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Upon Wakening

Joan M. Lovelace

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Joan M. Lovelace, B.S., Radio-Television and Journalism

An abstract presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University for consideration of the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

Abstract

Upon awakening is a memoir essay that details the free fall from my prime into the disease of addiction, which took everything from me but the one thing I willingly would have given: my life. Instead, alcoholism dragged me on a horrifying public journey that began in a secret place in my mind.

At first, only I knew the trouble I was in, as I began drinking from the liquor bottles in the wet bar of our home. As my craving for booze grew beyond my control, I lost my career as a television journalist, my self-respect, my dignity and the trust of my children, husband and family. Finally, alcoholism took my sanity. A failed suicide attempt cost me the use of my left hand and too many drunk driving charges landed me in jail. Imprisoned and dazed as I was by my explosive plunge into depravity, I had no idea of the soul scraping pain and irrevocable loss that was to come.

That anyone could rise from that point to a life of true joy and meaning, is remarkable. I take little credit for that. *Upon Awakening* is an effort simply to prove that it can happen, and to explain, to the best of my limited ability in writing about miracles, how it happened. We all have a story, and if we can, we ought to tell it. I know for certain that no matter how difficult the journey we have taken, we will see how our experiences can benefit our fellow travelers.

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Upon Awakening

is dedicated to those who got caught in my crossfire, and are bravely healing from their own wounds with forgiving hearts and loving compassion. Thank you, family.

And to the woman who still suffers: there is a solution.

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Introduction

Looking at it logically, I shouldn't be here, writing this. I shouldn't be breathing, laughing, mothering, loving. But few meaningful things about life involve logic. The meaningful things are about the extraordinary; the wildly unexpected events that greet us at the front door in the middle of a perfectly ordinary day, and what we do next.

I started out like anybody else. I had a difficult childhood but felt oddly unaffected by it until I suddenly was. My father was an abusive alcoholic who started out like anybody else as well. A cruel genetic quirk derailed his own dreams early on, so my brothers and I never got to see the best of him. Years of sexual, emotional and financial ravaging sent me into the world at the age of eighteen with some distorted survival skills. I knew what I didn't want from life and went to work on what I did want. It never entered my mind that if I did the right thing, played nice and worked hard, I wouldn't be properly rewarded.

Coming from an Irish Catholic family, I learned to love a good story. I had a knack for telling them and writing them as well. A career in journalism seemed obvious to me and I honed my writing ability to a marketable skill through my first two years at Southern Illinois University. In my third year, I discovered the odd group working late hours in the basement television studio on campus and I was transfixed. These people were dramatic and crisis-oriented. Their willingness

to stamp their faces and voices on their work, and to do so against impossible deadlines made for an immediate attraction.

Getting my needs met as a child required the fine art of manipulation and I was a gifted learner. I had always been able to out-work, out think, out-wit, out talk, out *anything* to get what I wanted. Only much later in life, when I needed help but could not ask for it, would I come to see this trait less as an asset and more of a liability. For television, however, this tenacity would be an asset, so I added TV classes to my journalism curriculum and a solid player in a cut-throat business was born.

I took my first TV job as a weekend photographer at WSIL-TV in Harrisburg, Illinois during my senior year in college. It required that I leave school and my bartending job late Friday, drive the hour and a half distance to the studio, and sleep on the floor in the upstairs conference room to be ready to work on Saturday. I had no money for a hotel, so I carried my belongings in a backpack that I hid under a desk so no one knew my routine.

Every Saturday and Sunday I hauled around a thirty pound recording box slung over one of my small shoulders, and hiked an equally heavy camera on top of the other, as I videotaped local happenings. Not much went on in Harrisburg and it was a good thing, because I returned without video many times, thinking the camera was on when it was off and vice-versa. I rarely got discouraged paying my dues. In fact, I never backed away from a challenge.

My break came the weekend the news anchor failed to show up one evening and the man in charge literally said, "Joan, can you do the newscast tonight?" The job was mine after that, at which point, I began the search for my next opportunity and that's how it went. I sent out dozens of tapes – we used tape back then – and kept every rejection letter, which only solidified my determination.

I found my next job at WICD-TV in Champagne, Illinois, where I also found the first man who ever got through to me. Jeffrey, a photographer at the station, taught me how to give and showed me that a woman who'd come from where I'd been could trust a man and survive. We got married on a Saturday afternoon in the library of a synagogue in front of our families and friends. We both worked the ten o'clock newscast that night.

We began a glorious life together. He joined me as I climbed the industry ladder rung by rung. After two years at WTLV-TV in Jacksonville, Florida, we both landed jobs at WSVN-TV in Miami. The station had just lost its NBC affiliation and would have been delegated to a land of sitcom re-runs had it not been for its innovative owner, Ed Ansin. Ansin saw an opportunity for a market niche that had gone untapped and programmed the station with hours of local newscasts. It was wildly successful and, for those of us in at the beginning, a heady experience. The ratings soared. WSVN and most of its star players garnered national attention.

Most of what we did was *live* news; meaning it was not pre-recorded and rarely planned. We went wherever there was news. I became adept at gathering the facts of a story quickly and turning them around in a compelling, authoritative manner that required an enviable gift of gab. Our coverage of the 1986 Super bowl riots and 1992's Hurricane Andrew brought coveted awards and job offers I had dreamt about long ago.

Personally, these were high times as well. Our first child was born in the spring of 1990, and she brought forth from her career-driven mother a tenderness and compassion that only a child can summon. She would not have the life I had had as a child, and we spoiled her with love and all the material things money could buy. It was around this time that my father, who had been exiled by the rest of the family and moved to Miami where I could support him, began to die.

I don't remember wanting or not wanting to help him, but the death watch was surprisingly painful. I was hard on him. He'd brought this on himself, I told him, and he could change if he chose. Years later, I would hear my own words and be ashamed of my ignorance. I paid for various treatments, limited his visits, threatened to end all contact with him, and still, he drank. His body began to fail, slowly and painfully. His alcohol consumption resulted in diabetes, cataracts, heart trouble and gout. Almost invariably, his binges landed him in a

hospital where he would dry out to the news that he would die sooner than later. Detachment ruled my heart.

I was pregnant with our second child, Jonathan, when an executive with Chicago's WBBM-TV called to offer me a sweetheart deal. Chicago was Jeff's hometown, the third largest television market in the nation, and I would anchor the news next to Bill Kurtis, a journalist I had admired for a decade. We left my father in Miami, bought a home on the north shore of Lake Michigan, and brought our newborn son, who was born on Jeffrey's birthday, into the perfectly planned life.

The celebration was short-lived. I did good work in Chicago; even won some Emmys, but WBBM's ratings had been stuck in the basement for years and they would not budge. This was not the station that viewers favored, and a plan to bring in accomplished out-of-towners (I was one among many) to fix things, went downhill almost as quickly as I did. For a reason still not completely understood by anyone, I began to drink too much.

Alcoholism is a disease with a strong genetic component. Scientists know this because those who have come from healthy, stable backgrounds have died of the disease, while others who hail from loaded environments can put down a glass of beer only half empty. It took four harrowing years to release its grip on my father who finally died in 1997. I do not know why my alcoholism blossomed when it did. I was at the peak of my career and could have found a high paying

job anywhere, in spite of WBBM's struggles. I had a supportive, loving relationship with my husband and two amazing children. Recovering alcoholics would tell me I had a "soul sickness" that only a spiritual approach could conquer. I would hear none of that. I would take care of this myself, just as I had my entire life.

When my lofty family speeches and drunken emcee episodes became an embarrassment, I declared that I would put down the bottle. The problem was that I kept picking it back up. I drank my way through demotions and indifference. I drank because it was sunny out, raining, snowing or because I was excited or depressed. Any reason was a good enough reason to drink. I was dumbfounded by how difficult it was to lick this thing. When my contract expired at WBBM, my husband took a good job in Baltimore, Maryland and we looked to the move as a new beginning.

I had opportunities to work but considering my condition, Jeff and I thought I should take my time and stay home to help our children adjust to their new surroundings. I became a stay-at-home drunk, piling up DUI's and becoming a frequent visitor to psychiatric hospitals. It was appalling how much I understood my father's dilemma. I would gladly have died rather than become the person he became, but a major suicide attempt failed and left me in a state of continuous oblivion, interrupted by moments of confusion. My time-proven tenacity had failed me.

I finally went to jail, where I began a thorough descent into a nightmare I could not have predicted in my worst imaginings. How fine the line can be between an ending and a beginning. I have come to tell you about the long road back.

In the first year of my sobriety, a friend in the television business told my story in two short segments, about three and a half minutes apiece. Quite a commitment in TV time, but hardly time enough to say what really happened. I allowed it because I had recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind, if I may paraphrase from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, and *that*, my friend understood, was noteworthy. Drunks like me generally don't make it out alive.

After my story aired on national television, I was deluged by letters of support and pleas for help. People asked me how I quit drinking, how I stayed quit, and how I joyfully live with my past and look forward to my future. Some asked me to write a book about it. The thing was, I had no idea why I got and stayed sober. I had very little to do with my recovery. I told my colleague the nuts and bolts for sure, but I veered away from the one moment in the middle of the night that changed everything. I was afraid people wouldn't believe it and I didn't blame them. I was still pinching myself.

I spent the next four years on healing with my children, and occasionally, sharing my story with those who asked to hear it. Through those experiences I began to understand some fairly abstract ideas, some existential truths, which

played a major part in my awakening. I am, these days, a one-step-at-a-time kind of person. The first thing to do, I figured, was to find out what kind of writer I could become. Writing for a television viewer requires a completely different skill set than does writing for a reader.

Two years ago, I began the pursuit for a Master's Degree in Writing. I learned immediately that I do not have the patience to write fiction. I know too much about the amazing truth of life to make anything up. I enjoyed poetry and found I could be deeply moved by the particular placement of a single word.

