my son started school. By this time I was consuming nearly a fifth of tequila each day, and blackouts were occurring on a regular basis.

One day I got up as usual. The last thing I remember was feeling so shaky I could hardly stand up. I ate a tablespoon of honey, hoping it would give me the necessary sugar rush. The next conscious memory was the emergency room. They said I was suffering from

malnutrition. I was nearly thirty pounds underweight. They had the audacity to ask me how much I drank! What could that possibly have to do with anything? I promised I would never do it again.

For the first time in my life, I tried very hard to quit drinking. After a few days of shakes and nausea, I decided that a shot of tequila wouldn't hurt. I had managed to put on a little weight, but six months later I collapsed and was diagnosed with a bleeding ulcer. I was in the hospital for four days that time. They told me that if I didn't stop drinking, I would probably die.

My son called his grandparents, and they traveled to the mountains to visit us. I had not seen them for years. We got along much better than I expected. The relationship they formed with my son was incredible. My dad took his grandson hiking in the wilderness, and mom helped out with looking after him while I worked. My health continued to fail. My parents wound up moving to our town in an attempt to help their grandson and me.

My dad and I decided to go to a Native American gathering. I hadn't been to one of these pow wows since I was a child. When we heard the drums and watched the dancers, I felt some great passion well up inside me. I felt like an outsider. I wanted a drink. I wore my hair down to my waist and wore a lot of turquoise jewelry I had collected over the years. I looked like the people, but I certainly didn't feel like one of them. I felt as if they all knew something I didn't.

In an effort to prove I was getting better, I started hitting the streets again in order to make more money.

I told my parents that I was going down the mountain to visit friends. I received my third arrest for drunk driving on one of the trips back, after working all weekend. The night in jail seemed a long time to go without a drink.

Weeks and months passed, and the blackouts continued getting worse. Then I met a man in a local bar. I didn't like him very well, but he had quite a lot of money, and he sure liked me. He took me to nice restaurants and brought me expensive gifts. As long as I had a buzz on, with a few drinks, I could tolerate him.

One thing led to another, and we wound up married. The most powerful motive I had was getting out of the streets and being provided for. I had begun to think I did not have much longer to live. The faces of my doctors were looking more and more grim every time I went into the hospital to dry out.

The marriage was a farce, and it didn't take long for this man to figure that out. Someone had told him about my past, and he demanded to know the truth. I was tired, nauseated, and drunk. I just didn't care anymore, so I admitted everything. We fought every day after that, and my visits to the hospital became more frequent. One afternoon I decided I no longer wanted to live and got the gun from over the fireplace. I owe my life to the man I had married. He heard my child scream from out back and came running into the house. He grabbed the gun and wrestled it away from me. I was numb and couldn't figure out what had happened. My son was taken away from me by the authorities, and I was placed in a locked ward

for the criminally insane. I spent three days there on legal hold.

After I was released, most of the next few weeks was a blur. One night I caught my husband with another woman. We fought and I followed him in my car and tried to run him down, right in the middle of the main street in town. The incident caused a six-car pileup, and when the law caught up with me later, I was sent to the locked ward again. I do not remember arriving there, and when I woke up, I didn't know where I was. I was tied to a table with restraints around my wrists, both ankles, and my neck. They shot heavy drugs into my veins and kept me like that for a long time. I was released five days later. When I left, there was no one there to drive me home, so I hitchhiked. The house was dark and locked, and no one was anywhere around to let me in. I got a bottle and sat in the snow on the back porch and drank.

One day I decided I'd better go to the laundromat and wash some clothes. There was a woman there with a couple of kids. She moved around quickly, folding clothes and stacking them neatly in a couple of huge baskets. Where did she get her energy? Suddenly I realized I had to put my clothes into the dryers. I couldn't remember which washers I had put them in. I looked into probably twenty different washers. I made up my mind how to handle the situation. I would stay here until everyone else had left. I would keep whatever clothes were left behind, as well as my own. As the other woman finished her tasks, she was writing something down on a small piece of paper. She loaded her baskets and kids into her car, and came back into the laundromat. She came right up to me

and handed me the small blue paper. I couldn't make out what it said. I smiled politely and slurred a friendly "Thank you." Later I made out the telephone number and the handwritten message below: "If you ever want to stop drinking, call Alcoholics Anonymous, 24 hours a day."

Why had she given me this, and what made her think I was drinking? Couldn't she see that my bottle was soda? Of all the nerve! I was mortified! I folded the paper neatly and put it in the back pocket of my jeans. As the next few weeks passed, I became sicker by the day. One morning I woke up alone as usual. I hadn't seen my husband in a long time. I needed a drink, and the bottle on the bedside table was dry. I rose on my shaky legs, but they refused to hold my weight. I fell to the floor and began crawling around the house looking for a bottle. Nothing! This meant I had to leave the house and get to a store.

I found my empty purse on the floor, but I knew I could never make it to the car. I became terrified. Who could I call? I never saw any friends anymore, and there was no way I could call family. I remembered the number in the pocket of my jeans. I hadn't even gotten dressed for several days. Where were the jeans?

I searched the house until I found them on the floor of the bedroom. The number was in the pocket. After three tries I managed to dial the number. A woman's voice answered.

"I . . . uh . . . got this number from you . . . uh . . . Is this A.A.?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you want to stop drinking?"

“Please, yes. I need help. Oh, God.” I felt the fiery tears run down my face.

Five minutes later she pulled into my driveway. She must have been some kind of an angel. How had she appeared from nowhere that day in the laundromat? How had she known? How had I kept her number all that time without losing it?

The A.A. woman made sure I had no more alcohol in the house. She was very tough on me for a long time. I went to meetings every day and started taking the steps. The First Step showed me that I was powerless over alcohol and anything else that threatened my sobriety or muddled my thinking. Alcohol was only a symptom of much deeper problems of dishonesty and denial. Now it was a matter of coming to grips with a Power greater than myself. That was very hard for me. How could all these *white* people even begin to think they could understand *me*? So they brought a sober Indian woman up to work with me for a day. That was a very powerful day. That Indian woman cut me no slack at all. I will never forget her. She convinced me I was not unique. She said these *white* folks were the best thing that ever happened to me.

“Where would you be without them?” she asked. “What are the alternatives? You got any better ideas for yourself? How many *Indians* do you know who are going to help you sober up?” At the time, I couldn’t think of any. I surrendered behind the tears of no answers and decided to do it their way. I found the Power greater than myself to be the magic above the heads of the people in the meetings. I chose to call that magic Great Spirit.

The Twelve Steps worked like a crowbar, prying

into my dishonesty and fear. I didn't like the things I learned about myself, but I didn't want to go back where I had come from. I found out that there was no substance on the planet that could help me get honest. I would do just about anything to avoid working on myself.

The thing that kept me sober until I got a grip on honesty was the love in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. I made some friends for the first time in my life. Real friends that cared, even when I was broke and feeling desperate. At twenty-two months of sobriety, I was finally able to complete an honest inventory. The Fifth Step enabled me to see my part in my resentments and fears. In the chapter "How It Works," in the Big Book, I was shown some questions. The answers to these questions provided me with knowledge about my reactions to the conditions in my life. Every response to every resentment, real or imagined, had been sick and self-destructive. I was allowing others to control my sense of well-being and behavior. I came to understand that the behavior, opinions, and thoughts of others were none of my business. The only business I was to be concerned with was my own! I asked my Higher Power to remove from me everything that stood in the way of my usefulness to Him and others, and to help me build a new life.

I met my current husband in an A.A. meeting. Together we carry the message to Indian people on reservations all over the country. I started at the fifth-grade level in school when I had been sober nearly two years. After college I started my own business. Today I publish the books I write. Our daughter was

born during my early sobriety, and she is in high school now. She has never seen her mother take a drink. Our family has returned to the spirituality of our ancestors. We attend sweat lodges and other ancient ceremonies with our people on sovereign native land. We take panels of sober Natives into Indian boarding schools and institutions, and share about recovery.

My life is filled with honesty today. Every action, word, prayer, and Twelfth Step call is an investment in my spiritual freedom and fulfillment. I am in love and proud to be a Native American. At an A.A. meeting on an Indian reservation, I heard the words "Sobriety is traditional." I stand at the top of the sacred mountain, and I listen to the wind. I have a conscious daily contact with my Creator today, and He loves me. Everything is sacred as a result of the Twelve Steps and the love and recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.

(5)

TWICE GIFTED

Diagnosed with cirrhosis, this sick alcoholic got sobriety—plus a lifesaving liver transplant.

TODAY IS SUNDAY, my favorite day of the week. Things are usually peaceful, and I always get that wonderfully humbling, it's amazing to be alive, feeling. I am happy to say that very few days go by without that feeling.

Sunday used to be pretty wild in the old days. That is what I call my drinking days, the old days. It was the last day of the weekend, finishing up a few days of partying with my friends. I never went anywhere that was not a party, and if in doubt about the occasion, I'd think of a good one and bring the party with me. I cannot remember a time without booze in my life. Even when I was young and didn't drink myself, liquor was always around. I do remember a time at the beginning of my drinking, thinking to myself that I was not and would never become an alcoholic, knowing in a very personal way exactly how an alcoholic lived. I was a teenager then, and I figured I was just having fun and could control everything about my drinking. By the time I actually reached legal drinking age, I had definitely gone beyond weekend party drinking, and Sunday once again became the first day of the week, soon to become a week of daily drinking.

During my young adulthood, drinking was the way

I related to others. I did not know anyone who did not drink, and all of my interests, friendships, and more intimate relationships revolved completely around drinking. Over the years, by all appearances, I grew up and got a life, but it was only a façade. I never did mature other than in the physical way. I appeared normal on the outside. I knew I drank and so did everyone else, but I behaved pretty well and, only by chance, managed to stay out of harm's way, except for a few occasions. Looking back now, the picture of my life before I got sober looks like a long series of unfinished matters. Through the years I had quit on everything that ever mattered: college, going for promotions, relationships—at least the relationships that demanded any work.

Then a few things began to change. Some years before I finally gave up drinking, my body started to give me signals that continuing on this course might not be as carefree as it had seemed up to that point. When stomach problems began, I visited a doctor, and when queried about my drinking habits, I glossed over the idea that I overindulged. Tests were run, but no real diagnosis was ever confirmed. I was advised to maintain a healthy diet and watch alcohol intake, along with other prudent suggestions from the doctor. I was still young, and I thought to myself that just giving my body a break, by slowing down, would allow me to bounce back. Over the next few years I had quite a few episodes of feeling sick, and of course having never attended to the real problem, my drinking was still escalating. When my symptoms started to multiply, I finally had to consider the real possibility that drinking was the cause of all my health problems. For very

brief moments I somehow realized that giving up the booze was probably in my future. With that realization came fear and so many questions. How will I live? What will I do with my life? Certainly a life without booze meant I would not have fun, and surely I would not be fun.

Up until the moment I realized I might have to give up drinking, I had believed I was perfectly happy. I had a fine life, a good job, a nice place to live, a car, friends, all the things I thought I needed in life. Ideas of getting help to quit drinking had surfaced but were fleeting and never grew into anything like reaching out. My health had finally taken a serious turn for the worse. I was frequently unable to get out of bed even to go to work, and strange new problems were exhibiting themselves with regularity. I resolved to divorce myself from the bottle, but trying to stop alone was disastrous. During the dry periods, I was very weak and sick. Then at times I would drink, and it was out of control. I would isolate and binge; those last drunks ended in episodes of uncontrollable shaking, dry heaves, and even hallucinations. At the end I was scared and suffering, and I felt as though I were absolutely alone in the world.

A series of circumstances brought me to a new doctor. I had to see a doctor because once again I had become fearfully ill, and I was unable to work. My stomach was distended, and my ankles were swollen nearly twice their normal size due to fluid retention. The whites of my eyes had yellowed from jaundice, I had spidery broken veins all over my body, my skin itched all over and took on an eerie greenish-gray appearance. My blood had apparently thinned, because

the lightest touch would cause a terrible bruise and even a small scratch would bleed for a very long time. Dark marks appeared on my face and arms, my hair began to fall out, and because I had no appetite at all, I was very weak and extremely fatigued. The new physician took one look at my appearance and my blood test results, and asked if I drank. I said that I used to but had abstained for quite a while. This was a blatant lie.

In reality the only person who was being fooled was me. My new doctor explained that I had a disease called cirrhosis of the liver. How far it had progressed was hard to tell, but by the symptoms I was having and the results of my tests, the disease seemed fairly advanced. The picture he painted was very bleak. As the disease worsened, I would become sicker and weaker, and finally there would be a slow and painful progression, usually ending in a fatal episode of bleeding into the stomach or lapsing into a coma and death. With that, he referred me to a special clinic, not an ordinary group of doctors but a liver transplant clinic.

The initial interview with this group of doctors made it clear that if I wanted to live, I was going to have to prove that alcohol was no longer going to be part of my life. I was thirty-seven years old at the time, a relatively young woman for what was happening to my body. I was suddenly very afraid of dying, and I was desperate.

I had attended A.A. meetings prior to that time, but the words of the doctors had somehow, finally, begun to clear the way. At the meeting that first night more of what the people in A.A. were saying started to pass through my ears, and into my head, and finally into my

heart. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous offered me a gift, a gift of life. I found myself willing, and after some weeks of just showing up, I began to believe that this program could work for me. The next six months were spent in A.A. meetings every single day, at least one, sometimes two or three. I found a wonderful, patient sponsor who helped me to work the steps and practice the principles.

During the six months of evaluation by the clinic, I was given a blood test at least weekly, sometimes randomly, to validate that I was not drinking. I had weekly meetings with the psychiatrist on the transplant team. My family members attended some of those meetings, and the doctor also had contact with my sponsor. Another mandate was that I enter some type of psychotherapy with a professional, either group or individual sessions. This too was not something I would have chosen for myself, but it has turned out to be a very positive force in my life. At the time of the evaluation, there had to be evidence that I was doing everything possible to assure my continued sobriety. After a six-month period I was officially listed as a candidate for a liver transplant.

By the time my name was placed on the transplant waiting list, I had become very sick. My liver had progressively continued to shut down, and the official wait had really just begun. I had no way of knowing how long it would be before a suitable organ would become available or how long it would be before I rose to the top of the list. At times I felt resentful of the selection process, the tests, the close supervision of my A.A. program, and the seemingly endless wait. Unquestionably it was only because of the program of

Alcoholics Anonymous that I was able to let go of that resentment. I actually found an abundance of peace and serenity during those months preceding the surgery. After another six months I was given a second chance and a second gift of life. The surgery itself was a wonderful success, and my recuperation was unmarked by setbacks.

