

The Unbeliever

One of the original twenty-nine stories printed in the First Edition of the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, published in 1935, this story was taken out when the Second Edition was published in 1955. It is reprinted here with permission of AA World Services.

Dull, listless, and semicomatose, I lay on my bed in a famous hospital for alcoholics. Death or worse had been my sentence.

What was the difference? What difference did anything make? Why think of those things which were gone — why worry about the results of my drunken escapades? What the hell were the odds if my wife had discovered the mistress situation? Two swell boys...sure...but what difference would a corpse or an asylum-imprisoned father make to them?

Thoughts, stop whirling in my head! That's the worst of this sobering-up process; the old think tank is geared in high-high...what do I mean high-high. ..where did that come from...insane asylum...how that bus could scamper. . .yes...even then liquor probably poisoned me. What had the little doctor said this morning? Thoughts, hesitate a moment. Stop your mad turning! What was I thinking about... oh yes, the doctor.

This morning I reminded Doc this was my tenth visit. I had spent a couple of thousand dollars on these trips and those that I had financed for the plastered playgirls who also couldn't sober up. Jackie was a honey until she got plastered and then she was a hellion. Wonder what gutter she's in now. Where was I? Oh, I asked the doctor for God's sake to tell me the truth. He owed it to me for the amount of money I had spent. He faltered, said I'd been drunk that's all. God? Didn't I know that?

But Doc, you're evading. Tell me honestly what is the matter with me. I'll be all right did you say? But Doc, you've said that before. You said once that if I stopped for a year I would be over the habit and would never drink again. I didn't drink for over a year, but I did start to drink again.

Tell me what is the matter with me. I'm an alcoholic? Ha, ha and ho, ho! As if I didn't know that! But aside from your fancy name for a plain drunk, tell me why I drink. You say a true alcoholic is something different from a plain drunk? What do you mean...let me have it cold...brief and with no trimmings.

An alcoholic is a person who has an allergy to alcohol? Is poisoned by it? One drink does something to the chemical makeup of the body? That drink does something to the nerves and in a certain number of hours another drink is medically demanded? And so the vicious cycle is started? An ever smaller amount of time is needed between drinks to stop those screaming, twitching, invisible wires called nerves?

I know that experience, Doc. The spiral tightens...drink...unconscious...awake...drink...unconscious... poured into the hospital...suffer the agonies of hell...the shakes...thoughts running wild...brain unleashed...engine without a governor. But hell Doc, I don't want to drink! I've got one of the stubbornest will powers known in the business. I stick at things. I get them done. I've stuck on the wagon for months. And not been bothered by it and then suddenly, incomprehensibly, an empty glass in my hand and another spiral started. How do you explain that one?



He couldn't. That was one of the mysteries of true alcoholism. A famous medical foundation had spent a fortune trying to segregate the reasons for the alcoholic as compared to the plain hard, heavy drinker. Had tried to find the

cause. And all they had been able to determine as a fact was that the majority of the alcohol in every drink taken by the alcoholic went to the fluid in which the brain floated. Why a man ever started when he knew those facts was one of the things that could not be fathomed. Only the damn fool public believed it a matter of weak will power. Fear...ostracism...loss of family...loss of position...the gutter...nothing stopped the alcoholic.

For Christ's sake, Doc! What do you mean — nothing! What! An incurable disease? Doc, you're kidding me! You're trying to scare me into stopping! You wish to God you were? What are those tears in your eyes Doc? What's that? Forty years you've spent at this alcoholic business and you have yet to see a true alcoholic cured? Your life defeated and wasted? Oh, come come Doc, what would some of us do without you? If even to only sober up. But Doc, let's have it. What is going to be my history from here on out? Some vital organ will stop...or the madhouse with a wet brain? How soon? Within two years? But Doc, I've got to do something about it! I'll see doctors...I'll go to sanitariums. Surely the medical profession knows something about it. So little, you say? But why? Messy. Yes, I'll admit there is nothing messier than a drunk alcoholic.



What's that, Doc? You know a couple of fellows that were steady customers here that haven't been drunk for about ten months? You say they claim they are cured? And they make an avocation of passing it on to others? What have they got? You don't know...and you don't believe they are cured...well why tell me about it. A fine fellow you say, plenty of money, and you're sure it isn't a racket...just wants to be helpful...call him up for me will you, Doc?

How Doc had hated to tell me. Thoughts, stop knocking at my door! Why can't I get drunk like other people, get up next morning, toss my head a couple of times and go to work? Why do I have to shake so I can't hold the razor? Why does every little muscle inside me have to feel like a crawling worm? Why do even my vocal cords quiver so words are gibberish until I've had a big drink? Poison! Of course! But how could anyone understand such a necessity for a drink that it had to be loaded with pepper to keep it from bouncing? Can any mortal understand such secret shame in having to have a drink as to make a person keep the bottles hidden all over the house. The morning drink...shame

and necessity...weakness...remorse. But what does the family know about it? What do doctors know about it? Little, Doc was right, they know nothing. They just say, "Be strong," "Don't take that drink," "Suffer it through."

