

(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.