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Things were out of hand. It was eight-thirty on Monday morning and I was working on my second Budweiser. I hadn't wanted to open the beer, or the one before it, and I didn't want the one I was sure to have after it. I put the can down on the coffee table and called Isol at work. It was a call I had wanted to make for months, but I hadn't had the strength to lift the phone until that morning. When Isol answered I said I wanted her to help me stop drinking. She was not surprised at the call. I had only recently discovered I was a drunk; she had known about it for a long time. When you single handedly keep Anheiser-Busch in business your wife notices. That night we talked about it together. We talked about my drinking, our commitment to each other, and our insurance coverage. We cried together. Talking about our insurance always made us cry.

The following morning I had a couple of Budweisers for breakfast and worked my way through the Yellow Pages looking for alcohol treatment programs. I learned that alcoholics were in reasonably high demand in Oregon. A drunk may not be of much use to most people, but in the medical world an insurance policy is a terrible thing to waste. For the first time in a long time the people I spoke to on the phone were happy to talk to me. Shopping for treatment made me feel wanted. The programs sold themselves, and I, the literally drunken judge, got to pick the winner.

I spent a lot of time looking at treatment alternatives. I talked with a waterfront detox center for the

down and out that wanted me to get in a line at the front door before dawn and hope for an open bed. I talked with a couple of full service hospitals that promised not only to beat alcoholism but also be ready if I needed an emergency organ transplant. One place boasted an ocean view and a cure that consisted largely of golf and cable TV. I learned about in-patient programs, out-patient programs, aversion and diversion. This search took several days, filled several legal pads with notes, and required numerous cases of beer. After much deliberation and consultation with Isol, I chose the most expensive cure my insurance would cover.

The treatment center I picked had a real name but the patients never called it anything other than Malady Manor. The Yellow Pages ad for the Manor had a line drawing of the building that reminded me of *Wuthering Heights*. What the drawing didn't show was that the building stood in the center of Portland's industrial district. I didn't mind. I didn't pick the place because of the neighborhood. I picked it because it accepted my insurance and the receptionist had the sweetest phone voice of any facility in town.

One Thursday morning a well dressed woman from Malady Manor Inc. walked me through the facility and explained the basics of the Malady program. She spoke in hushed tones and exuded the earnest confidence that comes from working on commission. She explained that the program at the Manor was based upon the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous. That meant nothing to me. I was concerned about architecture. If I was going to sober up I wanted an appropriately

depressing place to do it. An abandoned convent in the middle of the Portland warehouse district seemed perfect. When we finished the tour, I disclosed the details of my insurance policy and promised to show up the following Monday with a suitcase and toothbrush.

I had enrolled in a twenty-one day residential treatment program: one day for each year of my drinking. Over the weekend I broke the news to my parents and my tavern buddies. My parents were supportive but suspicious. Each of my bar buddies pledged his support and silently thanked God it wasn't him. On Sunday I said farewell to the most constant companion I had ever had: alcohol. I spent a few melancholy final hours at the tavern, then went home to drink until the wee hours of the morning. In final tribute to my twenty-one year affair with booze I passed out that night with my glass half full.

On Monday I showed up at the Manor shortly before noon with five days worth of clean clothes, a few toiletries, and a stack of novels. My hangover from the previous night kept me company. I walked through the double doors of the Manor and was met inside by a bearded giant wearing work boots and overalls. He thrust an enormous hand at me and bellowed, "Hi. My name is John. I'm an alcoholic and a dope fiend."

I whimpered a hung-over "hello." The Goliath shook my sweaty hand and lumbered out the doors.

The sweet-voiced receptionist who had attracted me to the Manor in the first place turned out to be seventy-five years old if she was a day. She confiscated my luggage and ushered me into the accounting office

where I disgorged more insurance information and pledged my first born in the event my insurance company declined to pay. Sobriety is free; treatment requires collateral.

After my visit to the accounting department they sat me down in a bare cubicle furnished with two chairs and a writing table. The time for my first drink of the day had long passed, and my hands were doing the sobriety shiver. A tall red-haired woman carrying a black binder came into the room and sat at the table across from me. The binder, my official entry in the bureaucracy of recovery, had my name, birthday, and social security number printed on the front.

The woman with the binder introduced herself as Joan, and for the next two hours I answered questions from Joan about my alcohol and drug use. The questions were oddly difficult to answer. At the tavern we reveled in war stories about drinking and drugging. Each tale was a Purple Heart in the war against sobriety, but in the little room at the Manor, being questioned in detail, the particulars escaped me. I remembered the places I lived and worked, but when it came to the drinking, all the days were the same. When I wasn't working I was loaded, when I did work I was hung over, and I hadn't worked in a long time. I gave her the most honest answers I could, and she wrote them down without comment. In having to tell it all to Joan, I realized that, despite the tavern war stories, my drinking had been boring. I was a run-of-the-mill alcoholic. I'd always hated the idea of average. Being an average drunk was the worst.

