

Introduction

THE WOMEN IN MY FAMILY bled all over each other; when we weren't hemorrhaging fear, we spent our time looking for an out. None of us knew how to feel and deal. Our one thought was escape, and the answer to every triumph or sorrow was: Drink this. Swallow that.

I realized there was no way I could outrun alcoholism. Everywhere I turned, there it was, and that's when I knew I had to write about it. It was getting harder and harder to say nothing after I realized that so many wonderful women and families were affected and no one had the insight or the guts to call it what it is—alcoholism.

Transformative experiences come on the heels of crises. My transformative experience occurred three years after my mother's death. She died with thirty good years of sobriety, and for a chunk of those years she proposed I write about alcoholism. "So many women are in trouble," she'd say. Mom knew better than most about the sneaky way alcoholism grabs a hold, and the many outfits it wears.

Though my mother's imprint is all over this book, it takes time for a message to ripen; it took twenty-five years for me to sort it all out—from my childhood to what it was that I learned, and what I needed to share. During Mom's last months of life I had asked her when she got to heaven to ask God what was with this writing business. I wanted to know why I kept going back to write book after book; I always felt

there was a higher purpose, but what was it? Maybe it was just a hobby, or maybe fiction wasn't the genre where I was supposed to land.



Early or potential alcoholism manifests in ways that, unless you understand the disease, no one labels as alcoholism: multiple marriages, anxiety, health problems, weight problems, lives plagued by resentment, and chaotic relationships with family and friends.

I've been immersed in alcoholism since my first breath of life. Like others who were once immersed in the mayhem of the disease and now are recovering, I've become an expert at recognizing alcoholism and all of the subtle signs that leak out long before others notice that someone has a problem.

I have become an expert on a disease that I hate: I hate what it does to women, their families, and especially their children, who have little say-so in the matter. We are conditioned to believe that alcohol is synonymous with fun, yet for so many families, alcohol bites back in the form of dysfunctional or broken homes, domestic violence, health problems, fractured relationships, and devastating mishaps.

From afar, I recognize the disease swirling around families, yet they remain oblivious to the looming heartaches on the horizon, all because they lack knowledge and don't understand the many faces of alcoholism. My hope is that this book will shed new light on an old subject, challenge worn thought patterns, and provide insight. To do so I've included stories from women who in the earlier stages of their drinking, one could most certainly argue, were just fine and didn't have a problem with alcohol. They were too smart. Too rich. Too kind. Too together. Too much fun. Pick one.

Through reading their stories, as well as anecdotes from other women, you'll come to learn the truth of the statement found in the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* that female drinkers experience condemned futures far sooner than males. No one wants to be the downer at the party, but for a lot of women, alcohol is a

problem—yet they go to the party anyway. Talk of saturated lives and jaundice elicits nary a blink.

Women tell me they drink because they have problems, when the truth is that they have problems because they drink. The solution stares us in the face, but we don't like the option, so we move on to something else: antidepressants, therapy, self-help books, yoga, holistic healers—the list goes on . . . *my God, just don't tell me to quit drinking*. The real question that needs to be asked is this: how can you live a joyous, fulfilling life when alcohol—a depressant—gets invited along on every occasion?

For many, it was only when they put the cork in the bottle that they came to understand that the overall feeling of discontentment that they harbored had a direct correlation to their party lifestyles and preoccupation with alcohol. Few want to believe that alcohol can become the proverbial spoiler—the single thing a woman may never dare want to axe from her life; yet if she gets honest, she'll realize that alcohol is the one agent present in all the discord.

Most women can identify something about their life that they'd like to see changed, but few are willing to do the necessary work to institute any real transformation—unless of course the pain grows greater than the problem. *Raising the Bottom* challenges you to open your mind and consider the *maybe*.



I quit drinking in my late twenties, and that decision mostly had to do with my then-sober mother, who pointed out that my drinking started to look shady. I chose to listen to her concerns, and because I listened, I saved myself from years of self-manufactured hell. With one healthy decision, the whole trajectory of my life changed.

For twenty-three years I've been a registered nurse; I have seen and heard it all. I've worked in emergency rooms and psych wards, and both departments are magnets for dysfunctional drinkers and alcoholics. Lives implode all over the place, and much of the time the blame is placed on everything but the drinking or the prescription- or

street-drug use. Furthermore, most doctors know nothing about alcoholism or addiction—they can barely spot a real alcoholic, let alone a budding alcoholic. There, I said it. Health care needs a complete overhaul in this area, so yes, we'll talk about that too.

Raising the Bottom is for intelligent, open-minded women who can appreciate a collective three centuries of experience, as opposed to statistical data and theoretical explanations from people with certificates and degrees who spout theory but have no practical or firsthand knowledge or exposure.

I've lived with an active alcoholic in one form or another my entire life—and, well, it takes one to know one. Chaos and crises become a way of life that seems normal. Often women recognize they have a problem, but plenty of them are okay with that knowledge and party on until the bottom falls out.

I've worked with hundreds of women over the years, and the common thread is that most all the women dubbed themselves *social* drinkers, myself included, until we learned that there was nothing social about the way we drank. In addition, most alcoholics are functional and hold jobs—people don't realize that either.

As for the mothers whose stories are in this book, all said their biggest regret was that they were not present for their children, mentally and/or emotionally. They all agreed they got caught up in their selfishness, depression, and self-centeredness, and that they turned inward, failing to recognize that right under their noses their children were in jeopardy. It's crucial we hear what our kids say, so I will give them a voice. I've devoted an entire chapter to what they say about you and your drinking.

Children have little respect for the woman whose focus is the mommy party, and who laughs about her need for wine and Ativan in order to parent—so why does social media support, congratulate, and even glamorize women who whine that they need wine? What are we doing? Does anyone know?

Some women continue to look outside of themselves for the secret to raising good kids, but here's the truth: maladaptive women will likely raise maladaptive children. The secret is *you*.

The women you will meet range from the über bright—a board-certified surgeon who holds a PhD in neurophysiology (she admits she learned nothing and knew nothing about alcoholism despite all her education and medical training)—to a former Washington DC socialite, to a teacher, nurses, a massage therapist turned jewelry maker, and another physician who admits she used to pass out while breastfeeding her fourth child.

Most of the women had no idea their problems were caused by alcohol. None felt they fit the stereotypical mold of what they thought a problem drinker or alcoholic looked like. All of them, like me, were baffled by their behavior, confused by serial marriages, broken by an unexplained emptiness, and devastated by a loneliness and spiritual bankruptcy that only an alcoholic or addict can understand.

Through all the misery, anyone peering at our lives from the outside in might see suburban normalcy, privilege, or even wealth. I purposely sought out women who were like me when they quit drinking—women who looked like they could not have a problem with alcohol. For most of us, it was inner turmoil that precipitated our higher bottoms.

Families often contribute to the problem. It takes courage to stand up to the family members whose only idea of fun includes copious amounts of drinks, even when you insist that you want a better quality of life than cocktails, bars, and getting blotto on the beach.