Creative non-fiction, however, makes my heart beat. I have always loved a good story. I have marveled at the grace with which people have survived the unthinkable. I once told the story of a dying woman who searched out an adoptive mother for her young son, and denied herself precious time with him so that he would transition away from her as painlessly as possible. I chose every video image and wrote every sentence to do her justice. I'd like to do the same for others if my ability allows.

Telling my own story has been a different challenge, indeed. It is much easier to examine the lives of others than to investigate my own, often ugly, truth. But it is also only fair, that as I embark upon a potential career in the genre of non-fiction, that I practice on myself first. As I wrote, I kept in mind the words of Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who said, "What is to give light must endure burning." I offer to you, *Upon Awakening,* a memoir essay about a woman's trip

to the gates, her revival and what she did next. If it illuminates anything for you at all, the walk through my own fire was worth it.

It is the kind of August day that draws even a pessimist away from the orderly routine of a weekday morning. The woman two houses down in our small enclave in the Maryland countryside should have been measuring out inventory at the only pharmacy within thirty miles. Instead, she is meticulously pulling weeds from the flower bed at the back of her house. She rarely spends time outside when the neighbors are around. From the vantage point of my screened-in porch, I watch her silently not appreciating the perfect combination of warmth and quiet as she tends to a group of yellow and purple perennials. She moves angrily from one task to the next. If it were me, I'd stop and sit in the sun, meander through the wooded acres around my house, and sip from a heavy blue and white coffee mug full of the warm taste of Hazelnut.

I wonder what is wrong with her. Whatever it is, I'm willing to bet it is an easier problem to solve than the baffling disease that has taken me from a life of personal and professional success to one of utter hopelessness. I rock violently back and forth in my metal chair so that the squeak is loud enough to drown out the peace. The vodka bottle sits empty on the table in front of me next to my cigarettes. I'd chugged the last two inches before taking that momentary trip out of my miserable head and now I am without enough alcohol to get me through the day. The miscalculation angers me. Now I face the enormous task of searching out hidden car keys and getting more to drink. Lost in semi-conscious wallowing, I finally notice the odor of my thinning blonde hair burning at the end of the long ash of the Marlboro Light I hold slack between my fingers. Shit.

Wobbly, I throw open the double French doors to the enormous great room inside, the home in which I am now an unwanted visitor. Pictures of my children, Samantha and Jonathan, crowd the top of the honey colored baby grand piano in the corner. A silver frame shows my fifth grade girl, petite, with navy blue eyes and freckles across her creamy face, holding a trophy awarded to the elementary school graduate who gives of herself to others without expectation. Amazing, I think, when so much has been taken from her in these last years. Jonathan is mostly displayed in sports frames decorated with baseballs and soccer balls. His yellow hair is trimmed in a bowl cut, and the bangs dangle in his sleepy hazel eyes.

There is no one in this room right now to ask me to retreat to the guest bedroom where I live now in a continual state of drunken oblivion, interrupted only when I run out of booze and writhe painfully in physical and mental agony. Right now, I am between the two conditions and coherent enough to play the game I invented called "Who Lives Here?" In the game, I am the outsider intruding on a family's intimacy and gathering information about them so that I can fall in love with them over and over.

The couple who designed the home has style. The grayish blue floor- to-ceiling stone hearth is an earthy touch in the midst of an otherwise elegant concoction of wood flooring and marble tiles. A tall oak bookcase features a ladder to allow access to top shelf antique cameras and expensive artwork. They

must be financially successful. I open two small glass doors in the middle unit and run my fingers gingerly over a gold statue of a small winged woman holding a globe high over her head. She is heavy when I pick her up to read the plaque on the base.

1996-1997 CHICAGO/MIDWEST EMMY AWARDS

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT WITHIN A REGULARLY SCHEDULED NEWS PROGRAM

SPOT COVERAGE/FLOODS OF '96

JOAN LOVETT, REPORTER

WBBM-TV

There are four of the highly coveted awards, each for a different news event. The college diploma on another shelf boasts a dual degree in Radio-Television News and Print Journalism. Several black and white publicity photos reveal an attractive woman with varying hairstyles over a span of nearly twenty years. "Well, weren't you something," I sneer. "I hate you." Oops. I go back to the game.

The intimate square office adjoining the big room must be the husband's. The rich smell of cigars lingers on a leather jacket hanging casually on the back of

a chair. A computer carelessly tops a desk made of fine cherry wood. The woman of the house should have insisted he put protection under it. The man must be the photographer in the family. There are few photos of him and stacks of books on the art of taking pictures. A built-in shelving unit, graceful in its arched trim and flanking windows, holds at least three dozen academic manuals, hard-covered and inches thick, related to archeology. I let the visitor I am playing know without looking that the pages inside credit Jeffrey Abrams for the excavation pictures taken during the exploration of the historic Cahokia Mounds.

An antique radio which appears to be in working condition, sits on the floor, a spinning children's globe on top of it. A Chicago Cubs baseball hat rules the world as it rests on the North Pole. A tightly meshed blue basket is piled high with television credentials that are worn around the neck at important events. I pick up a large plastic photo of a jockey on a racehorse. The silver beaded neck chain zips across the edge of the basket as I read it.

TV/RADIO PASS FOR THE 1999 PREAKNESS AT PIMLICO RACE COURSE

JEFF ABRAMS, OPERATIONS MANAGER, WBAL-TV, BALTIMORE

So, this guy is no slouch in the television news field either. Dozens of credentials for major events from Miami to Chicago and now Baltimore fill the container. A press photo shows a team of people standing near a palm tree. In the center, a man in his forties, obviously fit with a closely trimmed beard, wears an expensive

suit and tie and a baseball cap that reads, "WSVN Covers Hurricane Andrew." His smile is relaxed. I remember how calm he was in the aftermath of the storm.

I burst into tears looking at my husband. The mind game that lets me detach from reality is over. My hands are shaking, and I need to vomit. Too long without alcohol, I drag myself up the back staircase from the kitchen to our large master suite and throw up on the green slate floor of the bathroom. It's not that messy. I don't eat much food anymore. I stretch my body out next to the watery deposit and lay my cheek on the cool tile. My eyes catch a spot on the wall near the bottom of the cabinets. I know what it is but do not look away or gasp in horror.

The spot remains from the December day nearly three years ago in 1999, when I balled my left hand into a fist and tore a straight razor through my veins. I should have died. The blood broke free of the wound as if it had been caught in a windstorm and sprayed the bathroom walls in pain beyond imagination. Jeff, hearing my scream from the lower floor flew up the stairs. His management skills went to work as he instructed my daughter to call 911 and pulled off his shirt to fashion a tourniquet around my arm. At the hospital they told me they'd need my permission to amputate in the event that crucial tendons could not be reattached. I don't remember caring at the time what they had to do.

My eyes travel from the stain and the memory to the present. I turn my left arm to reveal the angry white scar that runs horizontally across my wrist, and

another six inches long from my palm to the middle of my forearm, where the doctors removed scar tissue last year to give me more mobility. I have no feeling in my finger tips, very little in my hand, and constant physical pain in the rest of the area that I feel only when I'm sober enough. I would gratefully endure ten times the amount of physical pain if it could wipe out the much more devastating emotional agony of addiction.

Alcoholism has been like that for me. I can't drink and I can't *not* drink. My physical addiction for more of any alcoholic substance has resulted in behaviors I cannot face. I have neglected my children, exploded in self-destructive rages that have landed me in psychiatric hospitals, and humiliated my family. Sobering up involves a physical craving that courses through my body like shockwaves, and the emotional anguish of facing myself unfiltered. The only way out for me, I figure, is death. And I've been waiting for it since my failed suicide attempt.

Too weak to walk the mile and a half to the liquor store, a ransack search turns up the car keys my husband hid in an old tool box where I once stashed an empty bottle. I wonder why he doesn't routinely take them with him when he leaves, but people tend to underestimate the resourcefulness of a desperate alcoholic. I have been known to ride a rusty bike uphill for miles to get alcohol, or call for a twenty dollar cab ride to take me five minutes away for a swallow that will lead to oblivion.

My malnourished five foot two frame exerts itself to get up into the driver's seat of the mini-van. Our outsides match. The dark green van is dented and scratched by run-ins with mailboxes and trash cans. My body is marked by bruises in varying stages of healing from yellowish green to dark angry purple; the one from a recent head first tumble down the stairs. The interior of the car is another story. The van, once mine for kid duties, is now Jeff's weekend warrior. There are empty Skittles candy bags and coloring books from restaurants. A soccer ball rests on the floor in the third row back. My insides revolt at memories of ball games or family dinners. I have relegated these thoughts to a place inside as inaccessible as possible.

A half mile down the street I jerk the steering wheel to avoid a ditch. Covering one puffy red eye, I work hard to stay in the lane on the little country road, glancing occasionally in the rear view mirror. I realize with an underwhelming sense of dread that Officer Hagen is behind me. He has arrested me for DUI's twice before, and should have done so countless other times, but his heart went out to my husband and children and he often simply drove me home. My unresolved legal issues have piled up like junk mail on the prosecutor's desk, so it comes as no surprise that today I will go to jail for a long time. Finally, I think, it is over. After eight years of problem drinking, I have hit the bottom in the summer of 2002.

What a small mercy it is that we cannot see what lies ahead. I do not yet know real bottomless pain; the true soul scarring loss that a human being can feel when she loses something more important than herself. Had I known I would never again see my home or my husband and children as they had been, I would have gratefully thrown myself from the speeding squad car. As it was, I was simply relieved that someone other than my family would have to deal with me.

At the county jail, I am watching events unfold as if they are happening to some other woman. In handcuffs and shackles, and stripped naked, a female guard does a very personal full body search. I do not know where my belongings are. In a one-size-fits-all bright orange jumpsuit with the crotch down to my knees, and some plastic slippers, they shuffle me off to an intake cell.

"I need something to read!" Desperate for any kind of diversion, I shout between sobs at the guard outside my single cell. I am totally conscious now, and paralyzed with the familiar fear that only a chronic offender can know. He tosses me a Bible.

