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CROSSING THE RIVER OF DENIAL

She finally realized that when she enjoyed her drinking, she couldn't control it, and when she controlled it, she couldn't enjoy it.

DENIAL IS THE MOST cunning, baffling, and powerful part of my disease, the disease of alcoholism. When I look back now, it's hard to imagine I didn't see a problem with my drinking. But instead of seeing the truth when all of the "yets" (as in, that hasn't happened to me—yet) started happening, I just kept lowering my standards.

Dad was an alcoholic, and my mother drank throughout her pregnancy, but I don't blame my parents for my alcoholism. Kids with a lot worse upbringings than mine did not turn out alcoholic, while some that had it a lot better did. In fact I stopped wondering, "Why me?" a long time ago. It's like a man standing on a bridge in the middle of a river with his pants on fire wondering why his pants are on fire. It doesn't matter. Just jump in! And that is exactly what I did with A.A. once I finally crossed the river of denial!

I grew up feeling as if I was the only thing keeping my family together. This, compounded by the fear of not being good enough, was a lot of pressure for a little girl. Everything changed with my first drink at the age of sixteen. All the fear, shyness, and disease evaporated with that first burning swallow of bourbon

straight from the bottle during a liquor cabinet raid at a slumber party. I got drunk, blacked out, threw up, had dry heaves, was sick to death the next day, and I knew I would do it again. For the first time, I felt part of a group without having to be perfect to get approval.

I went through college on scholarships, work study programs, and student loans. Classes and work kept me too busy to do much drinking, plus I was engaged to a boy who was not alcoholic. However, I broke off our relationship during my senior year, after discovering drugs, sex, and rock n' roll—companions to my best friend, alcohol. I proceeded to explore all that the late sixties and early seventies offered. After backpacking around Europe, I decided to settle in a large city.

Well, I made it all right, to full-blown alcoholism. A big city is a great place to be an alcoholic. Nobody notices. Three-martini lunches, drinks after work, and a nightcap at the corner bar was just a normal day. And didn't everyone have blackouts? I used to joke about how great blackouts were because you saved so much time in transit. One minute you're here, the next minute you're there! In retrospect, making jokes, just laughing it off helped solidify my unfaltering denial. Another trick was selecting companions who drank just a little bit more than I did. Then I could always point to their problem.

One such companion led to my first arrest. If the driver of the car had only pulled over when the police lights flashed, we would have been fine. If, when I had practically talked our way out of it, the driver had kept his mouth shut, we would have been fine. But no, he started babbling about how he was in rehab. I got off

with a misdemeanor, and for years, I completely discounted that arrest because it was all his fault. I simply ignored that I had been drinking all day.

One morning while I was at work, a hospital called, telling me to get there quickly. My father was there, dying of alcoholism. He was sixty. I had seen him in hospitals before, but this time was different. With stomach sorely distended, swollen with fluids his nonfunctioning kidneys and liver could no longer process, he lingered for three weeks. Alcoholic death is very painful and slow. Seeing him die of alcoholism convinced me I could never become an alcoholic. I knew too much about the disease, had too much self-knowledge to ever fall prey. I shipped his body back home without attending the funeral. I could not even help my grandmother bury her only son, because by then I was inextricably involved in an affair mired in sex and alcohol.

Plummeting into the pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization that that relationship became, I had my first drunk driving arrest. It terrified me; I could have killed someone. Driving in a total blackout, I “came to” handing my driver’s license to the patrolman. I swore it would never happen again. Three months later it happened again. What I didn’t know then was that when I put alcohol in my body, I’m powerless over how much and with whom I drink—all good intentions drowned in denial.

I remembered joking about how most people spent their entire lives without ever seeing the inside of a jail, and here “a woman of my stature” had been arrested three times. But, I would think, I’ve never really done “hard time,” never actually spent the night in jail. Then I met Mr. Wrong, my husband-to-be, and

all that changed. I spent my wedding night in jail. Like every other time, however, it wasn't my fault. There we were, still in our wedding clothes. If he had just kept his mouth shut after the police arrived, we would have been fine. I had them convinced that he had attacked the valet because our wedding money was missing. Actually, he thought the valet had stolen the marijuana we were going to smoke. In reality, I was so drunk I had lost it.