The biggest testimony that I made a great decision in 1989 to quit drinking is that I'm not the same person I used to be. By God's grace, my twins have only known a sober mother. I have changed in a big way—and all of the positive modifications allowed me to complete my education, hold a job, stay married to the same man for thirty-plus years, and raise my sons, both of whom went on to become Division I athletes, graduate college, and secure jobs. Not bad for what *certainly* would have been a very different outcome had I not quit drinking.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Please join me as we travel on a journey that is all about changing and saving lives. It's all about *Raising the Bottom*.

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Crazy Is Normal, Right?

HER FOOT NEVER TOUCHED THE BRAKE. Even seconds before the imminent impact, my mother looked serene: one hand draped over the steering wheel, her glazed stare fixed on the road, rubbery lips puffing on a Salem menthol like she had all the time in the world to consider the options. She never flinched—not once—in spite of our howls. The brown Chrysler barreled toward the crowded intersection at forty miles per hour. The outcome was inevitable.

My mother stumbled out of the car mumbling something about low blood sugar. My brother and I tossed about inside, him in the backseat and me up front in the passenger seat. My brain registered shock: the entire front end of the car was gone.

Intoxicated driving was her specialty. Mother swiped endless mailboxes, jumped countless curbs, plowed through walls and closed garage doors, and drove herself and her four children into numerous ditches.

I share this story because I want to give you a picture of what happened to my mother and what it was like for me as her child. It would be impossible to appreciate Mom's miraculous recovery without understanding how deeply she sank and how her disease of alcoholism affected our entire family. Alcoholism may isolate the drinker, but it's impossible to isolate the disease.



My mother's descent into addiction started innocently enough. A physician—perhaps the family doctor—prescribed her Equanil, a mild tranquilizer, to calm her frazzled nerves. She had four kids and a crazy Italian husband who was still locked in childhood himself. My dad's mother died when he was five, and to this day I think he hates women: he never forgave his mother for dying on him. Of course Mom needed help coping.

One winter morning back in the sixties, Mom loaded her four small children into the black-and-white Pontiac for a quick run to the drugstore. On any given day, never mind the sleet, snow, or blizzard conditions that were common in northeastern Ohio, she did what she had to do. My two sisters, six and eight, sat in the backseat and held onto the bungee-like cord stretched across the rear of the front seat. I was four, and I sat unbelted in the front seat holding my brother, who at the time was an infant. Like a toboggan pointed downhill, the Pontiac sped down Chestnut Ridge, slipping and sliding, and without much more fanfare than a loud whoosh, my mother drove us right into a deep ditch. My brother bounced out of my arms and hit the floorboard like a loose gourd. Mother, after the sudden jolt, regained a modicum of composure and crawled out of the car, seemingly unfazed by the biting wind, the poor visibility, or the fact that one side of the car lay snuggled into the ditch.

She puffed on the Salem clamped between pink lips, blue eyes bleary, yet again. In spite of the winter weather, she crawled out of the car dressed in short shorts; her sandals and pink painted toenails spoke volumes about her state of mind. I can still clearly see her scantily clad feet stepping into the mid-calf-high drift of fresh powder. She muttered about what in the hell she was supposed to do now as she exhaled a cloud of white smoke.

Some man driving along stopped to help—it seemed someone always showed up. And so it went, for years, one escapade after another. She drove high on Equanil or Valium and eventually lit up

on alcohol and pills. Often, she was too drunk to stand, but that never stopped her from getting behind the wheel.



As a child, if I had to pick one prevalent emotion, it would be fear. I had frequent recurring night terrors. I wet the bed until I was seven. I remember sheer horror the one time I witnessed my father smack my mother in the hall as she cried and packed a suitcase. I stood in my bedroom, frozen in place, watching the spectacle unfold. The idea of her leaving was unthinkable.

When coherent, my mother was beautiful, fun, and just plain wonderful. She didn't have a mean bone in her body, and there was never a doubt that she loved us. Most of my childhood was a blur, except a few sharp memories, or traumas—however you want to couch them. But there were years when Mom controlled her pill use and rarely drank, except for the occasional time at card club or when she and Dad had dinner with friends. We picked berries, shopped, helped Mom can produce from the large garden my father and grandfather tended in the backyard, scoured county fairs, and spent weeks at a cottage on the lake with throngs of friends in tow.

There were good times, especially during the years I had a horse. From the age of five I was nuts about horses. I rode my bike a mile down the road to the dairy farm that also boarded horses, and they had a Shetland pony that I couldn't get enough of. I learned to ride on that Shetland, and my love affair with horses began.

Of course I wanted a horse of my own, and after much pleading and many rosaries later, my parents bought me a palomino quarter horse. I named him Sham. Sham had been abused by men and kicked out to pasture. It was love at first sight: he was beautiful, solid, but much too wild for a twelve-year-old girl. He was terrified of people, and terrified of the saddle I wanted to rest on his back. A snapping branch was all it took for him to haul ass to the other side of the pasture. He had zero trust in anyone. Though he was still young, the horse people had written him off as ruined.

My mother had carted me around to look at and ride at least a dozen other quarter horses, all of them wise choices for a twelve-year-old, but my heart was set on the wild palomino, and of course my mother said yes.

With help, I broke that horse and developed the first solid relationship I ever had. We were a perfect match. We both had trust issues. I understand now why equine therapy is effective: those times when I could escape the madness, the emptiness, the dark gloom that saturated our home, turned out to be pure bliss. I spent most days, all day, in the barn. I'd saddle up and ride wherever I wanted. I loved that horse fiercely, and I loved the freedom of being on his back. It helped that I had an idyllic setting in which to ride: miles of trails, meadows, and orchards. Looking back, I think if I didn't have that wholesome reprieve, I may have fallen harder, faster, and deeper into my own addiction at a much younger age.



My father, good-looking in an Elvis Presley sort of way, had his own demons. He knew nothing about soothing reassurance or how to broker peace—both concepts were foreign ideas to him. He incited fear and dread when he walked in the door, barking orders or hollering about something we did or didn't do from the moment his foot hit the threshold. His presence alone was an accelerant, the turpentine that set our fragile nerves on fire. We all loved it when he traveled out of town on business.

When I was young, pretty much everyone in my family was out of control in his or her own way; we used whatever coping skills we could cleave on to in order to deal with the violence and predictable unpredictability. My oldest sister babysat a lot for the neighbors; my middle sister, full of her own rage, spent a lot of time elsewhere. It's hard to find your gift or live up to your potential when, in order to survive, you're always looking to escape. We later learned she started down the path of her addiction at eleven years old.

My little brother was a terror. He ran around the house with a pair of scissors and whacked the hair off of our dolls, chopped up our party dresses to make rags to grease his bicycle, and pretty much destroyed whatever property was in his way. He and his friends built dangerously high ramps in the driveway, then hurled themselves and their bicycles right off of the edge of them, just like we were all doing in real life.