Some years have passed, and as I look back from the clarity of this moment, I know that the way here for me could not have been by an easier path. I would not willingly have stopped the course my life was on. I needed harsh reality to see the damage that alcohol abuse causes, in so many ways. I needed to be forced into acceptance and humility.

My physical being has certainly undergone a transformation, but the major transformation has been spiritual. The hopelessness has been replaced by abundant hope and sincere faith. The people of Alcoholics Anonymous have provided a haven where, if I remain aware and keep my mind quiet enough, my Higher Power leads me to amazing realizations. I find joy in my daily life, in being of service, in simply being. I have found rooms full of wonderful people, and for me each and every one of the Big Book's promises have come true. The things that I have learned from my own experience, from the Big Book, and from my friends in A.A.—patience, acceptance, honesty, humility, and true faith in a Power greater than myself—are the tools I use today to live my life, this precious life.

Today my life is filled with miracles big and small, not one of which would ever have come to pass had I not found the door of Alcoholics Anonymous.

BUILDING A NEW LIFE

Hallucinating and restrained by sheriff's deputies and hospital staff, this once-happy family man received an unexpected gift from God—a firm foundation in sobriety that would hold up through good times and bad.

WE HAD BEEN in the fields all day baling hay. When the work was done, the men brought out a gallon of muscatel. I took a few drinks because I wanted to be like the men, and for a few minutes I felt like one of them. Then I fell asleep under the outdoor table where my mother fed the workers. When I was found, they carried me into bed, and the next day I got a scolding. I was six years old.

My early years were spent on my aunt and uncle's farm. They raised me after my father and mother divorced. My father kept my two brothers and two sisters; my grandmother took me, the baby, and when raising a baby was too much for her, I ended up on the farm.

Life was hard work in those days. We ate what we grew ourselves, plus the few store items we traded for. By age eight I was guiding a horse-drawn plow by myself. In the family and in our farming community, we spoke only Spanish. It wasn't until I went to school that I was forced to speak English and was told that speaking Spanish wasn't right. I never felt I was as

smart as the other kids or as good as anyone else. On the farm I knew I could do anything; in school it was a different story.

At thirteen I was tall, strong, and looked older. My aunt and uncle had sent me to live with a family in a larger town to get schooling they hoped would help me. I went around with guys who were eighteen, and they took me to a Halloween party. I almost choked on the first sip of the whiskey they were passing around, but by the second sip, I thought it was pretty good stuff. It made me feel like one of the guys. It didn't matter that I was only thirteen; I felt just as old as they were. By the end of the night, I had passed out in the outhouse and had to be carried home by a friend.

By fifteen, picking produce in the summer to earn money, I was sneaking out nightly to drink beer in the fields with the other pickers. Primed with beer, I could talk to girls and go to dances. I was just like everyone else; I could enjoy the day. I was the equal of others, even if they were older.

The next summer I began working construction during school vacation. I was working with the older men, and at the end of the day, I went to the bar with them. The bartender would put the beer in front of the man next to me, but it was intended for me. I loved Fridays—payday—when we went out and got loaded. I started getting liquor on weekends so I could go to dances. I was hanging around with guys who drank like me. We'd put our money together to get enough booze for the night, and because I looked older, I bought the liquor. I could talk to the girls. I was a big shot with the guys because I had the booze and the girls.

Two days before Christmas I was on the way to basic training. On the train's next to last stop, my buddies from home and I got off and rushed to the bar to buy liquor to celebrate Christmas. Back on the train, we were warned that the M.P.'s were throwing bottles out the windows, so we drank ours hard and fast and got loaded.

After basic we were sent to different bases. I didn't drink often because I wanted to get ahead, but every time I drank, I wouldn't stop until everything was gone. I didn't know how to say, "I'm going to quit now."

At home on leave, I married a young woman from my hometown, and our first daughter was born the next year. When I came home from the air force, soon after that, the party really started. A big hero like me! I drank only on weekends at first, drinking and dancing with my old buddies and their new wives. The only car accident I was in while drunk happened that year. It was a hit-and-run on a parked car, and my buddy just pulled the car's fender off the front of my car and we kept on driving. The next morning we looked in the paper to see if the accident was mentioned. It wasn't, and we were never found out.

The same construction company I had worked for in the summers as a high school kid hired me as an apprentice carpenter. I was smart and learned fast. Then I got too smart and forgot all that company had done for me. I complained to them about money I thought they had promised, and they fired me.

Using the G.I. Bill I went to mechanic's school at night and got a job with the city. That's when I really started drinking. These guys had a ritual. As soon as

they got to work, they bought a bottle of wine. At first I didn't participate. I didn't drink wine, not a tough guy like me. But then one day I decided I might as well drink. I had a couple and I liked it. For the next five years, I drank every day.

Finally I was injured on the job and sent home for a week, but I was supposed to call in every day. But I didn't, I couldn't; I was drunk every day. On the fourth day the boss came to my house to check on me. I wasn't there, but I returned, drunk, before they left. They didn't say anything, but the next day the union leader told me I was going to get fired. I went to city hall and resigned.

Three more daughters had been born to my wife and me during those years. I was filled with remorse, guilt, and fear because I didn't have a job. I knew I had screwed up. There was no unemployment then. To my mind it was bad luck, not me. I took whatever construction work I could get, even nonunion, whatever there was.

My first son was born, and my second son two years later. I had recovered my pride and wondered why I should make all this money for other people. I thought I should become a contractor and make it for myself, so I took the exam and got my license. I curtailed my drinking a little bit and business started getting good, so I started drinking more. I'd go to the bar and leave my crews working by themselves. By the third year I spent all my time in bars. I couldn't finish the jobs I had, and I had spent all the money. I was in bad shape. I was a full-blown alcoholic, blaming God and bad luck. It had me down; I just couldn't get back up, and I lost my business.

For the next three years I was working odd jobs, two days here, three days there. I was barely making it, with a big family to support. I didn't bring home enough. I drank it up. My wife was griping and cussing, and I just wanted to get away from it all.

I started taking jobs out of town. One time I was a foreman for an aluminum siding company. I don't know how we got jobs finished. Every morning I was hung-over, sick. The workers would have to wait for me to start. At noon I would go to the bar to fix myself up, and then I would party at night.

There was only fighting at home, and I finally moved out so the kids wouldn't see me drunk. Now I can really drink, I thought. My wife went on welfare, and I even stopped contributing after a while. I had to have enough to drink. I continued to work construction, but I wasn't very dependable. I'd work okay for three or four weeks, and then I wouldn't want to get up in the morning. I'll get another job, I would think, but I always got fired.

A few years later I was arrested driving while intoxicated, but it was reduced to reckless driving, with the help of a state police buddy of mine. I was told, however, that if I had one more offense, they would take my license away. That was at the same time as my first try at A.A. I couldn't get sober, and I couldn't get drunk. I was feeling scared, remorseful, guilty. I ran to a hamburger stand near my apartment, looked in the phone book for the number of a clubhouse for A.A.'s, and gave them a call. Two men came to my apartment and stayed with me, drinking coffee until after the bars closed. They kept coming, taking me to meetings for a month. I thought I was doing okay, so I didn't

need it anymore. It felt like those two guys were after me, bothering me too much. So I got drunk to get back at them.

After that I moved to California. My kids were on welfare while I was touring all over. I never knew anyone could make the money I made in union construction jobs in California, so I drank it up. I didn't feel bad about the kids because I was drunk all the time. I sent them presents. When I got sober, I felt bad about them, so I'd drink again. I couldn't stand being sober because I couldn't stand thinking about how I hadn't taken care of my own kids.

I did a lot of drinking on the job. Carpenters worked in shorts and had coolers of beer. There were beer cans all around the job site. I would go to the all-night store early every morning to buy a bottle of wine for my thermos, to keep me going until lunch. Then I'd buy wine at lunch for the afternoon. And on my way home I'd buy a six-pack of beer and a bottle of wine for my evening. That was the cycle of my life.

Once, I was stopped because my truck was "weaving" while I was driving home from a friend's house, and they gave me a D.W.I. It meant a \$300 fine and one year of probation, and I didn't think I would make it, so I decided to move back home.

I spent three months on unemployment, which to me meant three months of partying. When the money ran out, I looked for a job. Even though my California union card meant nothing, I got a job as a foreman back with my first employer. I look back on that now and I think, was God good to me, or what? And I was blaming God all this time for my troubles.

Since it was my first job in some three months, I

celebrated, staying drunk. I would go to the job site and get the workers set up, then take off to drink. This lasted until the day I told off the owner of a company we were working for, and I got fired. That job put me on the union hiring list, however, and I got good jobs, with good companies. I began to try to get sober. Sometimes I could last for a week or two. Then I would get drunk again. I was seeing the kids a lot then. I moved into an apartment behind my wife's house, sharing it with my father-in-law. My daughters were married by then, and my sons were in junior high school. I wasn't included in family events, but I was there.

That year I went to an alcohol treatment program twice. The first time I was in treatment, I was shaving at the mirror in the bathroom and it seemed to me that my beard was growing back in as fast as I could shave it off. Even though I was in a hospital gown, I escaped, running down the streets and jumping up and over fences. I was on the porch of a woman's house banging on the door for her to let me in when the police arrived. I tried to convince them she was my wife and my children were inside, but they saw the hospital bracelet on my wrist, and they took me back to the program.

Those were the days when they strapped you down to protect you when you went into D.T.'s. They were the worst D.T.'s I had ever experienced. I had never been so scared in my life. I thought gangsters were after me and they were going to kill me. They had me tied down, so I tried to be very quiet and hide so they wouldn't find me. The doctor told me that if I went into D.T.'s like that again I might not come out. I

stayed sober three months after that experience, going to some A.A. meetings. Then I drank again. A few months later I was back in the treatment program, not as sick this time, and I stayed sober for three more months.

Then I went on a ten-day binge. I was filled with fear and I couldn't walk. I had to crawl to make it to the bathroom. I eventually cleaned myself up and managed to work. Then a Thanksgiving party on the job started me back drinking every day through Christmas. I was laid off after that; then I really got down to some serious drinking. By mid-January I was having hallucinations that would not go away.

I called a residential treatment program and said I wanted help. They told me I could be admitted in three days. I drank to maintain for those three days. Amazingly, I knew that once I got to the program my drinking would be over.

One of my daughters drove me to the program and helped me fill out the paperwork. I almost fell down going into the building. My hallucinations began again, and the staff moved me to a room with a padded floor they called the TV room. I began to think I was in prison and these guys wanted to kill me. When they opened the door to the room, I ran for a window down the hall, thinking I would escape. They grabbed me, afraid I would try to jump through it. I kept hitting my shoulder against the wall trying to break out and picked at nails with my fingertips until they were raw. The staff called the sheriff's department, and it took three deputies, two counselors, and two nurses to hold me down and give me a shot. Finally I lay there quietly, ready to die like a man.

It was three days later when I woke up, naked and stinking. They cleaned me up and I felt great. I'd never felt so good, like I'd never had a drink. I went to the treatment sessions and listened to everything that was said. They took us out to A.A. meetings. I wanted what the A.A.'s had. I don't think I ever wanted anything as much as I wanted the program. I saw men dressed in suits in those days, looking good. That's how I wanted to be. The thought of a drink has not entered my mind since. I've thought of doing some crazy things but never about taking a drink. To me sobriety is a gift from God to me. If I drank, it would be giving the gift back. If you return a gift, the person takes it back, right? If God takes it back, I'm dead.

In my first year in A.A. I was going to at least seven meetings a week. I just loved it. I dressed up in suits like the men I had seen. I went to work building a mall, and there was an A.A. member working there who had eight years of sobriety, and we would share together every day. I know now God put that guy there for me.

During that year, I was offered a job with the city and one with a construction company out of town. My sponsor counseled me to stay where I had the support of my group and my A.A. friends; I was too young in the program for an adventure. I went with the city and am now retired from there. A guy like me—with one employer for eighteen years!

Once I was sober, my wife took me back. I felt that I had to go back to take care of the kids I had once left on welfare. My third son is our A.A. baby. I also got to see all our boys play sports. There were other

A.A.'s with kids on the teams, and we would hang around together at the games. I really enjoyed myself. My sobriety baby is now in college. I have beautiful relationships with all my kids.

Pushed by my sponsor, I got into service work right away, and I really enjoyed it. Now I'm a general service representative of a Spanish-speaking group, learning how to express myself about this great gift of sobriety in my original language.

There have been some hard times too during these years of sobriety. When I was five years sober, the daughter who drove me to the treatment program and helped me get admitted disappeared. My A.A. friends helped me search for her, but she has never been found. Her mother and I raised her three daughters. I did not have to take a drink. I went to lots of meetings to relieve the pain. When I lost a second daughter to cancer a few years ago, I did the same thing.

What I've learned is that it doesn't matter what hardships and losses I've endured in sobriety, I have not had to go back to drinking. As long as I work the program, keep being of service, go to meetings, and keep my spiritual life together, I can live a decent life.

When I look back now, I think I stopped maturing at fifteen when I started to get drunk with the older guys. I wanted to feel at peace with myself and comfortable with other people. I never found it in drinking. The belonging I always wanted I have found in A.A. and in sobriety. I don't think about drinking. God is there. My sponsor is there. All the credit belongs to God. On my own I could not have quit. I know, I tried it.

(7)

ON THE MOVE

Working the A.A. program showed this alcoholic how to get from geographics to gratitude.

I THOUGHT MY LIFE had come to an end when I arrived at my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous at twenty-eight years old. I had been drinking since my early teens, and to my way of thinking, booze had been the answer to my problems, not the problem itself. Even I had to admit, though, that my life had gotten pretty bad and my options were quickly running out. In a moment of desperation, I agreed to go to *one* A.A. meeting.

It is easier to see now, as I look back on my drinking days, that from the very beginning alcohol had been a part of nearly every disaster in my life. As a very young boy, perhaps ten or eleven years old, I had begun to steal drinks when my parents were not looking, or my friends and I would convince someone from the local high school to buy us some beer. Slowly, but very steadily, my problems began to grow from there.

It started with simple episodes at school. My buddies and I would split a six-pack over lunch and thought nobody would notice. It never occurred to me that a thirteen-year-old could not easily hide the effects of even a single beer. By the time I was fourteen

or fifteen, things were getting far more serious, and the consequences of my drinking were getting more costly in every way—socially, morally, financially.

