

Signs

Unshed tears pool in my eyes. There is a hush as I look out over a sea of faces. All eyes are on me. I know they are expecting some glorious story about how wonderful it is to be sober. All I have to give them is the truth. Today, it's not wonderful. At this very moment, I want nothing more than to run away, find a dark corner in a bar, and drink. Helen died yesterday. It's the first time I've faced death sober. I've wept until I can't believe I have any tears left, but the pain remains.

A month earlier, I was asked to speak at this annual AA picnic in Flora, Illinois. Honored by the request, I jumped at the opportunity to tell my story. Now, here I stand, paralyzed. People are beginning to whisper in hushed tones. I've got to say something. After drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly, I say, "I'm Barb, and I'm an alcoholic. Today, I stand before you a miracle . . . because if I weren't here with you right now, there's a good chance I would be stinking drunk." That got their attention. "I lost someone I dearly loved yesterday. It was the perfect excuse to get drunk. I've used it many times over the years."

For the past three years, attending meetings, spending time with other members, and working the AA program gave me direction and new tools to find a better way of life, but Helen had been my rock in an otherwise shaky, uncertain sober world. I told her things I never told another human being, and she loved me anyway. From her, I learned what it meant to be a lady, to have dignity and self-esteem, to believe there is a purpose. Like Aunt Ruthie, she was sure there was more to me than met the eye. But how will I do it without her?

An hour later, my talk is over. I can barely recall what I said. It's like I was possessed, the words coming through me but not from me. There is applause. People stand, hug me, and shake my hand as I make my way through the crowd. I smile and nod, their words falling on deaf ears. I want to go home. I want to rip off the clothing that feels like it's strangling my body. I want to snuggle up with Angel and sleep away the pain. In the back of my mind, I want to drink. I am exhausted, tired of life kicking me in the ass every time I think things are getting better.

At home, I automatically grab the mail from the mailbox, open the door to let Angel out, and step inside to the absolute quietness of my three rooms. The cardboard boxes stacked in the middle of the living room remind me I'll be moving soon, starting a new life. Panic takes my breath away. I slide down the door to the floor and stare at the boxes. I'm 38 years old, and my entire life is packed in four boxes and a trash bag. What am I doing? What if I do this, start over, allow myself to love fully and completely, and I get stomped on again?

I can't move, can't shut the memories out. Eighteen years ago, on March 8, Jon's fifth birthday, we stepped off the bus into a snowstorm in Mattoon, Illinois. We had had to get out of Winslow, Arizona in a hurry. When my abusive husband was hospitalized for a back problem, I put my plan of escape into action. I'd been stealing money from the country club where he worked as a golf pro and I ran the restaurant. I had hocked a ring I found in the kitchen. I had skimmed what cash I could from the purchasing funds for groceries, always careful not to get caught. No sooner had he been admitted to the hospital, and I was digging my cache out of its hiding place inside the back of a zip-off couch cushion and running out the door to buy bus tickets for Jon and me. Mattoon, Illinois, the only place I knew anyone, far enough away that my husband wouldn't find me and kill me, seemed the logical choice.

With two suitcases, a bread bag full of bacon sandwiches, and a jug of tea, we were on the bus and headed out of town. I tried to appear calm for my son's sake, pretending that we were going on a vacation, while my heart beat so fast I felt like I'd run a footrace. I kept looking over my shoulder out the back window to see if we were being followed. I didn't know what I was going to do, but anything would be better than the way I'd been living. I closed my eyes and felt the tension melt away with the humming of the wheels against the highway as they took me away.

Nervous and excited, my lively son gobbled up the bag of sandwiches in a hurry. By the second day, the food was gone, and money had dwindled to a bit of change. I cased the bus, wondering if I could get away with stealing from the other passengers. If I got caught, we'd be put off. I decided to wait until the next bus stop, where I might be able to do some shoplifting. But what would happen to Jon if I got arrested? When the situation looked hopeless, three sailors got on the bus and sat directly in front of us. Jon, a gregarious child who'd never met a stranger, made friends with them quickly.