I'm sure in today's world his behavior would warrant a diagnosis of ADD or ADHD—something of that nature—but I tend to think his unsettled countenance was nothing more than the result of poor parenting. Regardless, my parents were oblivious to his pain, to my pain, to my sisters' pain. I remember when, at five years old, my brother swiped his chubby arms across end tables and coffee tables, sending crystal lamps and the beautiful gold mermaid planter that my mother kept on the coffee table crashing to the floor. Looking back, I think my brother just wanted attention. I think we all wanted some attention, or perhaps calm order. I remember my older sister called my mother's parents, who lived about a mile down the road, to tell them we needed some help up here.

I started drinking beer and smoking an occasional joint at twelve years old. Not often, just here and there on the weekends. Innocent enough, right? I had two older sisters who were experimenting, and that's what kids do, or so I thought.



My father stayed angry and desperate to dictate and control everything, including my mother's drinking, which was a losing proposition. He marked the liquor bottles or filled them with water—as if those attempts could in any way deter an alcoholic. My father was a social drinker. He had one small cabinet in our house where he kept maybe three or four bottles of liquor. He cleared out the bottles to keep her from drinking—another lame gesture, like plugging a sinkhole in the highway with Play-Doh. Alcoholics will not, and cannot, be deterred. It's not that they want to keep

drinking and screwing up their lives and the lives of everyone else around them—it's just that it gets to a point, like it did with my mother, that they have no other choice but to drink.

Bewilderment and confusion is how I would categorize my mother's early addiction. She could function, but she was never fully present, as if she'd encased herself in a cocoon, or as though she'd erected a screen between herself and reality and then sifted through and allowed only the particles that she could handle to seep in.

By the time we were teenagers, my mother's judgment was so skewed that, had other mothers been aware of her incompetence, they perhaps would have kept their kids from visiting our home—although back in the sixties and seventies, parents didn't micromanage their children like they do nowadays.

When my father traveled on business, we all exhaled and ran amok. Between my mother, one of my sisters, and me, the car wrecks continued. My father arranged for rentals, and we wrecked those vehicles too. Our house was full of teenagers, all camped out around the kitchen table, smoking and laughing or crying our asses off, depending on whatever happened to be going on with any specific friend or sister at that particular time.

Looking back, the progressive nature of my mother's alcoholism was already evident, but no one knew what early alcoholism looked like. No one, including the medical professionals, understood or recognized that irrational thinking and the inability to see problems that were mushrooming right in front of you were a big part of the disease. For instance, we went from Queenie Mae, a kind and loving woman whom Mom hired to do the ironing, to wacky Irene.

Queenie Mae doted on us kids. She was reliable, honest, and a darn-near perfect person. She wore her hair arranged in such a manner on top of her head that it looked like a bird's nest. We'd put trinkets—like wrapped peppermints, jacks, broken crayons, and miniature baby dolls—in the nest, and then, standing next to the ironing board, she'd lean over so we could examine all the surprises hiding in her hair.

She even put up with my Sicilian grandpa, who lived with us until I was sixteen, when he died. We all loved grandpa and his old-world charm. He'd do things like, well . . . lie. He'd tell Queenie Mae that we were locked out of the house, but what he wanted was for her to sit at the picnic table under the maple tree in the backyard and help peel apples. Grandpa liked my mom's homemade applesauce, and as long as the apples were peeled, Mom would make it for him. If Grandpa wasn't peeling apples or shelling peas, he could be found under the tree reading a Western. When my mother worked, he was the resident chauffeur for us kids. At night he'd dart off to some club to play poker with his friends. He was the bright spot in all of our lives.

As for Queenie Mae, I don't know whatever happened to her or why she quit coming around, but I could guess. Queenie Mae was gone, and here came Irene, a scraggly Russian woman who had the same proclivity for vodka as my mother. Mom supposedly hired Irene to help clean the house, but what she really hired was a self-proclaimed psychic who fancied gathering around the kitchen table to read tea leaves and have a cocktail, rather than doing any actual work.

Every week, Mom fetched Irene at the bus stop and brought her to our home. She might do a little cleaning, or at least hold a dust rag and a spray can of Pledge, but not too long after settling in, she'd beeline over to my dad's meager stash of booze, nip on that, and take a break to chat with Mom, who was already in the kitchen brewing Turkish tea so Irene could read the leaves. Without fail, the kitchen would end up a mess and we'd find Irene passed out on the sofa. We kids would huddle together, whispering about what to do while Mom stood there wringing her hands—I guess hoping Irene would come to so she could take her to the bus stop before our father came home.

This was a perfect display of the insanity in an alcoholic's mind. My mother knew Irene would drink, pass out, and not do any work, but every week, Mom fetched her at the bus stop and brought her home to clean the house. How crazy was that?

People in the throes of their disease lack the ability or insight to see the insanity of their thinking. They continue on, act abnormally,

and when called out on their behavior, they twist it back on you, or, as some say, “flip the tortilla.” That’s one of the most heartbreaking riddles of alcoholism. Alcoholics do not see what they don’t want to see. They’ll dig down into that trench of denial, furnish the space, and hang curtains. They’ll convince themselves that their thinking and their ways, regardless how fucked-up they may be, are logical and without reason for reproach. They will manipulate. (*I need Irene to help me.* Translation: *I want someone to drink with.*) They will accuse others of doing and saying things they never said, just to get the focus off of their drinking. (Translation: *you guys don’t like Irene because you can’t understand her Russian accent.*) Alcoholics will lie, and you’d better believe they will lie without so much as flinching a muscle or twitching an eye.

My parents fought constantly. My mother never said no to us kids about anything. My father never wanted to say yes. It was important to Mom that we had fun; it was important to Dad that we worked. Looking back, I think Mom always said yes because it was her way to assuage any guilt for not being the mother I know she wanted to be. Physically, she was present, but mentally and emotionally, she was absent—and clueless.

Mom worked in hospitals as a nurse, and she could brilliantly diagnose better than most of the doctors, with only a fraction of the information. For years, she worked for an equally brilliant and gregarious orthopedic surgeon. As her drinking and Valium use increased, I believe she was fired from her job.

Over a period of a few short years, she got to where she was almost unemployable. She could barely function. Her thinking was nowhere near normal—which was evident the day she toted home from work one of the residents from a nursing home.

My mother walked through the door with a big black woman (remember this is back in the ’60s) in tow—think of a person the size of Tyler Perry’s “Madea”—and the second they arrived, it was clear that something was amiss. The woman had bulging eyes and a clumsy gait, and she invaded our personal space. She’d latch on to an arm, then go

about patting or touching whatever body part was within reach. She also appeared to have the mental capacity of an eight-year-old.

The boom fell well after midnight, when the lady fled the bed my mother had made for her on the living room couch and tried to crawl in bed with my parents. My father was apoplectic. His voice thundered throughout the house, rousing us all out of our slumber. Every light in the house blazed. My dad stood there in his underwear, his face purple with rage. He demanded that my mother haul the crazy-ass woman the hell out of his house, right now! Dad's tirade scared the senseless woman. She screamed and ran around the house like a toddler with a sugar buzz. The four of us kids and my grandpa crowded around our respective bedroom doors, all practically in shock. My mother, as usual, stood there wringing her hands and looking bewildered, like she might want to understand, but like she couldn't quite figure out what all the ruckus was about this time, either.