During the interrogation of the valet in the restaurant parking lot, my husband became so violent the officer put him in the back of the patrol car. When he tried to kick out the rear windows, the policeman retaliated. I pleaded with the officer as a second policeman arrived, and both bride and groom were taken to jail. It was then that the "stolen" marijuana cigarettes were discovered, to my horror, in central booking as they catalogued my belongings. I was arrested for three felonies, including drunk and disorderly, and two misdemeanors, but it was all my husband's fault. I had practically nothing to do with it; he had a drinking problem.

I stayed in that abusive marriage for nearly seven years and continued to focus on *his* problem. Toward the end of the marriage, in my misguided attempts to set a good example for him (plus he was drinking too much of my vodka), I mandated no booze in the house. Still, why should I be denied a cocktail after returning home from a stressful day at the office just because he had a problem? So, I began hiding my vodka in the bedroom—and still did not see anything wrong with this behavior. *He* was my problem.

I accepted a transfer with a promotion (yes, my pro-

fessional life was still climbing) shortly after the divorce. Now I was sure my problems were over, except that I brought me with me. Once alone in a new place, my drinking really took off. I did not have to be a good example anymore. For the first time I realized that perhaps my drinking was getting a bit out of hand, but I knew you'd drink too if you had my stress: recent divorce, new home, new job, didn't know anyone—and an unacknowledged, progressive disease that was destroying me.

Finally, I made some friends who drank just as I did. Our drinking was disguised as fishing trips and chili cook-offs, but they were really excuses for week-long binges. After a day's drinking disguised as softball, I nicked an old woman's fender driving home. Of course, it was not my fault; she pulled out in front of me. That the accident occurred at dusk and I had been drinking since 10:00 a.m. had nothing to do with it. My alcoholism had taken me to such depths of denial and heights of arrogance that I waited for the police so they'd know it was her fault too. Well, it didn't take them long to figure it out. Once again, pulled from the car, hands cuffed behind my back, I was taken to jail. But it wasn't my fault. The old broad shouldn't have even been allowed on the road, I told myself. *She* was my problem.

The judge sentenced me to six months in Alcoholics Anonymous, and was I outraged! By now I had been arrested *five* times, but all I could see was a hard partier, not an alcoholic. Didn't you people know the difference? So I started going to those stupid meetings and identified myself as an alcoholic so you'd sign my court card, even though I couldn't possibly be an

alcoholic. I had a six-figure income, owned my own home. I had a car phone. I used ice cubes, for God's sake. Everyone knows an alcoholic, at least one that had to go to A.A., is a skid row bum in a dirty raincoat drinking from a brown paper bag. So each time you read that part in Chapter Five of the Big Book that says, "If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it," my ears closed. You had the disease of alcoholism, and the last thing I wanted was to be an alcoholic.

Eventually, you talked about my feelings in the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous until I could no longer close my ears. I heard women, beautiful, successful women in recovery, talk about the things they had done while drinking, and I would think, "I did that" or "I did worse than that!" Then I began to see the miracles that happen only in A.A. People who would nearly crawl in the doors, sick and broken, and who in a few weeks of meetings and not drinking one day at a time would get their health back, find a little job and friends who really cared, and then discover a God in their lives. But the most compelling part of A.A., the part that made me want to try this sober thing, was the laughter, the pure joy of the laughter that I heard only from sober alcoholics.

Still, the thought of getting sober terrified me. I hated the woman I had become, a compulsive, obsessive daily drinker, not dressing on weekends, always afraid of running out of alcohol. I'd start thinking about a drink by noon and would leave the office earlier and earlier. Or, promising myself that I wouldn't drink that night, I'd invariably find myself in front of the refrigerator with a drink in my hand, vowing,

Tomorrow. I won't drink tomorrow. I despised all of it, but at least it was familiar. I had no idea what sobriety felt like, and I could not imagine life without alcohol. I had reached that terrifying jumping-off point where I couldn't drink anymore but I just couldn't not drink. For almost twenty-three years I had done something nearly every day of my life to change reality to one degree or another, yet I had to try this sober thing.