"I've read this!" I cry. He laughs.

I hadn't read the Bible. But I had prayed. "God, help me quit drinking. Help me quit. Help me." I didn't see much use in any further religious contemplation. Finally, the guard slips a well worn paperback through the food slot in the door. It is a formulaic Danielle Steele love story, mind numbing

enough that I can pretend to read it, while pleading with my racing thoughts not to run off with any remaining sanity.

As daylight slips away from the peeled corner of the tinted window that earlier allowed me a view of a parking lot, panic doubles me over onto the steel cot padded with a foam mat encased in torn, hard green plastic, and leaves me there wide awake until morning. Other than the occasional gut-wrenching longing for my children and husband, and a fatal certainty that I will never find my way back to anything, I try to focus on the walls or the floor, or the book. The next day, bail is denied and trial is set for three months away. They say I will likely serve five years.

There is a point, I believe, beyond a person's ability to reason, when something automatic, close to primal, takes over. I am there. On the third day in jail, zombie-like and medicated, I numbly accompany the guards to general population, where twenty or so other female inmates are surprisingly cordial to me. One of them, a huge trash-talking black woman, who seems oddly functional for someone in her situation, manages later in the evening to get a cigarette into the cellblock. She shares it in the shower with a dozen others. That means, of course, that no one gets a nicotine buzz; not even a nanosecond of relief to buffer the blow of reality, but it is an oddly touching gesture that pierces my emotional exile. Her name is Crystal.

"What's your problem?" She approaches me before anyone.

"DUI's," I say. "Have you been in here long?" I want to know it is possible to survive like this.

"Six months," Crystal shrugs. "Let me braid your hair." And I do.

People have asked me, not completely in jest, what else I let Crystal do. That kind of legendary jail lore did not exist in our unit. Crystal was simply a fellow traveler, who, like me, did not wake up one day and say, "I think I'll ruin my life and the lives of those I love, become a danger to society, and spend what time I have left looking forward to an hour of daily sunlight, and cookies from a prison commissary just because I wanted a Vodka Tonic or a hit off a crack pipe." We were all just addicts, suffering from a misunderstood disease. I can't say I blame anybody. At least a diabetic who goes off the wagon with sugar doesn't fall into criminal behavior because of it.

We spend most of our time here in the dayroom. It is the size of a two-car garage, painted with some kind of thick, plaster-like substance the color of cat litter. For variety, the metal picnic tables and benches bolted to the floor are sprayed a gun metal gray, adorned with inspiring messages left by those who have come before, such as "Life sucks and then you live." Our cells, one for each of us, surround the dayroom like a mouthful of metal braces. During inmate count, we spend time writing or reading in our six-by-six foot spaces. I have a thin, scratchy blanket. I do not yet have enough rank to be in possession of a

pillow that might be handed down from someone who gets to leave, so I roll the flat sleeping mat at the top to hold my head up.

These are the hardest hours. Isolation awakens my mind. I read voraciously. I pace. Like a cliché, I chip my name into the bubbly paint with my pencil out of some need to prove to myself I am really here. I cross the days off of hand drawn calendars because I am starting to lose track. I write letters of promise to my children on yellow legal paper, which, in my sick mind, I imagine they will cherish. I get an occasional letter back from a husband who compassionately recognizes the fact that they are my only lifeline. He gives brief updates about the kids; "I'm taking them to Six Flags," and he signs them simply, "Jeff." I am grateful that the prison doctors consider me mentally ill, and ply me with sedating medications.

One evening, we are watching the news, and NBC anchor Lester Holt is filling in for Tom Brokaw.

"He is so fine," a woman croons.

"Nice, too." I say. "And a great dad. Before he went to NBC, I anchored the news with him at CBS in Chicago."

"Get oooouuuutt!"

"Seriously, I was a TV reporter before my life fell apart."

I look up at the TV bolted high on the wall, at Lester in his Armani suit, at his deserving peak, and my eyes travel with resignation down to myself. I am skinny in the clothes I have been allowed to have sent from home; sweat pants, t-shirts, nothing with zippers or snaps. No belts. My once manicured nails are cracking and yellow from malnutrition and a smoking habit I picked up two years ago with an idea that it could replace my drinking. I begin to laugh in a low rumble that reaches a manic perch. "If he could see me now!" I bellow. I continue for a few minutes with a full-bellied, hyena-type outpouring at the absurdity of it all. When it stops, I have an alien, unfounded idea that somehow I am finished with alcohol and this can all be worked out.

After ten weeks, I begin stashing the medication they insist on numbing me with under my mat. I don't want to take it while I am making my mythical plans for a way to get myself out of this, but, true addict that I am, I save them just in case. *Just in case* is my time-worn excuse for why I drink, as in, "I will keep a small bottle in the coat pocket of my high school jacket in the cedar closet where no one will look *just in case* I need a little fortitude." It has inexplicably only rarely occurred to me that normal drinkers do not think like this.

A cell shakedown reveals the accumulating pills and I am sent to solitary confinement for ten days. My hopes go out the window, and again, my mind scurries like a hamster in a tube. Isolation threatens to strip me of any shred of coherency I might muster. Primal again, I lie on the floor and surround myself

with Jeff's letters and my mother's endlessly loving cards of encouragement. I need to remind myself there is a world still going on outside of here. I study the cell, inch by inch, and without success, try to peel the strong dark tint from a spot in the window. At six o'clock in the evening on the second day, two guards take me to see someone in the front office. They don't answer my questions on the way, but I figure they've realized I do not deserve such a harsh punishment and they will send me back to general population after a light lecture.

I enter and a gentle-looking man says softly, "Please, sit down."

They have never been mean to me but they've never been particularly nice. I freeze to the floor, my feet numbly rooted in place. The blood rushes from my head.

"My children?" I hear myself ask.

"Please, sit down." This time it is an older nurse, round and grandmotherly, whom I had not seen seconds before.

Whispering, "Tell me."

"There's been an accident." Gray fog surrounds the soft man's face, and he threatens to disappear. I scream silently, "Wait! I still need you." My heart is skipping beats. There is nothing but his eyes and my eyes. My fragile mind immediately brings itself into razor-sharp focus and tells me, "If my children are

not okay, I can dissolve into liquid and seep away between the cracks in the concrete floor." I wait for the bullet, and he delivers.

"It's your husband. He's dead. He had a heart attack while he was jogging at six-thirty this morning."

The round wall clock behind him comes into view and grows distortedly large. The giant black hands stop in place. Six thirty two. I have been alive for twelve hours and two minutes, protectively caged like a mad animal at a shelter, maniacally planning how I can get back to my life; ignorantly unaware that the atomic balloon that had been holding the fall-out of my addiction, had finally burst and showered the fatal toxins of my disease onto my innocent family. There is no life to go back to. Any hope I had mustered in the last few weeks evaporate as quickly as a feeling of déjà vu. The clock starts again.

Tick.

"Where are my children?"

Tock.

"Your brother is on his way from Missouri right now. Neighbors are with them."

Tick.

"I need to see them."

Tock.

"That isn't possible right now."

Tick.

"Please."

Tock.

The lights go out. I am vaguely aware of the hard cement floor. Upon awakening, in a low, guttural sob, a voice is saying, "Please, God. Help me find a way to live. Help me find my way to my babies. Help me want to live." I am humanely medicated again, my stockpiling forgiven, and gently returned to the unit. A female guard tells my fellow inmates, her own voice cracking, "Her husband died. She really needs you ladies right now." I fall into outstretched arms and allow myself to be carried to my bunk.

There are so many phone calls, and each time I am escorted to a private room hoping to speak to my mother, or brothers or children, it is someone else. Now, I am talking to a woman from a skin donor organization. Jeff had been an organ donor but by the time family members had found his license, it was too late to use his vital organs. I remember our plan to scatter our remains over the beloved mountains we had visited in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. "This would be a good place to spend eternity," he had said, riding horseback through the Grand Tetons. Jeffrey was a spiritual man. He believed that we all go on in some form.

The woman on the phone is apologetic in telling me Jeffrey's skin can still be used to help burn victims. "I have a series of questions to ask you, if that's okay?"

"Yes," I say, my voice flat. I will not feel this conversation.

"Has he ever had skin cancer?"

"No,"

"Been treated for any kind of disease affecting the health of his skin at all?"

"No." I am thinking about Jeffrey's skin. Olive colored, smooth. I think of the center spot in his chest where his brown hair is graying a bit, and how I loved to lay the left side of my face under his chin, his arm wrapped around me, and bury my face in that spot. It was the safest place on earth for me. I wonder if they can give me a piece of his hair. After dozens of questions I don't remember answering, the guards quietly lead me back to the dayroom.

I sleep for days. The women try to get me to eat, or bathe or talk, but I hold tight to my cocoon because whenever I wake, the split second of un-remembering wears off and I realize that he is dead. My mind demands to know why God—if there is a God--took the wrong parent. Even as I rage, I start eating and showering. Without my permission, I have taken tentative steps into a new

awareness, fueled by the core truth that I cannot, by my own hand, leave my children orphans.

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In the courtroom two weeks later, I stand defeated in my baggy orange jumpsuit, handcuffed and shackled at the ankles, awaiting sentencing. My mother has made the trip from Missouri and I can hear her crying behind me. I glance back at her and see what the pain has done to her soft, round face. Her eyes are swollen, her cheeks slack, and she clings to my step-father for support. "Please, your honor, can I hug my daughter?" The bailiff looks at the judge who shakes his head, and a small comfort so desperately needed is denied. The arguments between my attorney and the prosecutor begin and go something like this:

"Your honor, the state requests no less than a period of five years to be served with the Department of Corrections. Ms. Lovelace has several prior offenses, probation violations and has proven to be a danger to her community." My mother is crying louder now. I wonder how I will survive whatever these next few minutes produce. My attorney speaks.