Once Joan was done writing in the binder, she showed me up to my room in the second floor dormitory. The ambiance in the dormitory was decidedly different from the floor below. The lobby area, where the public was allowed, held delicate Edwardian chairs and plush curved sofas. Mozart played through invisible speakers. The dorm area looked like a cross between a rent-by-the-week hotel and a bus station.

My room contained four beds and four writing desks—the desk drawers serving as a bureau for my clothes. My bed, piled with folded towels and sheets, stood next to a small window that had been sealed shut by the ivy growing up the outside of the building. At some point several decades before my arrival, plumbing had been inexpertly retrofitted into the building, leaving water and drain pipes visible along the high ceiling in the hall. The bathroom, three doors down, resembled the ones you find in the better minor league baseball stadiums.

Happy hour at the tavern was almost over by the time I'd put my clothes in the drawers of my writing desk, and I was definitely out of sync with the world. Joan located a healthy looking young man and introduced him as Robert. He was to be my roommate and my "buddy" for purposes of introducing me to the Manor routine. At the moment the only buddy I wanted came out of a beer tap, however, I put up with the kid long enough to get a tour of the dining room, laundry room and, thank God, the smoking room. After the tour I knew where to take each of my crucial bodily functions.

Before dinner they searched my belongings again. One of the apprentice jailers removed, unfolded, and examined everything I had with me. She sniffed my toothpaste, opened my bars of soap, and flipped through the pages of my books. Anything drug related or otherwise subversive had to go. I had been careful packing so everything except my nail clipper survived. The clipper, a potential weapon, was confiscated for my protection. No longer a danger to myself or others my buddy took me to the dining room.

Dinner started promptly at six o'clock in a room containing about twenty-five of my new colleagues. The diners were seated four to a table, waiting for those patients who had attained trustee status to deliver the food. I hadn't had a drink all day and abstinence was not being kind to me. The last thing I felt like was food. If forced to eat, I wanted a sullen meal among people who were at least as miserable as I was. The dinner companions I had were chatty, noisy, and annoying. I had expected a room full of alcoholics and drug addicts to look threatening and desperate. My colleagues were normal looking folks from different age groups and economic backgrounds. Some were a year or so short of graduating high school; others looked like retired schoolteachers. Most disturbing was that they were goofing around, laughing, and enjoying themselves. I had just turned my back on alcohol, the love of my life. Frivolity was an insult to my grief.

One of the Manor staff stood at his table and announced my name to the assemblage. The diners responded with an embarrassing round of applause,

and I meekly waved to the crowd. I would learn later that this was the traditional welcome to new patients.

Toward the end of my drinking, food and I had grown apart. Eating was an annoyance that diluted the effect of alcohol and wasted good drinking time. My first meal at the Manor was a bland chicken casserole. I picked at it while my comrades gobbled. My stomach rebelled at the thought of swallowing any of the casserole, so I turned my attention to a vegetable soup served on the side. My hands were shaking badly enough by then that I was unable to consistently hit my mouth with the spoon.

After my awkward dinner we all retired to the smoking room. All addicts smoke. The smoking room was a messy smelly place with several beat-up couches and a coffee table. The ashtrays were overflowing and the curtains reeked of smoke. It felt like home.

Whether on the outside or in treatment, addicts make friends with each other quickly. In the smoking room I was promptly accepted into the fellowship of recovery. If you had a name and an addiction you were welcome. I had both, and within an hour the other patients were no longer strangers. I met Big John, the alcoholic and dope fiend, for the second time. I talked with, Frank, an alcoholic, Robert, my roommate the coke addict, and Rollo, another coke head. I met Patty the wino and Della the heroin addict. Everyone had a drug of choice, but most were crossovers and multi-users. Some were on leave from professions; some were on leave from jail, but in the smoking room, money, education, and social status meant nothing. All that

mattered was that each of us had lost a good friend. My friend had been alcohol. For others it was cocaine or heroin. It didn't matter. We were all at the Manor to talk about our losses, and there is nothing an addict would rather do than talk about his addiction. If we couldn't defeat our addictions we'd talk them to death. We did most of the good talking in the smoking room.

Bedtime was at eleven o'clock. My hands were still shaking when I marked the first day off my little paper calendar. I climbed into bed and sweated between the sheets into the night.