What the hell do they know about suffering? Not sickness. Not a belly ache — oh yes, your guts get so sore that you can't place your hands on them...oh sure, every time you go, you twist and writhe in pain. What the hell does any nonalcoholic know about suffering? Thoughts, stop this mad merry-go-round! And worst of all this mental suffering — the hating yourself — the feeling of absurd, irrational weakness — the unworthiness. Out that window! Use the gun in the drawer! What about poison? Go out in a garage and start the car. Yeah, that's the way out...But then people'll say, "He was plastered." Jesus! I can't leave that story behind. That's worse than cowardly.



Isn't there someone who understands? Thoughts, please, oh please, stop! I'm going nuts...or am I nuts now? Never...never again! And yet I've said that a dozen times and inexplicably I've found an empty glass in my hand and the whole story repeated.

My Lord, the tragedy that sprang out of her eyes when I came home with a breath on me...and fear. The smile wiped off the kids' faces. Terror stalking through the house. Yes...that changed it from a home to a house. Not drunk yet, but they knew what was coming. Mr. Hyde was moving in.

And so I'm going to die. Or a wet brain. What was it that fellow said who was here this afternoon? Damn fool thought, get out of my mind! Now I know I'm going nuts. And science knows nothing about it. And psychiatrists. I've spent plenty with them. Why should they feed on us who are suffering? Thought, go away! No, I don't want to think about what that fellow said this afternoon.

He's trying...idealistic as hell...nice fellow, too. Oh, why do I have to suffer with this revolving brain? Why can't I sleep? What was it he said? Oh yes, came in and told about his terrific drunks, his trips up here, this same thing I'm going through. Yes, he's an alcoholic all right. And then he told me he knew he was cured. Told me he was peaceful...(I'll never know peace again)...that he didn't carry constant fear around with him. Happy because he felt free. But

it's screwy. He said so himself. But he did get my confidence when he started to tell what he had gone through. It was so exactly like my case. He knew what this torture is. He raised my hopes so high; he looked as though he had something. I don't know, I guess I was so sold that I expected him to spring some kind of a pill and I asked him desperately what it was.

And he said, "God."

And I laughed.

A baseball bat across my face would have been no greater shock. I was so high with hope and expectation. How can a man be so heartless? He said that it sounded screwy but it worked, at least it had with him... said he was not a religionist...in fact didn't go to church much...my ears came up at that...his unconventionality attracted me...said that some approaches to religion were screwy...talked about how the simplest truth in the world had been all balled up by complicating it... that attracted me. Oh, for God's sake, get out of my mind...what a fine religious bird I'd be. Imagine the glee of the gang at me getting religion...phooey! Thoughts, please slow down...why don't they give me something to go to sleep...lay down in green pastures...the guy's nuts...forget him.



And so it's the nuthouse for me...glad Mother is dead, she won't have to suffer that... if I'm going nuts maybe it'd be better to be crazy the way he is...life's cruel...the puny-minded, curtain-hiding gossips ... didn't you know his father was committed for insanity...what a sly label to hang on those boys...damn the gossiping, reputation-shredding busybodies who put their noses into other people's business.

He'd laid in this same dump...suffered...gone through hell...made up his mind to get well...studied alcoholism... Jung...went to Blank Medical Foundation...asylums...Hopkins. Many said incurable disease...impossible...nearly all known cures had been through religion...revolted him...made a study of religion...the more he studied, the more it was bunk to him...not understandable...self-hypnotism crap...and then the thought hit him that people had it all twisted up. They were trying to pour everyone into moulds, put a tag on them, tell them what they had to do and how they had to do it, for the salva-



tion of their own souls. When as a matter of fact people were through worrying about their souls, they wanted action right here and now. A lot of trips had been built up around the simplest and most beautiful ideas in the world.

And how did he put the idea...bunk...why in hell am I still thinking about him... in hell...that's good...I am in hell: He said, "I came to the conclusion that there is SOMETHING. I know not what it is, but it is bigger than I. If I will acknowledge it, if I will humble myself, if I will give in and bow in submission to that SOMETHING and then try to lead a life as fully in accord with my idea of good as possible, I will be in tune." And later the word good contracted in his mind to God.