"Your honor, Ms. Lovelace has a history of mental illness due to the severe abuse she suffered as a child. There are indications of Dissociative Identity Disorder for which she has never been properly treated. She has just lost her husband to a heart attack. It would be excessive to accept the prosecutor's

recommendation. There are children involved. Ms. Lovelace was, at one time, a productive member of society, a decorated journalist, and a good mother. In the right surroundings, she can get the treatment she needs. We are requesting she spend no more than two years at a treatment-oriented minimum security facility so she may begin to get her life back on track."

The mention of my mental illness gets the judge's attention and startles me. I know the only illness I have is alcoholism. Before I abandoned therapy a year ago, a psychiatrist suggested that due to the severity of the sexual abuse by my father, I might have a multiple personality disorder. During hospital stays after my horrific drunken escapades, I observed the other patients who had been diagnosed with D-I-D. I knew very well how the sexual trauma had affected me, and how it hadn't. But the idea that I could blame my drinking on something so completely out of my control – another personality entirely, appealed to me. I invented an alter I called "Little Marie." One time "Marie" got drunk and crawled under her bed in the master bedroom. In a carefully practiced ten-year-old voice, she screamed obscenities and raged about the injustices of life for hours. The truth was that I was fully aware of what I was doing. I had gotten drunk, said things I didn't mean, and then put on an Oscar-worthy performance to cover it up. I faked this disorder so thoroughly, and sold it to my doctors and husband so well, that I began to think it was real for me. When I got tired and admitted the charade, they told me I was in denial.

Sexual abuse did not cause my drinking or give me a split personality, but it did convince me that I was on my own in the world. My father was an attractive man when he was young. I have a picture of him and my mother walking down a city sidewalk, she in a Jackie Kennedy style black sheath and pillbox hat, he wearing a tailored dark suit and a skinny tie. They walk arm in arm smiling wide, their entire lives ahead of them. I look at this and know that my father never set out to hurt me. He came from his own line of drunks and his own story of abuse, but when he married my mother, who'd been born into a cultured, if not moneyed family, he aspired to a better life. Instead, he died from alcoholism in a nursing home at age sixty two.

The abuse began when I was around the age of eight. I am told I had horrific nightmares and that my father slept on my floor to comfort me. Most of my recollections are of myself waking up screaming and finding him on top of me, his swollen wet lips kissing my face saying, "I'm here, Princess. I'm here." I knew in the child part of me where every kid knows something is not right that this was not right, but I said nothing. In later years, he would lure me to the basement of whatever home we occupied between evictions, drink himself into a rage and force me to take off my clothes. His assaults on me varied in degrees, from fondling to sodomy. Eventually, he was too drunk and I was too old to let it continue. But for years I feared the night, as I lay curled in a ball willing myself to stay awake.

I am thinking about my father and myself, and our failed best efforts in life as I wait for the judge to throw down the gauntlet. I'd survived a lot but it occurs to me that even the best outcome today will be nearly impossible to bear. Even if the judge does consider what my lawyer says, no matter what, someone else will care for my children, my husband is dead and I am going away. I feel like a scourge on society as I stand there. The courtroom is decorated with expensive wood paneling, the state emblem high on the wall behind the bench. The American flag stands tall on one side. The judge, an older man with a fleshy face and thick gray hair, speaks softly as tears run down my face.

"Two years to be served at Right Turn of Maryland, (the minimum security facility my lawyer had requested) followed by three years of probation upon your release. Any questions?" I want to shout, "Yes I have questions! How will I see my children? Isn't there a shorter treatment program somewhere? Two years is forever. How will they survive?" Instead I say, "No, your honor." There are at least twenty more cases to be heard after mine. The room is packed with nervous people, some out on bail, clutching papers and whispering to their lawyers. After hearing my case, I imagine them to be releasing a collective sigh of relief at the fact that at least things aren't as bad as they could be. My lawyer looks pleased. "Two years," he whispers to me, "is great. We'll come back later for a modification."

Guards lead me to the holding cell outside the courtroom until all of those who have come from jail with me go before His Honor. The cell is four feet square, dank and musty with yellowing white tile marred with graffiti. The single caged bulb overhead dimly illuminates the box and I sit on the cold built in bench. There is no toilet, no sink, only a slot about eye level in the door where someone might hear my muffled cries and do nothing. There is no way to know how much time will pass until I return to jail. I think about Mom leaving the courtroom and wonder where she will go next. Perhaps to the house and my kids, where neighbors and family are packing up our lives and moving everything but me to Missouri. I try not to think about how long two years is. I wonder how this will help me get sober. If consequences could help me kick the booze, I would have stopped drinking long ago.

Back at jail, everyone is outside for the day's half hour recreational break. We spend twenty three and a half hours of the day in cells or a common room, so this half hour outside is to be savored. I join them in the yard, which is not a yard but an oversized basketball court covered in cement with walls as high as one can see. I strain to glimpse the top of a tree. It is the only bit of nature I've seen in months, aside from the recent trip to court in a van. Most of the inmates sit along the sides of the yard, their backs against the wall, faces tilted toward the sun. It is October and still warm.

"So?" Chrystal wants to know how it went.

"Two years at Right Turn," I say. Every Maryland offender knows Right Turn. It is a hoped for alternative to hard time. She sees the defeat in me and says, "They might get to visit you there." Having my traumatized children see me every couple of months at a minimum security facility makes me sick. I am supposed to be home with them, showing them videos of their late father, telling them it will be okay, engaging them in comforting routines. I leave the yard early and shuffle back to my cell. I want to sleep.

For days now, it seems like every woman but me has been called to leave, but I am still waiting to report to my next stop. Yesterday, they called for Bess. She has been here with me the whole three months, with the exception of the two weeks she went to solitary for putting fruit in a paper bag and hiding it under the desk in the hopes it would turn to alcohol. Not much of a thinker, the camera facing directly into her cell did not give her any clue that this might be a bad idea. After Jeff died, she stayed by my side. She is a petite woman with long brown braids and an optimistic smile. She has six children, and like me, is a hopeless alcoholic. She has been given five years probation for her two DUIs, and will go home to her family. I wonder how she'll do.

I am losing another round of Spades, a popular jailhouse card game that I know nothing about except that it passes the time, when I hear, "Lovelace! Bunk and junk," which means gather your belongings, roll up your mattress and bring it with you to the processing area. I am shaking. Tonight I will begin my two year

sentence at Right Turn. I start calculating what the end of two years will look like. Jonathan will be eleven; Samantha, fourteen; a young woman who will need a mother to guide her through adolescence. She certainly won't want me.

Up front, I am handed a bag of personal possessions, the things I was carrying so long ago when I was arrested. It contains a pair of green shorts, now a size too big, white flip flops, a t-shirt with a Nike logo, a lighter and some change. Jeff had taken my purse with my wallet, keys and phone. Jeff. Jeff had taken everything. I imagine now that most of my possessions are in storage. My youngest brother, Dan, had been named in our will to take care of the children if anything were to happen to us. Five years younger than me, and a new father to his own son, he and his wife have taken on the enormous task of becoming guardians to his devastated pre-teen niece and nine-year-old nephew. He has taken them back to Missouri to live with him for an undetermined amount of time. With power of attorney, he will be in charge of selling my home, enrolling my children in school, setting up therapy appointments, and holding down a full time job while putting his own grieving on hold.

Jeffrey's funeral is held in Chicago where he spent most of his life and where we enjoyed our happiest years. I am not allowed to attend since it is out of state. To this day, I do not have a clear picture of what it was like. My children, who claim little memory of it themselves, say there was a crowded service at a synagogue. From their reports, I visualize their father inside a plain wood casket

with the Star of David etched on top. They cling tightly to their aunts and uncles, terrified to let go. Jeff's brother and sister are in shock through it all, having lost their mother barely three months before. Dan and my other brother, Henry, are among the pall-bearers. As they lower Jeffrey into the ground, each family member tosses a handful of dirt into the grave. This is a Jewish custom known as a *Mitzvah,* a way of assisting in the burial and accepting the death.

At Jewish funerals, onlookers often show up. They are usually older women, perhaps trying to prepare for the day when the funeral is their own. I am told that one of them asked, "Where is the widow?" My mother simply replied, "I don't know." The family sat *Shiva* afterward, a week in the Jewish tradition when the survivors host visitors wanting to pay their respects. Mirrors in the home are covered so the grieving do not have to be concerned with appearances. Sam and Jon would have played with their cousins, making the best of a situation they hadn't fully comprehended, as the adults stared at tables full of casseroles, trancelike.

As I dress in street clothes preparing to leave jail, I am unsure about this place I am going next. Loaded into a van of inmates I have never seen, some going with me to Right Turn, others elsewhere, I am in handcuffs and belted onto a bench behind a screen protecting the drivers from whatever a desperate, alcohol-addicted widow might do. Through the grid and the windshield, I watch the cars go by, men and women with children in the back, going to normal

everyday places. The leaves are turning colors and I remember picking apples in the fall for brown bag pies.

After an hour, we turn onto a long gravel road featuring a weathered white sign that says in small black letters, "Right Turn of Maryland—Women's Facility." In the distance is a group of one-story brick buildings, some with chipped white paint on the trim. The place is surrounded by forlorn trees and wildly growing shrubs. I note the lack of fencing and gates. There is a large mobile home on the edge of the compound and a group of women are trailing in, some smoking the last of a cigarette, some carrying notebooks. We stop in a circle drive by the front doors, and five of us disembark, filing into a cramped lobby, sparsely furnished, with a strong antiseptic odor.

A short, round woman orders us into a room furnished with a table and chairs and we wait. The driver of the van salutes us and takes off. No one speaks. A half hour later a prim looking woman in a suit and high heels bounces in with several manila folders and hands out forms and pens.

"My name is Candy," she smiles. "I am the director here. Do you all know how lucky you are to be here?" No one moves.

"For most of you this is your last stop before a more permanent prison term, so I expect that you will follow the rules. Anyone caught drinking, stealing or otherwise behaving inappropriately goes back where they just came from. Get it?" We nod.