And so it went.



While writing this book, I called my dear friend Kim. I've known Kim since middle school. She used to spend a lot of time at our house, especially around the holidays. Back in the day, Kim loved all the Christmas decorations, especially the tree. I remember her wishing that her mom would forgo the traditional menorah in favor of a decorated Hanukah bush.

I wanted Kim's perspective, to see if she could recollect a bit more than I could, or fill in any blanks. Her memory was as fuzzy as mine, but she did remember my mother's frequent exploits with the car. She also remembered Mom mixing grasshoppers and some pink alcohol concoction at Christmas, and, of course, she remembered the Ramada Inn.

Mom was too busy to have a lot of friends, so when she wanted to go out for a martini, she enlisted me, one of my sisters, or whoever happened to be available to accompany her to the smoky lounge. Kim remembered tagging along on more than one occasion.

Years later, my mother and I would laugh about her horrible judgment. Eventually, she got to where she could joke about some of her behavior, but I could always tell by the way she fidgeted and lowered her gaze that she felt uncomfortable reminiscing about the past. She would later confide that her shame regarding her choices and shoddy judgment ran deep.



At fifteen, I stole my older sister's driver's license. Then, allegedly, I was eighteen. I had unlimited access to Tony's Bar, a seedy dive that attracted college students and underage drinkers, armed with fake IDs, like myself. This was back in the time of 3.2 beer. I drank freely at that bar. I began to practice and solidify my *modus operandi*: fake names, fake IDs, and being anybody but who I was, because I had no clue who I was.

There were nights I didn't go home, and one time, on a whim, I left the country. I had four close friends, two of them sisters, and we decided it was time for a road trip to Mattawa, Ontario. The sisters had family and boyfriends up north that they wanted the rest of us to meet. We enlisted the help of a few car-savvy guy friends to give us a hand. They disconnected the odometer. Mattawa was a good five hundred miles away. How could we have explained logging a thousand miles on my friend's mom's car in only a few days? It was in Mattawa that I discovered spicy Bloody Marys, the fine art of playing pool, and the word *eh*: "You want a drink, eh?"

I was gone a couple of days, and the only thing my dad thought to say when I got home that Sunday morning was, "You look like a whore." He couldn't have been more wrong. I guess he didn't know that I was never boy-crazy and relationships were not my thing anyway. When he called me a whore, something inside of me shifted, shut down, and hardened up. I was a crumpled mess—not from drinking, but because I'd been asleep for the last five hours in the backseat of my friend's car.

My mother had no comment about my two-day absence. I explained that I wasn't MIA, that I had, in fact, called and told her that

I'd be staying at a friend's house for a few days. It wasn't my problem that she couldn't remember shit. Got that? Not my fault.

Aha. I saw how this lying-and-manipulating thing worked. Mom nodded and agreed: "Yes, of course, Lisa called me. She stayed with her friend last night, and the night before . . ." Of course Mom had no clue where I was, and of course she wasn't going to admit that she didn't know, because then the focus would ricochet right back on her and her drinking. What could Dad say? He was out doing his thing too, so he sure didn't have a clue. The dysfunction wasn't all with my mother.



I was a good student, but by the time my senior year rolled around, things at home continued to unravel. I still smoked a little pot, and I added snoozing in class to my repertoire. Here again, nothing about my behavior—my alcohol use or my pot smoking—concerned me in the least. I convinced myself I was nothing like my mother. I wasn't doing anything that half, if not all, of the other teenagers weren't doing as well. Rationalize. Rationalize. Rationalize.

My sisters were away at college. My father mentioned once or twice that I should go to college too, but I wasn't feeling that option. I wasn't feeling much of anything those days. I was numb, fearful, lost, confused. Most of my close friends had graduated high school and moved on. My whole senior year, I was miserable.

Mom's outrageous behavior usurped all the attention. My brother and I flew under the radar, doing the best we could to live our lives. All I could think about was graduating high school so I could break free of the chaos.

Regularly, I came home drunk and slept with one foot on the floor to stop the spinning. When I had to puke, which I did a lot, I stripped the pillowcase from my pillow, vomited in it, and then stashed the whole soggy mess under my bed. When I woke the next morning, I hiked to the rear of our acre lot and threw the stinking pillowcase over the barbed-wire fence into the woods that lined the perimeter of our backyard. My mother never questioned all the disappearing linen.

Mom and I lived in parallel universes. I didn't recognize that I drank more than I used to, and she surely wasn't cognizant of my behavior. I argued frequently with my dad and started mouthing back. I was sick to death of his verbal abuse, and my mouthing off just enraged him more. He smacked me around, and I still didn't shut up.



Then one day, I figured out what I wanted to do with my life! The vision was so clear. I planned to become a famous makeup artist. Of course, the *famous* part was a good indication I was already leaning toward grandiose thinking, but my mother didn't think so. In fact, she applauded this idea and said, "Marvelous! Yes, go for it."

She loved beauty of any kind. She was the kind of woman who in her later years wasn't shy about getting a few nips and tucks. She wore brown curls till the day she died, and she instructed my sisters and me to not even think about letting our hair go gray. She hated Florida in the winter for that very reason: she used to say, "All you see is gray and white, gray and white. Bunch of old people. No, thank you."

With minimal research, I learned that in order to be a makeup artist, first I needed a cosmetology license. So during my senior year of high school I enrolled in beauty school. It was a nine-month program; easy enough, right? Well, I had a problem with showing up. On the way to beauty school, I passed by the house where two of my best friends lived. My plan was to drop by to say hello, then be on my way. More often than not, I never made it to school. Nine months passed and the administrator informed me that I needed to reenroll and pay for a second year. I was nowhere close to having the fifteen hundred hours needed to sit for my managing cosmetology license.

At this point, my mother's drinking was beyond out of control. My brother and I never knew what to expect. We toggled between worrying about her, feeling it was our responsibility to keep her safe (mostly from herself), and wanting to run as far away from home as possible. The whole environment was just too crazy and depressing. And what

was really strange was that, as drunk as Mom got every day, none of us witnessed her drinking. We found empty bottles stashed in the laundry bin, in cupboards, and under the seats in her car; several times, we found baggies full of white pills buried down in the dirt of the various potted plants scattered about the house, but we never witnessed her drinking the booze or taking the pills.

Dad was in full-blown crazy mode. He couldn't control her addiction. But like a possessed maniac, he tried anyway. One day, stalker-style, he followed her. They ended up—where else?—at a drug store. He later told me that from the shampoo aisle he had a clear view of the pharmacist. He watched the pharmacist hand my mother a small brown lunch bag that looked lumpy and full.

I remember my father regaling us with the tale: “After I saw that asshole hand over that bag, I told the son of a bitch I was going to mop the goddamn floor with his head if he gave her one more pill! The pharmacist threatened to call the police. I told him, ‘Go ahead, call. While you're on the phone, tell them about the bag of pills you just gave my wife. Go ahead—call them. I don't give a rat's ass if you lose your license.’”

