

(4)

LISTENING TO THE WIND

It took an “angel” to introduce this Native American woman to A.A. and recovery.

I STARTED DRINKING when I was around eleven years old. I stayed with my brother and his wife just outside of Gallup, New Mexico. We were poor. The smell of beans and fresh tortillas symbolized home to me. I slept in a bed with three other children, where we huddled close to keep warm in the freezing winter. The snow was deep around us.

I had a hard time reading and understanding school work, so I skipped school every chance I got. My dad and grandma had told me the old stories about the longhouse and the travels of our people across the deserts and mountains of this country. I met a boy and together we ditched school and stole a truck. We drank tequila and explored the red mesas together. Sometimes we sat in the shade of the trading post directly across the street from the tracks. When the train rumbled through the dusty small town near the reservation, it promised glamorous places far away.

When I was fifteen years old, I arrived alone in San Francisco with a guitar, a small suitcase, and \$30. I went to several taverns and coffeehouses in search of a job singing. I believed I could pursue a career as a performer. Three days later I found myself sleeping in a doorway to stay out of the rain that had fallen all day.

I was broke and cold, and had nowhere else to go. The only thing I had left was my pride, which prevented me from trying to reach my brother by phone or finding my way back to the only people who ever really knew me.

Sometime in the middle of the long, restless night, a kindly middle-aged white man laid his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, young lady," he said. "Let's get you to someplace warm and get you something to eat." The price he asked in return seemed little, considering the cold rainy night behind me. I left his hotel with \$50 in my hand. Thus began a long and somewhat profitable career in prostitution. After working all night, I would drink to forget what I had to do to pay the rent until the sunrise brought sleep. The weeks passed.

I started stealing and robbed a gas station and a liquor store. I made very few friends. I had learned to trust no one. One night, around eight o'clock, a car pulled up to the curb just as I had settled myself, half drunk, against the wall of a building. I figured I had met my companion for the evening. We made the appropriate conversation to confirm the deal, and I got into the car. Suddenly I felt a deafening blow to my temple. I was knocked senseless. In a desolate area across town, I was pulled from the car, pistol whipped, and left to die in the mud with rain falling softly upon me. I came to in a hospital room with bars on the windows. I spent seven weeks there, having repeated surgeries and barely recognizing my surroundings each time I woke up. Finally, when I was able to walk around a little, a policewoman came and I was taken to county jail. It was my third arrest in two

months. Nearly two years on the streets had taken its toll.

The judge said I could not be rehabilitated, and I was charged with eighteen counts of felony. I would not see the streets again for nearly twenty-six months. I was seventeen years old. The first few months I would have done just about anything for a drink. I knew I was powerless over the drugs, but I really couldn't see what harm there was in alcohol. In the summer I was released. I wasn't sure where I was going, but a nice cold beer sure sounded like a refreshing celebration of freedom. I bought a six-pack and a bus ticket.

When I got off the bus, I got a waitressing job in a bar. By the end of my first shift, however, I had enough money to get a bottle and a sleazy motel room nearby.

A few weeks later I saw him, the only Indian I had met in a very long time. He was leaning over a pool table when I came to work. I put on my apron, grabbed a tray, and headed straight for him to see if he needed a refill.

"Who let you off the reservation?" he asked. I was furious, humiliated, and embarrassed.

That man became the father of my first-born child. My relationship with him lasted only a few months and was the first of many mutually abusive relationships that would continue over the next few years. I found myself alone, drunk, homeless, and pregnant in a matter of weeks. Afraid that I would wind up back in jail, I went to live with my brother and sister-in-law.

My brother had gotten a very good job and moved to Hawaii. My son was born there, and on the day of

his birth, I found my purpose in life: I was born to be a mom. He was beautiful. Straight black hair and dark eyes. I had never felt like this in my life. I could put my past behind me once again and move forward into a new life with my child.

After a year or so I became bored with my life in the islands and the guy I had been dating. I said goodbye to my waitress job and my family, and moved to California with my one-year-old son.

I needed transportation, but cars cost too much money. Where could I get lots of money? It did not seem appropriate to go back to prostitution in the same town where I was raising my son. I could take the bus to the next town, work all night, and come home in the morning if I could get someone to watch my little boy. The night job paid well. As long as I didn't work close to home where my child would attend school, everything would be fine. Also, I could drink on the job. I kept the welfare, though, because it provided health insurance.

I did quite well financially. After one year I found a beautiful large apartment that had a view of the ocean, bought a new car and a purebred Collie dog. The social workers started getting very nosy. I could not figure out what their problem was. I led a double life. By day I was super-mom, and by night I was a drunken hooker.

I met a wonderful man at the beach, and we fell in love. Everything was like heaven on earth until he asked where I worked! Of course, I lied. I told him I worked for the government and held a top security clearance, which required complete secrecy. That's why I had to work nights, undercover, out of town,

on weekends. Now, maybe he would stop asking so many questions. But instead he proposed.