To this day I am amazed at people who get sober before the holidays. I couldn't even attempt it until after the Super Bowl. One last blow-out party when I swore I wouldn't get drunk. When I put alcohol in my body, I'd lose the ability to choose how much I drank, and Super Bowl Sunday that year was no different. I ended up on someone's couch instead of my own bed and was sick to death all the next day at work. That week I had to go to a hockey game. It was a work event, so I tried to really watch my drinking, consuming only two large cups of beer which, for me, wasn't even enough to catch a buzz. And that was the beginning of my spiritual awakening. Sitting near the ice, frustrated, and pondering the fact that two tall beers didn't give me any relief, something in my head—and I know it wasn't me—said, "So why bother?" At that moment I knew what the Big Book meant about the great obsession of every abnormal drinker being to somehow, someday control *and* enjoy his drinking. On Super Bowl Sunday, when I enjoyed it, I couldn't control it, and at the hockey game when I controlled it, I couldn't enjoy it. There was no more denying that I was an alcoholic. What an epiphany!

I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous the next night, knowing I wanted what you had. I sat in

that cold metal chair just as I had for the past five months and read Step One on the wall for the hundredth time. But this time I asked with all my heart for God to help me, and a strange thing happened. A physical sensation came over me, like a wave of pure energy, and I felt the presence of God in that dingy little room. I went home that night and for the first time in years I did not have to open the cupboard with the half-gallon jug of vodka in it—not that night or any night since. God had restored me to sanity, and I took Step Two the very moment I surrendered and accepted my powerlessness over alcohol and the unmanageability of my life.

I attended at least one meeting every day, emptied ashtrays, washed coffeepots, and on the day I took a thirty-day chip, a friend took me to an A.A. get-together. I was in absolute awe of the power of 2,000-plus sober alcoholics holding hands, saying the final prayer together, and I wanted to stay sober more than I wanted life itself. Returning home, I begged God on my knees to help me stay sober one more day. I told God to take the house, take the job, take everything if that's what was needed for me to stay sober. That day I learned two things: the real meaning of Step Three and to always be careful what I prayed for.

After five months of sobriety, I lost that six-figure job with the firm. The wreckage of my past had caught up with me, and I was out of work for a year. That job would have been lost whether I was drunk or sober, but thank goodness I was sober or I probably would have killed myself. When I was drinking, the prestige of the job was my self-worth, the only thing that made me worth loving. Now I was starting to love myself

because A.A.'s had unconditionally loved me until I could. At five months I realized that the world might never build a shrine to the fact that I was sober. I understood that it was not the world's job to understand my disease; rather it was my job to work my program and not drink, no matter what.

At nine months of sobriety I lost the big house that I bought just to prove to you I couldn't possibly be an alcoholic. In between five and nine months, my house was robbed, I had a biopsy on my cervix, and I had my heart broken. And the miracle of all miracles was that I didn't have to drink over any of it. This from a woman who had had to drink over all of it. I was so unique and so arrogant when I got here, I think God knew that He had to show me early on that there was *nothing* a drink would make better. He showed me that His love and the power of the Steps and the Fellowship could keep me from picking up a drink one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time, no matter what. A drink would not bring back the job, the house, or the man, so why bother?

I found everything I had ever looked for in Alcoholics Anonymous. I used to thank God for putting A.A. in my life; now I thank A.A. for putting God in my life. I found my tribe, the social architecture that fulfills my every need for camaraderie and conviviality. I learned how to live. When I asked how I could find self-esteem, you told me, "by doing worthwhile acts!" You explained the Big Book had no chapters titled "Into Thinking" or "Into Feeling"—only "Into Action." I found plenty of opportunity for action in A.A. I could be just as busy and helpful to others as I wanted to be as a sober woman in Alcoholics

Anonymous. I was never a “joiner,” but I got deeply involved in A.A. service because you told me if I did, I would never have to drink again. You said as long as I put A.A. first in my life, everything that I put second would be first class. This has proved to be true over and over again. So I continued to put A.A. and God first, and everything I ever lost was returned many times over. The career that I lost has been restored with even greater success. The house that I lost has been replaced by a townhouse that is just the right size for me. So, here I am, sober. Successful. Serene. Just a few of the gifts of the program for surrendering, suiting up, and showing up for life every day. Good days and bad days, reality is a wild ride, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. I don't question how this program works. I trust in my God, stay involved in A.A. service, go to lots of meetings, work with others, and practice the principles of the Steps to the best of my willingness each day. I don't know which of these keeps me sober, and I'm not about to try to find out. It's worked for quite a few days now, so I think I'll try it again tomorrow.