That pharmacist, a.k.a. educated drug dealer, had kept my mother illegally stocked with whatever poison she was taking at the time. Those lunch bags filled with white pills, called either *714s* or *Quaaludes*, were no doubt responsible for making her loopier than she already was most days. After my father's brazen appearance at the drug store, the pharmacist must have had a change of heart. Perhaps he decided not to peddle any more drugs to *that* nurse with the crazy Italian husband. We never found another Quaalude buried in a houseplant; instead, Mom's drinking picked up.

Addicts and alcoholics do this sort of thing all the time—that is, switch addictions. When one addiction gets too out of control or the supply runs out, they just make the shift to something else. People do it with food, sugar, sex, gambling—anything that is addicting. If you take away a substance or an activity that an addict is attached to, chances are the addict personality will find a substitute. Any vice will do, and the disease marches on.

My father's desperate attempts to control my mother's addiction were futile. Just because he eliminated one problem—the Quaaludes—didn't mean he found a solution, a cure, or the cause of my mother's addiction.



I drove my little brother around as much as possible. My mother's drinking was at the critical stage where she could barely even get herself together to get into the car. My father's solution, when at fourteen my brother complained to him about Mom's drunk driving, was to instruct: "If she comes to get you and she's drunk, tell her to move over." My brother drove frequently when he was only fourteen.

Most days when I came home from school in my senior year, Mom was passed out either in the garden, in the kitchen, or on the dining room floor. Almost always, she was in various stages of undress, and she'd stagger around the kitchen, slurring her words to where you couldn't understand her.

My father was who knows where—out of town working, or perhaps trying to escape, too. I remember feeling so callous that, when it got to the point that I'd find Mom passed out on the floor yet again, I'd step over her, call 911, and go off to cosmetology school or my waitress job. Perhaps having to detach or dissociate from the constant drama and chaos reinforced my ability and my need to compartmentalize my feelings. I can't say that I ever felt much of anything. The first time I found her like that, yes, fear welled up inside of me. My heart pounded, I couldn't breathe, and the whole anxiety package showed up. As the pattern continued over and over, though, I learned that she'd go to the hospital for a few days, or maybe she'd be gone a week or two, but eventually she'd come home . . . until the next time.

With all the passing out she did, it was a miracle she didn't burn down the house. By this time, my mother was guzzling a fifth of vodka a day. Her goal: oblivion.

One afternoon, my brother and I realized the house was filling with smoke while my mother snoozed on the dining room floor. I tried to wake her to get her out, but she was dead weight. My brother

and I couldn't lift her. In the kitchen, like a chugging smokestack, the oven billowed out black, acrid smoke. When we realized where the smoke was coming from, we figured we could handle things. Mom was in the prone position, and she murmured something about cooking dinner. The dinner part turned out to be true: we opened the oven, and, bless her heart, she'd plopped an entire package of frozen chicken right onto the rack—she didn't even bother with a pan—and the yellow Styrofoam tray and clear plastic wrap was responsible for the acrid black smoke.

I don't remember my drinking getting worse or better around this time. I tried to survive the black hole of having a mom but not having a mom. I know my mother had to be in her own hell. She'd gotten to the point where I don't think she even tried to control her drinking anymore. She was dying: physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Physically: Well, her skin was yellow and she looked eight months pregnant. She was sloppy, out-of-her-mind drunk every day. Mentally: she couldn't make good decisions or function as an adult. Spiritually: I could only guess. No one can ever know the inner workings of someone else's mind. Yet with all the obvious outward signs, I can say with certainty that she was in a dark place.



This picture I've painted of my mother is just one of the many faces of alcoholism. Everyone has a different bottom: The disease exists on a bell curve of sorts. What is rock bottom for one may be the starting point where another alcoholic is just revving up. My mother hit one of the lowest bottoms I have ever seen, and I have worked with and seen a lot of alcoholics in various stages of their disease. To this day, she represents the *ne plus ultra* of alcoholism.

Countless times, we asked about her drinking: "Mom, are you drunk again? You can't even stand. What's the matter with you?" Of course she denied drinking. Never mind that she smelled like she'd spritzed herself with vodka and her eyes were perpetually glazed. Where's the glass?

Mom enlisted the help of my brother and me to dispose of her growing stack of empty bottles. She instructed us to clear them out of her car, the laundry baskets, the bathroom closet, and wherever else we could round them up. She had us take the arsenal of empties to one of the many fields or wooded lots surrounding our house so we could properly dispose of them. Can you say *codependents in the making*?

She saw one psychiatrist after another. She visited one counselor after another. No one diagnosed her as an alcoholic. Instead, they said things like she was having a nervous breakdown, or she was depressed, or maybe she was a manic-depressive.

Bullshit. We were the ones having a nervous breakdown. She was in her own world, sleeping or passed out almost all of the time. She spent multiple stints in the psych ward, and she came out pretty much the same as when she went in—flat affect, dead eyes, bewildered and confused. I remember visiting her in the hospital: the doctors had her so medicated on Thorazine or Lithium and God only knew what else that she sat there and stared, an empty shell of her former self, helpless and hopeless.

Alcoholics always think they're in control. The other lie they tell themselves is that no one knows about their drinking. Maybe for a while that's true, but as the disease progresses, everyone knows the alcoholic is a lush—everyone, that is, except for the alcoholic. It's a disease of denial. The sickest alcoholic will hold on to the belief that he or she is fine. Later, I would chuckle at the twelve-step definition of *FINE*: Fucked-up, Insecure, Neurotic, and Emotional.

Alcoholism/drug addiction is also the only disease I know of that is self-diagnosed. You have to believe you are an alcoholic/addict, or at least be willing to consider that option, for any treatment center, twelve-step support group, vitamin therapy, cleanse, Naltrexone, church, or finding God—whatever solution du jour is out there—to work, to cure the malady.

As mentioned, alcoholism is also a threefold disease. It affects a person physically, mentally, and spiritually. In order to recover, all three aspects need to be treated. To make the disease even more

difficult to treat, most alcoholics are noncompliant. They refuse to stay away from alcohol, or if they agree to forego alcohol, they will start smoking pot. (Those of us in recovery call that the “marijuana maintenance program.”) Others can’t be treated because of their deep denial, evidenced by the millions of people who try and fail to stay sober, the millions who need to get sober but won’t even consider that option, the repeat offenders who pretend they want sobriety when they really want to get people or the judge off of their backs, and others who have any number of ulterior motives. There are those, too, who use treatment centers, hospital emergency rooms, and psych wards like their own personal bed-and-breakfast or respite stop.



Despite the madness swirling about, I attempted to grasp a bit of normalcy, and going on a date seemed like a fair idea, even though I wasn’t a fan of dating. One night, though, I thought I’d give it a try. I was seventeen; he was nineteen. There was something about the two-year age difference that set my dad on fire. He forbade me to go out with this person, yet ironically, the young man had far more sense than all of my family members put together. I was looking forward to the date because any escape from the drama at home was a solid option. Mom was all for it because she thought I seemed depressed. She told me I’d been moping.