After we write dozens of answers to questions about our various offenses, family backgrounds and health, we get in a single file line behind a nurse with a big metal cart on wheels. We are each carrying a medical record from jail. Among my medications, which are for an underactive thyroid and depression, the jail doctor had been giving me Ativan for anxiety after Jeff died. Ativan is not allowed here because it is a benzodiazepine and considered mood-altering. The nurse informs me I will not be taking any more of it. I do not know the dangers of quitting Ativan cold turkey, and apparently, neither does she.

We take a tour. It is a small, cold place, consisting of about twenty bedrooms with three occupants each, a TV lounge and a basement cafeteria. The floors are worn linoleum, stained in spots. The yellowing walls are adorned with small plaques that hang crookedly offering inspiration such as, "Attitude is everything." The furniture is threadbare. The cafeteria is cramped in what must have been a basement storm cellar at one time. The ceilings are low, and the cinder block walls have been painted over with thick white plaster. There are former windows covered by brick with cobwebs in the corners. The meals are cooked elsewhere and brought to the facility where they are reheated and served on throw-away Styrofoam trays. I note some of the residents coming in from jobs carrying take-out food. I was denied work release so I will continue a jail-style diet.

I am delighted to learn we get a smoke break every hour. I am still fairly new to smoking. I missed it in jail. A large black woman named Eve, whom I would later come to appreciate, leads us through a back door to an enclosed patio. A high wood fence surrounds a fifteen by fifteen foot space of grass. A shelter with two picnic tables sits to one side. At least a dozen women cram together around the tables and chatter loudly. I don't have any cigarettes but a young heroin addict named Heather offers me one and I gladly light up. I inhale deeply and feel a rush that briefly releases me from the horrific thoughts crowding my head. But it is more than that. My body stiffens. I try to speak but I can't. I feel myself leaning. Heather rushes over and yells for help. Several women carry me to the picnic bench where my body is contracting in spasms. I am awake but unable to say anything. I think I am dying.

An ambulance worker appears and is leaning over me asking my name.

"Joan," I force out the word. "I feel better. Don't take me to the hospital." I am terrified that if I leave this place I will end up back in jail.

"Are you sure, Joan?" He says it with a concern I am not used to. "It might be better if we get you checked out."

"I don't want to go to jail," I start crying. By now the spasms have passed and I am told I have had a seizure due to stopping the Ativan too suddenly.

"I'll need you to sign this form saying you've refused treatment and we'll get out of your way."

With a shaking hand I scribble my name at the end of a page full of information. I wonder how much I will have to pay for this ambulance call and if I have any money. I am escorted to my room where there is a single bed and a bunk. I get the single. It has a real pillow and sheets. I run my hand across the smoothness of the fabric. I slide under the covers, and a nurse comes with a dose of Phenobarbital to guard against further seizures. She is going on about how someone should have told her how much Ativan I'd been on and they never should have sent me to her until I'd been weaned off, and the people at the jail are simply incompetent and all I can hear is the song in my head. "One day at a time, sweet Jesus." I sing it over and over. I don't know anything about Jesus but I do know that repeating the phrase soothes my terror and keeps me from thinking about my children and remembering that Jeff is gone.

The days are the same here. After I recover from the danger of further seizures, I fall into the routine. We wake early, eat, do chores, shower, attend a twelve step meeting in the trailer on the property, eat lunch, do more chores, hit another meeting, eat dinner, do more chores and some homework assignments and go to bed. Every treatment center I have ever been to has been big on chores, as if busy alcoholics won't have time to drink. One evening, three weeks

after I'd arrived, I am taking out the trash and bump into Eve standing outside the door.

"Why don't you never say anything?" she asks me.

"What do you want me to say?" I respond.

"You ain't gonna be here forever ya know. You better start talking in some of these sessions and working with the people who's just tryin' to help you."

I am intimidated by Eve. She is an authority figure and I never know which of them will help me and which will hurt me. I nod.

"Candy told me to keep an eye out for you. Looks like your kids might be comin' to see you, but not if it's just gonna make you more depressed."

My heart stops. I haven't seen Sam in months and I'd only seen Jon when my mother brought him to jail after Jeff died. I wish she hadn't. We looked at each other through filmy glass that day. He sat on her lap, his round nine-year-old face and mop of blonde hair tilted up at me. He put his hand against the glass as I had done on the other side. We weren't allowed physical contact. I could not imagine what he was thinking; his father gone, his mother in jail and unfamiliar relatives taking care of him. He smiled an uncomfortable smile but said nothing into the phone that connected our voices. I cut the visit short, went back to my cell and threw up.

"Are you sure about this, Eve?" I whisper.

"Candy's supposed to talk to you tomorrow. Don't say I said nothing but you better perk up."

The visit is scheduled for late November, two weeks from now just after my birthday. I will turn forty two without fanfare. How do you wish someone in my position a happy birthday? There is no greeting card dysfunctional enough.

I am pacing in front of the upstairs windows. Several of the other women are crowded around the windows with me. Common misery forms unlikely bonds between people who would not normally mix. Heather is on her last chance before prison. She was pretty before the drug ravaged her skin with permanent red welts and dried out her long brown hair. Sharon is a single mother in her mid-forties who truly believes her latest DUI should be overturned and talks incessantly about how her fancy lawyer plans to get her out of this mess. Gloria is a tall blonde amphetamine fan counting down the days until she gets work release. I depend on all of them for strength.

My brother's gray SUV pulls into the circle drive. I run downstairs, out the front door and stop as the car doors open. There is some negotiation inside before my children get out and run into my arms as I kneel to the ground. The scene is forced. I know that Dan and his wife coaxed them to come to me. I inhale them. I touch their faces and squeeze their arms and hands. They smile politely and step back a little. They are twelve and nine and we are strangers. I

have always been a small woman, but now I am skinny, my face drawn and pale and my hair a frizzy mess of brown curls, minus the highlights and straightening I have always applied. I am overwhelmed with grief, but we all go through the motions.

Candy, her eyes wet with tears, allows us to visit in a room in one of the vacant inmate apartments on the grounds. "Don't leave, Joan," she says. "I'm taking a risk here." I appreciate her compassion and think for a second that I'd rather go back to the main building with her than be here, awkward and afraid, in front of my own children. We enter a dark, dusty room and unfold some chairs leaning against the walls. I can't take my eyes off of Sam and Jon, and the way they look to my brother and his wife for direction in this strange situation.

"Is this where you live?" Jonathan asks, eyes fixed away from me on the green and gray tile floor.

"No, honey, Mommy is getting well here and then I will come home to be with you again," I say. He does not look up and I die knowing that a reunion is not something he can count on or look forward to. Samantha is nervously biting her fingernails and refuses eye contact as well. Her large blue eyes are hidden by impossibly long black lashes. She reaches into a bag and pulls out a box wrapped in birthday paper. She stretches her arm out to me gingerly, as if I might grab her and never let go. *Dear God, can this be any more painful?* I smile wide and say "How sweet!" way too loudly and force myself to be delighted about the soft

yellow sweater I unwrap. We spend an hour together and I walk them to the car promising to call soon. They are going back to Missouri to start school next week.

My attorney told me at the sentencing that we would request a modification to reduce the two years and to allow me to serve the rest of my time near my family. I have been at "Right Turn" for five months when I write the judge a letter. In it, I explain that I am a changed woman, that I am whole-heartedly involved in a twelve-step recovery program and that it is "my fervent prayer that I be allowed to go home to my children to begin a new life." The truth is that I have no idea how to live without Jeff and without drinking in the face of the enormous recovery ahead.

Plenty of people drank at "Right Turn," and most went back to jail. Heather, the woman who befriended me that first day in the smoking area and who had paced the halls with me time after time in my grief, drank two beers on her job at Pizza Hut one day. She failed the breathalyzer test when she returned to the facility that evening and was waiting in a room for the police to pick her up when she sneaked out the window. They found her dead days later at a hotel from a drug overdose. It was only my terror of returning to jail that kept me from temptation, and possibly the same kind of tragic end.

I am baffled that my mental craving for alcohol is still very much alive. It comes to me in dreams where I know that Jeffrey is going to die but I drink and fail to save him. I break out in cold sweats, shake from anxiety and wonder

frantically if I will drink again. I set up scenarios in my head for the day that I will be free and shopping at a grocery store. How will I avoid stashing those small bottles of wine in my purse and guzzling them in the restroom as I had done so many times before? In the deepest part of me, where I hide the truth, I know that I have gained no insight from the countless therapy sessions and meetings I have attended over the last several months. But everyone believes I have, including the judge who grants my request and reduces my sentence to include only four more months to be served at a halfway house in Saint Louis, Missouri, forty five minutes away from the suburb where my brother and children live.

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I am giddy and chattering relentlessly in the car with my brothers as we drive to the airport where we will head to Missouri and my next stop. They ask me why I am peppering my speech with street lingo such as, "Wow, I am so up in my head about the new digs." I tell them it's the company I've been keeping. I am ecstatic to leave Maryland and to be able to see my children every weekend. Our few visits at Right Turn were dampened by the knowledge that our connection would be fleeting.

We eat lunch at an airport restaurant. I don't tell my brothers, but I am delighted by things as simple as real flatware and a waitress who politely asks me what I would like to eat. At my core, however, I am ravaged by fear. I am about to enter a halfway house – the same place my father had gone decades

before and left in a failed attempt to get sober. Harris House is a mile from where my mother and step-father live. I don't know anything about the program except that my brother, Henry, who has been sober for years, is friends with several board members. His connections secured a bed for me and I am once again overwhelmed by the support my family has given me. It is not what I remember growing up.

The flight home is uneventful. I don't remember much of the actual homecoming except that Dan and his wife are welcoming. I will stay at their house for two days before checking into Harris House. They have a lovely home on a cul-de-sac in Saint Charles. They have given Jonathan one of the three bedrooms upstairs, and finished the basement with a bedroom for Samantha. I feel like a mere acquaintance visiting someone else's children.

