

(8)

BECAUSE I'M AN ALCOHOLIC

This drinker finally found the answer to her nagging question, "Why?"

ISUPPOSE I always wondered who I was. As a child, isolated in the country, I made up stories, inventing myself along with imaginary companions to play with. Later, when we moved to a large city and I was surrounded by kids, I felt separate, like an outcast. And although I learned to go along with the cultural norm as I grew up, still, underneath, I felt different.

Alcohol helped. At least I thought it helped until I saw the oppressive thirty-year shadow it cast on my life. I discovered it in college, and although at first I didn't drink often (didn't have the opportunity), whenever I started, I drank as long as there was any alcohol around. It was a reflex. I don't remember liking the taste, but I liked that it seemed to bring me to life and get me through a date or a party able to talk. It moved me outside of that hole I felt in myself and lowered the wall I created between me and any person or situation that made me uncomfortable.

For ten years, through college and graduate school interspersed with jobs, I drank periodically, so it was easy enough to think that I was a social drinker. Looking back, I see that alcohol helped me construct an image of myself as a sophisticated metropolitan

woman, diminishing my feelings of being a backward country girl. I studied vintage wines and selected them with care to accompany the gourmet dishes I learned to make. I read about the correct drinks for various occasions. I learned to put just the tiniest whiff of dry vermouth into my martinis. Meanwhile, my tolerance for alcohol grew, so that while at first I got sick or passed out, as time went on I could hold larger quantities without any visible effects. Until the next morning's hangover.

Behind the façade, my real life seemed just out of reach. I wanted to consider myself grown up, but inside I felt small and helpless, hardly there at all. I would look at my friends—delightful, interesting, good people—and try to define myself through them. If they saw something in me that made them want to be with me, I must have something to offer. But their love for me was not a substitute for loving myself; it didn't fill the emptiness.

So I continued spinning fantasies, and now alcohol fueled my dreams. I would make great discoveries, win the Nobel Prize in medicine and in literature as well. Always the dream was somewhere else, further off, and I took a series of geographical cures in search of myself. I was offered a job in Paris and jumped at the chance. I packed my trunk, left my apartment to my boyfriend, and sailed off, thinking that at last I would find my real home, my real self.

I began to drink daily and rationalized that in France, of course, you have to have wine with meals. And after the dinner, after the wine, then there were liqueurs. My journals and letters bear witness in the deterioration of my handwriting as the evening wore

on, drinking as I wrote. It was there too that I first became dependent on alcohol. After work, on the way to the Alliance Française for classes, I'd stop at a bistro for a glass of cognac to give me courage to get me there—my need greater than the embarrassment of being a woman drinking alone in the 1950s. One vacation, I went to visit friends in Scotland, traveling slowly through the English and Welsh countryside. The bottles of cognac and Benedictine I'd brought as gifts for them I drank in little hotel rooms miles before I got there. As long as it lasted, I could stay out of the pubs.

Europe hadn't proved to be the change that would repair my life, and I started west again. It was in Cambridge that I pronounced my first resolutions about cutting down—New Year's resolutions I recycled for a dozen years while my drinking and my life kept getting worse. Alcohol had enslaved me. I was in bondage to it, although I kept assuring myself that drinking was a pleasure and a choice.

Blackouts began, vacant places in my life when hours would disappear, lost to memory. The first time was after I'd given a dinner party. The next morning I woke up without remembering that I'd told my guests good night and gone to bed myself. I searched the apartment for clues. The table was cluttered with dessert dishes and coffee cups. Bottles were empty, and the glasses too. (It was my custom to polish off any drinks that were left.) My last memory was sometime during dinner. Did we ever finish? But there were the plates. I was terrified that I'd done something horrendous, until my friends called to tell me they'd enjoyed the evening.

One time we sailed from Guadelupe to a little island for a picnic, swam to shore from the ship. After lunch, and quantities of wine, I was with a French ski instructor talking to a troop of small boys on their way home from school, trying to explain to those tropical islanders what snow is like. I remember them giggling. The next thing I knew, I was back at the camp, walking to the dining room—apparently after swimming back to the ship, sailing to the port, then taking a rickety bus across the island. I had no memory of what I had done during those hours between.