A turning point came when I was fifteen. My mom was in the middle of an ugly divorce. Through nobody's fault but my own, I decided that I had the answer. In a drunken brawl, having planned every step of my actions, I attempted to kill my stepfather. I vaguely remember being dragged out of the house by the police and came to, yet again, trying to answer for what I had done while drunk. The results were that I was eventually given a choice by the judge: Go to juvenile hall until I was twenty-five years old, or leave the state until I was at least twenty-one. I did not want to go to juvenile hall, so I did the math and decided the better part of valor was to get as far away from there as I could.

Over the next thirteen years, until I graced the doors of A.A. for the first time, life really never got any better. I did, however, learn the fine art of geographics. From my home on the East Coast, I landed in Japan. Then I moved back to the United States and to New England, then out to California, where over the next six years I saw my alcoholism take me to new depths of disgrace, embarrassment, and despair. As one of my early A.A. sponsors used to say, I didn't hang out with lower companions—I had become one.

The specifics are pretty much the same as for most alcoholics. I went places I used to swear I would never go. I did things I could not imagine myself doing. I hung out with people that at one time I would cross the street to avoid. There came a time when, looking into the mirror, I honestly did not know just who was

looking back at me. To say that I had arrived at a “jumping-off point” is an understatement. Life just could not go on like this much longer.

I began the process of speeding up the day when life would end. My doctor has six or seven suicide attempts on my medical records. Most were pitiful efforts to reach out for help, although I didn’t see it at the time. My last such attempt was very public and demonstrated that I had lost touch with reality and with any sense of what my actions could do to others.

A friend took pity on me, I think, and invited me to his home for Thanksgiving. His parents were in town from the East Coast, and he was having a big party. There at the dinner table, I stood up and attempted suicide in front of everyone. The memory of that has always stuck in my mind as the definition of “pitiful, incomprehensible demoralization” that the Big Book talks about. What is sadder is that my actions had made sense to me at the time.

As a result of that episode, I ended up seeing a psychiatrist to find out what was wrong with me. At our very first session she invited me to “tell me about yourself.” I proceeded to do so, only to be told to stop after I had only spoken for five minutes or so. She explained that she really only had two things to say to me: that she thought I hadn’t told the truth since I walked into the office, and that I was an alcoholic. (It took me a long time to understand how a description of my life could make anyone think I was a drunk.) The doctor said that if I was going to continue to see her, I had to agree to do two things. First, she gave me a business card with a phone number on it. She said the next time I tried to kill myself, I should call that

number first. Second, she was going to give me a book to read, and she wanted me to read the first few hundred pages before our next meeting. Before I left that day, she gave me a copy of the Big Book.

It took some time, but I eventually made it to my first meeting. I had gone out on New Year's Eve. When I came to, I thought it was the next morning. As I held my head steady, popped some aspirin, and tried to drink a cup of coffee, I glanced at the front page of the newspaper. It was January 9, and I had been in a blackout for over a week. After everything else that had happened, that was terrifying enough to get me to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

When I drove up to that first meeting, though, I saw that the address I had was actually a church. As a nice Jewish boy, I was not about to wander into a church; I knew that I would not be welcome. I hid on the floorboards of the car and peeked out the window, waiting for the drunks to walk by. Everyone looked normal, so I figured I might be in the wrong place. I was about to leave, but then I saw a drinking buddy of mine go by. I jumped out of my car and greeted him. Funny thing, but it was his first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous also. What a coincidence! In we walked—into a world that has turned everything in my life inside out.

I didn't like A.A. and the people in it for a long time. I didn't trust anyone, and I got tired of sitting at meetings listening to other newcomers as they began to talk of finding God, having their families return to them, being treated with respect by society, and finding some peace of mind. It never occurred to me that they had sponsors and were working the Twelve Steps

of recovery. I had what I now call “a sponsor of the month.” I always had a sponsor, but whenever one of them would “lovingly suggest” I do something, I would fire them and move on to someone else. I remained angry, bitter, and isolated, even though I was going to five or six A.A. meetings per week and was not drinking. At seven months sober I was getting a little bored with A.A. and began to wonder if this was all there was to life. The concept of not drinking again seemed a little extreme, and I thought that perhaps it would be different this time.

Then something happened that I now believe helped me to stay sober and find my Higher Power. I woke up one morning and couldn't feel my legs. I could still walk with a little difficulty, but it got worse as time passed. Several months and lots of medical examinations, doctors, hospital visits, and tests later, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The path since then has been quite a journey. I now either walk with crutches or use a wheelchair. There have been lots of times I wanted and intended to drink again. During my second year of sobriety, I slowly became angrier and angrier. I was in what one of my sponsors now refers to as “the angry years.” I was one of those people we see at meetings and wonder how they stay sober.

At my home group, members didn't give up on me; they loved me anyway. One day the group's general service representative announced she was moving and would have to give up her commitment, and they elected me to her job. They explained to me that a serious, two-year service commitment was exactly what I needed. I tried to explain that I was not eligible, but they told me to go to the monthly general service

business meeting and tell them my problems with serving. Needless to say, they didn't allow me to quit either.

Along the way I learned, in spite of myself, that the best thing about A.A. service jobs is that, for a period of time, I got out of myself. At some point I began to shut my mouth and actually listen to what other people were saying at meetings. After white-knuckling it for almost two years in A.A., I finally broke down and saw that I could not stay sober all by myself, but I was terrified of going back to drinking. After all my suicide attempts I had no fear of dying, but I could not stand the idea that I would go back to living that way again. I was at what the oldtimers and our literature refer to as a "jumping-off point." I didn't know what to do.

One evening I did the unimaginable—at least for me. After picking up my sponsor of the month to go to a meeting, I informed him that I was ready to work the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In most respects my life began again that night. That man took me through the steps in a loving, gentle way that for the remainder of my life I will be grateful for. He taught me to look inward at my soul, to welcome a Higher Power into my life, and to reach out to others. He taught me how to look into a mirror and to like, and even respect, the man who looked back at me.

When I reached the Ninth Step, I began to hesitate in my enthusiasm. One morning I woke up covered in sweat and could not get over a nightmare I had—that this was my last day of sobriety. After calling friends and my sponsor, I knew what had to be done. I spent the entire day, more than eight or nine hours, going into people's offices and making my amends. Some

were thrilled to see me. One woman called the police. When they arrived, it turned out the policeman was in A.A., and he convinced the woman not to press charges. I even ran into someone who I had thought was dead, so I took a “dead guy” to lunch and made my amends to him also. For the first time I thought, and actually felt, as if I was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, with something to share at meetings.

When I was four years sober, I took a trip back to my home city, one of the very few times since I had left so many years before under the threat of jail time. I made amends to the man I had attempted to kill when I was fifteen years old. I visited, and made amends to, several people who had sat at that Thanksgiving dinner table and had watched me attempt suicide in front of them. I came home exhausted but knew that I had somehow done the right thing. It is probably no coincidence that the following year my old friend invited me back for Thanksgiving dinner.

A.A., and the steps of recovery, have shown me how to look at events in a different way. I can now understand how some things, which once seemed like major disasters, turned out to be blessings. Certainly my alcoholism fits that category. I am truly a grateful alcoholic today. I do not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. Those events that once made me feel ashamed and disgraced now allow me to share with others how to become a useful member of the human race. My physical disability has not altered that attitude; if anything, it has enhanced it. Long ago I learned that no matter how uncomfortable I was physically, I felt better by getting out of myself and help-

ing someone else. It has also helped to learn how to laugh at myself and to not take myself so seriously. I am aware that I am not the only person on this earth with problems.

Through my experiences in general service, A.A. has shown me how widespread and diverse the program is. I have traveled throughout the United States and even went to Israel for several months a few years ago. While there, I attended meetings and was the secretary to a meeting located in a bomb shelter.

Like everyone else I have good days and bad days. Unlike my attitude while I was still drinking, however, I rarely dread what is going to happen to me today. I have even had the chance to see my father come into A.A. We have been to numerous A.A. conventions together and have shared more with each other in the past few years than we ever had before. I think we are both at peace with our pasts and comfortable with the present.

In the past several years I have gone back to school and begun a new career. As I roll around in my wheelchair, I am amazed when I realize that I honestly cannot imagine life to be anything different than what it has been—and that is just fine with me. The tools of sobriety and recovery in A.A. are there for me to use in all aspects of my life, and all I ever need is the willingness to do what is in front of me. I am grateful that a drunk like me was fortunate enough to live until I arrived in Alcoholics Anonymous.

A VISION OF RECOVERY

A feeble prayer forged a lasting connection with a Higher Power for this Mic-Mac Indian.

I THOUGHT I WAS DIFFERENT because I'm an Indian." I heard that statement from many Natives at my early A.A. meetings. I would only shrug and say to myself: You think you're different, what about me? I'm a red-headed Indian.

I grew up on a reservation in Canada. As a young fellow, I was a proud Mic-Mac Indian. My family had a reputation: They were hard drinkers, violent and tough, and I was proud of this. I was told that my grandfather had been the chief of our band, but he had to step down because he went to jail for shooting a man. Jail was almost a badge of honor in my family, or so it seemed to me. As a small boy, I remember standing on top of a case of beer (there were always lots around the house), saying to myself: In a few years I will be this tall.

There were times, though, when I witnessed my father's rages and I was full of fear. I swore that I would not be like him, but I didn't see that alcohol and the rages were related.

I always thought I was different. On many occasions I wished I had black hair like my friends. Mic-Mac was the language in our home, but I would not speak it. All my family spoke Mic-Mac, but when they

spoke to me, I would answer in English. I believed I couldn't speak Mic-Mac as well as my parents, so I resolved not to speak it at all.

I was ten years old when I had my first drink of alcohol. On New Year's Eve I stole two glasses of vodka from my parents. I can't say that it did what it was supposed to do, for I got deathly sick, threw up, and had diarrhea. The next day I was full of fear that my parents would find out. I learned my lesson for a while.

A few years later, in junior high school, a few friends and I got a bottle of rum from a bootlegger. I got really drunk, and it was great. I remember having a feeling of complete freedom. I drank for the next fifteen years. Drinking became a major part of my life and I thought it was normal. Then came the violence, the fighting, the illegal acts, and the image of "the tough guy." My family was proud of me, and some relatives would actually encourage me.

I spent a number of years in and out of juvenile correctional facilities, and after my eighteenth birthday, I began spending time in county jail. I actually got a high when I came home, knowing that my friends and relatives would respect me more because I had been in jail and was becoming a man.

While in a juvenile detention center about 500 miles from my home, I received word that my mother was dying of cancer. I was able to get a pass and return home to spend time with her. One evening my family asked me if I would stay home with my mother and give her the medicine she was required to take. I had already had a few drinks and was anxious to get out and party with my friends, but I reluctantly

agreed to stay. Self-pity set in, and all I could think of was the good time I could have been having. I got very impatient with my mother, and when she refused to take her medicine, I almost forced it into her mouth; then I left to join my friends. The next morning I woke up in county jail, about 100 miles from home. I had attempted a break-and-enter, and was caught by the police.

That very evening, as I sat in jail, my mother died. I was allowed out for the funeral, and I still recall how alone I felt, even when I was with my family. I felt shame and remorse, and for years to come I believed I was somehow responsible for my mother's death. This incident haunted me for years. Alcohol would take it away for a while, but the remorse always returned. I tried to comfort myself by saying that my lifestyle was a part of my destiny just like many of my family members, but this did not remove the remorse.

I can remember only one good thing that happened during this time. As my mother lay dying, I talked to her in the Mic-Mac language. She seemed so happy, and she told me that it sounded beautiful to hear me speaking Mic-Mac. I cherish this memory.

I was to meet a young girl and have a son. Proud, I named him after myself, and my drinking slowed down for a little while. One day I promised my son that "tomorrow" I would take him to the movies. I really meant it from the bottom of my heart, and I was looking forward to it. That night I took a drink, and it led to many more. The next day I was hung-over, and even though I had promised to go to the movies that afternoon, I took a drink to fix myself up. That drink

was followed by many more, and I justified them by telling myself: My son is so young, he will never remember the movie. The day after the promised movie I was guilty and remorseful, and felt I was just no good. I faced my son, only to hear him talking excitedly about going to a movie. I couldn't say anything, for the movie was no longer playing. I left his mother to explain.

The next few years saw me living back in the old home with my father, as my girl had left me, taking my son. My drinking escalated even more, as did the guilt, remorse, and fear. I was hospitalized for dehydration, had a mild stroke, spent a week in a psychiatric ward, and suffered a number of alcoholic seizures. I lost the trust of my family and friends. They simply could not rely on me for anything. I would stop for a while, but I always drank again.

I can certainly identify with our co-founder Bill W. when he says on page 4 of the Big Book: “. . . the old fierce determination to win came back.” I would take a drink, and then I knew everything was going to be all right. I was going to clean up my act; everything was going to change—you'll see. It didn't; nothing changed. I tried so many ways of beating the game: I went to church and took a pledge; I went to a Native sweat lodge; I would do something so I would be put in jail; I vowed to stay away from hard liquor. Nothing worked. Then came the pills to stop the shakes and get off the sauce for a while.

One evening during a party at my home, an argument led to fighting, as usual. One of my brothers stabbed me in the back with a knife, and I fell to the floor unconscious. I came to in the hospital. They told

me that one lung had collapsed, and they had a drain in my lung that came out the side of my body. The very next day some friends came to visit me, bringing a bottle of liquor. I still had that pride. I was still the tough guy. I lay there in bed with tubes draining my lung and smoked cigarettes and drank liquor. Later, in A.A., I had the nerve to question Step Two and wonder why I had to be “restored to sanity.”

I can honestly say that nothing worked for me until I joined Alcoholics Anonymous. Eventually I ended up in a treatment center, and after a twenty-eight-day program, I began attending A.A. meetings on a regular basis. The treatment center introduced me to the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I left there knowing that the only hope for me was the Twelve Steps.

I was told that A.A. is a spiritual program and that I had better have a Higher Power. I knew nothing of God or Higher Powers, and I began trying to find one. At first I thought that since I was a Native, maybe I should practice the Native traditional ways. Then I thought maybe I should go to the church on the reservation. Then I believed that if I went to enough A.A. meetings and just sat there, I would have a vision and achieve recovery. One day a member asked me if I believed that there actually was a Higher Power. I did believe there was a God of some sort or another. He told me that was enough. He said with that belief and attending meetings, I would find a Higher Power of my own understanding. Today I am thankful for that advice.

