

The officer approached my side of the truck and asked me to pull over on the side street. I did – just down from my parent’s house. The officer asked me to get out and walk a straight line. I told him, “You got me. I’m drunk. There’s no way I could walk a straight line. Let’s go to jail, don’t pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars, just go straight to jail.”

He made me try and walk the line. After that useless exercise, we left my truck there and they took me to the station house and jail.

I had many friends in law enforcement in the county and neighboring suburbs and name-dropped between breathing into the Breathalyzer, blowing a measurement high enough to be in a coma. They listened to the rambling and decided to call my Dad instead of making me spend the night in jail. Dad had always said if I was picked up by the cops for any reason not to call him because he’d just as soon leave me in jail. But out he came. Actually, it wasn’t that late, maybe nine or so. He took me to their house, and Mom and he listened to my story. I was so ashamed of the name dropping and being so drunk.

I had other blackouts, becoming more frequent. I could never predict their onset. And I didn’t care if I slipped into one.

The courthouse in the suburb where I was arrested was cracking down on DUI’s, so my attorney pressed for a change of venue. He hoped for a court more receptive to changing pleas and adjusting records for bribes. A month or two later, he asked me to bring a thousand

dollars cash and meet him at the courthouse. I did. I waited outside smoking a cigarette, until he came back and said everything was fixed. My record would show a speeding ticket violation with my guilty plea. My DUI arrest and charge were expunged from the record. I never asked nor did I care about where the cash had gone.

The only other requirement in the agreement was taking at a class for driving under the influence. I went downtown to attend. There was a graph describing the phases leading to alcoholism – and the possible results of death, incarceration, insanity or going into recovery. I still remember looking at the chart, trying to decide how far along I was in the disease. I failed to act on that moment of clarity. Instead, I stopped at the bar on the way home.

Bobby Thulin

Just like Jerry O. took me under his wing, I took Bobby Thulin under mine in the Guard. I was a platoon leader, and if I had homosexual appetites I would have been chasing Bobby big time. He wasn't quite six feet, thin, blond a baby face, and really naïve – the picture of a white boy guessing his way through life. For some reason – I have no idea why – he looked up to me and followed me everywhere.

Another call-up – for some emergency I don't remember – the whole battalion was stuck in the Rockford armory, which wasn't big enough for

the two platoons it housed. With bodies scattered everywhere on a Saturday night, waited for the higher ups, who were waiting for the next riot to break out. I worked with an officer from the Rockford contingent to find semi-permanent rack-time places for my platoon. As usual, Bobby tagged along. When word came down we weren't going anywhere until the morning – if at all – I asked the lieutenant if he knew a place we could get a few beers and maybe find a party. He knew just the place and went to call a cab. Bobby begged to tag along and the lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. He didn't care. It seemed the officer wanted that first drink as badly as I did, and he sure knew where to go. The place rocked.

Bobby kept up and even paid for a few rounds. We were feeling no pain by the time we set off to a nearby restaurant for something to eat before returning to the armory. One of us suggested the possibility of continuing the party with some professional entertainers – it might even have been Bobby's idea. A black fellow at the counter proceeded to go to a phone. Not twenty minutes later, a rather attractive young woman was asking if we wanted to party. We rode in her car to a run-down neighborhood not far from the restaurant, and stopped in front of a two-story large older home. A small unkempt front yard led to wide steps to a slanting front porch. Bobby had nearly passed out in the car. Spying a wicker couch on the porch, he said he felt really sick and wanted to sit there.

It was anyone's guess who was most intoxicated – the lieutenant, the two unbelievably sexy ladies in the kitchen, or me. The woman who drove us hit on the officer, obviously familiar with the bar on his lapel. One of the prettiest women I've ever seen sat with next to nothing on, her leg up on the kitchen table. She stood up and motioned for me to follow her down the hallway to the back of the house. It was as if we'd known each other for years instead of five minutes; we talked for a long time after the deed.

"Want to do it again?" she asked.

I was out of money but remembered Bobby on the front porch. "Let me check something out."