But, mister, I can't see any guy with long white whiskers up there just waiting for me to make a plea...and what did he answer... said I was trying to

complicate it...why did I insist on making it human...all I had to do was believe in some power greater than myself and knuckle down to it...and I said maybe, but tell me mister why are you wasting your time up here? Don't hand me any bunk about it being more blessed to give than to receive...asked him what this thing cost and he laughed. He said it wasn't a waste of time... in doing it out he had thought of something somebody had said, "A person never knew a lesson until he tried to pass it on to someone else." He had found out that every time he tried to pass this on it became more vivid to him. So if we wanted to get hard-boiled about it, he owed me, I didn't owe him. That's a new slant...the guy's crazy as a loon...get away from him, brain...picture me going around telling other people how to run their lives...if I could only go to sleep...that sedative didn't seem to take hold.

He could visualize a great fellowship of us...quietly, semi-secretly passing this from alcoholic to alcoholic...nothing organized...not ministers...not missionaries...what a story...thought we'd have to do it to get well...some kind of a miracle had happened in his life...common sense guy at that...his plan does fire the imagination.

Told him it sounded like self-hypnotism to me and he said, "What of it?"...didn't care if it was yogi-ism, self-hypnotism or anything else...four of them were well. But it's so damn hypocritical...I get beat every other way and then I turn around and lay it in God's lap...damned if I ever would turn to God...what a low-down cowardly, despicable trick that would be ...don't believe in God anyway...just a lot of hooley to keep the masses in subjugation...world's worst inquisitions have been practiced in His name... and he said...do I have to turn into an inquisitionist...if I don't knuckle down, I die...why the low-down missionary...what a bastardly screw to put on a person...a witch burner, that's what he is...the hell with him and all his damn theories...crap...witch burner.



Sleep, please come to my door...that last was the eight hundred and eighty fifth sheep over the fence...guess I'll put in some black ones...sheep...shepherds...wise men...what was that story...hell there I go back on that same line...told him I couldn't understand and I couldn't believe anything I couldn't

understand! He said he supposed then that I didn't use electricity. No one actually understood where it came from or what it was. Nuts to him. He's got too many answers. What did he think the nub of the whole thing was? Subjugate self to some power above...ask for help...mean it...try to pass it on. Asked him what he was going to name this? Said it would be fatal to give it any kind of a tag...to have any sort of formality.

I'm going nuts...tried to get him into an argument about miracles...about immaculate conception...about star leading three wise men...Jonah and the whale. He wanted to know what difference those things made...he didn't even bother his head about them...if he did, he would get tight again. So I asked him what he thought about the Bible. Said he read it, and used those things he agreed with and understood. He didn't take the Bible literally as an instruction book, for there was no nonsense you could not make out of it that way. If ministers could only just advise people and not try to tell them what they had to do, he figured religion would be more successful with fellows like us...figured most preachers tried to pour people into some mould of their own.

Thought I had him when I asked about the past sins I had committed. Guess I've done everything in the book...I supposed I would have to adopt the attitude that all was forgiven...here I am pure and clean as the driven snow, or else I was to go through life flogging myself mentally...bah. But he had the answer for that one too. Said he couldn't call back the hellish things he had done, but he figured life might be a ledger page. If he did a little good here and there, maybe the score would be evened up some day. On the other hand, if he continued as he had been going there would be nothing but debit items on the sheet...kind of common sense.



This is ridiculous...have I lost all power of logic...would I fall for all that religious junk...let's see if I can't get to thinking straight...that's it...I'm trying to do too much thinking...just calm myself...quietly...quiet now...relax every muscle...start at the toes and move up...insane...wet brain...those boys...what a mess my life is...mistress...how I hate her...ah...I know what's the matter...that fellow gave me an emotional upset...I'll list every reason I couldn't accept his way of thinking. After laughing at this religious stuff all

these years I'd be a hypocrite. That's one. Second, if there was a God, why all this suffering? Wait a minute, he said that was one of the troubles, we tried to give God some form. Make it just a power that will help. Third, it sounds like the Salvation Army. Told him that and he said he was not going around singing on any street comers. Simply, if he heard of a guy suffering the torments, he told him his story and belief.

There I go thinking again...just started to get calmed down...sleep...boys...insane...death...mistress...life all messed up...business. Now listen, take hold...what am I going to do? NEVER...that's final and in caps. Never...that's not no discount. Never...never...and my mind is made up. NEVER am I going to be such a cowardly low-down son of a bitch as to acknowledge any God. The two-faced, gossiping Babbitts can go around with their sanctimonious Christ mouthings, their miserable worshipping, their Bible quotations, their holier-than-thou attitudes, their nicy-nice Christian, Sunday-worshipping, Monday-robbing actions, but never will they find me acknowledging God. Let me laugh...I'd like to shriek with insane glee...my mind's made up...insane, there it is again.

Brrr, this floor is cold on my knees...why are the tears running like a river down my cheeks...God, have mercy on my soul! 