After three months in A.A., I returned home one evening after a meeting to hear the music and laughter of a party next door. Some of my drinking buddies

were at that party, and I just knew I was going to end up there. I did not want to drink, yet the party was like a magnet. I was full of fear as I ran across the street to a pay telephone. I called my sponsor, but there was no answer. Panic set in as I ran home. In the house I went into my bedroom and sat on the side of the bed. I looked up and said these words: "Well, Buddy, I guess there's just you and me." Believe it or not, it worked; those simple words worked. Something happened: A little peace came over me, anxiety left, and then I lay down and fell asleep. I slept well that night, the first good sleep in a long time. That feeble request to God worked. I was honest and really wanted God's help. From that day on, I knew that I had found a Higher Power and that He would help me.

Over the next few months my life slowly began to change as I worked on Step One of our recovery program. I listened to speakers and began a Big Book study with an older member. In Mic-Mac folklore there are little people we call Bugalademuj. They live in the mountains, but they often sneak into our homes to play tricks on us, usually at night so we won't see them. When I noticed that Chapter 4 of the Big Book, "We Agnostics," had appeared to change, I told A.A. members that the Bugalademuj were fooling around with my Big Book. You know what—they are still at it today.

I now understand that the spiritual malady should be my main concern and that the more faith I have, the fewer problems I will have. Today I have more faith than I ever had, and as my faith grows, my fears lessen.

For a guy who has spent years in jails, hospitals, psychiatric wards, a guy who just could not stop drinking, there was only one answer—Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve Steps. I was very fortunate that I was steered in the right direction. A dramatic change has taken place in my life. Soon I hope to celebrate my second anniversary of continuous sobriety. In two years my whole life has changed. Today I sponsor others. I understand the word *compassion*, and I feel it. I am working on Step Eight at the present time, and I just know that more happiness is to come into my life as I “trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.”

GUTTER BRAVADO

Alone and unemployable, he was given two options by the court, get help or go to jail, and his journey toward teachability began.

I WAS BORN in a major midwestern city at the tail end of the baby boom. My parents were not well-to-do, but they were employed and pursuing the American dream in the mid-1950s. Dad was an ex-policeman who had put himself through law school and worked with banks and as a real estate broker. Mom had graduated from a well-known East Coast college, majoring in journalism, and moved west to marry my father and raise a family. Both were children of hard-working European immigrants.

Growing up, my big brother and I went to church on Sundays and attended parochial schools. We had plenty to eat and more than just the basic necessities of life. I was a smart but mischievous kid, and at some point I decided it was easier to lie than to suffer the consequences of my pranks. Dad was big on law and order but especially didn't like liars. We often had conflicts. Other than this, my early childhood was a relatively happy one.

Eventually my brother went off to college, and I started venturing into the world on my own. I enjoyed my friends and our many adventures. This is where my first experiments with alcohol began. Sharing a few

beers or a stolen bottle with friends on Friday nights was my approach to maturity and adulthood. In school I developed the reputation of never quite working up to my potential. I felt the world took things much too seriously. Where I saw myself as fun-loving and happy-go-lucky, others saw irresponsibility and insolence. A rebellious nature soon started to surface.

In the mid-sixties I had the opportunity to visit my brother, who had a fellowship at a university in California. These were heady times, and my experiences there left a lasting impression on me. There was music in the air and dancing in the streets. Little wonder that after returning to the Midwest I soon became a discipline problem. Disillusioned with what I saw as the mundane trivialities of school, I found it harder and harder to concentrate. I longed for the carefree life. By the fall of 1968, after leaving three different schools, I decided I'd had enough. So I quit the books, packed my guitar, left home, and headed back to the West Coast filled with the optimism of youth and intending to make a life for myself.

My tiny grubstake soon started to run out, and work was hard to find. I panhandled a little but found I was too proud for it or, more likely, not hungry enough. I began living hand-to-mouth, but my survival skills were not as sharp as I thought. In warmer weather I camped in the woods near the coastal highway. The barking of the sea lions made it hard to sleep. With winter approaching, I roamed the waterfront and the streets, sleeping in storerooms and seedy hotels or flopping with migrant farm workers in town for their off-season.

What had begun as an adventure was turning into a

nightmare. My moments of escape from this uncomfortable reality came when I persuaded someone to share their wine or vodka. With a drink in me, my confidence returned, my direction seemed clear-cut, and I reveled in lofty plans and dreams for the future. Drinking to escape became as important as eating to survive. All of the gutter bravado and determination crumbled when, in the end, I ran up against the law. The authorities sent me packing back to the Midwest with nothing more than the clothes on my back.

Arriving home, I dazzled my friends with exaggerated tales of exotic people and strange happenings, some of them true. We went straight out drinking, and I picked up right where I left off. Always the object was to go out and “get wasted.” Though I sometimes had trouble holding my liquor, I was willing to try harder. I felt the key to successful drinking was the same as it is in musicianship—practice, practice, practice.

After an attempt at college, I sought employment, often with a hangover. The jobs I found I considered to be menial. I did not yet know that all work is honorable. The maintenance crews, the electroplating, the factory work, and the pharmaceutical industry (after emptying the trash, I started on the shelves) were all on my résumé. My thievery, tardiness, and absenteeism, the reasons for my dismissals, weren't on my résumé. I was becoming generally dissatisfied, but I did not know that the problem was within me. I wanted some of the finer things in life, but upon realizing they took effort, I dismissed them as trappings of the establishment. Watching out for a bag of money by the side of the road was more my idea of planning for the future.

In spite of my drinking, I managed to save a little money. With my first thousand dollars I bought a motorcycle. With this I purchased a lifestyle more than a means of transportation. For years afterward I lived the biker lifestyle. At times raw and exciting, my existence revolved around building and drag racing motorcycles. Ride hard, live fast, and die young were the new rules. Weekdays I spent bar-hopping the neighborhoods. Weekends would find me in the clubs downtown. As the years passed, my circle of friends grew smaller. Some died accidentally, some were killed, some went to jail, and some just developed the good sense to get out and grow up. These were the ones I didn't understand. I sure wasn't making any new friends, so more and more I found myself a loner.

In the mid-seventies I was hired by the steel industry, a union job at good pay. Soon I bid to a craft job and started learning the electrical trade. The work was hot, dirty, and dangerous. Everyone worked swing shift and at the end of my turn, I felt as if I had survived an ordeal. The first stop was the tavern on top of the hill. Many times there was no second stop. Liquor was not the only recreational substance available there, and I was no stranger to any of them. This was where I got my first bar tab, so no matter how broke I was, I could always stop in for drinks after work. While the guys around me were buying homes, raising families, and otherwise living responsibly, I was already having trouble keeping my utilities on and my car running. I saw to it that I paid my bar tab, however.

My life became the pursuit of intoxication. After a few drinks I felt more normal and in control. I

changed from a furtive loner into a party animal. My jokes were funnier, the girls were prettier, I shot better pool, and the juke box played better tunes. I could look people in the eye and mingle with the best of them.

Every so often I took work-related college courses. Spending time with normal people, I began to see how wild I had become. My cherished individualism was turning into isolationism. I had a growing uneasiness that I was in a vicious circle. I had no friends—only acquaintances. This fact was underscored by the bullet holes in my car, courtesy of one acquaintance I had double-crossed. My only sense of relief was in the bottle, but even that was beginning to fail me. My dreams had long since faded, my direction was unclear, my confidence lost, and the drinking would not restore them as it once had. Personal hygiene became an afterthought. There were times when I would try to live without drinking, but it was difficult, often ending at the most inappropriate times. I cleaned up for special occasions such as holidays, funerals, job interviews, and court dates, only to fail in the final hour, snapping back to the bottle like a rubber band. Planned abstinence was extremely stressful.

The downward spiral of my life began making smaller circles. My driving record included many accidents and a ticket list that would raise a policeman's eyebrows. When I carried insurance, it was high risk. I grew sneakier and less outwardly defiant. Despite breaking laws routinely for years, I stayed out of big trouble for the most part. A few times they almost had me, but I managed to scam on technicalities

or I got yet another break. Finally an indiscretion committed years earlier came back to haunt me. I was about to have a forced encounter with the federal judicial system. I began to feel like a clown juggling too many balls. Each ball represented a problem I was keeping up in the air. My arms were weary and I knew I couldn't keep on much longer, but I was not about to give up. My pride and ego wouldn't let me. Bosses, judges, co-workers, lawyers, car notes, bar tabs, loan sharks, utility payments, landlords, my girlfriend, people I had double-crossed—I looked to all these as the source of my problems, while overlooking the most basic problem: my drinking and myself. I'd known for a long time that I desperately wanted off this merry-go-round, but I had no idea how to do it.

The judge had no trouble coming up with a few ideas, however. I got house arrest with electronic monitoring and strictly supervised probation with random urinalysis for openers. Five years in the penitentiary waited after that. I still played the angles, until it became clear to the authorities that I could not live up to the conditions of my probation. It didn't matter what the consequences were—I couldn't not drink, and I gave up trying. When the court eventually called me in for my violations, they gave me two choices: get help or go to jail. After careful thought I chose the first. Now either they were going to send me someplace, or I could send myself. I chose the second, and they gave me a week to make arrangements. Procrastinating to the end, it took me three. This is when, once again, desperate, cornered, and at my lowest, I said the only prayer I still knew: "God help

me—if you get me out of this one, I'll never do it again." My life was finally out of my control.

No longer the party animal, I was broke and my rent was overdue. I had dirty dishes piled in the sink and moldy pots on the stove. Bags of garbage and bottles were lined up by the door and the toilet had stopped. Piles of stolen junk were sitting on the floor. I had been wearing my clothes much too long and, except for a box of macaroni and cheese or a pot pie, I was not eating. When a knock came at the door, I would run into the bathroom and peep out the window to see who was coming to get me. Not drinking wasn't an option, but drinking didn't help. Such was my condition as I left the house to check myself into the hospital for my day of reckoning.

Outside of being very nervous, I don't remember much about admissions because I was so loaded at the time. After a few hours I began to feel safer. My apprehension slowly turned to relief. Maybe they could help me after all. I had no idea how sick I was to become. The first five of my seventeen days in detox were hell. I could do little more than lie in bed. It had been years since I was sober that long. After a week I felt a little better and began surveying my surroundings. I started my own counter-evaluations. I found the doctors and nurses to be knowledgeable and professional, but I sensed that while they knew much about alcoholism, they had learned it in books—they had not lived it. I did not need knowledge. I needed solutions. No one but the hopeless really knew what it felt like to exist without hope. The skeptic in me came out, searching for every loophole and excuse to pick things apart and to divert attention from my

condition. My initial optimism was beginning to waver. Was this all there was?

However, there was one man on the staff who seemed different. He seemed very comfortable and at ease with a bit of a knowing sparkle in his eye. This guy was clearly not as stuffy as the rest, and when he told me his story, I was surprised to find it very similar to mine—only his was no secret. He mentioned being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. How could it be that he obviously had the respect of the staff after having lived a life of crime? How could it be that he was a lot like me but had made it back? Here was someone who was sober, yet cool; humble, yet firm in his convictions; serious, but not without a sense of humor. This was one to whom I could relate and maybe even trust. He may have saved my life just by being there, and to this day he doesn't even know it.

Over the next few days I was still not talking much, but I was listening and watching. I learned more about how Alcoholics Anonymous works and met more of its members. I found out it was not something they left at the hospital as they went home; it was a way of life. I found out it was spirituality, not religion. I saw them enjoying themselves, and they all agreed on one thing: If I wanted to change my life as they had changed theirs, I could, as long as I became willing to do what they did. I became fascinated. Here I was, the scum of the earth, yet they came to me and invited me to join them. I started to feel that if I was ever going to try something different, I'd better do it now. It might be my last chance. After all, I still had to deal with the authorities, and I had nothing

to lose by playing along. So I read their book, I started to work their steps, and (with the door closed and the lights out) I asked for a little help from a Higher Power as they suggested. Finally, they highly recommended that I attend their meetings—especially the first night out.

I walked out of there on a sunny afternoon. I intended to go to a meeting that night, but I also had ten dollars in my pocket and a reason to celebrate. I was sober for twenty-two days, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Soon my old instincts began to take over. Sunny day. Ten bucks. Celebration. Feeling good. Before I knew it, I was walking into the back door of one of my old watering holes. The smell of alcohol hit me when I entered, and my mouth watered. I sat down at the bar. I ordered my usual ginger wash. Couldn't I make it just one day without drinking? At this last question I realized that yes, since I put it that way, I probably could make it just one day without drinking. Besides, I was going to a meeting that night and who knows, they might have breathalyzers there. I put down my dollar, got off that stool, and walked back out the door. After all, I could drink tomorrow if I wanted to—and that's just what I planned to do.

At my first meeting that night the people fulfilled their responsibility—they made me welcome. I met others like me and it felt good. Maybe this thing was for real. So I went to another meeting, and I got the same feeling. Then another meeting. The tomorrows came and went, and to this day, I still haven't found it necessary to take another drink. That was well over six years ago.

The meetings gave me what my sponsor likes to call one of the most important words in the Big Book: A.A. put a “we” in my life. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol. . . .” I no longer had to be alone. Fellowship and activity kept me coming back long enough to work the Twelve Steps. The more I did, the better I felt. I started hanging out with my sponsor and some active people at the meetings. They showed me how gratitude is something that is demonstrated, not talked about—gratitude is action. They suggested I was lucky to still have a car, even though it was a junker; therefore, I might consider taking the less fortunate to meetings. They reminded me you can’t teach anything to a know-it-all, so remain teachable. When old behaviors started to creep back in, they called me on it. When life just didn’t feel right, they talked about developing faith and relying on my Higher Power. They told me lack of power was my dilemma and that there is a solution. I took to A.A. immediately and believed like a child that if I leveled my pride enough to thoroughly follow their path, I’d get what they had. And it worked. Starting out, I just wanted to keep the authorities off my back. I never bargained for this program’s changing the course of my life or showing me the way to freedom and happiness.

Still very impatient, I wanted the whole deal right away. That’s why I related so well to the story about a wide-eyed new person and an oldtimer. When the newcomer approached the oldtimer, envying his accomplishments and many years of sobriety, the oldtimer slapped down his hand like a gavel and said, “I’ll trade you even! My thirty years for your thirty

days—right now!” He knew what the newcomer had yet to find out: that true happiness is found in the journey, not the destination.