The second day started at four o'clock in the morning when a young woman in medical garb walked into the room, flipped on the overhead lights, and proceeded to remove several gallons of blood from my right arm. To the medicos, there is nothing like a good bloodletting to give a person a jump-start on sobriety.

Detox is aggravated assault on the body, and food is the first line of attack. The seven thirty breakfast was huge and mandatory. My stomach, lined only for coffee and aspirin, went into caloric shock. Lunch was at noon sharp and, like everything else, mandatory. Dinner was at six and snacks were at nine-thirty. Everything was sugar free, caffeine free, and massive. The evening snacks alone could have sustained certain small countries for several weeks. Everyone ate. The alxies ate; the cokeheads ate; everyone ate. In the smoking room we talked our additions to death. In the dining room we buried them in carbohydrates.

When I wasn't eating I drank. All the alxies drank. We drank juice, milk, water, and anything else the

Manor cook could put in front of us. Dehydration from drinking alcohol had left us constantly thirsty. For the first few days I downed fruit juice so fast that I slobbered when I walked. All the newbies slobbered. When two or more newbies walked down the hall together you could hear the sound of the ocean in the halls.

Food and healthy drink had an immediate effect. My urine changed from clear to a deep yellow. When I took a dump, I produced solid cylindrical turds rather than the odiferous soup I had been producing for years. The medical people took my blood pressure three times a day. All the new patients had their blood pressures taken, however, the staff was particularly careful with me. My shakes were persistent and dramatic. Alcoholism had elevated my blood pressure. One of the delightful side effects of detoxification was that when I stopped drinking it went up even higher. Withdrawal from alcohol can kill. Big John explained to me that in the severe cases, or in the event of chest pain, a patient gets lithium to control the rising blood pressure. He extolled the pleasures of lithium—instant serenity—and taught me how to fake the tremors that got you the pills. I declined his advice and made it through the day without.

During my third day at the Manor I received a full medical checkup. I was stripped, poked, prodded, and stabbed. I answered questions about my health, my father's health, my mother's health, and the general well-being of everyone I had ever known. The doctor said I was underweight, out of shape, and I smoked too much. My vision was bad, my reflexes were shot, my

teeth were decayed, and my skin was rejecting my body. My heartbeat was too fast, my bowels were schizophrenic, and my liver was in open revolt. For a person with twenty years of drinking under my belt, I was in remarkably good shape.

The doctor assured me that all I had to do was completely change every aspect of my life and I would be fine. The trip to the doctor was precautionary. Detox was simply eating and waiting. I did both. The Manor staff seldom bothered me during the first few days, so I ate, smoked, and ate again. The coffee had no caffeine, the drinks no carbonation, but the food had calories. My shakes went away and my weight went up. I could think clearly in the morning. When the severest of my symptoms had retreated the staff suggested I tackle the disease.

During the first day or so at the Manor I had come into possession of a blue hardcover book entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*. It was called the Big Book and everyone had one. The Manor staff was constantly referring to it, quoting from it, and encouraging people to read it. At first this put me off, but one day, against my better judgment, I picked it up and started to read. It had big print and easy words. The style was *The Grapes of Wrath* written by a committee, and the message chilled me to the bone. The book and the people at the Manor were suggesting that I stop drinking forever. The concept of lifelong abstinence was simply beyond me. I could accept detox as annoying but necessary respite for body and soul on the way to learning to drink normally, but total abstinence seemed

like cutting off my legs to get handicapped parking. The message in the Big Book so disturbed me that I put it away and went to the smoking room to incinerate a pack of cigarettes.

2

I think I was born alcoholic. All I needed was one good drunk to prove it. That drunk occurred after my junior year in high school. Partying with friends, I drank malt liquor until I passed out on the floor. When it was time for me to leave, my pals roused me from unconsciousness and poured me into my car. On the way home, amid other traffic blunders, I stopped in front of a red motel sign and waited patiently for it to turn green. In the morning I was the one who turned green. I vomited most of the day. My head throbbed. The hangover lingered for three days, but before the hangover was half over, I wanted to do it again.

Liquor was always my drug of choice, but until I turned twenty-one, liquor was difficult to obtain in the quantities I needed. At the high school I attended marijuana was easier to get, more compact, and generally less messy. I smoked a lot of it, but it never became my love. My love was beer—cases and cases of beer.

I didn't drink often in high school. If I possessed liquor, which was seldom, I saved it for the weekends. But when I drank I drank to get drunk. I didn't drink to overcome shyness, be part of a gang, or to be sociable. I drank to feel the effect of alcohol, and the more I drank the more I liked it. From the very beginning, I had no use for one or two drinks. I drank to get stumbling down drunk.