The officer and his partner were at the kitchen table drinking beer, smoking, and talking. I asked if he was up to some more exercise. What a silly question. Bobby was passed out on the wicker couch, his rear end sticking up, and his wallet easy picking. I reminded myself to teach him about carrying his wallet in his front pocket as I slipped it out and took a hundred dollars before I slid it back into his pocket. He never moved.

She taught me a new position the second time. I won't go into detail, but I was sincerely impressed. We lay there and talked again I looked at my watch. Formation was an hour away. What do you say? There was emptiness between our souls as deep as the ocean.

My sin buddy called a cab. We woke Bobby and piled into the vehicle, making it to the

armory just as troops were forming up for role call. We told Bobby what he missed and promised to pay him back. Despite his deep embarrassment, he thanked us for bringing him along. He said it made him feel like one of the guys.

My last summer camp – 1975 – would haunt me for the next couple of years with a reoccurring nightmare about missing the whole two weeks. Jerry wasn't there, his time up some months before. I never found a replacement, but my drinking had become alcoholic. My father had died, and no one was drinking like me nor wanted to be around me. I hooked up with a pothead, and we'd head uptown right after maneuvers. Bobby tagged along when he didn't have stuff to do.

Jerry and I had patronized a striptease place every year, and as the pothead, Bobby, and I walked in the first night, I fell in love.

I probably had a few on the way – drinking Old Style beer in those days on the river in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, wondering what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Sergeant Fisher wanted me to re-up, and my marriage was going south – almost as fast as my business. In my twisted alcoholic mind, the woman dancing before me became my solution. What a beauty!

I shared my thoughts and feelings with Bobby, who, being as drunk as I was, thought they were out of this world. Days followed nights following days. She'd meet me before work, and we'd talk. I told her I'd give it all up – the wife,

the house, the business – and move up here to God’s country where we could be together. In the little bar where we met, I’d go to the jukebox and play Barbra Streisand’s “What Are You Doing The Rest Of Your Life?” and Diana Ross’s “Touch Me In The Morning” over and over, even after she’d leave to go dancing. Bobby worried about me. I should have worried about me, too.

Years later, recovering from Katrina and living in Sioux City, Iowa, next to the Missouri River, I would purchase CD’s with the songs on them. I was an emotional wreck in those days, having learned I had diabetes II and trying to adjust to a regimented diet and insulin doses. When I heard these songs in my earphones, I’d break into nearly uncontrollable sobs. I’d wrack my brain trying to remember why I was reacting to these melodies. For a while I reasoned it was the storm, the new surroundings, the loss of friends, my physical state...but intuitively I knew it was something deeper. Then it came to me, my last summer camp and my love for the dancer I’d leave all to be with – unbelievable. I’d been listening to the songs over and over again, just like I did sitting in that bar in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, thirty years earlier.

That Wisconsin summer, she declined my offer. Bobby was as happy about that as I was sad. He’d become my caretaker even though I was the platoon sergeant and he was probably an E-3 by then. My love affair ended as we loaded trucks and headed back to Illinois. The next two years my disease progressed

dramatically. I forgot about Bobby and the dancer as I spiraled deeper and deeper into self-centered drinking.

Precipitating Factor

Earlier in 1975, that spring, we added a second story addition to a house. I saved myself from falling off the roof we were adding – at the expense of popping one of my lumbar discs out of its bone casing. I was still recovering from the surgery, the most painful experience yet in my fairly young life, when one Monday evening my Mom called. My wife answered the phone call that would change my life then handed me the phone.

“Have you heard?” my Mom yelled over the phone.

“Heard what?” I was confused.

“He’s dead? Your father is dead.”

“What?” I don’t remember the rest of the conversation except I said we were on our way. Kathy had to drive because, still in my back brace, I couldn’t.

When we arrived, a number of neighbors and friends were already there. Mom was hysterical. Others told me Dad had finished his Monday night Elks Golf League, had a couple drinks and dinner at the club, walked out to the parking lot, and dropped over dead. The Cook County Sheriff’s officer who answered the call was one of my lifelong best friends. He called his Mom,

our neighbor, and had sent the body to nearest hospital.

In the modern vernacular I was codependent on my father big time and probably always had been. My sister too but she had deserted us for upper New York State and was trying to be near a guy she fell in love with while traveling across Europe.