Dad flipped out. He blamed his over-the-top reaction on the two-year age difference, but I wasn’t buying that reason. I think my father was so inflamed by my mother’s alcoholism that he pounced on the one thing he thought he could still control, and that was me. Like a poltergeist, he physically attacked me in the kitchen. I argued and fought back, which enraged him even more. At one point he had me pressed against the kitchen counter with his hands around my neck. He kept squeezing. I couldn’t breathe, and I kept thinking, *Maybe the last thing I’ll see will be his red face with those map-like veins bulging at his temples.*

I do believe my father was enraged over his powerlessness over his wife’s disease. He couldn’t fix my mother, he couldn’t build

relationships with his children, and he couldn't control anything, including himself.

This was the first time in years that I'd seen my mother rally. She pounded her fists on his back and screamed for him to stop. It must've been her voice that snapped him back to reality and out of a blind rage. Had Mom stayed silent, I believe we all would have made for a tragic blurb in the next morning's newspaper.

The good news was that my mother's instinctual reaction proved that the woman I knew and loved was still alive somewhere in that body, even if her essence was drowning in all that booze. I needed to leave because I couldn't deal with my father anymore, and I couldn't stand to watch my mom commit slow suicide.



Two days after high school graduation, I packed up and moved to Columbus. I found another cosmetology school and an apartment where I acquired two roommates—a new life had begun.

I liked my roommates well enough, and this time, I actually showed up at beauty school. We saved our partying for the weekends, along with the thousands of other students who lived on or near The Ohio State University (OSU) campus. I was eighteen years old, and I never considered there was anything abnormal about my current lifestyle. So I had a few drinks on the weekends. Big deal.

Over the years, I've heard other recovering alcoholics talk about how they drank alcoholically from the get-go. For most of us, that was not, and is not, the case. For the vast majority of alcoholics, alcoholism tiptoes up on us. It starts with weekend drinking, and then maybe along the way, over a period of years, beers or drinks on Thursdays creep into the picture. Then maybe Thursday *and* Friday nights enter. Maybe we go on vacation and feel that daily drinking is perfectly fine: after all, we tell ourselves, we work hard and deserve to relax. This sort of thinking can be an early warning sign. Why is alcohol the only way you know to reward yourself? Why is drinking the only way you know to relax? Have you whittled your

life down to one narrow hallway where the only fun things you can think to do revolve around alcohol?

Of course, we like that warmth, the mellow glow, that soothing release of tense emotions that melt away after the first sips of wine, beer, or a cocktail. Suddenly, all feels right with the world. But as we've seen, for the alcoholic, or even the potential alcoholic or problem drinker, one innocent drink can lead to a lifetime of misery.

The book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, first written back in 1939, issued a dire warning that, in my mother's case, turned out to be all too true: "Potential female alcoholics often turn into the real thing and are gone beyond recall in a few years." Why is this warning not shouted from rooftops and through bullhorns? The topic of women and alcohol is just now starting to be dissected and discussed more openly.

Sure, Mom's pill addiction started years before her alcoholism, but she didn't drink alcoholically her whole life. Yes, she drank socially, as most people like to believe they do, but her most destructive drinking happened during a short span of five years.



Columbus was a blast. One of my roommates liked to drink like me. We jibbed and jabbed our way up and down High Street. In various campus bars, we'd instigate fights that turned into brawls. We fell down the steps at Kitty's Bar, listened to McGuffey Lane—the American country rock band that started its journey in Columbus—and partied our asses off, all in the name of fun. And yes, it was fun. Never mind that we dwelled in a roach-infested apartment on Lane Avenue; the location was superb! We lived across the street from the stadium and right next door to the Varsity Club, a campus bar. Talk about convenient.

My roommate and I branched out to classier places, like restaurant lounges that had a Ramada Inn-type feel. I wore wide-brimmed hats, carried a rhinestone cigarette holder, and doled out fake names like a blackjack dealer deals cards. I liked the name Brook, but I used Alexis a lot too. I love that name. At these upscale lounges, if you'd ask to buy

me a drink, I'd tell you to order me a Glenlivet Scotch, Drambuie, or Jim Beam and water. If the drink was on my dime, Coors Light would do, thank you very much.

I rubbed elbows with outliers, people like Evel Knievel, who back in the 1970s was considered the American daredevil, and Eddie Arcaro, the Hall of Fame jockey, who landed perched on my lap inside a crowded limo, hunched over in a ball much like he'd be when on top of a Thoroughbred. I had no idea why so many people were piled into that limo, or where we went. What I can assume, though, is that most all of the people in the limo probably didn't know I was only eighteen and well on my way to becoming a professional bullshit artist.

I finished beauty school, took and passed the test for my managing cosmetologist license, and immediately realized I had made a colossal mistake. I wasn't at all interested in hair—not your hair, not my hair—and I sucked at styling. As for the makeup-artist plan: ridiculous! I liked makeup okay, but not enough to paint faces all day. A life of dipping brushes and cotton swabs into blush and eye shadow pots . . . this was not for me. Seriously, what was I thinking?

I needed to go to college, a real college. So instead of walking across the street to enroll at The Ohio State University, I drove downtown and enrolled in the community college. I can't say why I chose that option, other than, I suppose, that the community-college route looked like the easier, softer way. I could easily have enrolled at OSU. Keep in mind: this was back in the day when if you had a pulse, you were admitted. Plus, I was familiar with the OSU campus, my friend Kim lived in one of the dorms, and, lest we forget, I already lived on campus. It made no sense, but nothing I did back then made sense.

At the community college, I took all sorts of math—binary math, algebra, more algebra—and told myself I needed to learn how to do something with computers. It was the wave of the future, you know? But was my dyslexia getting worse or what? *Was that number forty-two or twenty-four? Oh, hell, forget these numbers!*

It didn't take long for me to realize I hated working with figures. The numbers had a life of their own—they transposed themselves all

the time and all over the place, or maybe I was just lazy and didn't want to work that hard. Homework interfered with my social life, so perhaps, I thought, I needed to take a quarter off and think about my options, maybe switch my major and take business classes. Yes, I looked handsome in suits and scarves. I would be a businesswoman.

I pursued this new businesswoman plan for just a while, and then I called my mother. I relayed to her how hard I was working and asked her what she thought about me taking a vacation. Through slurred speech, Mom, as usual, agreed. "Yes, my God—go, have fun!"

I failed to mention to her that I'd already arranged financing and had booked the cruise. The student loan I secured—not for classes, but for my hiatus—was small. I rationalized this foolhardy plan by telling myself I'd pay back the loan in no time. I wanted to go to Mexico, and I'd heard the snorkeling in Grand Cayman was awesome.

An early manifestation of my alcoholism was rationalizing poor decisions. My mind was like a ticker tape: fast-moving messages reeled on through, and every once in a while I'd pluck one of those messages off the imagined scroll and run with it, like the idea to take a cruise. I had no clue where that idea originated, or why I thought to cruise at nineteen years old, all by myself.