So today I’m much more comfortable with life, as Alcoholics Anonymous has promised, and I know they’re right when they say it keeps getting better. My circumstances have steadily improved as my spiritual life grows and matures. Words cannot begin to describe the feelings in my heart as I sometimes ponder how much my life has changed, how far I’ve come, and how much there is yet to discover. And though I’m not sure where my journey may take me next, I know I’ll owe it to the grace of God and to three words of the Twelve Steps: continue, improve, and practice.

Oh, and one more thing they told me: Humility is the key.

(10)

EMPTY ON THE INSIDE

She grew up around A.A. and had all the answers—except when it came to her own life.

I SPENT MY LIFE “acting as if”—either acting as if I knew (I didn’t ask teachers questions in school; they might find out I didn’t know the answer) or acting as if I didn’t care. I always felt as though everyone else had been given the directions to life and I had been somewhere else when God was handing them out. To me, you either knew how to do something or you didn’t. You could play the piano, or you couldn’t. You were a good ballplayer, or you weren’t.

I don’t know where I learned the attitude that it wasn’t all right not to know, but it was a certainty in my life, and it almost killed me. The concept of set a goal, work for the goal, achieve the goal was foreign to me. You either “had it” or you didn’t, and if you didn’t, you couldn’t let on—you might look bad. I never once stopped to consider that others might really have to work hard for what they had. Gradually my attitude translated into contempt for those who did know—leave it to an alcoholic to look down on someone who is successful!

My father joined Alcoholics Anonymous when I was seven. Many of my childhood Friday nights were spent at open A.A. meetings because we couldn’t

afford a babysitter (I was the kid sitting over in the corner with a book). What effect did it have? I knew that being alcoholic meant you couldn't drink any more and that you had to go to A.A. As my drinking career began, I was always careful not to utter the "A" word in connection with my name. At my house I would have been handed a meeting schedule. Besides, I knew that A.A. was all old guys that drank coffee, smoked, and ate donuts—I had been there. (Looking back, I'm sure most of those "old guys" were barely thirty.) So no A.A. for me. That would mean not drinking. And when I drank, life changed.

I was fifteen the first time I got drunk. I can tell you where I was, who I was with, what I was wearing. It was an important day for me. Within a year I was a poster child for adolescent treatment of alcoholism. My grades plunged, my friends changed, I wrecked a car, my appearance went downhill, I was suspended from school. (When I first got sober, I wondered why my parents never checked me into treatment. Then I remembered they didn't have adolescent treatment centers when I was a teen. As a matter of fact, I still have ceramics Dad made me in the psychiatric ward, because when *he* was drinking, they didn't have treatment centers.) I was always ready with a promise to do better, to try harder, to apply myself, to live up to my potential. Potential—now there is the curse of every budding alcoholic.

I managed to graduate somehow and went on to college, where I promptly flunked out. I couldn't make it to class. Hindsight has shown me two reasons for this. First, if someone else had a free period, I tagged along with them. I thought that I had to be

with my friends all the time. I was afraid that if they spent any time without me, they might begin to wonder, Why do I hang out with her anyway? They might realize they had a better time without me. And then they might tell other people, who would tell other people, and I'd be alone.

Second, social conversation was a skill that I never acquired. When I met someone, I felt totally inadequate. To me, when I said "Hi, my name is _____," there followed a deafening silence, as if they were thinking, So? How did people have conversations anyway? How did they meet and then begin to talk as if they had known each other for years? For me it was one more thing that it wasn't all right not to know. So I kept drinking. When I drank, it didn't matter.

It's important to interject here that I loved to drink. Drinking put me into the middle of life. I was a social drinker—drinking made me extremely social. I didn't particularly like drinking with other women; I drank with the big boys. I always had a tremendous capacity for alcohol, and I learned to shoot an excellent game of pool, which made me quite popular in the local tavern scene. At one point I even had my own motorcycle. When I read "Bill's Story" in the Big Book and he said, "I had arrived," I knew what he meant.

For fourteen years my drinking took me places I never meant to go. First I moved south, since I knew the town I grew up in was my problem. (I once heard a guy remark in a meeting that there are three or four states that should just post signs on their borders: "This state doesn't work either!") I did the things women do. My first marriage was really a one-night

stand that lasted five years—I certainly couldn't admit that I had made a mistake. We had two children and I wanted out, but to leave would have meant taking responsibility. I just drank until he threw me out. Then it was his fault the marriage failed.

At one point before moving home, I lost a job that meant a lot to me, as the direct result of my drinking. For the first time, I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and said, "I am an alcoholic." When I had gone to meetings with my dad I always just said, "I'm with him." I called my father and told him I went to a meeting. Within a week he mailed me a box containing the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a tape of his A.A. talk, a couple of meditation books, a copy of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and a few other odds and ends. I think he had been saving up for the day I was willing.

So, divorced, I moved back home. Within a year I was under arrest for child endangerment. I had left my sleeping children home alone and gone to drink. They were removed from my custody and placed with my mother. Then started my rounds of the treatment centers. I could talk a good game. After all, I had grown up with A.A. I was the one the counselors asked to talk to other women who were reluctant to leave their kids long enough to go into treatment. I could give the whole speech: "We can't be good mothers if we're not sober." The problem was, inside, I was relieved that my kids had to live with my mom. It was too hard to be a parent. But I couldn't tell people that—they might think I was a bad mom.

And I *was* a bad mom. I was a terrible mom. No, I didn't beat them, and of course I told them I loved

them. But the message my kids got from me was “Yes, I love you; now go away.” They had to be practically invisible in their own home. I had absolutely nothing to give them emotionally. All they wanted was my love and attention, and alcoholism robbed me of the ability to give it. I was empty on the inside.

While I was in treatment, my dad died and I inherited almost enough money to kill myself. I got to drink the way I wanted to for 2½ years. I’m sure I got here faster because of it.

Near the end, I was living in an attic apartment; the money was long gone. It was November, cold and gray. When I woke up at 5:30, it was gray outside. Was it 5:30 a.m. or 5:30 p.m.? I couldn’t tell. I looked out the window, watching people. Were they going to work? Or coming home? I went back to sleep. When I woke again, it would either be light or dark. Opening my eyes, after what seemed like hours, it was only 5:45. And gray. I was twenty-eight years old.

I finally got on my knees and asked God for help. I couldn’t go on the way I was living. I had been in the apartment since August and hadn’t bothered to unpack. I wasn’t bathing. I couldn’t answer my phone. I couldn’t show up on weekends to visit my kids. So I prayed. Something made me go dig through a box, and I found the Big Book my father had sent me years earlier (I always tell new people to buy the hardcover version—for some reason they are harder to throw away). I read “Bill’s Story” again. This time it made sense. This time I could identify. I slept, holding the book like a teddy bear. I woke up feeling rested for the first time in months. And I didn’t want to drink.

I would love to tell you that I have been sober ever

since, but that is not the case. I didn't want to drink that day, but I took no action to insure against it. You see, I believe that we get more than one "moment of grace" from God—but it is up to us to seize the moment by taking action. But I heeded the voice that said, "You may as well drink. You know you're going to."

For the next few days every time I went to my favorite watering hole, I was surrounded by people talking about sobering up. My bartender wanted to quit drinking. The guy I was shooting pool with talked about going back to A.A. Someone next to me at the bar was talking about being at the local clubhouse for A.A.'s. I did stop drinking (sort of) for a few months but eventually went on the bender that would end it all.

By the end of two weeks of drinking, nobody was speaking to me, so I headed south, where I was sure they all missed me. There was no homecoming parade. People barely remembered me, and by the end of a week, I was out of money. I couldn't even book a plane ticket home. I had less than one dollar, and I had one of *those* hangovers. I knew if I tried to sit in the airport bar long enough for someone to buy me a drink, it would be obvious that was my intent, and my pride couldn't bear the thought of being asked to leave. I briefly considered mugging a little old lady and stealing her purse, but I knew I would end up picking on the one who was still in shape.

If there had been one more dollar, I might not be sober today. Once I was drinking, I always had a plan, but that day, by the grace of God, I was out of plans. I didn't have one single better idea. I called Mom, told

her where I was, and asked her to fly me home. She later told me she almost didn't do it, but she was afraid they'd never see me again.

She deposited me at the local detox center, where she told me I could go in or not but that she was done with me. I was on my own. Detox gave me the same message. I thought they should send me on to a treatment center—thirty days of hot meals and rest was sounding pretty good to me—but they told me I already knew everything treatment was going to teach me, that I should go do it and save the bed for someone who needed it. I have been sober ever since. I was finally accountable for my own recovery. I was responsible for taking the action. One of my favorite games had always been making it someone else's job to see that I got my work done. That game was over.

I had never expected to live to see thirty. Suddenly I was 29½ and showing no signs of dying anytime soon. I knew in my heart that I would live whether I drank or not, and that no matter how bad it was, it could always get worse. Some people get sober because they're afraid to die. I knew I would live, and that was far more terrifying. I had surrendered.

The first night out of detox I went to a meeting, and the woman speaking commented that alcoholism had taken her to the point where she didn't want to work and didn't want to care for her daughter, she just wanted to drink. I couldn't believe it! That was me! She became my first sponsor, and I came back.

The second night I sat in what I now call the "new guy chair"—second row, against the wall (if you sit in back they know you're new, and if you sit in front you might have to talk to someone). When it came time to

hold hands and pray at the end of the meeting, I had no hand to hold on one side. I remember thinking “I will never fit in here” and hanging my head. I felt my hand being taken—someone in front of me had taken the time to be sure that the circle was complete. To this day I don’t know who it was, but that person is the reason I came back the next night—that person saved my life. And I kept coming back.

The local clubhouse had a noon Big Book meeting every day, and I went, every day. Not to get sober, mind you, and certainly not to learn about what was in the book. Here was my thinking: I knew you were supposed to read your Big Book every day, and they went around the room reading an entire chapter, so that should count, right? This also took up nearly thirty minutes, so it was less likely that I would get called on to talk. And the meeting was at noon, which left my nights free. I figured out all of that with my keen alcoholic mind!

Luckily, I forgot that God is in charge of results. I was finally taking action, and my motives didn’t matter. I thought I’d go through the Big Book once, then “graduate” to discussion meetings, but there was a lot of laughter in that room, so I kept going. I was not one of those people who walked into meetings and said, “Thank God, I’m home.” I did not particularly want what they had; I just didn’t want what I had anymore—that was the humble beginning I needed.

The convenience of the noon meeting meant that I went to two meetings every day; I had nothing else to do at night. I began to notice people there with several years of sobriety—my own laziness had thrown me in with some of the most active people in

Alcoholics Anonymous. What I found out was that people who attend Big Book meetings on a regular basis tend to read the book and do what it says.

When I was two weeks sober, a man's nine-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, and three days later he was at a meeting saying he had to believe it wasn't for nothing. That maybe one alcoholic would get sober because of it. As I left that day, I found myself wondering what would have happened if that had been my kids, or me? What would they remember about me? A feeling came over me (I know now it was gratitude), and I realized that I could call my children right then and tell them I loved them. That I could show up when I said I would. That my word could be worth something to them. That even though I might always just be "mom who comes over on the weekends," I could be a good weekend mom. I had a chance to move forward with them, forging a relationship built on a foundation of God and Alcoholics Anonymous, rather than always trying to make up for the past. One year later I was able to share with that man that maybe it hadn't been for nothing, because my life changed that day.

By the time a month passed, my feet were firmly planted in Alcoholics Anonymous. And I kept coming back. I cannot begin to list all the wonderful things that have happened in my years here. My kids were four and six when I got sober, and they have "grown up" in A.A. I brought them to open meetings, and the people there gave them what I couldn't in the early days—love and attention. Gradually they became part of my life again, and today I have custody of my children.

I remarried in Alcoholics Anonymous, to a man who believes in A.A. the way I do. (I knew we were off to a good start when he didn't get angry that I stood him up to go on a Twelfth Step call.) We agreed to never be higher than third on each other's list, with God always first and Alcoholics Anonymous second. He is my partner and my best friend. We both sponsor several people, and our house is filled with love and laughter. Our telephone never stops ringing. We share the joy of a common solution.

We have had some tough times. Our son is the third generation of A.A.'s in my family. After a suicide attempt at age fourteen, we found out he too was an alcoholic. After his one year in A.A., it's hard to tell what will happen, but we trust Alcoholics Anonymous, even on the days we don't trust our son. Our daughter is a beautiful, confident teenager who has found her own path to God without having to drink. She is the product of the love and faith of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I still have a sponsor and a home group today. I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous in good standing. I learned how to be a good A.A. member by watching good A.A. members and doing what they do. I learned how to have a good marriage by watching people with good marriages and doing what they do. I learned how to be a parent by watching good parents and doing what they do. And I finally have the freedom of believing that it is all right not to know.

GROUNDED

Alcohol clipped this pilot's wings until sobriety and hard work brought him back to the sky.

I AM AN ALCOHOLIC. I am part Comanche Indian and grew up poor but in a loving home until alcoholism took both of my parents. Then the divorces came, three for each parent, and I learned the anger that is such a part of alcoholic family life. I vowed I would never be an alcoholic. Active in my Indian community, I saw what the alcohol did there also, and I was repelled and disgusted by it.

I graduated from high school at seventeen and immediately left to join the marine corps. I found a home there, relishing the tough discipline, camaraderie, and esprit de corps. I excelled and was one of three who were promoted upon graduation from boot camp. Four and a half years later I was given an opportunity to go into flight training. Success at the end of the eighteen-month period would mean pilot wings and an officer's commission. Again I excelled. Although most of my peers had college educations and fear of failure constantly plagued me, I graduated near the top of my class.

I excelled at something else also. Drinking was encouraged; the pilot persona was one of hard, gutsy flying with equally hard drinking, and attendance at

happy hour was considered a duty. I did not need any encouragement and reveled in the squadron camaraderie, good-natured joking, and competition at these events.

One year into my training, I reported for the final phase and met a young beauty. I was drunk the night I met her, and she would have nothing to do with me, but I could never have approached her without the false courage the alcohol gave me. The next day I saw her again, this time sober, and we began to date. I graduated from flight training on her twentieth birthday, and she pinned my gold wings and my second lieutenant bars on me. We were married two weeks later. We have just celebrated our thirty-fifth anniversary, and she is the most wonderful person I could ever have found.

We immediately had two young sons, and I left to go to war in Vietnam. Thirteen months later I returned. I spent 11½ years total time in the marine corps before deciding to get out because of the family separation my military career required. I had seen enough family chaos to know that I could never allow that to occur in my own family, so reluctantly, even painfully, I resigned my commission and joined a major airline. I had gained a reputation in the marines I was proud of. I had many accomplishments to my credit, a good combat record with decorations, and skill as a pilot.

