

(10)

TIGHTROPE

Trying to navigate separate worlds was a lonely charade that ended when this gay alcoholic finally landed in A.A.

DRINKING WAS ALWAYS a part of my family background. All the men in my family drank; my father—and later, my brothers—were heavy drinkers. As long as a person held down a job, didn't embarrass his family or friends too frequently, and kept out of trouble, he was entitled to get drunk on a regular basis. Drinking was an adult thing to do, a part of growing up. I don't believe it ever crossed my mind that I shouldn't drink.

I was raised in a conservative religion, and I commuted to religious schools some distance from home. Because I had a quick mind and was comfortable with academics, I became something of a teacher's pet. As a result, I was a serious, shy, somewhat bookish child and teenager who found it difficult to relate to my peers. So when I went away to college, I was an alcoholic waiting to happen. My relation to alcohol was a love affair from the very beginning. Although I wasn't too thrilled with the taste, I loved the effects. Alcohol helped me to hide my fears; the ability to converse was an almost miraculous gift to a shy and lonely individual.

It was at this time that I also began to struggle with

the question of my sexuality. For me, the idea of being homosexual—the word *gay* wasn't then in common use—was unthinkable. Drinking helped me to forget and evade. Also, it provided some cover; when you are drunk, people are not surprised at an inability or disinclination to make any serious moves toward a woman. This struggle continued throughout years of unsuccessful dating and pretending.

When I eventually decided to act on my desires, the guilt and the shame—as well as the drinking—increased. Now I had to hide not only my thoughts but also my conduct. I always tried to project the image of the conservative, masculine, deep-voiced loner with the mysterious, possibly tragic, but always heterosexual love affair in the past. I wound up living two separate and distinct lives—that of the gay man with friends and interests to match and that of the straight man with a totally separate set of friends and interests.

I had to walk this tightrope while trying to build a solid professional life as well. After college I had gone on to law school, where drinking on a daily basis became the norm. I justified myself with the thought that a few drinks helped me to relax and “focus” on my studies. Somehow, I managed to do well in law school and to land several prestigious legal positions afterward. I soon learned that I could not drink during the day; if I had even one drink at lunch, the rest of the afternoon would be lost. Instead, I postponed my drinking until immediately after work and would then make up for lost time.

Work in a law firm added a third side to my already divided life. Now I had to try to maintain social relations with clients, members, and associates of the firm,

in addition to my gay and straight friends from my private lives. Needless to say, as the drinking increased, things became ever more confused. Eventually, the pressures became too great. I had formed a serious relationship and decided that I could no longer carry on the deception. Instead, I would change careers and go into teaching.

For a while things seemed to be going well. But the slide toward active alcoholism was slowly accelerating. I had had my first blackout several years before. At that time I told myself that if it ever happened again, I would stop drinking. It happened again—and again and again—but I didn't stop. I was always able to come up with some explanation, excuse, or rationalization that justified my continued drinking. In time, personality changes began to occur with regularity when I drank. I had always had a sharp tongue; when drinking, I frequently became vitriolic. At other times I could be charming and affectionate, sometimes too much so. People never knew just what I would do or say.

After a few years I was a nightly blackout drinker. My lover drank heavily as well, and I began to compare my drinking with his. I argued to myself that I could not have a problem because his drinking was worse than mine at times. In fact, I suggested that he might try A.A. When he did try this Fellowship, I did all I could to undermine his efforts to get sober—his recovery would present an obvious, if unacknowledged, threat to my drinking. Eventually, the stress became too much and we broke up, but not before I had succeeded in undermining his recovery.

The slide continued. Most of my friends were un-

willing to put up with my conduct—the verbal and sometimes physical abuse, the midnight phone calls, the forgotten invitations, and the selfish disregard of anything but my own need to drink. Those few friends who did not withdraw were forced away by my resentments and increasing paranoia. I cut people out of my life, refusing to return phone calls and ignoring them when we met by chance. By the end of my drinking, only two people were willing to have anything to do with me on a social basis, and both were heavy drinkers who were not surprised by my actions.