I got back from my adventure, and my fun-loving roommate splashed me with a dose of reality: she informed me she was moving out to get married. I was stunned. We were too young for marriage. *Now what do I do?* I sure as hell didn't want to move back home. I didn't make enough money to support myself without a roommate. I needed to figure something out before she skated off to wedded bliss.

Not long after she dropped the marriage bomb, it came to my attention that someone had rented the space above our apartment. I heard muffled voices, and the phone upstairs never stopped ringing. I learned, through peeking in the windows, that the new tenants had turned the ratty upstairs apartment into a makeshift office. One day, I walked out to my car and found it blocked in by a big blue Cadillac. I climbed the rickety stairs, and, through the

open screen door, I commanded the tall blonde guy to move his goddamn car. Two months later we were married.

I was nineteen, and the blonde guy, Gary, was twenty-nine. He was witty, charming, and about as unstable as they came. I liked him. Shortly after we met, he inundated me with red roses and trips to Atlantic City. On our way to Atlantic City one particular night, he told me we needed to swing by his friend's house to get money. Gary explained that he didn't trust banks. Hmmmm. Well, wasn't that interesting? Of course something about that statement bothered me, but I brushed off any discomfort.

I wondered where he lived because I never saw his apartment. Later, I realized he didn't have one! Couch hopping and blankets in the backseat of his car kept him warm and dry. The topic of living together cropped up because I did need a roommate, but my father, two hundred miles away, still wielded influence. He blew a gasket and told me that living with Gary wasn't an option for a Catholic girl like me. But there was always Plan B: Fine. We'll get married.

Gary and I attended Catholic premarital classes. The results of the compatibility tests and whatnot were disastrous. Actually, we were so incompatible that everyone at the church vigorously shook their heads and frowned. They advised us to wait a while, get to know each other—what's the big hurry?

Gary lied and told the priest he'd never been married. I didn't know it then, but I later learned that I was wife number three. I had a tough decision: Move home? Shyster? Move home? Shyster? I chose the shyster.

As my dad walked me down the aisle, he whispered, "I'll call this off right now." I kept walking. We had the ceremony, and a week later the officiating priest died. An auspicious sign, indeed.

After the I do's, I learned Gary had a nine-year-old son. Now I knew for certain he was a worthless daddy, too. My father ran a Dun & Bradstreet on Gary's so-called company and mailed me the proof that he was a big fat liar.

I was waiting tables and going to school. Gary was doing God

knows what. Either he'd come home with wads of cash or he stayed broke. He drank more than my mother—was that even possible? He liked to cook and had a great sense of humor, but he had a disappearing problem. For days at a time, he'd go missing. Then he'd come back and accuse me of cheating. He'd get all possessive and jealous if a stranger glanced my way. Bookies called the house, constantly. He carried around a small amber vial filled with cocaine, complete with a tiny glass spoon. He became proficient at the Pac-Man game and darts at the local watering hole.

I dealt with him by saying fuck you and took flying lessons—the lessons no doubt indicative of my subconscious desire to fly away for real. I got to where I could land the Cessna—well, sort of land, and then I ran out of money and moved on to something else.

In between the fighting and dysfunction, Gary and I drank—and he shared his cocaine. We did lots of both, together.

We lived in an apartment only marginally better than the roach-infested pad on Lane Avenue. One afternoon, I looked out the kitchen window; we had a splendid view of the street and the parking lot. Imagine my astonishment when a tow truck pulled up and attached the blue Cadillac—and away it went.

Now, I know my upbringing was screwed-up in a lot of ways, but this total lack of financial resources and instability was a whole other kind of race. I asked Gary about the car, and he blamed someone else. He became verbally aggressive after he'd been drinking. One night he came home in a blackout and was violent. I'd had to run out of the apartment a few times before, but on this occasion, I was terrified. He threw a portable TV at my head, missing by millimeters.

I snapped. I mustered every bit of strength, all one hundred and twenty-five pounds, and rammed his sorry ass into a cupboard in the hall. One of the knobs punctured his head at the base of his skull. When he reached back to inspect the spot, blood trickled down his hand. I believe the sight of blood jarred him out of his blackout. He stood there inspecting the blood on his hand, then slunk off to bed. I think we were both lucky that I didn't have a baseball bat.

I barricaded myself in the spare bedroom and called my sister. She, in turn, unbeknownst to me, called my dad. My sister relayed to me that she called Dad to inform him that my loser husband was beating on me. My father, always ready for confrontation, left his house at 3:00 a.m., and at 6:00 a.m. he arrived at my door in Columbus, with my mother in tow.

My father stormed into the bedroom, grabbed Gary by the ankles, and dragged him out of bed. Gary begged to be allowed to shower first. My father relented, so the three of us waited, huddled around the kitchen table. My mom looked haggard and bemused. True to form, she doled out Valium like Pez candy while she smoked and sighed.

The Valium kicked in. I felt much calmer. I didn't realize that a significant thirty minutes or more had passed. The shower kept running. Dad finally asked me to go see what the hell was going on in the bathroom, so I nudged the door and peeked in, and that's when I saw the opened window—the shower curtain fluttering in the breeze.

My father went berserk. He insisted on a manhunt. I didn't have the energy to participate, but he was hell-bent on scouring the city: by God, we would find that son of a bitch! Dad had no clue that locating Gary was akin to discovering the one student at OSU who, come game day, would not root for the Buckeyes. Nonsense! It wasn't going to happen. We visited about a dozen bars. Mom nodded off in the passenger seat, and, frankly, I was mentally and emotionally beaten. I couldn't care less if I ever saw Gary again.



My first foray into recovery rooms happened during that brief marriage. A respectable gentleman, the kind of guy with clean clothes, a job, his own teeth, and a real bank account, tried to twelve-step Gary. I went with them to the meeting, but I couldn't relate at all. The speaker talked about injecting drugs into his eyes because he'd blown out all his other veins. Those people were seriously messed up and sick.

At the time, no one in my extended Catholic family had ever been divorced, but when I told my mom I was done with the marriage, she

said, "I think that's a good idea." Even then, before I learned what playing the tape forward meant, I couldn't envision a future with Gary. He was a disaster, and I was sick to death of alcoholics. Do you hear me? No more alcoholics. I was twenty-one years old. Already, I was done with alcoholics' chaos and their never-ending drama.

Crazy is normal, right? At least in my world, it was the norm. We repeat the same patterns over and over unless we change. For things to change, I had to change, but I didn't know that then. I didn't realize that if I wasn't the problem, there was no solution.

After the bathroom escape, I never saw Gary again. I divorced that whack-a-doodle through a little-known process called Notification by Publication. At least, it was little-known to me at the time. (I was so naive that I thought I could get an annulment without first getting divorced. I thought the annulment *was* the divorce). With this process, the courts publish, in some obscure newspaper that no one reads, intentions for divorce. If there is no response within ninety days, then all one has to do is stand before a judge with a witness to collaborate the given statement, and that's the end of the show.

Months after the divorce, Gary called. He acted nonchalant, like we'd only parted ways a few hours ago. He asked how I was doing. I told him better, now that we were divorced. He couldn't believe I was so heartless. He said, "Lisa, why'd you go and do that? You didn't give me a chance. I'm gonna get it together. Come to Texas. You'll love it here."