Slowly I worked my way up within the airline structure and finally became a captain after twenty years. It had been a strife-ridden company, and our family endured some tough times. During one of the lengthy labor strikes, we adopted a baby girl. She completed

our family. Nearly half Chippewa Indian, she was a beautiful baby of seventeen days when we took her home with us.

My drinking continued to escalate, but I did not believe I was any different from my drinking comrades. I was very wrong. I had two charges of driving under the influence, years apart, which I wrote off to bad luck, and I paid handsome legal fees to get the charges reduced. This was years before the Federal Aviation Administration began cross-checking drivers' records against pilot licenses.

One night, after a hard afternoon and late evening of drinking, I and my two fellow flight crew members were arrested. We were charged with violation of a federal law that prohibits the operation of a common carrier while impaired. It had never been used against airline pilots before. I was devastated. Suddenly I was thrust into an experience beyond my worst nightmare.

I arrived home the next day, sick at heart and unable to look my wife in the face. Ashamed and destroyed, I saw two doctors that day and was diagnosed as an alcoholic. I was in treatment that night, going in with only the clothes on my back. The news media had picked up the story, and it was blared all over the world, on all the major television networks, and my shame and humiliation were beyond words. All the light in my life had gone out, and I entertained the idea of suicide. I could not envision ever smiling again or having a day with a bright horizon. I was hurting more than I ever knew a human could hurt, and I just wanted the pain to end.

I became notorious in commercial aviation, and the media had a field day with me. I lost my FAA med-

ical certificate because of my diagnosis of alcoholism, and the FAA issued an emergency revocation of all my licenses. I thought about my parents (now both dead), my Indian people, and all those I had previously considered alcoholics, and I knew I had become exactly what I vowed I would never become.

I learned my career was over via the six o'clock news one week after entering treatment. I refused to watch TV, but my fellow patients kept me informed. I was the lead story on the news for weeks. I was joke fodder for the late-night TV comics as they ridiculed me, my profession, and my airline.

I also learned I was going to federal prison. The sentence was mandatory if convicted, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would be. With nothing left, I dedicated myself to learning about recovery. I fervently believed that the key to my sobriety, and hence my survival, lay in the power of all I was being taught, and I spent no idle moments in treatment. I worked as hard as I had worked to earn my wings, but this time my life was at stake. I struggled to regain a spiritual connection as I underwent one legal crisis after another.

I got out of treatment determined to complete ninety A.A. meetings in ninety days but was afraid my court date would interfere, so I completed my ninety meetings in sixty-seven days. I went through an intense, media-covered three-week trial. On most evenings after the day in court, I sought refuge in A.A. meetings and renewed my strength for the coming day. Recovery and all I had learned allowed me to handle things much, much differently than my two co-defendants. Many spoke of my serenity throughout

this experience of horror, which surprised me. Inside I did not feel what others seemed to see.

I was found guilty and sentenced to sixteen months in federal prison. My two codefendants received twelve-month sentences and chose to remain free pending appeals, while I chose to go into prison and get it over. I had learned how to live life on life's terms and not my own. From somewhere back in my high school days, I remembered a poem that says something to the effect of, "Cowards die a thousand deaths, a brave man only once," and I wanted to do what had to be done. I was terrified of walking into prison but told my children that I could not come out the back door until I walked through the front. I remembered that courage was not the absence of fear; it was the ability to continue in the face of it.

On the day I entered prison, nine of my fellow pilots began making our family's house payments, which they did for nearly four years. After my release from prison, I made four attempts to get them to let us take over, and they refused each time. So many came to help us from places we could never have imagined.

I served 424 days in the federal prison system. I started an A.A. meeting in prison, which was opposed by the prison administration, and they hassled us weekly as we came together to meet. The weekly meeting was a quiet oasis in the desert, a few moments of serenity in a prison full of bedlam.

My prison term was followed by three years of probation, which restricted my travel and had thirteen other conditions. Upon release from prison, no longer a pilot, I returned to the same treatment center where

I had once been a patient, and worked full-time with other alcoholics. Pay was minimal, but I found I was effective at reaching others, and I wanted desperately to pay back some of what so many had given me. I did that for twenty months.

For a long time I did not consider flying again, but I could not purge the dream of doing so from my heart. One of my meditation books had said, "Before any dream can come true, there must first be a dream." I had been told if I wanted to fly again, I would have to begin at the very bottom, with a private license, even though I had previously held the highest license the FAA awarded, the air transport pilot license. I studied for and took all the lengthy FAA written examinations. I had to go back and relearn things I had learned thirty years before and had long since forgotten. I had, unexpectedly, been able to reacquire my FAA medical certificate after proving the quality of my sobriety for more than two years.

The trial judge had put sanctions on me that made it impossible for me to fly again because of my age. My lawyer had become my friend and worked for three years after my conviction without taking a cent from me. He was one more person who entered my life in a manner I could only ascribe to some kind of Divine Providence. He took a motion to the judge to lift the sanctions, and the tears came flooding down my cheeks when he called to let me know the judge had approved it. With the lifting of those sanctions, the impossible became slightly less impossible. An extraordinary amount of work was left to do, but at least the attempt could now be made.

None of my friends thought it possible to regain

licenses literally from the ground up, but I had learned how to do many things one day at a time, one small step at a time, so I went after the licenses in exactly that manner. Had I chosen to view the whole panorama of licensing requirements, I would have quit; they were simply too overwhelming. But one day and one thing at a time they were doable. So I did them.

I knew no one would ever hire me to fly passengers. I was an ex-con, a convicted felon, a drunk. I had doubts as to whether anyone would even allow me to fly cargo. It took several months for the FAA to process my licenses and mail them to me. On the exact day they arrived, another miracle occurred. I received a phone call from the head of the pilot union, who informed me that the president of the airline had decided personally to reinstate me. I had not pursued the legal grievance process I was entitled to, because I knew my actions could never be defended or excused. I had steadfastly accepted responsibility, in front of TV cameras and in the treatment center, because my recovery demanded rigorous honesty.

It was almost beyond my ability to believe that the president of the airline could ever consider having me work for them again. I marveled at the courage of such a man and such an airline. What if I relapsed? What if I flew drunk again? The media would have a field day. For days afterward, as I awoke each morning, my first thought was that it had only been a dream, that it could not possibly have occurred.

Almost four years after my arrest and the explosive devastation of my life, I signed my back-to-work agreement. Restored to full seniority, given the retire-

ment I had lost, and once again an airline pilot! A large crowd gathered to watch me sign the document.

So much had happened in my life. I lost almost everything I had worked to acquire. My family had suffered public shame and humiliation. I had been the object of scorn, shame, and disgrace. Yet much more had also happened; every loss had been replaced with rewards. I had seen the promises of the Big Book come true in a magnitude I could never have imagined. I had gotten sober. I had regained my family, and we were once again close and loving. I had learned how to use the Twelve Steps and to live the wonderful program that was founded so many years ago by two drunks.

It took several years, but I learned to be grateful for my alcoholism and the program of recovery it forced me into, for all the things that had happened *to* me and *for* me, for a life today that transcends and far exceeds anything I had previously known. I could not have that today if I had not experienced all the yesterdays.

My back-to-work agreement said I would retire as a copilot. But the miracles in this program have never ceased for me, and last year I was notified that the president of my airline had granted permission for me to once again be a captain.

I retired at age sixty, and I checked out as a 747 captain, which means my final year at my airline concluded in the left seat. The circle, so sacred to my Indian people, will once again have been completed.

I take little credit for all that has happened. I suited up and showed up, but the process of A.A., the grace of a loving God, and the help of so many around me

have been far more responsible for all the events in my life. Today one of my sons has more than 3½ years of sobriety after nearly losing his life to alcohol and drugs. He is truly one more miracle in my life for which I am so deeply grateful.

I have returned to my Indian people once again after a long shame-filled absence. I am dancing again and returning to the old ways I left behind. I have spoken at two Native American A.A. conventions, something I never thought I'd see when I was a youngster growing up. Adversity truly introduces us to ourselves. But we need never deal with our adversities alone as long as we can find another alcoholic in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

ANOTHER CHANCE

Poor, black, totally ruled by alcohol, she felt shut away from any life worth living. But when she began a prison sentence, a door opened.

I AM AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN alcoholic. I don't know when I became an alcoholic, but I do believe I became one because I drank too much too often.

I always blamed my drinking on being poor, or on anything other than the truth—that I liked what booze did for me, that when I had a drink I was as big and had as much as the next person. I would never admit that I was drinking too much or spending money that I should have used to buy food for my two little boys.

As time went on, I drank more. I was not able to hold a job—no one wants a drunk around. I was always able to get a boyfriend who had a drinking joint or sold whiskey, but it didn't last long. I would embarrass everyone by coming in drunk or passing out. Then it got to the place where I couldn't drink without getting in jail. On one of these trips, the judge must have thought I was worth saving, for instead of sending me to jail, he sent me to A.A. for one month.

I went to A.A. At least, my body went. I hated every minute of it. I couldn't wait until the meeting was over to get a drink. I was afraid to drink before the meeting. I thought if they smelled whiskey on my breath,

they would lock me up, and I couldn't live without my bottle. I hated that judge for sending me to a place with all those drunks. I wasn't an alcoholic!

Oh, I might drink too much at times—everyone I knew drank. But I don't remember that any of them ever went to sleep in joints and woke up with no shoes on in the winter or fell out of chairs. But I did. I don't remember any of them getting put out in the winter because they didn't pay their rent. But to me, whiskey meant more than a home for my sons.

Things got so bad, I was afraid to go on the street, so I turned to Mothers' Aid. That was one of the worst things that could have happened to an alcoholic woman. I would wait for the mailman each month, like any good mother, but as soon as he handed me my check, I put on my best dress and went looking for my alcoholic friend. Once I started drinking, I didn't care that the rent wasn't paid or that there was no food in the house or that my boys needed shoes. I would stay out until my money was gone. Then I would go home full of remorse, and wonder what I was going to do until I got my next check.

In time, I began to go out and forget the way back home. I would wake to find myself in some beat-up rooming house, where roaches were crawling over everything. Then the time came when I couldn't afford whiskey, so I turned to wine. Finally I got so low-down, I was ashamed of my friends' seeing me, so I went to the worst joints I could find. If it was daylight, I would go down alleys to make sure no one saw me.

I felt that I didn't have anything to live for, so I tried suicide many times. But I would always wake up in the psychiatric ward to begin another long treat-

ment. After a while I found that the psycho ward was a good place to hide when I had taken something stolen to the pawnshop. I thought if the cops did come to the hospital, the doctors would tell them I was crazy and didn't know what I was doing. But then one good doctor told me there was nothing wrong with me except drinking too much. He said if I came back again, they would send me to the state hospital. I didn't want that, so I stopped going to the psycho ward.

Now I had gotten to the place where I would wake up with black eyes and not know where I got them, or wake up with a lot of money and not know where I got it. Later I found out that I went into stores and stole clothes, then sold them. One morning I woke up with a thousand dollars. I was trying to remember where it came from, when two of the biggest cops I ever saw walked in and took me to jail. It came out that I had sold a woman a fur coat. The cops had picked her up, and she told them she had bought it from me. I got out on bail right away, but when I went to trial, the judge gave me thirty days. When my thirty days were up, I started back on my rounds. I didn't last long. They tell me that I killed a man during that period, but I can't remember anything. It was a total blackout for me. Because I had been drunk, the judge gave me only a twelve-year sentence in prison.

By the grace of God, I only served three years. It was there that I really found out what A.A. was. I had rejected A.A. on the outside, but now it came to me in prison. Today I thank my Higher Power for giving me another chance at life and A.A. and being able to try and help some other alcoholic. I have been home for a year and have not taken a drink in four years.

Since I have been in A.A., I have more friends than I ever had in my life—friends who care about me and my welfare, friends who don't care that I am black and that I have been in prison. All they care about is that I am a human being and that I want to stay sober. Since I've been home, I have been able to gain the respect of my two sons again.

The only thing that bothers me is that there are only about five African-Americans in A.A. in my city. Even those don't take part in A.A. functions as I would like to see them do. I don't know if it's force of habit or something else that keeps them in one place, but I do know that in A.A. there is much work to do, and none of us can do it standing still.

I do think that some of the African-Americans here—and other places too—are afraid to go to other meetings. I just want to say that you don't have to be afraid, because no one at any A.A. meeting will bite you. There are no color bars in A.A. If you give us a try, you will see that we are really human beings, and we will welcome you with open arms and hearts.

I'm writing this during an A.A. convention, where I have spent the weekend with nothing but white people. They haven't eaten me yet! I have not seen a black face but mine since I've been here, and if I didn't look in the mirror, I wouldn't know that I *was* black, because these people treat me as one of them, which I am. We all have the same sickness, and in helping one another, we are able to stay sober.

A LATE START

“It’s been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic.”

I AM A SEVENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD alcoholic. For fifty-five of those seventy-five years I led what is known as a normal middle-class life. Alcohol had a little part in it as candied yams—nice when there but unmissed when absent. The home in which I grew up included two loving parents, one older brother, a constant flow of house pets, riding horses, and friends who were welcomed. Discipline in our house was strict but not out of line with the thinking prevalent during the first quarter of the twentieth century; certainly I don’t consider that I was in any way abused. I attended private school and later a midwestern college. I married, had children, worked, experienced the pain of the death of my parents and of a child. Knew, too, the pleasure of real friends and financial success. I enjoyed horseback riding, swimming, tennis, and had quiet evenings filled with children, books, and friends.

What happened to me somewhere between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-three? I’ve no idea! Was life too much? Did some latent gene suddenly take on a fierce life of its own? I don’t know. What I do know is that at sixty-five I was a crawling, dirty maggot of a woman, willing to tarnish all I’d worked for and to

desecrate every dear relationship I had. I know too that through a wonderful set of God-guided circumstances and people, I was led to the only possible course of behavior that will keep me sane, sober, constructive, and happy.

I was twenty when I had my first drink, and although I liked the taste, I didn't like the way it made me feel. I didn't drink again until I was in my early thirties and thought it made me seem cool and sophisticated. During these early years, a couple of drinks were enough, and I often nursed one Scotch on the rocks for a full evening. When I was thirty-five, my twelve-year-old son was diagnosed with an incurable cancer and within a few months my husband demanded a divorce. For the following five years while my son lived, I seldom drank and never drank alone. Agony, fear, hurt, and exhaustion did not make me a drunk. Happiness opened that door much, much later.