The cases in which disaster struck when I drank outside my home increased. I made inappropriate passes at parties, or at people at work—both men and women. At other times I awakened battered or with my watch or wallet missing, or in the company of strangers whose names I did not remember and did not want to know. There were the inevitable injuries and accidents. I was ejected from bars because I would steal tips or change from bartenders or other customers to pay for the drinks I could no longer afford. At other times I would get into arguments and be forced to leave.

In consequence, I made the seemingly logical decision not to drink outside the house. Instead, most of my drinking was now solitary. When I left work, I would have a few stiff drinks at dinner and then go home. I would stop off at the kitchen to pick up a glass, some ice, and some mixer. I would go to my bedroom, where I kept half-gallon bottles of gin and vodka, and “read” while the ice melted, the mixer ran out, and sometimes the glass broke. Every night was blackout drinking. The really bad times were when I

would have to struggle outside to a liquor store or bar late at night, weaving and trying not to stagger, because I had miscalculated and run out of alcohol.

I found it increasingly difficult to do anything more than work and drink. I was afraid to use public transportation or even to walk on the streets. My stomach was constantly upset and my doctor had diagnosed a number of intestinal disorders. Even though I rarely drank away from home, my body was covered with bruises because I often fell down during blackouts. I never wore short-sleeved shirts, even in summer, because people would ask me about the bruises. One morning I awoke with a numb leg and found that I had somehow ruptured two spinal discs while in a blackout at home.

For the last four years I lived alone in a small house. The ceiling of one room had collapsed, and plaster dust was everywhere, coating the garbage and newspapers that littered the floor. Empty food cartons, beer cans, bottles, and dirty clothes lay where they were tossed. I had gotten a cat because the mice were out of control. But I was not conscientious about cleaning up after the cat. It is not surprising that I had few visitors and neighbors tended to avoid me.

The last few months were filled with fear and self-pity. I began to contemplate suicide with increasing regularity, yet I was afraid of dying. I remember thinking that this life would go on and on, never getting better and slowly fading away to nothing.

Then I began to hear the whispers. I became convinced that there were people living in my house. I couldn't see them, except for occasional glimpses out of the corner of my eyes, and so I concluded that they

were small and somehow living in the walls or under the stairs. I could hear them plotting to kill me. There were nights when I went to bed with a knife in hand to protect myself. Other nights I locked myself in the bathroom so they couldn't get me. One night I left a shot of vodka on the mantelpiece so they would go after that and leave me alone.

Then a miracle occurred. An evening came when I decided to have one drink outside and then go straight home. I had that drink and left for my house. The next thing I remember is waking up the next morning with a stranger I had picked up in a bar. Apparently I had gone on autopilot and, in a blackout resulting from just one drink, had gone on a tear. The look of disgust and pity on the face of that stranger was the jolt I needed. I suddenly realized that my life was totally insane, that my drinking was out of control, and that I was either an alcoholic or a candidate for committal to the local asylum. Not wanting to be locked up, I decided to try Alcoholics Anonymous.

I called my former lover, and he put me in contact with an individual who took me to my first meeting. Although I can barely recall anything about that meeting, I heard two things I have never forgotten. The first was "You don't have to drink again." This was a total revelation to me. For a long time I had believed that alcohol was one of the few positive things left in my life. I looked forward to my first drink every evening and thought that alcohol was holding my life together. I had to drink to survive, let alone to have any comfort. Yet here, people who had been in the same boat were telling me that I didn't have to drink.

I don't think I believed them that night, but it gave me enough hope to avoid drinking the rest of the day.

The second thing I heard was "You don't have to be alone anymore." This too was a revelation. For years I had rejected or been rejected by friends, lovers, family, and God. I was alone and afraid. My life had narrowed to work and the bottle, and work remained in the picture only because it was necessary to enable me to buy the bottle. The isolation and loneliness that alcoholism brought weighed heavily on me, and those words lifted an immense burden of fear. Again, I'm not sure that I completely believed, but I felt hope for the first time in years.