When I enter Sam's room, where I will stay, I am assaulted by a remote familiarity. I recognize the pictures, artwork, and trinkets that used to decorate her room in Maryland. I look at these things with new eyes, running my hand over the paper Mache butterfly she made that had been retrieved from her father's desk. There are photos of long-ago family vacations in painted frames, books we read to her, and journals decorated with flowers. In her closet, I take in the scent of her clothes and note there are new dresses and shoes. She has grown quite well in my absence.

While she is at school, I poke through the plastic tubs stacked in a corner. A big gray plastic box is filled with cards and letters of condolence sent from hundreds of people who knew Jeffrey, every one of them answered by my relatives. As I read through them, I hate myself for all of it. I know I caused his death. Stress causes heart attacks. Everybody knows it. He was jogging to relieve the hell I had put him through and his heart gave out. What were his last thoughts?

I had not allowed myself to think about Jeff's last moments while I was in jail. I avoided looking at pictures or listening to music. But now I am confronted with all of the emotion. I take one of his shirts that hangs in Sam's closet, hold it against my face and inhale deeply. His scent is still there. I detect the musky Old Spice deodorant he favored on the long sleeved button down cotton shirt. I remember how he looked in it; comfortable, relaxed, a man who spent his weekends outdoors in a pair of old denim jeans and flannel shirts. I smell a hint of the expensive cigars he occasionally smoked and let my mind wander painfully through what I have pieced together about the morning of October tenth, 2002.

The alarm went off at five forty-five as it did every morning. Jeffrey stretched a bit before he put on his bright orange running shorts. It was still dark and he was careful to dress in colors oncoming cars would see on his pre-dawn morning runs. He wore a thick t-shirt; the sage green one he had purchased on our trip to a ranch. He let Katie, our big black Labrador, outside and put on the

coffee. Usually Katie would run with him, but on this day he returned her to the house and left through the garage. His route was always the same. I had run it with him during the few times I was able to make a go of putting my life together. He had faith in every one of those attempts.

On the last day of his life, Jeff started slowly down the hill in front of our house toward a two lane road at the entrance of our neighborhood in the country. It was cool outside, and a light rain was falling. After he died, his brother had asked about the rain repeatedly, as if it could explain something. But, no, it was just a misty rain. He crossed the two lane road onto a single lane gravel road sparsely lined with houses on thick wooded lots. After a mile or so the gravel gave way to black top. This is where he picked up his stride. His heart rate increased and he was covered by a thin veil of sweat. This is the point where he became less aware of his running and more in tune with his thoughts.

My husband would have spent his last ten minutes planning his day at work, where he was a newsroom executive. He had to calculate his day to the minute since he'd been a single parent for a while now. Perhaps Jonathan had a soccer game that evening and Jeff thought over the details of who would take him to the game when the after-school babysitter went home. He might have been angry, too, thinking about the life he no longer had after sixteen years of marriage, yet remembering the good times. As he began his last mile, maybe his chest felt tight and he was slightly dizzy. He would have ignored those feelings.

There was no time to be sick. In a few minutes he would wake the kids and begin a busy day. As he approached home near the end of three miles, he slowed down, relishing the remaining quiet moments of the morning.

The coroner says death came instantly. He explained to my brother that a small piece of plaque that built up on the arterial wall broke off, backed up the blood flow and stopped everything. He says Jeff felt no pain, that there would have been little warning, or any time for a last thought. I don't believe the coroner. I know he had an instant before he crashed onto the rocky shoulder of that two-lane road, to visualize his children and feel that inexplicable love a parent has never felt before the birth of his child.

Workers at a tractor business across the street saw him face down and called for help. Paramedics attempted resuscitation only because that is what they do. They say Jeff was long gone before they arrived. His body was transported to the county hospital, and there the difficult process of notification had begun. In his jogging clothes, Jeff carried no identification. He only had a key to the house in a small zip-up pocket of his shorts.

At home, Sam awakened later than normal since her dad had failed to come get her at the usual time. The house was quiet and she padded down the back staircase to the kitchen calling out his name. When no one answered, my twelve year old called her baby-sitter and reported that she didn't know where her father was. Barb rushed over and made frantic phone calls to the newsroom

where Jeff worked. It took no time to get the story after that. One of his co-workers identified his body, and hours later a detective rang the doorbell where my children waited, expecting Jeff to walk in and explain the confusion.

The details of the following hours and days belong to my children and family, revealed much later to me in unexpected ways, such as in the narrative my daughter wrote about the moment after the detective left her with her father's personal effects: "I would decide to sit up, to place the torn green shirt in my lap, and do the best job I could of reassembling the article of clothing. I would unfold the sleeves so that the tear straight down the middle would disappear when I brought each side together, and I would be sure that this would cure the aching. And if I could fix the shirt, I could erase the detective and the rain and the words and I could look into the eyes of my father and say, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I didn't mean what I said.'" Apparently Sam had told her father she hated him the night before. It was nothing more than a typical spat between a father and a pre-teen upset about being disciplined. As a final exchange, however, it became a demon she would fight for years.

I slide the lid back on the large gray tub in Sam's closet in her bedroom at my brother's house. Self-loathing invades me. If I hadn't been so busy drowning my fear of everyday life in alcohol, perhaps I would have forced Jeffrey to take better care of himself. He'd been on medication for high cholesterol, a hereditary condition that didn't show on his slender frame. Maybe I would have

cooked healthy dinners for him. Perhaps I would have been jogging with him that day and been able to perform CPR. I might have noticed a warning sign and made him slow to a walk.

Fueled by emotions I cannot name, the obsession for alcohol overcomes me. The kids are at school; my brother and his wife are working. I frantically search their basement storage area for alcohol. They have hidden it well, but when an alcoholic needs to drink, nothing less than placing her under lock and key can stop her. I am without a car, miles away from the nearest store. I do not, even for a second, consider the consequences of taking a drink. If I get caught, I return to jail in Maryland. I must be sober when I enter Harris House tomorrow, yet none of this enters my mind. This is the phenomenon of alcoholism. An alcoholic, once obsessed with the idea of a drink will do almost anything to relieve that obsession, and, once drinking, she cannot stop due to a physical craving beyond her control. As far as most people know, only a twelve-step program that offers a spiritual solution has been successful with alcoholics as hopeless as I am.

I had been to a few of these twelve-step meetings and when the idea of a Higher Power, such as God, the universe, the Great Mystery, was suggested, I balked. No way did I believe in anything but myself. Any time I had called on God, it had been because there was nothing left to do. As far as I was concerned I had been the architect of my success, and ultimately my demise, due to a moral

failing and weakness. I did not accept addiction as a disease. Instead I berated myself for being a loser in life, which only perpetuated my need for emotional escape. I had no idea how egotistical it was to assume I had ultimate control over who lives or who dies; who gets sick or who gets well. I had never considered that there was victory in defeat; that if I had admitted I needed help from something greater than myself, I might heal.

A search through a hall closet produced a bottle of rubbing alcohol. I held the clear plastic bottle in my hand, considering for a moment how much physical harm would result from drinking it. I unscrewed the lid, put the bottle to my lips and paused at the strong antiseptic odor. I took a big swallow and put the bottle down. I looked in the bathroom mirror and my eyes had immediately begun to water. I felt an intense burning in my throat and my face swelled. It wasn't the instant warm release I had always gotten from the first swig of Vodka. This was raw and painful. Escape did come, but in the form of a physical sickness I had never felt. The rubbing alcohol sat in my stomach refusing to allow me to vomit. It had burned the route from my throat to my digestive system violently. My head swam and my vision blurred. I was inebriated alright, but in more of an emergency state than a drunken condition. Amazingly I passed out and awoke without damage, no one the wiser.

The morning I was to enter Harris House was a different story. I had hit the rubbing alcohol again, and was obviously impaired. I don't remember how I

got there, but I was in the car with my mother in front of the place. A breathalyzer test explained everything and I went home with Mom. Next thing I knew, Henry, my sober brother, removed me from my mother's house and took me to a twelve-step meeting. I suffered through it miserably and spent the night with him. His contacts had made arrangements for one last chance at Harris House. I could check in three days later and if I was sober, I could stay. I finally began the last phase of my sentencing. I had a hundred and twenty days to get through before reuniting with my children in a new home I was building where the three of us would live. I had no idea how far away I was from that goal.

At the halfway house, I share a small bedroom with two other women. It is an old building with hardwood floors and big windows. It is modestly decorated with donated furniture and supplies. The bathroom we share is old and leaky but clean. There are probably twenty women occupying two row houses that connect, and at least that many men in another house. We have a long narrow backyard where we can garden and smoke and visit with our families. On weekends, it is occasionally populated by visitors but most residents prefer the passes that allow them to leave overnight and return on Sundays. The complex is in an older, fairly neglected neighborhood on the south side of the city. Considering where I had previously been staying, however, this is a palace.

We are expected to work forty hours a week at Harris House and be home by five-thirty for dinner and groups. This is a dilemma for me. The

likelihood that any Saint Louis television station will be interested in a half-sober ex-con are pretty slim. And even if I find work in a newsroom, there is no such thing as a nine-to-five position. My roommates suggest I try the mall, which is a short bus ride away. I find only part-time jobs, available in the evenings. Finally I answer a newspaper ad for a position selling phone packages. It is a telemarketing job. I have no idea what it entails but the hours are right and I can get there by bus. My mother, God bless her, drives me on the first day.

The boss approaches his new employees. We are sitting, clueless, in a large cubicle. He hands us head-sets and goes over the expectations.

"You get two ten minute breaks and a half hour for lunch. I expect eight sales per day. If you do this you can make money. If you don't, we'll evaluate the problem and try to help."

It looks like we will be selling name brand pagers. I don't know anything about the product and he tells me not to worry. There is a stack of papers we can study at home, but right now we'll pair up with ace employees for training. The guy they put me with sells upwards of twenty pager packages per day. Apparently, what we are really selling is a messaging package and if you act now you can get a free pager which has been considered obsolete by the company. We don't tell our customers this, of course. Most of them are older people who have no idea they need a pager until we explain its benefits in an emergency situation. I already hate this job, but I need it.