During my mid-forties, my interest in alcohol began to gain momentum. Although I had continued to work, I had otherwise isolated myself to care for my son and his younger sister, each of whom required a special dose of stability, love, and security. Soon after my son's death, I made a decided effort to reenter the adult world. My debut encouraged my drinking. It was not yet obsessive, but drinking became more and more a part of my daily life. I no longer entertained without serving cocktails and seldom attended gatherings where liquor wasn't provided. I always managed to find the post-activity drinking crowd whether it was after dog obedience training or an oil painting class. During my late forties, it was not unusual for me to have a drink alone in the evening, although there were

still many days when I didn't drink at all. Any event was an occasion for excessive celebration, and there were increasingly frequent weekends when I drank myself to a hangover-creating high. Nevertheless, it was during this period that I received a major job promotion.

I was forty-nine when my second husband and I were married. Years before, we had dated through high school and two years of college but then were separated by World War II. Each of us had married elsewhere, divorced, and thirty years later we met by chance. We had ten years of laughter, sharing, and wonderment well laced with martinis and Scotch on the rocks. By the time I was sixty, anyone wise in the ways of alcoholism would have known I was in for big trouble. Happy plans dissolved into pouts, arguments began, and meals burned. Hurricanes of anger rushed through our once-happy cottage. We agreed we were drinking too much. We tried the switch technique, the time control schedule, the drink-only-on-weekends ploy. Nothing worked. Between us we were badly damaging our budget. My husband lost his job, and then for two harrowing years I watched him die of alcoholism. But I learned nothing from his death, and my drinking escalated as I bottle-fed my sorrow.

My early sixties saw me drunk every night and more and more frequently calling in sick or for personal leave. Life was pure and unadulterated hell! At work, I was often shaking so badly that I hesitated to give dictation because I would have to sign the letters. I made every possible excuse to meet someone for a "business luncheon" so that I could have a drink or two. As my alcoholism accelerated, my absenteeism

increased and my productivity diminished. I bounced checks, pawned silver, mourned, and I continued my drinking.

Finally on one cold winter day, I called Alcoholics Anonymous, and that evening two ladies took me to a meeting. We had a twenty-five-minute ride in the car, and I remember how good it was to talk about my fear and shakes, how kind they were without encouraging my self-pity. I remember being given a cup of coffee I could hardly handle and hearing impossible promises that would materialize if I would only make the impossible commitment. I did want to stop. The ladies suggested that I go to a women's meeting the next night, and I did. I had a drink first, of course, and when it came time to identify myself, I stated that my brain told me I was an alcoholic but the rest of me didn't believe it. The next night it snowed, and I stayed home and drank. That was the end of my first try at A.A.

Some months later I invited my daughter and son-in-law for dinner to celebrate her birthday. They found me sprawled across the living room floor, passed out cold. What a mournful birthday present! It took very little persuasion to convince me to go into the detoxification program at the local hospital. I knew I was in trouble; I was ashamed and heartbroken that I had caused her such hurt. Seven days in detox and eight weeks of really good help from a psychologist, and I was dry, sober, and ready to face the world again. The doctor strongly suggested that I participate in the local A.A. program, but I would have none of it. I was cured—I needed no further help.

A year and a half later I retired. I was enjoying my

new freedom and gave myself permission to have a drink only when I was dining out. That worked so well that I made a new rule: I could have a cocktail before dinner and an after-dinner drink. Then I made a rule that said I could serve alcohol to my friends in my home. That of course is the rule that sent me spinning right back down into fearful drunkenness. I was worse than before. My self-imposed hell was in my own home. Unbathed, in the same nightclothes day after day, afraid of the phone, the doorbell, and the darkness. If the clock said six, I wouldn't know whether it was morning or evening. Days ran into each other in an agonizing blur. I crawled to bed, drank when I came to, and sat shivering in fear of some unknown tragedy that I thought was about to descend on me. I remember wailing because I couldn't make coffee, sitting curled in a corner trying to sort out how I could commit suicide without making a mess. I might have tried, but I was afraid no one would find me before I started to stink.

Once again my daughter came to my rescue, and I checked into the detox program at the hospital. This time I was there for ten days. During that time, A.A. meetings were made available at the hospital. I was genuinely touched by the fact that they were led by a young man in a leg cast and on crutches, especially when I realized that he came as a volunteer. And twice before I left, I was given a leave of absence to attend local A.A. meetings.

Others have stated that they eagerly embraced the A.A. program. Unlike them, I did not enter the rooms willingly, nor did I find myself immediately at home. However, I had no other option. There was no escape

route that I had not tried, none that had not led to another failure. I was sixty-nine years old. I had neither time nor health to waste. For six months I didn't drink, attended meetings, and sometimes read the Big Book. I went to meetings exactly on time, sat quietly, and left as soon as the meeting closed. In no way was I a part of the group. I was not impressed by the sayings and didn't really believe the messages I heard. Then one day I was called on to share, and I proceeded to explode. I announced that in no way was I a "grateful alcoholic," that I hated my condition, that I did not enjoy the meetings, and that I did not leave the meetings refreshed. I found neither ease nor growth in the Fellowship.

My healing began with the arrogance of that statement. One of the women came to me after the meeting and told me I was about to "go out." She offered to help me find a sponsor and led me to exactly the person I needed. This lady had nineteen years of sobriety and, even more important, a wealth of experience in helping and guiding alcoholics through the steps of A.A. By no means do I intend to imply that I leaped with pleasure into the program. I stalled and resented and refused to accept each step as it came up. I felt challenged by each new concept and resentful toward my sponsor, who seemed intent on reducing me to abject stupidity. It was years before I realized that I resented the changes the program asked me to make, not my sponsor.

With the patience of unconditional love, she led me to acknowledge first that I was powerless over my alcoholism; then that others before me had conquered their illness. That there had to be some source of help

higher than any one of us and that, together, we were a well of strength on which any one of us could draw. From that point it was not hard to venture into the realization that a Power greater than any one of us existed, and with that understanding I found direction to my own special Higher Power. On that spiritual foundation I began to build a new life.

The Third Step was the most difficult for me. But having completed it, I found that I could face or untangle the other steps if, and when, I could remember to relax, trust the program, and implement the step rather than fight it. Accepting my Higher Power did not fully change my attitude of resistance. It just made yielding to instruction a more rational and acceptable mode of behavior. For each step, I still had to go through the process of recognizing that I had no control over my drinking. I had to understand that the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous had helped others and could help me. I had to realize that if I did want sobriety, I had better do the steps whether I liked them or not. Every time I ran into trouble, I ultimately found that I was resisting change.

My mentor had to remind me that A.A. is not just a project. A.A. offers me an opportunity to improve the quality of my life. I came to recognize that there is always a deeper and wider experience awaiting me. Early in my growth I remember thanking my sponsor for the hours and hours she had given me. She said, "Don't you think that you will do the same for someone else some day?" I replied, "I will never be responsible to or for anyone else ever again." That refusal to make any kind of repayment to the program delayed my offering to be of service in any capacity

and consequently delayed my maturing process. Not until two years had passed was I willing to act as group secretary. It was four years before I was willing to sponsor anyone. Today it is with real gratitude that I am allowed into the lives of a few women. My own understanding is broadened and deepened by their influence in my life. As the newcomer and I examine each step, both she and I receive new insight and find an additional facet to this jewel of sobriety. I'm proud now to be a part of the Fellowship that showed me the path up and out of hell. Now I am eager to share my experience as others have shared theirs with me.

Small miracles keep offering new opportunities just when I need change and growth. New friends have shown me hidden truths in those sayings that I once found so shallow. The lessons of tolerance and acceptance have taught me to look beyond exterior appearances to find the help and wisdom so often lurking beneath the surface. All my sobriety and growth, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, are dependent upon my willingness to listen, understand, and change.

During my fifth year, as a part of my annual personal inventory, I realized that I had not succeeded in developing a spiritual depth in my program. I had accepted what I was taught but had not gone in search of the private growth that I saw in others. I watched for and found people who take the program with them as they live, work, and play in the real world. Through their leadership, by precept and example, I am finding the daily excitement essential to my development as a person and to my contact with my Higher Power.

I approached Alcoholics Anonymous with fear and hesitation. Then, urged by the dread of what was be-

hind me, I took tiny delicate steps onto this new path. When I found the footing was firm, each tentative move brought me a little nearer to trust. Confidence grew, faith in my Higher Power expanded, and I came to recognize a light I had not known existed. Something within me shifted and welcomed a new source of strength, understanding, tolerance, and love. That selfish, withdrawn woman who announced that she would “never be responsible to or for anyone ever again” now finds sincere warmth in just being available. I count it a privilege to help another drunk.

It's been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic. Had I not become a drunk, I would have become another sober but sad statistic. At seventy-five I would be a lonely, unproductive old woman, watching TV, doing needlepoint, in my home without friends, and sinking further and further into an old age depression. As it is, A.A. has filled my days with friends, laughter, growth, and the feeling of worth that is rooted in constructive activity. My faith in, and contact with, my Higher Power shines more brightly than I dreamed it could. Those promises I thought were impossible are a viable force in my life. I am free to laugh all of my laughter, free to trust and be trusted, free to both give and receive help. I am free from shame and regret, free to learn and grow and work. I have left that lonely, frightening, painful express train through hell. I have accepted the gift of a safer, happier journey through life.

FREEDOM FROM BONDAGE

Young when she joined, this A.A. believes her serious drinking was the result of even deeper defects. She here tells how she was set free.

THE MENTAL TWISTS that led up to my drinking began many years before I ever took a drink, for I am one of those whose history proves conclusively that my drinking was “a symptom of a deeper trouble.”

Through my efforts to get down to “causes and conditions,” I stand convinced that my emotional illness has been present from my earliest recollection. I never did react normally to any emotional situation.

The medical profession would probably tell me I was conditioned for alcoholism by the things that happened to me in my childhood. And I am sure they would be right as far as they go, but A.A. has taught me I am the result of the *way I reacted* to what happened to me as a child. What is much more important to me, A.A. has taught me that through this simple program I may experience a change in this reaction pattern that will indeed allow me to “match calamity with serenity.”

I am an only child, and when I was seven years old, my parents separated very abruptly. With no explanation at all, I was taken from my home in Florida to my grandparents’ home in the Midwest. My mother went to a nearby city to go to work, and my father,

being an alcoholic, simply went. My grandparents were strangers to me, and I remember being lonely, terrified, and hurt.

In time I concluded that the reason I was hurt was because I loved my parents, and I concluded too that if I never allowed myself to love anybody or anything, I could never be hurt again. It became second nature for me to remove myself from anything or anybody I found myself growing fond of.

I grew up believing that one had to be totally self-sufficient, for one never dared to depend on another human being. I thought that life was a pretty simple thing; you simply made a plan for your life, based upon what you wanted, and then you needed only the courage to go after it.

In my late teens I became aware of emotions I'd not counted on: restlessness, anxiety, fear, and insecurity. The only kind of security I knew anything about at that time was material security, and I decided that all these intruders would vanish immediately if I only had a lot of money. The solution seemed very simple. With cold calculation I set about to marry a fortune, and I did. The only thing this changed, however, was my surroundings, and it was soon apparent that I could have the same uncomfortable emotions with an unlimited checking account that I could on a working girl's salary. It was impossible for me to say at this point, "Maybe there is something wrong with my philosophy," and I certainly couldn't say, "Maybe there is something wrong with *me*." It was not difficult to convince myself that my unhappiness was the fault of the man I had married, and I divorced him at the end of a year.

I was married and divorced again before I was twenty-three years old, this time to a prominent band leader—a man whom many women wanted. I thought this would give me ego-strength, make me feel wanted and secure, and alleviate my fears, but again nothing changed inside me.

The only importance in all of this lies in the fact that at twenty-three I was just as sick as I was at thirty-three, when I came into A.A. But at that time I apparently had no place to go because I had no drinking problem. Had I been able to explain to a psychiatrist the feelings of futility, loneliness, and lack of purpose that had come with my deep sense of personal failure at this second divorce, I seriously doubt that the good doctor could have convinced me that my basic problem was a spiritual hunger. But A.A. has shown me this was the truth. And if I had been able to turn to the church at that time, I'm sure they could not have convinced me my sickness was within myself, nor could they have shown me that the need for self-analysis that A.A. has shown me is vital if I am to survive. So I had no place to go. Or so it seemed to me.

I wasn't afraid of anything or anybody after I learned about drinking. It seemed right from the beginning that with liquor I could always retire to my little private world where nobody could get at me to hurt me. It seems only fitting that when I did finally fall in love, it was with an alcoholic, and for the next ten years I progressed as rapidly as is humanly possible into what I believed to be hopeless alcoholism.

During this time, our country was at war. My husband was soon in uniform and among the first to go overseas. My reaction to this was identical in many

respects to my reaction to my parents leaving me when I was seven. Apparently I'd grown physically at the customary rate of speed, and I had acquired an average amount of intellectual training in the intervening years, but there had been no emotional maturity at all. I realize now that this phase of my development had been arrested by my obsession with self, and my egocentricity had reached such proportions that adjustment to anything outside my personal control was impossible for me. I was immersed in self-pity and resentment, and the only people who would support this attitude or who I felt understood me at all were the people I met in bars and the ones who drank as I did. It became more and more necessary to escape from myself, for my remorse and shame and humiliation when I was sober were almost unbearable. The only way existence was possible was through rationalizing every sober moment and drinking myself into complete oblivion as often as I could.

My husband eventually returned, but it was not long until we realized we could not continue our marriage. By this time I was such a past master at kidding myself that I had convinced myself I had sat out a war and waited for this man to come home, and as my resentment and self-pity grew, so did my alcoholic problem.

The last three years of my drinking, I drank on my job. The amount of willpower exercised to control my drinking during working hours, diverted into a constructive channel, would have made me president, and the thing that made the willpower possible was the knowledge that as soon as my day was finished, I could drink myself into oblivion. Inside, though, I was

scared to death, for I knew that the time was coming (and it couldn't be too remote) when I would be unable to hold that job. Maybe I wouldn't be able to hold any job, or maybe (and this was my greatest fear) I wouldn't care whether I had a job or not. I knew it didn't make any difference where I started, the inevitable end would be skid row. The only reality I was able to face had been forced upon me by its very repetition—*I had to drink*; and I didn't know there was anything in the world that could be done about it.