I did not fall in love with A.A. at first glance. The man who took me to my first meeting later became my first sponsor, and he had to put up with objections, arguments, questions, and doubts—everything a trained but very muddled legal mind could throw at him. He was gentle with me. He did not push his opinions on me. He had the sense to see that I was so afraid and so used to being alone that I could not face a "hard sell" approach. He listened to my questions, answered some, and suggested that I could best answer others myself. He refused to argue but was willing to explain and share his own experiences. I had asked him to be my sponsor before I knew what he did for a living and felt I could not back out of the relationship when I discovered he was a minister.

My alcoholism and my lifestyle had led me to reject the religion and the God of my upbringing; I had never replaced them. Instead, I was an agnostic, doubting the existence of God but afraid to say so in case I was wrong. My self-pity and sense of victimiza-

tion led me to doubt that a caring God could exist; if He did, why had He given me so many problems? I was very wary of the members who talked of their spiritual lives.

My sponsor was a living damper on my intolerance. But even more, he told me that it would be all right for me to doubt God, that A.A. was not a religious program and, to belong, I did not have to adhere to any set of beliefs.

He suggested that for me a good starting point would simply be recognition of the fact that I had failed in running the world—in short, acceptance of the fact that I was not God. He also suggested that I might try occasionally to act as if I believed. Somewhere I had heard that it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting, and this made sense in the context of “acting as if.”

I also thought that the people in meetings sometimes seemed too standoffish and overly concerned with their friends and acquaintances rather than with me, the newcomer. Well on my way toward developing a resentment, I expressed this to my sponsor. He suggested that I might find people more communicative if I took the coffee-making commitment for the group I had joined. Although I thought I was far too special to make coffee, I did figure that as coffee maker I would have the chance to select decent cookies, and so I agreed. My sponsor was right again. People did start to speak with me—if only to complain about the coffee and cookies. But once a conversation starts, communication frequently continues.

I started to work on the steps, and even with my

difficulty over the Third Step and “the God concept,” I began to develop a sense of trust in the A.A. group and in the ideals of the Fellowship as a manifestation of a Power greater than myself. Although for many years I did not come to an acceptance of a God who intervened personally and directly in the lives of individuals, I was able to accept the idea of a force that moved in the rooms and animated A.A. members with a sense of unconditional love. That satisfied my spiritual needs for a long time.

A later sponsor took me through Steps Eight and Nine and provided me with support during some trying times. In my third year of sobriety, I was bedridden for over a month as a result of that earlier injury to my spinal discs, my father died, a relationship ended, and the AIDS epidemic started to hit home among my friends and acquaintances. Over the course of that and the next few years, almost half of my gay friends died. I learned in that year that if I ask for help, my Higher Power will never give me anything I can't handle.

It was in this period that I started to turn to service beyond the group level. I had helped in founding the first gay A.A. group in my part of town and was elected general service representative after having served in other group offices. I knew nothing of general service at that time, and I decided to learn what it was all about so I could do a decent job and be able to pass it on to a successor as quickly as possible. After two years I went on to do a number of other service jobs for A.A.

In all these positions I never felt obligated to conceal or deny my sexuality. I have always felt that the

representatives of groups in my area were concerned only with how we carried the message of recovery, not with what I might do in my personal life.

When I first came to this Fellowship, I had lost my health and sanity, my friends, much of my family, my self-respect, and my God. In the years since, all of these have been restored to me. I no longer have the sense of impending doom. I no longer wish for death or stare at myself in the mirror with loathing. I have come to terms with my Higher Power; after more than a dozen years in the A.A. Fellowship, I was able to join a religious group and have now become active in that organization. I have a full, happy life, with friends and loving family. Recently I retired and have begun to travel throughout the world. I have attended and felt welcome at A.A. meetings wherever I have gone inside and outside the United States. Even more important, I have returned to my home group and am still asked to make coffee. I now have an extended family that is international in scope, all the members of which are joined by bonds of shared pain and joy.