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STUDENT OF LIFE

Living at home with her parents, she tried using willpower to beat the obsession to drink. But it wasn't until she met another alcoholic and went to an A.A. meeting that sobriety took hold.

I STARTED DRINKING at age eighteen, rather a late bloomer by today's standards. But after I started, the disease of alcoholism hit me with a vengeance and made up for lost time. After I had been drinking for several years and seriously wondering if I did indeed have a problem with alcohol, I read one of the "Are You an Alcoholic?" quiz-type checklists. Much relieved, I found that almost nothing applied to me: I had never lost a job, a spouse, children, or any material possessions through alcohol. The fact that my drinking hadn't allowed me to gain any of those things crossed my mind only after I came into A.A.

I can't blame one ounce of my drinking on my upbringing. My parents were loving and supportive and have been married thirty-five years. No one else in my family exhibits alcoholic drinking or alcoholic behavior. For some reason, despite the resources available to me growing up, I developed into an adult woman terrified of the world around me. I was extremely insecure, though I was careful to hide this fact. I was unable to handle and understand my emotions; I always felt as if everyone else knew what was going on and what they

were supposed to be doing, and my life was the only one that was delivered without an instruction book.

When I discovered alcohol, everything changed. I took my first real drink my first night at college. I attended what was to be the first of many, many fraternity parties. I didn't care for the beer, so I went to the vat of innocuous-looking punch. I was told it was laced with grain alcohol. I don't remember how many drinks I had, and my recollections of the actual events of the rest of the night are fuzzy, but I do remember this much: When I was drinking, I was okay. I understood. Everything made sense. I could dance, talk, and enjoy being in my own skin. It was as if I had been an unfinished jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing; as soon as I took a drink, the last piece instantly and effortlessly snapped into place.

I don't remember getting home that night, and I woke up the next morning completely dressed and in full makeup. I was sick as a dog, but I managed to crawl into the shower and prepare for my first college class. I sat through the entire class pleading with my eyes to the professor to let us out early. He kept us to the bell, and when it rang, I flew into the women's room, crashed into the first stall, and threw everything up.

The insanity of the disease had already manifested itself. I recall thinking, as I knelt retching in the stall, that this was fantastic. Life was great; I had finally found the answer—alcohol! Yes, I overdid it the night before, but I was new to this game. I only had to learn how to drink right and I was set.

I attempted to “drink right” for the next eight years. My progression was phenomenal; there is absolutely

no period in my drinking career that can be described as social drinking. I blacked out almost every time I put alcohol in my system, but I decided I could live with that; it was a small price to pay for the power and confidence alcohol gave me. After drinking for less than six months, I was almost a daily drinker.

I wound up on academic probation (I had always been on the honor roll in high school) my first semester sophomore year, and my response to that was to change my major. My life on campus revolved around parties, drinking, and men. I surrounded myself with people who drank as I did. Even though several people had already expressed their concern over my drinking, I rationalized that I was only doing what every other red-blooded college student did.

Somehow I managed to graduate, but while most of my friends were securing good jobs and abruptly stopping their boozing, I seemed to be left behind on campus. I had resolved that I, too, would now settle down and drink properly, but to my frustration I found I could not do so.

I took a pitiful sales job that paid next to nothing, so I continued to live with my parents. I kept this job for two years for one reason—it allowed me to drink with minimal interference. My pattern was to pick up a fifth of whiskey somewhere during my round of appointments and keep it under the car seat with me. When I got home in the evening, I drank at least half the fifth in front of the television set and watched reruns until I passed out. And I did this every night, by myself, for almost two years. I had become a daily, isolated drinker and was starting to get a little nervous.

My behavior at this point was textbook: I was stash-

ing bottles all over the house; sneaking drinks from my parents' small supply when I ran out; rationing the number of bottles I threw away at the same time so the trash bags wouldn't clink; refilling my parents' vodka and gin bottles with water; and so on. I had also resorted to videotaping my favorite reruns while I was watching them because I always blacked out before the ending.

About this time the TV movie *My Name Is Bill W.*, about the co-founder of A.A., was aired. Intrigued, I sat down with my whiskey and soda bottles to watch it. When Bill whipped out a flask in the car to bolster himself before a visit with his father-in-law, I heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm not that bad," I thought to myself. I then proceeded to get drunk and to black out; I don't remember any more of the movie.

My parents were at a total loss. I was going nowhere and I was irritable and hostile. Since they had no experience with alcoholism, they had no idea what was wrong with me or what to do about it, and neither did I. I knew I drank too much and that my life was miserable, but I never made the connection between those two conditions. My parents made the only suggestion that then made sense to them—they offered to help me financially if I wanted to go back to school. Seeing no other way out, I jumped at the opportunity.

I spent two years in graduate school 750 miles from home. I can honestly say I know why they call it a geographical cure. For about nine months, I was able to cut my drinking down sharply. I still drank almost every day, but not to the point of my usual stupors,

and I didn't black out very often. I was able to concentrate on my schoolwork that first year and make lots of friends. However, geographical cures are only temporary; mine lasted a little less than a year. After about ten months or so, I slowly started to slide back into my old patterns. Steadily, I worked my way back to the same quantities of whiskey I drank at home, and the blackouts returned. My grades started to drop, and my friends started to wonder. I even began watching reruns again—I had brought my homemade videotapes with me to school.

Fortunately, I managed to graduate, but I had gone nowhere. After graduation, I returned to my parents' house, as I had been unsuccessful in securing a job. I was back. I was back in my old bedroom, back to the same routine of drinking every evening until I passed out, and it was getting worse. I was starting earlier and earlier and consuming more and more liquor. I had no job, no friends; I saw no one but my parents.