"Good afternoon, Sir, my name is Jim. Do you have a moment for me to explain a new offer from Motoron that could save your life?" Jim winks at me and smiles. He goes into a spiel explaining that if the poor shut-in at the other end of the phone is not completely satisfied, he can get a full refund.

"Thank you, sir. You should receive your order within three business days. If it does not arrive by then, I will personally see that it is shipped overnight. You have a good day Mr. Hawkins." He knows his name because we have been given phone lists with names stored on a computer and connected to headsets that call one after the other and pause only if we get an answer. I am nauseated by the untruths Jim uses to get these people hooked and even more surprised that a company with the history of this one is engaged in such practices. At the end of the day, Jim has made over two hundred dollars in commissions if the sales all go through. If he can avoid cancellations for the first thirty days he gets the money. Jim is in his late twenties, has dark hair, a round face and wears jeans and a t-shirt torn under the armpit. I dread going solo tomorrow.

Back at the house, it is my group's turn to make dinner. The main cook works in a large restaurant-style kitchen next door in men's house. I forget her name, but she is a big black round lady with a great smile and we all love her. She is an excellent cook when it comes to comfort food. She doesn't worry about fat or salt or sugar. She makes some mean fried chicken. I am already gaining

weight. All we do is pick up the main course and cook some sides. Tonight it is a salad and some rice. We set the tables and barely make it by the five-thirty deadline. I feel comfortable sitting down with these women. The counselors join us for dinner every night. There is laughter and camaraderie. One of the women who has been here for a year mentions the turnover. She says maybe one of the more than twenty of us will stay sober. I look around and wonder who it will be.

I report to work for the second day and plug my own head-sets in the computer and begin dialing.

"Hi. My name is Joan. May I speak to Mrs. Ames?"

Click.

"Good morning. I'm calling from Motoron with an amazing offer I think you'll like. Do you have a moment?"

Click.

"Hello Mr. Dean. My name is Joan and I'd like to talk with you about an offer that could save you money on your phone bill. Do you have a moment?"

"Well, young lady, I don't mean to be rude. I know you're just doing your job. But my wife has cancer and we'll be moving soon so I don't know what kind of phone service I'll need." He is apologetic. I want to crawl under my desk.

"I'm so sorry. Good luck to you and your wife." I hang up. The plump blonde next to me shakes her head.

"If you engage them in a conversation, make the sale. You could have talked him into it. He was responsive." I start to cry. I make no more calls for the rest of the day. My mother picks me up at five and back at the house I tell my counselor I have quit the job because it's a scam and I can't lie to people. She tells me to look for another one, and suggests I try the temporary employment agency down the street.

I lay in bed that night hoping I will find a job. I am resentful that I have to work since I can pay the hundred dollars a week rent here out of my savings and I would rather do volunteer work. My friend in the next bed says, "Everybody has to work. Alcoholics hate responsibility and you have to show them here that you are willing to follow the rules." This really pisses me off. I have worked my entire life and been responsible for everything and everybody. I have no idea why I haven't been able to shake this addiction, but I am convinced that it is under control now and all I need to do is finish up here and get back with my children. I have been humiliated plenty, but I have no idea what it means to be humble.

In the morning I walk to Southside Temporary Job Agency. It is in a dusty storefront with yellowing windows and an impossibly heavy door at its entrance. Grimy plastic chairs line the walls, filled with people who are obviously down on

their luck. That would include me, I realize. It is perhaps the first time I see myself where I really am. I am no different from the balding older man sitting in the chair next to me. He is dirty, dressed in camouflage overalls and a ball cap. He is missing teeth and smells like cigarettes and beer. I wonder how long it's been like this for him. Maybe he once had a family and a job, and never expected to be waiting in line for a day's work to feed himself and possibly his addiction. I take a job application and begin filling it out. My list of former employers includes some big city television stations; WBBM-TV in Chicago being the most recent even if it was four years ago. Next to it I write my position as anchorwoman and reporter. Where it asks for my last reported salary, I write "400 thousand dollars a year." It looks like fiction.

I hand the application to the guy at the window who skims over it. He stares at it for a while and looks up at me. I am wearing black slacks, a tailored cranberry blouse, and a matching suit jacket. I wear my large diamond wedding ring on my right hand.

"What are you doing here?" he smirks.

"I'm, uh, I'm living down the street at Harris house," I explain. He whistles.

"Well you know you're not going to get more than six bucks an hour doing anything I find for you, don'tcha?"

"I just need a job," I tell him. "Anything. It doesn't really matter." He hands me a piece of paper for work at a factory. The hours are seven to three. I can start tomorrow. I am relieved beyond words.

The job involves assembly line work putting together baby bottles with rings and nipples. To get there in time, I wake at five, take two buses and walk ten blocks to the factory. It is a huge metal warehouse building without air conditioning. In the heat of summer, the temperature inside drenches me in sweat and frizzes my hair so that it looks like a Brillo pad. I get filthy standing for eight hours un-boxing, assembling and packaging the bottles. I hope people wash these things thoroughly after they buy them. Some of the girls from the house work here too. I listen to books on tape to pass the time. I have become a serious James Patterson fan. All in all, this is not so bad. It is mindless and soaks up the days until I will live with my children again.

On a weekend pass, the kids and I visit the site where our new house is being built. The frame is up and it is taking shape but there is nothing inside. We are all acting as if we are excited and ready for our reunion a few weeks from now. The last couple of months at Harris House, with its twelve-step meetings and therapy sessions are supposed to have prepared me for a life of sobriety. I want this more than anything, and I am sure I will never drink again. I am not sure what to do about the knawing fear in my gut.

Back at my brother's house, I am alone with my thoughts, unsupervised for twenty minutes to take a shower. A full bottle of Listerine mouthwash sits on a shelf. I remember hearing that people drink it. It is nearly twenty percent alcohol – the better to kill your germs, and in my case, my chances. A good chug relaxes my nerves. The entire bottle sends me back to Harris House a half day early, hiding in my bedroom hoping they don't find out. It defies explanation that, so desperate was my need for a drink, I risked a return to prison, and all of its repercussions, for peppermint mouthwash.

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The movers are trying desperately to fit a large, custom-made television cabinet into the ground floor master bedroom of our new home. After two hours and too many frustrated workers, I tell the woman on the moving team to keep it.

"Are you serious?" She looks at me as if I'm crazy. If she only knew.

"Yea," I tell her, "it's too big. Everything is just too big." And it is. Although I manage to stay sober those final weeks at Harris House, and take the kids and my parents on a relatively enjoyable getaway to Hawaii, heavily endorsed by my exhausted brother and his wife, I have a death grip on the illusion I am trying to keep up. I am pretty sure that only I know how flimsy my cover really is, but my children are on to me.

The three of us have moved into a new house, with all of the antiques and artwork, the baby grand piano and the gold framed mirror in the same places they occupied in other homes. Just as I tried to start over in Maryland after we moved from Chicago, with vows that things would be better, I have tried to start over in Missouri from Maryland. But in a twisted state of denial, I have failed to truly acknowledge the fact that Jeff is not here. His clothing hangs in one half of my master bedroom closet. The antique radio is near his desk, the globe on top of it wearing the Cubs hat. His car is in the garage, driven by a woman I pay to escort us where we need to go because I have no chance of getting a driver's license. His damaged children have no better idea of how to proceed than I do.

It has been just over a year since I went to jail and Jeffrey died, leaving us all in a state of post-traumatic stress. It is now late September, 2003. I have downed a half bottle of cold medicine while making dinner. Jonathan, sitting next to his sister on one of the counter stools at the island, follows my stilted back-and-forth movements with his eyes.

"You can't make spaghetti like Dad did."

"Maybe not, baby, but I can make good spaghetti," I say lightly with a crooked smile. I do not feel buzzed, but I am nauseous and dizzy, obviously impaired in some way. I have tried not to drink. I have gone to meetings, prayed to whomever, and stayed completely away from anything that might require a

true emotional response, lest I run screaming to the nearest liquor store. But I can't handle it. Every day is so painful, it's as if someone has shaved off my skin and placed me in front of a cold fan, raw.

"Nothing has changed!" My daughter shrieks and flies off the stool to the phone. Before I can try to explain my way out of this, my brother is on the phone.

"What's going on?" he asks in a flat voice.

"Same old thing," I say. "They think I'm drinking, but I'm not."

"Why do they think so?"

"I'm tired, I guess." I'm giving a super human effort to speaking clearly and it seems to work.

"Okay, well, tell them to call me if they need me."

I don't know how the rest of the evening went, but the general picture over the next six months was the same. I did not drink every day or even every week, but I drank, and lied, and drank. Sometimes I got away with it, most times I didn't. My family was dumbfounded and could do little but watch and wait. My brother's marriage was in trouble from the demands I'd made. My mother was terrified her daughter would lose her children and give up completely. The kids put themselves on automatic just to get through a single day.

The race was on. Would my family and children finish with me before I finished with alcohol? It was an excruciating wait. The disease of addiction takes it victims in slow motion. I saw how it ravaged my children; I saw the disbelief in the eyes of my anguished brothers and parents. I tried to say something but they couldn't hear. They could no longer see me right in front of them. On March 25th, Dan came to take Jon to his soccer game. I stumbled out of the closet, my eye bruised and swollen, and leaned against the wall. The last thing I remember is the relief on Jonathan's face as he left the house with a suitcase, holding his uncle's hand.

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I am on a plane to Newport Beach, California. My brother is with me sitting somewhere closer to the front. I could order a shot of Vodka back here and he would never know. But I don't even care enough to drink right now. For a split second, it registers that not wanting a drink is abnormal for me. Since he found me drunk in my closet yesterday, where I had gone to get ready for Jon's game and had passed out, few words had been exchanged, and an emotionless, mechanical process had begun.