After chatting with them, they told me if I wanted to get some rest, they'd keep an eye on Jon. I fell into a deep sleep and woke with a start when I realized the bus was stopped. The sailors were gone, and my son was gone. I was ready to scream when suddenly they all stepped onto the bus laughing, one young man carrying Jon. They handed me a cup of coffee and a wrapped hamburger. I never knew if Jon told them that we were out of food, if they figured it out, or were simply nice young men, but they fed us for the remainder of the trip. They got off the bus a stop before ours, and one of them stuck a few dollars in my hand.

I had to find a place to stay, and a job, quickly. My mom's sister took us in temporarily. She and her husband were great drinkers, so I didn't have any problem getting alcohol. The day after my arrival, I trudged through the snow to the downtown area of Mattoon and went from business to business, inquiring about jobs. Near the end of the main street, two bars sat across the street from each other: the Office and the Oasis. In the Office, I approached Jack, a ruddy-faced Irishman with a disarming smile. He needed a part-time bartender and said I could start the next day. He sent me across the street to see if I could get part-time work at the Oasis, too. He said to ask for Tom.

I'd read about it. I'd heard about it. I thought I'd experienced it. But when Tom turned toward me, our gazes locked and a shock passed through me like I'd been struck by lightning. I shook it off and convinced myself that my fear and exhaustion had caught up with me, making me vulnerable. The last thing I needed in my life at that moment was another man. Besides, he wasn't my type. I'd always gone for tall, brutish men. I reminded myself where that had gotten me: homeless, penniless, and scared.

Tom hired me part-time. I walked back to my aunt's house, relieved I'd found work but confused about my strange attraction to a virtual stranger. I couldn't get him out of my mind— those piercing blue eyes set in a round, baby face, soft brown curly hair beginning to thin on top, not much taller than I, with a muscular body . . . what was I thinking?

In a few days, I'll be moving in with Tom, and we are to be married. I'm still astounded by all the odd occurrences that have taken place since I almost went out drinking that day, when I fell to my knees and begged for help. At the AA meetings I was told that if it works today, it will work tomorrow. From that day on, I continued to get on my knees each morning, seeking those fleeting moments of peace. I returned to my meetings with a different attitude. I asked questions. I listened. I came to understand that if I wanted it all, I had to do it all. That meant actually working those steps.

I'd taken the third step that day on my knees, and every day since then. It was time to write out all the crap I did, to own up to my part in it. First, as was suggested to me, I drew a graph of my life by years, peaking up for good points, down for low points, and making a straight line for years when not much happened. It looked like a zigzag pattern on a quilt. Next, it was time to fill in the details. Oh, my God . . . who lives that kind of life? I did, and it was time to face it. I wrote. I wept. I hated myself. I threw up. I wrote some more. In the wee hours of the morning, I put the pencil down. Exhausted, I crawled into bed. Nightmares filled the night.

The following morning, on my knees, I asked this God of which I still had no understanding to give me the strength to complete the task. The papers spread across the metal kitchen table, I paced back and forth, smoking, reliving my

tortured life. My part in things? I'd always blamed everyone else for my problems. I didn't think I was lovable because I didn't believe my parents loved me. Of course, I didn't take into consideration how hard I made it for them to love me. I was a stubborn, willful child who would do anything for attention, and that usually involved inappropriate behavior. Although I squeaked by in school with barely passing grades, never doing homework, I was always in trouble. I could blame my brother for that. He was smart, clean, and well-behaved, and all the teachers loved him. When I came along a year later, they were in for a big disappointment. If I couldn't get attention for being good, I figured out how to do it for being bad. Who could live up to my perfect brother anyway?

Never having learned to be a real friend to anyone, I thrived on gossip and secretly enjoyed it when others suffered. After all, why should their lives be any better than mine? As my body began to mature, I realized boys liked me, paid attention to me, wanted to be with me. It was the beginning of a downhill slide that would last for many years. Females became one of two things to me: a threat or a nuisance, depending on what they looked like. I became a friend to none and a sex partner to many. For that one moment during sex, I felt loved—even if it wasn't real.