I walked into the backyard, kicking, and screaming to God, "How could You do this to me?"

When I returned to the kitchen, Mom asked if I'd go to the hospital to identify the body. She and I both knew she couldn't handle it. I reluctantly left for the hospital.

Walking into the emergency room, I was directed to a circle of white curtains. I opened one and stepped inside. Neil Quill, my friend, was there talking with another officer. The body on the gurney was covered with a sheet except for the feet. I recognized his big toes and knew immediately the body belonged to my father. Grief overcame me. I approached Neil and the other policeman. Neil apologized, picking up the corner of the sheet to reveal my father's face. One side was bruised badly. Neil said they thought it came from his falling against the car as he tumbled to the parking lot asphalt.

At the hospital they told me he died from an aneurysm and that his body was going to be sent to the funeral home. My father had been the accountant for the funeral home, and John, the director, had personally driven the hearse to the hospital. I made the necessary identification

and the body was released to John.

Kathy and I returned to the house where many friends and neighbors were drinking up a storm. Food was already arriving from everywhere. I reacted with anger, mad they were partying as my Dad's body was taken to the funeral home. I held it in, probably never sharing my feelings with anyone until years later when I got sober. I was mad and felt guilty for not stopping my father's death by telling someone how tense he had been the previous Friday.

I expect I joined in the mourning with sufficient liquor to ease the pain if not kill it. This night would catapult me into two years of chronic alcoholic drinking.

The funeral was truly a tribute to my father, evidenced by his multitude of friends. Of course Mom and I rode at the head of the long procession.

Mom asked me to handle Dad's business affairs and to interview accountants interested in buying the practice. I took on the projects from a sense of grief more than a desire to be helpful.

Mom said Dad always wanted a copper Army head stone supplied by the Army with his dates of service and rank. I knew his history: World War II service with the 101 Paratroopers in New Guinea fighting the Japanese and transport home on a hospital ship with malaria. Over the years many times while watching war movies he talked of having lost friends in battle, though he never discussed the details, at least not with

Karen and me. My joining the National Guard to avoid the draft and being sent to Viet Nam, my father criticized my choice and frequently degraded my service over the years. Even after I married, frightful arguments between us frequently disrupted family evenings.

I applied for the headstone using Dad's discharge papers. The Army's response came while I was in Dad's home office dealing with the business sale. Dad served as a clerk – a typist – and there was no mention of any combat duty. I couldn't believe the written form. (Years later I got the same form for my Illinois National Guard service reflecting I had served as a rifleman in the infantry.) I was so ashamed for my father, I told no one – not even my mother – and hid the form. The headstone was placed above his grave. When Mom died years later, I had her remains put in the grave next to Dad with a matching headstone made for her.

Dad's books held other surprises, discrepancies discovered by some of Dad's clients. One account showed Dad had embezzled money to pay his and Mom's income taxes that year. The company wanted to be repaid the sum Dad stole from them. I had to tell Mom about this one. It was as if she'd expected we'd find some problems.

We hid these difficulties from prospective buyers of the business, but I lowered the total price since at least this account was no longer part of the business being sold. It was a sizeable account.

I suggested Mom sell to a certain accountant who had a decent business in a nearby suburb. The accountant was Irish like us, could hold his liquor, and had a very nice wife and family. He even offered Mom a job since Dad had left little insurance. He was only fifty-seven when he collapsed in the parking lot that hot summer evening. The deal went through, and my responsibilities were complete.

Pictures of me over those next two years document the progressive chronic alcoholism. I was on a futile search, a quest to fill an endless unidentifiable need. My thirst couldn't be quenched as guilt turned to drinking which caused more guilt. The vicious cycle continued for two years after my father's death. My idol – the man I believed in – had not only died but destroyed the myth of his life in front of me. Dishonest in his past and present alike – a thief, a liar, a hero destroyed – my reaction was to drink, and drink I did.