We moved in together and my working arrangements became nearly impossible to live with. So did my conscience. One night on my way to work, I sat in rush-hour traffic on the freeway. I broke down in tears and felt all the lies of my life burst open inside of me. I hated myself and I wanted to die. I couldn't tell him the truth, but I couldn't continue to lie to him either. Suddenly a great light came on. It was the best idea I had ever had. I got off the freeway at the next ramp, drove home, and told him I got fired! He took it well, and we celebrated with a huge bottle of wine.

It took a lot of booze to cover the nightmares of my past, but I was sure I could get around this small problem before long. I never did. The relationship broke up over my drinking, and I packed my little car and moved myself, my son, our dog, and three cats to the mountains.

This mountain town was a place I had visited as a child with Dad and Grandma. Memories of the stories of my childhood and our Indian people flooded in. I got a job cleaning cabins for a local resort lodge and got back on welfare. Shortly after our move, my son started school. By this time I was consuming nearly a fifth of tequila each day, and blackouts were occurring on a regular basis.

One day I got up as usual. The last thing I remember was feeling so shaky I could hardly stand up. I ate a tablespoon of honey, hoping it would give me the necessary sugar rush. The next conscious memory was the emergency room. They said I was suffering from

malnutrition. I was nearly thirty pounds underweight. They had the audacity to ask me how much I drank! What could that possibly have to do with anything? I promised I would never do it again.

For the first time in my life, I tried very hard to quit drinking. After a few days of shakes and nausea, I decided that a shot of tequila wouldn't hurt. I had managed to put on a little weight, but six months later I collapsed and was diagnosed with a bleeding ulcer. I was in the hospital for four days that time. They told me that if I didn't stop drinking, I would probably die.

My son called his grandparents, and they traveled to the mountains to visit us. I had not seen them for years. We got along much better than I expected. The relationship they formed with my son was incredible. My dad took his grandson hiking in the wilderness, and mom helped out with looking after him while I worked. My health continued to fail. My parents wound up moving to our town in an attempt to help their grandson and me.

My dad and I decided to go to a Native American gathering. I hadn't been to one of these pow wows since I was a child. When we heard the drums and watched the dancers, I felt some great passion well up inside me. I felt like an outsider. I wanted a drink. I wore my hair down to my waist and wore a lot of turquoise jewelry I had collected over the years. I looked like the people, but I certainly didn't feel like one of them. I felt as if they all knew something I didn't.

In an effort to prove I was getting better, I started hitting the streets again in order to make more money.

I told my parents that I was going down the mountain to visit friends. I received my third arrest for drunk driving on one of the trips back, after working all weekend. The night in jail seemed a long time to go without a drink.

Weeks and months passed, and the blackouts continued getting worse. Then I met a man in a local bar. I didn't like him very well, but he had quite a lot of money, and he sure liked me. He took me to nice restaurants and brought me expensive gifts. As long as I had a buzz on, with a few drinks, I could tolerate him.

One thing led to another, and we wound up married. The most powerful motive I had was getting out of the streets and being provided for. I had begun to think I did not have much longer to live. The faces of my doctors were looking more and more grim every time I went into the hospital to dry out.

The marriage was a farce, and it didn't take long for this man to figure that out. Someone had told him about my past, and he demanded to know the truth. I was tired, nauseated, and drunk. I just didn't care anymore, so I admitted everything. We fought every day after that, and my visits to the hospital became more frequent. One afternoon I decided I no longer wanted to live and got the gun from over the fireplace. I owe my life to the man I had married. He heard my child scream from out back and came running into the house. He grabbed the gun and wrestled it away from me. I was numb and couldn't figure out what had happened. My son was taken away from me by the authorities, and I was placed in a locked ward

for the criminally insane. I spent three days there on legal hold.

After I was released, most of the next few weeks was a blur. One night I caught my husband with another woman. We fought and I followed him in my car and tried to run him down, right in the middle of the main street in town. The incident caused a six-car pileup, and when the law caught up with me later, I was sent to the locked ward again. I do not remember arriving there, and when I woke up, I didn't know where I was. I was tied to a table with restraints around my wrists, both ankles, and my neck. They shot heavy drugs into my veins and kept me like that for a long time. I was released five days later. When I left, there was no one there to drive me home, so I hitchhiked. The house was dark and locked, and no one was anywhere around to let me in. I got a bottle and sat in the snow on the back porch and drank.

