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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 I retreated further and became angrier and more withdrawn.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.”