The Last Few Days

Whiskey Bay, Upper Peninsula Michigan, was our place to fish for Northern Pike. I decided to go with a good friend and his two or three buddies. I wanted to get out of town, to escape the pressures getting to me. I intuitively knew the gig was coming to an end, though I didn't really know what the gig was. Insanity was my best guess. My approach to figuring out what

was wrong with me was to start having a few drinks. It didn't matter what kind of alcohol, anything worked for me. The problem was, after a number of drinks I'd forget what I was worried about and focus on improving the wonderful feeling that enveloped my mind and body.

But it was different on the way up to Whiskey Bay. The guys were getting good and drunk. They thought a bunch of peak-shaped clouds were mountains until I pointed out there were no mountains in northern Wisconsin, which they all knew. Instead of getting the buzz like everyone else in the van, I worried about what was going on with my mind, about my inability to get drunk and feel good. Their buzzes turned into drunks while I just watched and wished I could get there. It continued for the next three days, though I was able to drink enough to pass out a few times.

My mind was getting saturated – I knew that much – and when we returned to our Northwest suburb of Chicago I checked into the motel next to the bar I frequented instead of returning home to the business and wife.

The checkbooks were getting thin. I carried two of them – one personal and one business – making sure there were always funds on hand to buy the next batch of booze. The usual group was at the bar that afternoon, and I started drinking especially heavy. I was having an affair with the cocktail waitress, and she agreed to meet me at the room when she got off. I kept drinking heavy and left the bar for a well-needed respite.

I lay down in the bed and went into what I'd describe as a waking coma. I couldn't move my extremities, and my mind went in and out on consciousness. I suspect by blood/alcohol level was near death if not past it.

My friend and lover came into the room. I remember seeing her standing at the end of the bed, her cute little black cocktail outfit still on her shapely body. But there was nothing I could do, not even talk.

She yelled, "What are you trying to do? Kill yourself?" and stormed out of the motel room.

Her words registered in my foggy brain. That was exactly what I was trying to do.

It was late morning by the time I got to the bar only about five hundred feet from the motel room. One of my regular buddies was already putting them down before going to the racetrack. I gave him a twenty and asked him to put it down on the daily double. Anything would be better than returning home to the business and wife. I was already up for fraud with the State's Attorney General. When they sent out the preliminary paperwork, they sent one set to my house and business and another set to the bar I was sitting in. My friend left for the track and I sat talking to the bartender/owner about how tough things were getting. He understood perfectly, and he drank his morning drinks while cleaning up the bar.

My main – and at that time only – employee came into the bar, visibly upset. We'd been good friends for a long time, going back to college where we were roommates for two years. His

father was an alcoholic, and his parents were divorced over the disease, and his dad lost his business just as I was losing mine. We sat in the booth closest to the bar and he asked me if I had a drinking problem.

I looked around the bar and more or less indicated the accusation was probably right on. I told him if he wanted to quit, I would understand. Actually I was hoping he would, so I wouldn't have to bother with letting him go when the business collapsed. He left without making a final decision.

The afternoon crew was coming in. The Cubs were playing, and there would be the usual baseball pool. The sights and sounds of Wrigley field daytime baseball resounded through the bar over the rising ding of guys getting off from the early shifts.

My buddy came back from the track. I won the daily double! An hour later I was feeling almost that elusive buzz I'd been looking for the past week. I won the baseball pool! Being back in the money again meant I wouldn't have to go home for at least two or three more days.

I turned to a tap on my shoulder. It was a recent customer whose job was complete but whose expenses I had not paid for as yet. He asked to talk to me privately. We sat down in a booth, not the one I used earlier in the day. He informed me he intended to join the suit filed by the State's Attorney and make sure my personal parts were hung from the highest tree available. Then he changed tones, said he had heard I had a problem. If I agreed to go home right then and

seek help, he wouldn't press charges. Not only that, he would see to it the other charges were dropped.

I'm sure my eyes began to tear. What amazed me was not that he would drop the charges but that someone – anyone – cared enough about me to come into that bar and talk to me about getting help of any kind. I agreed to the conditions and left the bar.

A waiting committee greeted me when I arrived home. My wife, Mom, sister, the next-door neighbor to our family for twenty years, a sub-contractor, and one of my customers sat around the dining room table. Our dog eagerly greeted me after so many days' absence. The message at home was the same as delivered by the fellow at the bar. Get help or the gig was up. My premonition on the way to Michigan was right on.