I was beyond frustration at this point. Hadn't I done everything that was expected of me? Hadn't I graduated from college and gone on to earn a master's degree? I had never gone to jail, crashed any cars, or got into trouble like a real alcoholic would. When I was working, I never missed a day because of drinking. I never ran myself into debt, nor had I abused a spouse or children. Sure I drank a lot, but I didn't have a problem; how could I when I hadn't done any of the things that prove you're an alcoholic? So what was the problem? All I really wanted was a decent job so I could be independent and productive. I could not understand why life just wouldn't cut me a break.

I did odd projects around the house for my parents

to earn my keep until I took a job for a local entrepreneur. This job did not offer much opportunity for advancement, nor did it pay very well, but it got me out of the house, and it was challenging in many ways. At this point I was in a vicious battle to control my drinking. I knew that if I took only one drink, I'd lose complete control and drink until I passed out. Nevertheless, I tried day after day to beat this obsession with alcohol.

I picked up a half gallon of whiskey one day after work and drank over one-third of it in less than four hours that same night. I was so sick the next day, but I made it to work. When I got home from work, I sat on my parents' sofa and knew, *I knew*, I would start working on the half gallon again, despite the fact that I was still very ill from the night before. I also knew that I did not want to drink. Sitting on that sofa, I realized that the old "I could stop if I wanted to, I just don't want to" didn't apply here, because I did not want to drink. I watched myself get up off the sofa and pour myself a drink. When I sat back down on the sofa, I started to cry. My denial had cracked; I believe I hit bottom that night, but I didn't know it then; I just thought I was insane. I proceeded to finish the half gallon.

Six months later my boss flew me to California for a trade show. I hated working the shows, but I loved to travel, so I went. I was extremely nervous about this trip because my boss liked to party and we were flying in a guy our age from Hawaii to work the show with us. At this point I had managed to hold together thirty-one days without a drink, and I was terrified that I would give in to the temptation of being on an

all-expenses-paid trip in a fun city with two party animals. It had been very difficult for me to stay dry for thirty-one days; the obsession spoke to me every day.

I arrived late on a Friday and managed not to drink that night. The next morning at the show, I was offered the gift that changed my life. Our Hawaiian sales rep seemed frustrated; I thought he was disappointed that he hadn't managed to write an order for a couple he had just finished working with. I went over to console him. He said, no, his mood had nothing to do with the couple; instead, he explained that just this week he had lost his girlfriend, dropped out of school, lost his apartment, and also lost his full-time job. He added, "I'm an alcoholic. I've been sober for a year and a half, except I just drank again this past week. I'm a mess about it."

At that very instant, I heard one word in my head. The word was "now." I knew it meant, "Say something *now!*"

To my amazement I spoke the words, "Mike, I think I'm one too." Mike's mood instantly changed. I recognize now it was hope. We started talking. Among other things, I told him I hadn't had a drink for about a month but didn't go to A.A. When he asked why I had avoided A.A., I told him it was because I didn't think I had hit bottom. Somehow he didn't laugh but said, "You hit bottom when you stop digging." He took me to my first three A.A. meetings.

It was the second meeting that clinched my resolve to pursue sobriety. There were about thirty-five people in attendance, but the space was small, so the meeting seemed very crowded. Being from out of town, I stood up and introduced myself when asked to

by the chairperson. Later on in the meeting, the chairperson called on me to share. I got up and somehow walked over to the microphone and podium—I've never been so nervous in my life. But the words came out naturally as I described the events that led up to the meeting that night.

As I spoke, I looked around the room. More importantly, I looked at the faces of the people in the room and I saw it. I saw the understanding, the empathy, the love. Today I believe I saw my Higher Power for the first time in those faces. While still up at the podium, it hit me—this is what I had been looking for all my life. This was the answer, right here in front of me. Indescribable relief came over me; I knew the fight was over.

Later on that night, still reeling in the ecstasy of relief and hope, I remembered the afternoon in the bathroom stall at college after my first class when I was so certain I had found the answer in alcohol. I could clearly see now that had been a lie. That is the description that fits alcohol best for me; it is a lie, an evil, insidious lie. And I chased that lie for a long time—even when it was obvious that I was going nowhere and killing myself while doing it. At that A.A. meeting, when I looked out over all those faces, I finally saw the truth.

When I returned home, I threw myself into A.A. I did ninety meetings in ninety days, got a sponsor, and joined a home group. I did everything that was suggested. I made coffee, took commitments, and got involved with service. I rode the roller coaster of early sobriety; every second was worth it to get where I am today.

It is very important to my recovery to study and

work the Steps. To this day, I still make at least two Step meetings a week. I have a sponsor who guides me through the Steps gently but firmly, with a sure-handedness I hope I am able to emulate with the two women I now sponsor. The Promises have begun to materialize for me, and there's still so much work to do.

It is almost impossible to adequately describe how much the program has given me, even in just these six short years. I have been financially supporting myself in my own apartment for five years and plan to buy a house next year. I've secured a good job with a promising future—my income has increased more than 150 percent since I got sober.

But just as material losses are not necessary to indicate alcoholism, material gains are not the true indications of sobriety. The real rewards aren't material in nature. I have friends now because I know how to be a friend and I know how to nurture and encourage valuable friendships. Instead of the prolonged one-night stands I used to call my boyfriends, there is a special man in my life I've been involved with for almost five years. And, most importantly, I know who I am. I know my goals, dreams, values, and boundaries, and I know how to protect, nurture, and validate them. Those are the true rewards of sobriety, and they're what I was looking for all along. I am so grateful that my Higher Power stepped in to show me the way to the truth. I pray every day that I never turn my back on it. I came to A.A. in order to stop drinking; what I received in return was my life.