Click.



My divorce happened about the same time that my father called and told me he was done with my mother. I couldn't say I blamed him, but I didn't think now was the time to part ways, since she couldn't function and she was a danger to herself and others. And what would she do?

A few days later, in the morning, I was on the phone with Mom.

Even at such an early hour, her speech was slurred. A long lull in the conversation preceded a thud and a crash. I yelled into the receiver, “Mom! Mom!” Silence.

I couldn’t hang up the phone since it was a landline, so I ran across the courtyard to my neighbor’s. I called my grandmother—my mother’s mother—and told her that I’d been on the phone with Mom, had heard all sorts of noises, and then the line went dead. I asked: could she go check on her?

~ 2 ~

Blessed Break

Mom. Sobriety date: January 4, 1982

FOR YEARS, MY MOTHER HAD ASKED ME to write a recovery book. It just wasn't time. Instead, I wrote novels—four, to be exact. My mother died in 2011, and at the end of 2014, I made a radical change. I quit my job of twelve years, which I had come to hate. Actually, that job was sucking the life and the creativity right out of me. Within weeks of my newfound freedom, the idea for Raising the Bottom emerged.

I felt my mother around me, and I knew she'd be pleased. She was a grand lady. After she got sober, she became selfless and made a vocation of helping other alcoholic women. Women came to her funeral in droves—a human parade of testimony to Mom's tireless efforts. For four solid hours, throngs of women from all walks of life trudged to the casket, and between sobs, sniffles, and condolences, they said things like, "Your mom never gave up on me." "I've been sober three years now because of her." "I loved her so much. She saved my life." "She was so wise. I would be dead if it weren't for your mother." "The twelve steps saved my life; your mother saved my spirit." It went on and on and on. It was a tribute to a life well lived, and a tribute to how God can, and will, use any experience, no matter how virtuous or debauched, to help others find their way.

Also, around the time I started this book, one of my sisters, who had been unable to stay sober, completed a year's stint in a recovery house.

She found a sponsor who knew my mother well and was familiar with Mom's powerful story, having heard her lead in places like Cleveland, Akron, and other cities in and around Ohio and Pennsylvania.

As my sister relayed to me, one cold Saturday morning, her sponsor was adamant they make the hour's drive to attend a women's recovery workshop. My sister hemmed and hawed, but the sponsor insisted, so off they went. Later in the day, my sister met someone at that workshop who knew my mother, and this woman just happened to have three of my mother's lead tapes in her car!

Now, you tell me: is that odd, or is that God? I find it remarkable that my mother sobered up in 1982 and that in all those years, because we lived in different cities and different parts of the state, I'd only heard her lead once, about twenty-plus years before, while still early in my own recovery.

Mom was fervent about recovery. Now that I have those tapes, she can continue to pass on her message of hope and recovery to those who still suffer. I transcribed the tapes, so here we have her message, in her words, and I will let her tell you what happened the day the phone went dead.

Mom, Speaking to a Group in Clarion, Pennsylvania, in 2009

I am overwhelmed by God's grace that I am even here today. I was born to be here; I believe that. I function well here, my family functions well here, and I love what this fellowship has done for me, my family, and my daughter, who is in this fellowship. And we'll just keep praying for the ones who need to be here but haven't found their way yet.

A few stats: I am married—to the same husband, and that's a blessing. I need to tell you that when I got here he was sicker than I was. I have four children. I have a sponsor, and she has a sponsor—it's God. I got sober when I was forty-eight. My sobriety date is January 4, 1982.

Here we go. Yale or jail, Park Avenue or park bench, it doesn't matter. I grew up poor, with an outhouse. I remember my mother: we never got along. Like I said, we had this outhouse, and I used to dry corn silk on the cistern, wrap the corn silk in newspaper, and smoke in the outhouse. I caught the outhouse on fire, multiple times. My mother scolded me, and I became indignant. Disease of entitlement: I never saw wrong in anything I did. Ever.

My parents were from the old country—Depression-era people. They were full of fear about everything. I grew up Catholic. The God my parents knew was the God you needed to fear. One way or the other, He was going to get you.

Alcohol was no stranger in our home. My father made wine. Everyone drank, probably to medicate themselves, because life was hard. I remember, during WWII, wearing paper shoes. The first time I went on a date, the boy asked me if I planned to wear shoes; I went barefoot most of the time.

I don't remember any drunkenness in our home, but like I said, people drank. I never saw my mom or dad drunk, yet I became a falling-down drunk—a mother. A mother.

I was bound by all that nothingness: I never felt like I measured up. I never felt okay. I always felt inferior . . . or I'm better than you, but never on the same page, never just one of God's kids.

I believe today that my parents would like who I am. I went up to the cemetery for Easter and said to my parents, "I think you'd love the person I am today." I had a nice morning with my husband. He was getting ready for golf. When he left the house he didn't have to say, "Are you going to stay off the sauce today?" He used to say things like that all the time. "When are you going to get off the sauce?" But he didn't have to say that today. Isn't that nice?

A friend reminded me the other day that for the first five years of my sobriety, I bitched about my husband. The good thing is, you guys took it instead of him. That's a blessing. Today, I love him, and he loves me. It took a long time to get there.

If having it all makes you alcoholic, well, I qualified. My mother

didn't raise me to be an alcoholic. I had a good life. When I was young I had goals, dreams. I always wanted to be a nurse, and I did become a nurse. But behind any accomplishment was fear. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of being found out. God, I hated that fear—glad I don't have that anymore.

I had a great job with a doctor who I liked. I didn't even have to look for that job: he came to me. My father bought me a car, and I lived with my parents. I never paid a dime. My mother ironed and starched all my uniforms. What strikes me now is that I never knew the word *gratitude*. Until I came into this fellowship, gratitude was a foreign concept. I never said thank you for any of it. I took everything for granted, like having everything I wanted was my right. I spent all my money. I didn't save a dime.

I met my husband, but he scared me. I'll tell you why: he worked in his aunt's bar. I remember him telling me that he had to throw some drunk woman into a taxi. He said she looked ugly—makeup streaked down her face, slobbering all over herself. He made a point of saying he hated a woman who got drunk. Little did he know . . . Back then, we didn't have money to drink; we went to the hamburger place.

I didn't know resentments can kill an alcoholic. My first resentment was toward my husband for going to college after we got married. I thought he should've done that before we got married. I let that resentment poison me. When he graduated, I didn't bother to go to the ceremony. Resentments. I believe it's true what they say: for the alcoholic, resentments are the number one offender.

A few examples of how resentments can kill: I had a cousin who got a divorce and was out on the street with two little children. She'd gone to a Catholic charity to get help, but they didn't help her. For twenty-five years, until the day she died, she sat on the porch, drinking her beer, ruminating about the Catholic charity that didn't help her. She died from complications of alcoholism. Resentments.

Another lady I know kept drinking because her husband refinanced a loan to help his son from a previous marriage. I met her in treatment. I'd give her a call now and then to see how she was doing,