Once again I agreed. I was getting pretty tired myself and figured everyone knew about my insanity. In my mind, alcohol wasn't really the problem. I agreed to make the phone call for help right then and there. I used the phone in the gallery kitchen off the dining area so everyone could see I was doing it. I listened as the instrument rang the number I dialed. To my great relief no one answered, and a message reported the regular office hours of some kind of counseling center. Of course, I promise profusely I would get help the next day.

To my utter amazement they believed me or at least acted like they did. The women went to an Al-anon meeting and the guys left shaking

their heads, probably already starting to miss a decent drinking partner.

Desperate for some relief as my body was starting withdrawals, I opened the refrigerator door and found a six-pack of beer. I slowly consumed five cans and retreated to the bedroom and went to sleep, or more accurately pass out.

The phone was ringing. My wife had left for her job downtown without waking me. I looked at the clock: eleven in the morning. The caller was my banker, or better put a creditor to whom I owed quite a bit of money. He asked me out to lunch. I agreed to meet him in about an hour at a restaurant both knew well.

My memories of the next hour and the lunch we had are vague, to say the least. I do remember having a drink, V.O. and water, and I do remember agreeing once again to get some help. He offered to take me to a place nearby that might offer a solution to my problem. A peculiar sense of relief settled over me, and I agreed to go along for the ride. We left my truck at the restaurant and drove a couple or three miles to a building that looked like a house but surrounded by a white-stone gravel parking lot filled with cars.

We walked into the side entrance. A large group of people talked loudly, shaking hands, patting each other on the back, and generally having a good old time. The banker, standing tall above most of the group, announced I was a newcomer and had a problem with alcohol and if anyone could help. They nearly all cheerfully

answered in the affirmative with waves and smiles. My banker friend left me there without transportation. I found out later that he had called a friend in Wisconsin the night before asking what he should do with a drunk. The friend, a member of A.A., told him to drop me off at the nearest club and leave me there. I imagine he had a good laugh about how he just affected my life with his suggestion.

The group dwindled as people left the building. Their meeting had just ended, and the next one wasn't until later that night. A fellow name Ed T. invited me to sit down with him. He explained that we were in an A.A. club and that all those people I just saw were alcoholics. He read to me a paragraph from their textbook. The word he was emphasizing was honesty and that it was mentioned three times in the first paragraph of the portion of the book they read aloud at every meeting.

What amazed me was I couldn't remember the last time I'd been honest about anything to anyone, even myself. Ed T. brought me back to my truck, and I agreed to meet him at the meeting that night.

Returning home I went directly to the refrigerator, as was my custom. The last beer from the six-pack was still there. I stood over the kitchen sink looking out the window leading to the small area outside between our sunroom and family room. I popped the top of the can. A little foam came out of the opening. The most honest moment of my life took place as my mind told me I was an alcoholic. I poured the beer

down the drain and threw the can away. I sat for a while in the living room in one of a pair of large cushioned chairs then went into the bedroom to take a nap and wake to take myself to my first A.A. meeting. That was June 30, 1977 and I have been clean and sober ever since.

Part II –

Home

My Road to Damascus

Three of us newcomers attended my first night: Pat C., a lady probably in her forties who I liked immediately, and Jack O., about my age but not appearing nearly as bad off physically and emotionally as Pat and I did. After hearing the meeting opening we were guided to the newcomers meeting in one of the back rooms of the club. Within a couple of days I would learn that this was the step room, and those that wanted to get and stay sober went to the step meetings, not the discussion meetings in the room next door.

The people shared from their hearts – I could tell that. Not remembering what they said, or who was there, or how long it took, I do recall I cried most of the time. I had reached my glorious bottom. Why glorious? It was the last one I had to hit concerning alcohol. I didn't know at the time how important that would be. After each meeting we went out for coffee or ice cream, and some of us had late dinners.

A meeting each day was recommended. Churches I've attended have had life groups that meet twice a month. My life groups meet daily all around the world, and most days I go to one. During those early days, it was two times a day for me.