When sex wasn't enough, when the feeling didn't last, I started getting married in the mistaken belief it might be different. When getting married didn't fulfill my needs, it was time for babies. Except for Jon, my oldest son, the babies failed to thrive. But I kept trying until I reached age 25 and the doctors told me I had completely ruined my insides. They had to remove all my female organs.

I returned to marriage, but wasn't very good at it. I told myself I was a good parent, always made sure Jon was taken care of, that the reason I failed at marriage was because I picked the wrong men, men who couldn't give me what I wanted—but the truth was that in every relationship I'd had, my needs superseded those of whoever else was involved, including my kid.

I never considered my child when I went off with married men, when I got drunk and didn't show up for school functions, or showed up with booze on my breath at a parent-teacher conference. I didn't think about how I was teaching Jon to cope with life's problems by running away, drinking, using drugs, lying, and conning people. I blamed my husbands when I cheated with other men, drank myself into oblivion, and wrecked cars time and again. I blamed God for every death in my life. I carried a me-against-the-world attitude, and I inevitably came up on the short end of the stick. I deserved to act out, or at least I thought so until I faced my fourth step.

Jack had told me to watch for patterns as I wrote. The patterns became obvious, but hard to accept. I didn't have a clue how to act like a decent human being, wife, or parent. I didn't know how to relate to men—any man—without sex being involved. I had a part in absolutely everything that happened to me. I'd had choices, but chose to take what I believed was the easier way out. Those decisions may have been easier at the time, but they were sure making it harder now. Yet I felt like I was over my greatest hurdle. I'd written it all out, holding nothing back . . . even those secrets I was going to take to my grave.

The following day, sheets of paper in hand, I went to Jack's house to complete my fifth step. I did it. I admitted to God and another human being the exact nature of my wrongs. At home, I began making out the list of persons I'd harmed. Although I was willing to make amends to them, many were dead, and others had been out of my life for years and I had no way of knowing how to contact them. The following weeks were spent visiting cemeteries, writing letters and burning them, praying for the ability to make amends, and actually making the amends I could. Each day, I returned to my knees and turned everything over to a God of my understanding. The last thing I turned over was Tom and my feelings for him. Shortly thereafter, he stopped calling. I knew it was finally over and I could get on with my life.

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About seven months later, the phone rang. It was Tom. He said he hadn't had a drink in six months and would I have a cup of coffee with him. Stunned, I agreed, but as soon as I hung up the telephone I felt the fear creep in. What did he want? What would he say? How would I feel? Was this another ploy on his part to get me back and then start drinking again? How would I know what to do? I sunk to my knees and said, "God, I need your help. Please, give me a sign."

My heart pounding, nausea threatening, like a teenager on her first date, I pulled clothes off hangers, trying on one thing after another. I wanted to look good, but not too obvious. I finally settled on a blue chambray shirt and jeans. Hands shaking, I arranged my hair and applied a little makeup. I'd noticed I didn't have to wear nearly as much since I quit drinking. Ready, I stood at the window, watching for Tom's El Camino, smoking one cigarette after another. When he pulled up, I said, "Oh, God, please keep me from doing something stupid."

I fought the urge to run outside and jump in the car. I waited until he got out and knocked on my door and hoped I seemed calm and unaffected when I opened it. "Are you ready?" he said. "Let me grab my purse," I responded. I didn't carry a purse for years while I was drinking because I often got so drunk I lost it. I grabbed up the denim bag and followed him to the car. We made small talk on the few miles to Mt. Zion, a small town nearby. I talked about Helen, my work, and Angel. He talked about mutual friends from years ago that I hadn't stayed in touch with.

The restaurant was one of those self-serve places where customers go to the counter, order, pay for their food and drink, and then, when a number is called out, pick up the food. We ordered. Tom pulled out his billfold to pay. It caught my eye. It was the leather billfold Jon made for him when he was in Cub Scouts many years ago. He opened it, and I saw a picture of Jon inside. At that moment I knew the truth. I'd been given my sign.