When I left home to attend college alcohol became more available, but drinking was not the fashion. Protests against the Vietnam War were in full swing.

The fashionable users smoked pot and dabbled in hallucinogens. I did lots of both, but if left alone, my drug of choice came in a bottle.

I graduated from college and set off to see the country, reform the world, and write the great American novel. Shortly thereafter I was living in San Francisco and embracing bohemianism while I worked at a chain bookstore in a strip mall. When I wasn't working I was writing. While I wrote, I drank. Drinking didn't help me write, but if I drank enough I didn't have to write. In my alcohol fantasies I was already famous. Alcohol made me a genius.

After five years in San Francisco I decided I wanted to own a car. In order to buy a car I needed a real career. To get a career I sold all my books and did what everyone else did in the seventies—I signed up for law school.

My drinking had changed while I was in San Francisco. I still loved to get drunk. I still separated my drunks by days or even weeks. But I'd also begun to need a certain amount of alcohol every day to feel normal. I'd buy a six pack after work every day and it would be gone before I went to bed. It didn't get me drunk. It made me feel comfortable, and it relaxed me enough to sleep.

Law school made it easy to drink. I could schedule my classes late in the day. I could skip them all together. The studies didn't allow me a lot of opportunities to really tie one on, so I upped my daily drinking to compensate. By my third year I was drinking half a case of Budweiser every day.

While getting my law degree I had an odd sort of arrogance about my drinking. I was near the top of my class and was chosen to be editor-in-chief of the law review. Alcohol makes a person insane, but it doesn't make him stupid. I took a perverse pride in the fact that I could outperform a hundred other law students and still down a half case of brew every night. I had to keep this accomplishment to myself though. The drinking was secret—so secret that I wouldn't return my beer cans for the deposit out of fear the clerks would know how much I drank. I wouldn't throw them in the trash for fear that the garbage man might count them. For over a year I threw the cans into the unfinished attic of my apartment via a trap door in the ceiling of one of the closets—a present for some future occupant.

I graduated from law school with low-level academic honors and passed the bar exam. During my legal studies I had acquired the car I'd wanted, but my desire for that respectable career had diminished significantly as a result of contact with real lawyers. I had to do something, however, because law school had left me in serious debt. That debt was motivation to work.

I joined a respected Oregon firm where the lawyers had the manners of gentlemen and the morals of jackals. I lacked both the manners and the morals to fit in, so I got even with them by drinking. I quickly learned that there are not enough hours in a day to work full time and drink too. Practicing law can't be scheduled to start late and end early. Forty hours a week cut my drinking time to the bone, and the big

shots at the firm hinted that new associates should pay their dues at the rate of fifty to sixty hours a week. They put me under so much pressure to produce legal work that for a while I even tried to cut back on my alcohol consumption. It didn't work, but I tried.

While at the firm I burdened myself with a house, another car, two purebred dogs, and a rack of silk ties. I made the payments on the things I bought and still had money in my pocket. I'd never been so rich in my life. I was respected, respectable, and supremely miserable. Most people, I think, buy things in order to feel good and to enhance their quality of life. I bought things in a desperate attempt to look normal.

For many good reasons, the big firm and I didn't work out. I left it to team up with an older lawyer who practiced by himself in the suburbs. He was an eccentric who was tolerated, but not well-liked, by other lawyers. He had a knack for making money and a great work ethic, but was handicapped by the fact that he didn't understand law. He got it wrong every time. I was a perfect partner for him. I didn't get much work done, but I had an intuitive grasp of law. I knew what would work for a client and how to do it. Together, the two of us made one decent attorney.

The suburban practice accommodated my drinking. My boss seldom bothered me about production so I had an hour or so a day to close my office door and sleep away some of the hangover I brought to work every morning. Because I understood law I took over the court appearances and trial work. Trials start late and end early.

For a while everything clicked. My boss brought in the cases and could usually, through abrasive persistence, negotiate a resolution that paid the office expenses and my salary. If he could not, I took the case to court.

About this time I took up a new hobby: tavern drinking. In the taverns I learned that I was not alone in my love of alcohol. The tavern became my first stop after leaving work where a couple of pints took the edge off. I could then go home, change clothes, walk the dogs and eat my one meal of the day. Fortified by food, exercise, and a few more beers, I would go back to the tavern again and drink until I could sleep.

The tavern gave me a social life. I had friends, golfing buddies, and soon enough, a lover. In the taverns I didn't have to hide my drinking. Drinking was a badge of honor—a ticket to the good life.

The good life, however, was coming to an end. My boss went into semi-retirement and turned the business over to me. I no longer had a salary. Paying rent, figuring taxes, and generating business became my responsibility. I was worse than bad at it; I simply could not do it.