One day I decided I'd better go to the laundromat and wash some clothes. There was a woman there with a couple of kids. She moved around quickly, folding clothes and stacking them neatly in a couple of huge baskets. Where did she get her energy? Suddenly I realized I had to put my clothes into the dryers. I couldn't remember which washers I had put them in. I looked into probably twenty different washers. I made up my mind how to handle the situation. I would stay here until everyone else had left. I would keep whatever clothes were left behind, as well as my own. As the other woman finished her tasks, she was writing something down on a small piece of paper. She loaded her baskets and kids into her car, and came back into the laundromat. She came right up to me

and handed me the small blue paper. I couldn't make out what it said. I smiled politely and slurred a friendly "Thank you." Later I made out the telephone number and the handwritten message below: "If you ever want to stop drinking, call Alcoholics Anonymous, 24 hours a day."

Why had she given me this, and what made her think I was drinking? Couldn't she see that my bottle was soda? Of all the nerve! I was mortified! I folded the paper neatly and put it in the back pocket of my jeans. As the next few weeks passed, I became sicker by the day. One morning I woke up alone as usual. I hadn't seen my husband in a long time. I needed a drink, and the bottle on the bedside table was dry. I rose on my shaky legs, but they refused to hold my weight. I fell to the floor and began crawling around the house looking for a bottle. Nothing! This meant I had to leave the house and get to a store.

I found my empty purse on the floor, but I knew I could never make it to the car. I became terrified. Who could I call? I never saw any friends anymore, and there was no way I could call family. I remembered the number in the pocket of my jeans. I hadn't even gotten dressed for several days. Where were the jeans?

I searched the house until I found them on the floor of the bedroom. The number was in the pocket. After three tries I managed to dial the number. A woman's voice answered.

"I . . . uh . . . got this number from you . . . uh . . . Is this A.A.?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you want to stop drinking?"

“Please, yes. I need help. Oh, God.” I felt the fiery tears run down my face.

Five minutes later she pulled into my driveway. She must have been some kind of an angel. How had she appeared from nowhere that day in the laundromat? How had she known? How had I kept her number all that time without losing it?

The A.A. woman made sure I had no more alcohol in the house. She was very tough on me for a long time. I went to meetings every day and started taking the steps. The First Step showed me that I was powerless over alcohol and anything else that threatened my sobriety or muddled my thinking. Alcohol was only a symptom of much deeper problems of dishonesty and denial. Now it was a matter of coming to grips with a Power greater than myself. That was very hard for me. How could all these *white* people even begin to think they could understand *me*? So they brought a sober Indian woman up to work with me for a day. That was a very powerful day. That Indian woman cut me no slack at all. I will never forget her. She convinced me I was not unique. She said these *white* folks were the best thing that ever happened to me.

“Where would you be without them?” she asked. “What are the alternatives? You got any better ideas for yourself? How many *Indians* do you know who are going to help you sober up?” At the time, I couldn’t think of any. I surrendered behind the tears of no answers and decided to do it their way. I found the Power greater than myself to be the magic above the heads of the people in the meetings. I chose to call that magic Great Spirit.

The Twelve Steps worked like a crowbar, prying

into my dishonesty and fear. I didn't like the things I learned about myself, but I didn't want to go back where I had come from. I found out that there was no substance on the planet that could help me get honest. I would do just about anything to avoid working on myself.

The thing that kept me sober until I got a grip on honesty was the love in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. I made some friends for the first time in my life. Real friends that cared, even when I was broke and feeling desperate. At twenty-two months of sobriety, I was finally able to complete an honest inventory. The Fifth Step enabled me to see my part in my resentments and fears. In the chapter "How It Works," in the Big Book, I was shown some questions. The answers to these questions provided me with knowledge about my reactions to the conditions in my life. Every response to every resentment, real or imagined, had been sick and self-destructive. I was allowing others to control my sense of well-being and behavior. I came to understand that the behavior, opinions, and thoughts of others were none of my business. The only business I was to be concerned with was my own! I asked my Higher Power to remove from me everything that stood in the way of my usefulness to Him and others, and to help me build a new life.

I met my current husband in an A.A. meeting. Together we carry the message to Indian people on reservations all over the country. I started at the fifth-grade level in school when I had been sober nearly two years. After college I started my own business. Today I publish the books I write. Our daughter was

born during my early sobriety, and she is in high school now. She has never seen her mother take a drink. Our family has returned to the spirituality of our ancestors. We attend sweat lodges and other ancient ceremonies with our people on sovereign native land. We take panels of sober Natives into Indian boarding schools and institutions, and share about recovery.

My life is filled with honesty today. Every action, word, prayer, and Twelfth Step call is an investment in my spiritual freedom and fulfillment. I am in love and proud to be a Native American. At an A.A. meeting on an Indian reservation, I heard the words "Sobriety is traditional." I stand at the top of the sacred mountain, and I listen to the wind. I have a conscious daily contact with my Creator today, and He loves me. Everything is sacred as a result of the Twelve Steps and the love and recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.