"You're going to a treatment center in California for ninety days. You'll come back and stay sober, or we will give you some of your money and you can go away. You can drink yourself to death if you want, but you will never see your children again." I had no argument to offer, no resistance, no more ideas. This

was the end. I hadn't stayed sober after suicide attempts, jail, my husband's death, or for my children's sake. I was doomed and no longer cared. It was an oddly comforting place to be. My head was quiet. I was not plagued with plans or fears or hopes that would never come true. I simply sat there still, inside and out.

The woman who greets us in Newport Beach is a petite redhead, annoyingly cheerful. She shakes my hand as if I have just landed in paradise and should be thrilled to drop thirty grand on a treatment center by the ocean, even though it will fail like all the rest and the only difference is that after this one doesn't work, I don't have to try anymore. I can look forward to the sweet release of death. My brother is doing all the talking. A woman who was on the plane with us, I just realize, is headed for the same place, but she is not chaperoned. She blurts out, "I had a glass of wine on the plane." Cheerful redhead does a "tsk, tsk" thing with her tongue and says, "Well, if you show up on the breathalyzer you might have to go to detox for a few days before we can let you start the program." Her voice is sing-songy and her red ponytail bounces up and down.

It is dark out, probably about ten California time. The windows in the van are down and I can smell the salty ocean air. It's nice. "Not a bad stop before my journey toward death," I think. I am not even worried about my children. My brother has taken good care of them. I have left him plenty of money to do it.

Redhead is describing the center. "You'll looovvveee your house. The beach is right across the street, and you'll have plenty of time to enjoy it. Once we get you processed, we'll take you over to get settled and you can fill out your grocery orders for tomorrow and turn in. We get up early so make sure you get some rest." Dan starts getting out papers and asking questions I should be asking. "Does she get phone calls? Cash? Visitors?" I check out of the conversation and for the first time, consider the alcoholic next to me.

"How much did you really drink?" I ask her.

"Only a glass, I swear, but I don't want to go to detox." She is crying. Her name is Jan. She's a good ten years older than me. Mid-fifties probably. She's attractive, fashionably dressed, as if she's going to a company retreat. Her blond hair is cut in a bob style and her nails are a shiny red. She carries a matching set of Louis Viutton luggage. She keeps rubbing her shaking hands together.

"Is this your first treatment center?"

"Fuck, no," she surprises me. "I'm going broke trying to get sober, but I'm sure has hell not going to one of those cheap, nasty places that we have in Arizona where I live." I had not investigated this place where I am headed. It never even occurred to me to care what it was like. It wouldn't matter to me if it had cracked floors and bars on the windows like so many other places I'd been, but apparently I was to spend the next ninety days in a resort-like place, housed in a cottage near the beach.

We finally get to a check-in area. My brother turns me over to the redhead and starts to leave for his hotel. "Will you bring me some cigarettes in the morning before you leave?" I ask him in a flat voice. "I don't think so," and he walks out the door. I am accustomed to being a burden on him and embarrassed that I even asked. Jan and I each take a seat to blow into the tube that looks like an asthma inhaler to check our blood alcohol level. I know I won't register and she bursts into tears again when her glass of wine doesn't show up. "Oh, thank God," she says looking at me. "I can come with you." I am wondering why she would be happy about that. She looks like she may have hit the cooking sherry a little too hard. I'm a back alley wino next to her. It amuses me that she is trying to be optimistic about this fiasco. They could put me in with Charles Manson for all I care.

This is simply one more brief stop for me on the way to an end that I think will look something like this: I'll rent a room somewhere and that barely living former part of me will furnish it a bit. Perhaps I'll take my favorite reading chair and a table. I won't put up pictures because I won't be able to take the pain of looking at what was. I won't have a phone or a car. I'll drink and sleep. Eventually, if I'm lucky, one of my vital organs will shut down and I will go, relatively pain-free, in my sleep. Hopefully, at my most inebriated, I won't make contact with my mother, brothers, or children who will be slowly and painfully putting their lives back together. I will write letters to them all in my few moments of clarity, and hopefully they will understand someday that I could do

nothing to stop this. I shake my head. Right now I don't need to think about that. It is ninety days off, after my stay with the sherry drinker in a beach house.

We sign papers promising to pay the thirty grand. We hand over credit cards, keys, and other personal possessions. I tell them I don't have a cell phone, and they don't find it in the search through my luggage. They tell us the rules; no drinking, drugs or un-prescribed medications. We ride bikes to group sessions and meetings. We order groceries and they get delivered. We cook house dinners, do chores and find a sponsor to help us through the twelve-step recovery program. If we drink, we go to a detox house with no privileges for ten days. If we don't, we earn weekend passes to go home. The structure seems a bit loose to me. I figure I'll screw up pretty quickly.

They drive Jan and me several streets away from the check-in building to our house, which is really a two-bedroom apartment for four women. It has a living room, small kitchen and a patio with an ocean view. It is approaching eleven and I can't see it but I can hear and smell the waves. I will room with Jan. I am surprised by the comfort of the place until I remember I am paying a thousand dollars a day. We each choose a twin bed and start unpacking, Redhead having left us for the night.

"I don't know if I want to hang my shorts or put them in a drawer," Jan is saying. I try to ignore her, but I notice she pulls from her suitcase sandals of all colors, two or three bathing suits and a plethora of beauty products that would

rival a department store display which she puts on top of the dresser. I throw my meager packings into the drawers. I was in no condition to plan what to bring. I had little notice and when it was time to go I certainly didn't think I'd care what I'd be wearing.

"Do you think we can order healthy food or will they bring us the processed crap?" She asks.

"The last thing I care about is the food," I mumble.

"Well, we might as well do the best we can since we're paying for this," she laughs. "And I prefer organic as much as possible."

"Well, it is California so you probably won't have to worry," I crack. I don't want to get chummy with this woman. My life is over. I hate everything.

"I'm going for a walk on the beach," I say it in a way that she won't ask to join me.

"I don't think we're allowed to do that," Jan says it in question form.

"What are they going to do to me?" I walk out the door.

I cross two streets and find myself standing in front of an immense black ocean. I can barely tell where the sky and water meet, it is that dark. The roar of the waves is loud and deep. It could be intimidating if I had any sense of fear or self-preservation left. I kick off my tennis shoes and socks and set them next to a

wood post. No one is here. The streets are dark. Only a few bedroom lights illuminate the way back to the apartment. The sand is cold beneath my feet. The breeze is chilly but tolerable through my sweat jacket and jeans. I inhale deeply of the salt and fish. I am close to the water and thinking about walking all the way in, but I continue along its edges instead. I want to remember this feeling of complete emptiness. It has been so long since my mind was free of chaotic thoughts, guilt, pain, plans that go nowhere. I am unburdened. I have given up on life and there is peace. It is an odd place to have landed, finally. I don't know what comes next in my travel toward the end. I don't care.

Back in my room, Jan is snoring loudly. She has organized her side of the closet with shoe hangers and portable plastic shelving. Her robe lay across the foot of her bed with matching slippers on the floor. The small lamp on my side is on. I know that sleep is not an option. "Lightweight," I think, looking at her. I pace a bit and toss the twelve step book they gave me onto the center of the bed. I flip it open to its center and squat down on the floor. I begin to read a paragraph in the middle of the page. "When we became alcoholics, crushed by a self-imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or he isn't. What was our choice to be?"

"Ah, the God thing," I mused. I have never believed in anything but myself. Everything else had failed me in life and I had ultimately done the same.

What would be the point of suddenly turning my belief around and thinking that some guy with a white robe and beard could or even would do a damn thing for me now? Then again, what would be the point of *not* giving it a try?

I had nothing left to lose. Jeffrey had believed that we all go on. The twelve step pushers promised I could find *a God of my understanding.* "All you need," they said, "is to believe that there is something bigger than you, some kind of higher power. It doesn't have to be attached to religion. It can be a tree." The way I saw things at that point, everything was bigger than me.

I move to my knees and put my hands in the air. With more sincerity than I have ever had, I beg. "Whoever you are, whatever you are, I can't do this anymore. Help me. I can't do this anymore." I hang my head and slump against the bed. In the quiet of a humid California night, so very far from anywhere I had ever expected to be, a low voice outside me speaks. "It is going to be okay." Without so much as a muscle twitch, I move my eyes slowly from one side to the other. The room is the same. Jan is still asleep. Had anyone else heard this? Carefully, I let out a breath I'd been holding for ten years. Something inside me has shifted dramatically. I realize this is the feeling of serenity. I trust what I heard. I don't know why, but I do.

Freedom agrees with me. To questions such as, "What am I going to do about me, the children, alcohol, living?" I have no answers and seek none. Instead, I focus on the moment. I absorb all that I can for the remaining ninety

days at the treatment center. The desire for alcohol has vanished, and in its place is the knowledge that with the help of whatever power had come to me at my bedside that night, I can do anything. The change in me is not only obvious to myself, but to my daughter, on my first visit home.

"You're different," she says the moment she looks at me.

"I am, baby." Sam, the person in my life who had known before anyone else when I drank or was planning to drink, threw her arms around me in a way that I had never dared to hope for again. When I came home a few weeks later in June, I came to stay.

***

A few years after I got sober, I attended a swanky New York awards banquet honoring a former television colleague and dear friend. Somewhere between the fifty dollar an ounce fois gras appetizer and the entrée of smoked curry prawn, I remarked, "This sure beats prison pimento loaf." I am the only one who laughed, but I just can't take it all so seriously anymore.

I have travelled many places since sobriety and I have found that utopia is wherever I am at the moment. Last week, it was near a flower bed at the farm where I will live with my fiancé when Jonathan leaves for college. As if I needed further proof that there is a power greater than myself, I have fallen passionately

in love again. We were sipping iced tea in the shade of the front porch of his restored 1860s farmhouse and everything was in bloom.

"Do those colors look as bright to you as they do to me?" he grinned. We were quietly rocking back and forth in the wooden Adirondack chairs Jeffrey had purchased a lifetime ago for just such a moment.

Yes, I could hear his voice in the evening breeze as it tickled the leaves on the big old Maple tree.

"Yes," I said.