The blackouts increased, and my terror increased with them. Telephone bills would inform me that I'd made late-night calls to distant places. I could tell from the numbers whom I'd called, but what had I said? Some mornings I woke up with a stranger who had brought me home from a party the night before. These things weighed heavily on me, but I couldn't stop the drinking that had caused them. That too gnawed away any remnants of self-respect I might have had. I was incapable of controlling my drinking and my life.

I needed a drink to go anyplace—to the theater, a party, a date, and, later, to work. I would leave my apartment, lock the door, and start down the stairs, and then turn around and go back in for another drink to get me where I planned to go. I needed a drink to do anything—to write, to cook, to clean the house, to paint the walls, to take a bath.

When I passed out and fell into bed early, I woke up at four or five and had Irish coffee to start the day. I discovered that beer was better than orange juice to ease my hangover. Afraid my colleagues or students

would smell my breath at work, I was careful to keep my distance. When I got up late and rushed off to the lab, fortified only with coffee, my hands shook so badly it was impossible to weigh out the milligrams of compounds needed for an experiment. When I went out to lunch with another alcoholic, we might never get back to work that day.

Somehow I still managed to keep my job and most of my friends, social drinkers who were urging me to cut down on the alcohol. That counsel only made me mad, but I was concerned myself. I asked the therapist I was seeing, sometimes with beer in hand, would I have to stop? His answer was that we had to find out why I drank. I'd already tried but was never able to find out why until I learned the answer in A.A.—because I'm an alcoholic.

With my attempts to cut down, I stopped keeping alcohol around the house, drank up whatever was there, over and over deciding not to get more. Then on the way home after work or an evening out, I'd have to see if I could scrape together enough money for a bottle. There were liquor stores just about every block, and I rotated them so the salesmen wouldn't know how much I drank. On Sundays when the liquor stores were closed, I had to make do with beer or hard cider from the grocery.

The horrors grew. Inner horrors. On the surface it looked as though I was more or less keeping it together, but day by day I was dying inside, filled with fears I couldn't name but which shook me to the core. My worst fear was that I was an alcoholic. I wasn't sure what that was, except that I might end up down on the Bowery in New York, where I had seen drunks

curled up on the sidewalk. I made another New Year's resolution—to stop drinking entirely until I could handle it and then, I told myself, I could go back to wine and beer.

Hands trembling, body shaky, head splitting, I survived that first day until I was fairly safe in bed in an alcohol-free apartment. Somehow I made it through a couple more days, miserable in withdrawal. In spite of managing to stay dry that time, I have no doubt that resolution would have crumbled like the others and I would have been drinking again if I hadn't found A.A.

I had left the therapist who hadn't been able to tell me why I drank, and on New Year's Eve, I went to a party at the home of my new therapist. A few days later in the group, the therapist said, "You're drinking even more than I realized. You're an alcoholic. I think you should stop drinking, see a doctor, and go to A.A."

My resolution had endured three days and I protested, "I'm not an alcoholic!" That was my very last denial.

"Say it the other way," he suggested. "I am an alcoholic." It came out in a whisper, but it sounded right. I've said it thousands of times since then, and with gratitude. What I was most afraid to admit that evening was what would set me free.

The therapist told me then and there to call someone who had been in our therapy group, a doctor on the staff of a hospital alcoholism service. "I'll call her tomorrow," I said.

"Call her now." He handed me the telephone.

When I asked her if I was an alcoholic, she said that from what she'd seen of my drinking I might be and

suggested that I talk with her boss. Terrified, I made an appointment and kept it. She told me the symptoms of alcoholism, and I had them all. She gave me a list of A.A. meetings and recommended one.

I went to that meeting—a small women's group. I was scared and in withdrawal. Someone greeted me and I muttered my name aloud. Someone brought me a cup of coffee. People gave me their phone numbers and urged me to call, to pick up the telephone instead of a drink. They were warm and friendly. They said keep coming back.