About this time I met a man who had three motherless children, and it seemed that might be a solution to my problem. I had never had a child, and this had been a satisfactory excuse many times for my drinking. It seemed logical to me that if I married this man and took the responsibility for these children that they would keep me sober. So I married again. This caused the comment from one of my A.A. friends, when I told my story after coming into the program, that I had always been a cinch for the program, for I had always been interested in mankind—I was just taking them one man at a time.

The children kept me sober for darn near three weeks, and then I went on (please God) my last drunk. I've heard it said many times in A.A., "There is just one good drunk in every alcoholic's life, and that's the one that brings us into A.A.," and I believe it. I was drunk for sixty days around the clock, and it was my intention, literally, to drink myself to death. I went to jail for the second time during this period for being drunk in an automobile. I was the only person I'd ever known personally who had ever been in jail,

and I guess it is most significant that the second time was less humiliating than the first had been.

Finally, in desperation, my family appealed to a doctor for advice, and he suggested A.A. The people who came knew immediately I was in no condition to absorb anything of the program. I was put in a sanitarium to be defogged so that I could make a sober decision about this for myself. It was here that I realized for the first time that as a practicing alcoholic, I had no rights. Society can do anything it chooses to do with me when I am drunk, and I can't lift a finger to stop it, for I forfeit my rights through the simple expedient of becoming a menace to myself and to the people around me. With deep shame came the knowledge too that I had lived with no sense of social obligation nor had I known the meaning of moral responsibility to my fellow men.

I attended my first A.A. meeting eight years ago, and it is with deep gratitude that I'm able to say I've not had a drink since that time and that I take no sedation or narcotics, for this program is to me one of complete sobriety. I no longer need to escape reality. One of the truly great things A.A. has taught me is that reality too has two sides; I had only known the grim side before the program, but now I had a chance to learn about the pleasant side as well.

The A.A. members who sponsored me told me in the beginning that I would not only find a way to live without having a drink, but that I would find a way to live without *wanting* to drink, if I would do these simple things. They said if you want to know *how* this program works, take the first word of your question—the “H” is for honesty, the “O” is for open-mindedness,

and the “W” is for willingness; these our Big Book calls the essentials of recovery. They suggested that I study the A.A. book and try to take the Twelve Steps according to the explanation in the book, for it was their opinion that the application of these principles in our daily lives will get us sober and keep us sober. I believe this, and I believe too that it is equally impossible to practice these principles to the best of our ability, a day at a time, and still drink, for I don’t think the two things are compatible.

I had no problem admitting I was powerless over alcohol, and I certainly agreed that my life had become unmanageable. I had only to reflect on the contrast between the plans I made so many years ago for my life with what really happened to know I couldn’t manage my life drunk or sober. A.A. taught me that *willingness to believe* was enough for a beginning. It’s been true in my case, nor could I quarrel with “restore us to sanity,” for my actions drunk or sober, before A.A., were not those of a sane person. My desire to be honest with myself made it necessary for me to realize that my thinking was irrational. It had to be, or I could not have justified my erratic behavior as I did. I’ve been benefited from a dictionary definition I found that reads: “Rationalization is giving a socially acceptable reason for socially unacceptable behavior, and socially unacceptable behavior is a form of insanity.”

A.A. has given me serenity of purpose and the opportunity to be of service to God and to the people about me, and I am serene in the infallibility of these principles that provide the fulfillment of my purpose.

A.A. has taught me that I will have peace of mind in

exact proportion to the peace of mind I bring into the lives of other people, and it has taught me the true meaning of the admonition “happy are ye who know these things *and do them.*” For the only problems I have now are those I create when I break out in a rash of self-will.

I’ve had many spiritual experiences since I’ve been in the program, many that I didn’t recognize right away, for I’m slow to learn and they take many guises. But one was so outstanding that I like to pass it on whenever I can in the hope that it will help someone else as it has me. As I said earlier, self-pity and resentment were my constant companions, and my inventory began to look like a thirty-three-year diary, for I seemed to have a resentment against everybody I had ever known. All but one “responded to the treatment” suggested in the steps immediately, but this one posed a problem.

This resentment was against my mother, and it was twenty-five years old. I had fed it, fanned it, and nurtured it as one might a delicate child, and it had become as much a part of me as my breathing. It had provided me with excuses for my lack of education, my marital failures, personal failures, inadequacy, and of course, my alcoholism. And though I really thought I had been willing to part with it, now I knew I was reluctant to let it go.

One morning, however, I realized I had to get rid of it, for my reprieve was running out, and if I didn’t get rid of it I was going to get drunk—and I didn’t want to get drunk anymore. In my prayers that morning I asked God to point out to me some way to be free of this resentment. During the day, a friend of mine

brought me some magazines to take to a hospital group I was interested in. I looked through them. A banner across one featured an article by a prominent clergyman in which I caught the word *resentment*.

He said, in effect: "If you have a resentment you want to be free of, if you will pray for the person or the thing that you resent, you will be free. If you will ask in prayer for everything you want for yourself to be given to them, you will be free. Ask for their health, their prosperity, their happiness, and you will be free. Even when you don't really want it for them and your prayers are only words and you don't mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do it every day for two weeks, and you will find you have come to mean it and to want it for them, and you will realize that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred, you now feel compassionate understanding and love."

It worked for me then, and it has worked for me many times since, and it will work for me every time I am willing to work it. Sometimes I have to ask first for the willingness, but it too always comes. And because it works for me, it will work for all of us. As another great man says, "The only real freedom a human being can ever know is doing what you ought to do because you want to do it."

This great experience that released me from the bondage of hatred and replaced it with love is really just another affirmation of the truth I know: I get everything I need in Alcoholics Anonymous—and everything I need I get. And when I get what I need, I invariably find that it was just *what I wanted all the time*.

A.A. TAUGHT HIM TO HANDLE
SOBRIETY

“God willing, we . . . may never again have to deal with drinking, but we have to deal with sobriety every day.”

WHEN I HAD been in A.A. only a short while, an oldtimer told me something that has affected my life ever since. “A.A. does not teach us how to handle our drinking,” he said. “It teaches us how to handle sobriety.”

I guess I always knew that the way to handle my drinking was to quit. After my very first drink—a tiny glass of sherry my father gave me to celebrate the New Year when I was thirteen—I went up to bed, dizzy with exhilaration and excitement, and I prayed I wouldn’t drink anymore!

But I did, when I reached college age. Much later, when I progressed to full-blown alcoholism, people told me I should quit. Like most other alcoholics I have known, I *did* quit drinking at various times—once for ten months on my own and during other interludes when I was hospitalized. It’s no great trick to stop drinking; the trick is to *stay* stopped.

To do that, I had come to A.A. to learn how to handle sobriety—which is what I could not handle in the first place. That’s why I drank.

I was raised in Kansas, the only child of loving parents who just drank socially. We moved frequently.

In fact, I changed schools every year until high school. In each new place, I was the new kid—a skinny, shy kid—to be tested and beaten up. As soon as I had begun to feel accepted, we moved again.

By the time I reached high school, I was an over-achiever. An honor student in college, I became editor of the yearbook. I sold my first article to a national magazine while still an undergraduate. I also began to drink at fraternity parties and beer busts.

Upon graduation I ventured to New York to pursue my writing career. I landed a good job with a company publication and was moonlighting on other magazines. Regarded as something of a “boy wonder,” I began to see myself that way. I also began visiting bars after work with my older associates. By age twenty-two, I was a daily drinker.

Then I joined the navy and was commissioned as an ensign to write speeches for admirals. Later I went to sea, serving as gunnery officer on a destroyer escort and emerging a lieutenant commander. I also got into my first disciplinary trouble caused by drinking, on two separate occasions.

In the last year of my navy service, I was married to a lovely, lively girl who enjoyed drinking. Our courtship was mainly in bars and night spots when my ship was in New York. On our honeymoon we had iced champagne by the bedside day and night.

The pattern was set. By twenty-nine I was having trouble coping with life because of my drinking. Neurotic fears plagued me, and I had occasional uncontrollable tremors. I read self-help books. I turned to religion with fervor. I swore off hard liquor and turned to wine. I got sick of the sweetness and turned to ale.

It wasn't strong enough, so I added a shot of vodka—and was right back to worse trouble than before. I began sneaking drinks when playing bartender for guests. To cure my dreadful hangovers, I discovered the morning drink.

The early promise of the “boy wonder” faded, and my career began to drift. Although my ambition still flickered, it now took the form of fantasizing. My values became distorted. To wear expensive clothes, to have bartenders know what to serve me before I ordered, to be recognized by headwaiters and shown to the best table, to play gin rummy for high stakes with the insouciance of a riverboat gambler—these were the enduring values in life, I thought.

Bewilderment, fear, and resentment moved into my life. And yet my ability to lie outwardly and to kid myself inwardly grew with every drink I took. Indeed, I *had* to drink now to live, to cope with the demands of everyday existence. When I encountered disappointments or frustrations—as I did more and more frequently—my solution was to drink. I had always been oversensitive to criticism and was acutely so now. When I was criticized or reprimanded, the bottle was my refuge and comfort.

When I was faced with a special challenge or social event—such as an important business presentation or a dinner party—I had to fortify myself with a couple of belts. Too often I would overdo it and behave badly at the very time I wanted to be at my best! For instance, the fiftieth wedding anniversary of my wife's parents was the occasion for a huge family reunion at our home. Despite my wife's entreaties to take it easy, I arrived home in bad shape. I remember being dragged,

drink in hand, from under the grand piano, where I had hidden, to be locked in my room in disgrace.

Above all, I was suffering inner pain because my performance and my accomplishments in life failed to live up to my own expectations of myself. I *had* to anesthetize that pain with alcohol. Of course, the more I drank, the more unrealistic my expectations became and the poorer my performance, and the gap widened. So the need to drink grew still greater.

At age forty I developed a large lump in my pot-belly, and I feared it was a tumor. The doctor pronounced it a badly enlarged liver and said I had to quit drinking. I did. I went on the wagon, with no outside help and with no real difficulty—except that I didn't enjoy life without drinking. I had to cope with the demands of everyday living without my comforter, my anesthetic, my crutch. And I didn't like it.

So when my liver had recovered after ten months, I resumed drinking. At first, just one drink, on occasion. Then drinks came more frequently but were carefully spaced out. Soon my drinking was as bad as ever—all day long every day. But I was trying frantically to control it. And it had gone underground now, because everyone knew I shouldn't be drinking. Instead of drinking in fancy bars and clubs, I had to carry a bottle of vodka in my briefcase, duck into public toilets, and gulp from the bottle, trembling, in order to keep from falling apart.

Over the next two years I sickened rapidly. The enlargement of my liver degenerated into cirrhosis. I vomited every morning. I could not face food. I suffered frequent blackouts. I had severe nosebleeds. Bruises appeared mysteriously over my body.

I became so weak, I could barely drag myself around.

My employer gave me one warning, then another. My children avoided me. When I awoke in the middle of the night with shakes and sweats and fears, I would hear my wife weeping quietly in bed beside me. My doctor warned me that if I kept on, I might have esophageal hemorrhaging and die. But now all choice was gone. I had to drink.

What my doctor had warned me about finally happened. I was attending a convention in Chicago and carousing day and night. Suddenly I began vomiting and losing rectally great quantities of blood. Hopeless now, I felt it would be better for my wife, my children, and everyone in my life if I went ahead and died. I found myself being lifted onto a stretcher and whisked away in an ambulance to a strange hospital. I awoke next day with tubes in both arms.

Within a week I was feeling well enough to go home. The doctors told me that if I ever took another drink, it might be my last. I thought I had learned my lesson. But my thinking was still confused, and I was still unable to deal with everyday living without help. Within two months I was drinking again.

In the next half-year I experienced two more esophageal hemorrhages, miraculously surviving each one by a hair. Each time, I went back to drinking—even smuggling a bottle of vodka into the hospital as soon as the blood transfusions had ceased. My doctor finally declared he could no longer be responsible for me and sent me to a psychiatrist who practiced in the same suite of offices. He happened to be, by the grace of God, Dr. Harry Tiebout, the psychiatrist who probably knew more about alcoholism than any other in

the world. At that very time he was a nonalcoholic trustee on the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It was the late Dr. Tiebout, then, who persuaded me to seek help through A.A. I acquired a sponsor and began attending meetings but continued to drink. Within a few days I found myself drying out on a drunk farm. While there, I read the Big Book and the Grapevine and began the slow road back to health and sanity through the recovery program of A.A.

As the sober days grew into sober months and then into sober years, a new and beautiful life began to emerge from the shambles of my former existence. The relationship between my wife and me was restored to a love and happiness that we had not known even *before* my alcoholism became acute. (She no longer weeps in the night.) As our children grew up, I was able to be a father to them when they most needed one. My company advanced me rapidly once my reliability was established again. Regaining my health, I became an avid jogger, sailor, and skier.

All these things and many, many more, A.A. gave me. But above all, it taught me how to handle sobriety. I have learned how to relate to people; before A.A., I could never do that comfortably without alcohol. I have learned to deal with disappointments and problems that once would have sent me right to the bottle. I have come to realize that the name of the game is not so much to stop drinking as to *stay sober*. Alcoholics can stop drinking in many places and many ways—but Alcoholics Anonymous offers us a way to stay sober.

God willing, we members of A.A. may never again

have to deal with drinking, but we have to deal with sobriety every day. How do we do it? By learning—through practicing the Twelve Steps and through sharing at meetings—how to cope with the problems that we looked to booze to solve, back in our drinking days.

For example, we are told in A.A. that we cannot afford resentments and self-pity, so we learn to avoid these festering mental attitudes. Similarly, we rid ourselves of guilt and remorse as we “clean out the garbage” from our minds through the Fourth and Fifth Steps of our recovery program. We learn how to level out the emotional swings that got us into trouble both when we were up and when we were down.

We are taught to differentiate between our wants (which are never satisfied) and our needs (which are always provided for). We cast off the burdens of the past and the anxieties of the future, as we begin to live in the present, one day at a time. We are granted “the serenity to accept the things we cannot change”—and thus lose our quickness to anger and our sensitivity to criticism.

Above all, we reject fantasizing and accept reality. The more I drank, the more I fantasized everything. I imagined getting even for hurts and rejections. In my mind's eye I played and replayed scenes in which I was plucked magically from the bar where I stood nursing a drink and was instantly exalted to some position of power and prestige. I lived in a dream world. A.A. led me gently from this fantasizing to embrace reality with open arms. And I found it beautiful! For, at last, I was at peace with myself. And with others. And with God.