And I did. For weeks I sat in the back of the rooms, silent when others shared their experience, strength, and hope. I listened to their stories and found so many areas where we overlapped—not all of the deeds, but the feelings of remorse and hopelessness. I learned that alcoholism isn't a sin, it's a disease. That lifted the guilt I had felt. I learned that I didn't have to stop drinking forever, but just not pick up that first drink one day, one hour at a time. I could manage that. There was laughter in those rooms and sometimes tears, but always love, and when I was able to let it in, that love helped me heal.

I read everything I could about this disease I have. My readings recounted the course I had lived and predicted the way I would die if I continued drinking. I had access to a good medical library, but after a while, I realized the genetics and chemistry of the disease were of no use to me as an alcoholic. All that I needed to know about it, what would help me get sober, help me recover, I could learn in A.A.

I was blessed to live in a city where there were meetings at all hours of the day and night. There I

would be safe. And there, within a few blocks of my apartment, at last I would find the self I had traveled thousands of miles in search of. The slogans on the walls, which at first made me shudder, began to impress me as truths I could live by: "One Day at a Time." "Easy Does It." "Keep It Simple." "Live and Let Live." "Let Go and Let God." "The Serenity Prayer."

Commitment and service were part of recovery. I was told that to keep it we have to give it away. At first I made the coffee and later volunteered at the intergroup office answering telephones on the evening shift. I went on Twelfth Step calls, spoke at meetings, served as group officer. Ever so gradually I began to open. Just a crack at first, with my hand on the door ready to slam it shut in a moment of fear. But my fears subsided too. I found that I could be there, open to all kinds of people from this solid base that we shared. Then I began to go back out into the world, carrying that strength with me.

I found that now I could do many things without a drink—write, answer the telephone, eat out, go to parties, make love, get through the day and the evenings. Sleep at night and get up the next morning ready to begin another day. I was amazed and proud to have gone a week without a drink, then a month. Then I lived an entire year sober, through my birthday, Christmas, problems, successes, the mixture that makes up life.

I healed physically, felt good, my senses returned. I began to hear the delicate sound of autumn leaves rattling in the wind, to feel the touch of snowflakes on my face, to see the first new leaves of spring.

Then I began to heal emotionally, to experience

feelings that had long been so deeply buried they had atrophied. For a time I floated on that pink cloud. Then I cried for a year, raged for another year. My feelings returned and then began to settle down to reasonable size.

Above all, I healed spiritually. The steps took me on that path. I had admitted I was powerless over alcohol, that my life had become unmanageable. That was what got me through the door. Then I came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. And eventually, I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood God. Years before, in my search, I had explored numerous religions and dropped them because they preached a patriarchal God, which I felt never included me. Alcoholics Anonymous, I was told, is a spiritual program, not a religious one. Through my years of darkness, some spark of spirit remained in me, helped me survive until I found my way into A.A. Then, nurtured by the program, that inner spirit grew, deepened, until it filled the emptiness I had so long felt inside. Step by step I moved to a spiritual awakening. Step by step I cleared up the past and got on with the present.

A.A. is my home now, and it is everywhere. I go to meetings when I travel here or in foreign countries, and the people are family I can know because of what we share. As I write this, in my twenty-eighth year of sobriety, I am amazed to look back and remember the woman—or child—I was then, to see how far I've come out of that abyss. Alcoholics Anonymous has enabled me to move from fantasies about what I might do with my life into living it, one day at a time. In my

first move that was not a geographic, I left the city and moved to the country. I left research and became a gardener. I discovered that I am a lesbian and that I love women. I'm fulfilling a long-time dream of writing fiction that's being published. But these are things I do, aspects of the life I'm living in sobriety. The most precious discovery is who I really *am*—like all of us, a being far beyond any of the ego-selves, any of the fantasies I'd made up.

That sense of being different, which had long plagued me, disappeared when I saw the threads that run through all of us. Sharing our stories, our feelings, it is the areas where we are the same that impress me. The differences are but delightful flourishes on the surface, like different-colored costumes, and I enjoy them. But the basic ways we are human, the basic ways we simply are, stand out to me now. I came to see that we all are really one, and I no longer feel alone.