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MY CHANCE TO LIVE

A.A. gave this teenager the tools to climb out of her dark abyss of despair.

I CAME THROUGH the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous at age seventeen, a walking contradiction. On the outside, I was the portrait of a rebellious teenager, with miles of attitude to spare. On the inside, I was suicidal, bloodied, and beaten. My stride spoke of a confidence I didn't feel. My dress was that of a street-tough kid you didn't want to mess with. Inside I was trembling with fear that someone would see through my defenses to the real me.

If you saw who I really was, you would turn away in disgust or use my many weaknesses to destroy me. One way or the other I was convinced I'd be hurt. I couldn't allow that to happen, so I kept the real me veiled behind a force field of rough-edged attitude. How I got to this place is still a mystery to me.

I grew up in a loving middle-class home. We had our problems—what family doesn't? But there was no abuse, verbal or physical, and it certainly couldn't be said my parents didn't do the best they could by me. My grandfathers were alcoholic, and I was raised on stories of how it had ravaged their lives and the lives of those around them. Nope, I didn't want to be an alcoholic.

In my early teen years I began to be bothered by

feelings that I didn't fit in. Until this point, I had ignored the fact that I wasn't one of the "in" crowd. I thought if I tried hard enough I would fit in sooner or later. At fourteen I stopped trying. I quickly discovered the soothing effects of a drink. Telling myself I would be more careful than my unfortunate grandparents, I set out to feel better.

Drinking released me from the suffocating fear, the feelings of inadequacy, and the nagging voices at the back of my head that told me I would never measure up. All of those things melted away when I drank. The bottle was my friend, my companion, a portable vacation. Whenever life was too intense, alcohol would take the edge off or obliterate the problem altogether for a time.

Blackouts became my goal. Though it may sound strange, they never frightened me. My life was ordered by school and by home. When I blacked out, I simply went on autopilot for the remainder of the day. The thought of going through my teen years without a single memory of its passing was very appealing.

I hadn't given up on life, just childhood. Adults had it made. They made all the rules. Being a kid stunk. If I could hold out until I was eighteen, everything would turn around. I had no idea at the time how true those words would prove to be.

Diving headfirst into what remained of the subculture left over from the sixties, I took "party till you throw up" to new levels. I liked drinking. I liked the effect alcohol had on me. I didn't like throwing up at all. I soon discovered there were other substances I could take that would help me "control" my drinking.

A little bit of this or that, and I could nurse a drink all night. Then I had a good time and didn't throw up.

In no time at all I had arrived, or so I thought. I had a bunch of friends to hang around with. We did exciting things: skipping school, taking road trips, drinking were all a part of this new life. It was great for a while. Getting hauled into the principal's office or being questioned by the police, things I would have been ashamed of before, were badges of honor. My ability to come through these events without giving away information or being unnerved brought me respect and trust among my peers.

Outwardly I was a young woman who was comfortable with herself. Yet ever so slowly these actions that I knew deep down were wrong started eating holes in me. My first reaction was to drink more. The outcome wasn't what I expected. I continued to raise my intake without the desired effect. Blackouts became few and far between. It didn't seem to matter how much I drank or in what combination with other substances; I could no longer find the relief I sought.

Life at home was falling apart around me. Every time I turned around I'd done something to make my mother cry. At school they were looking for ways to be rid of me. The vice principal made it a point to explain his position to me in no uncertain terms: "Straighten up, or you are out on your ear. For good."

I started the painful spiral to my bottom a scant two years into my drinking career. Knowing I had to graduate, I made adjustments to my lifestyle to stay in school. I watched as my friends continued to have fun. A depression settled over me, encasing me in a gray haze. I couldn't skip school anymore; my boyfriend

came home from boot camp with another girl; my mother was still crying, and it was all my fault.

There were several attempts at suicide. I'm grateful to say I wasn't very good at it. Then I decided since I wasn't having fun anymore, I'd quit drinking and using. I mean, why waste good booze if you're going to feel just as bad drunk as sober? I held no hope for feeling better when I stopped. I just didn't want to waste the booze.

It never occurred to me that I couldn't stop. Every day I concocted some new method of staying sober: If I wear this shirt, I won't drink. If I'm with this person, or in this place, I won't drink. It didn't work. Every morning I woke up with a new resolve to stay sober. With few exceptions, by noon I was so messed up I couldn't tell you my name.

The voices in my head became even more and more vicious. With each failed attempt, my head said: See, you failed again. You knew you wouldn't feel better. You're a loser. You're never going to beat this. Why are you even trying? Just drink until you're dead.

On the rare days I managed to make it past noon, there were few brave enough to get within a hundred yards of me. I was not a nice person sober. I was angry and frightened, and I wanted you to feel as terrible as I did. A few times I had drinks pushed on me: "Here, drink this; then maybe you won't be so difficult." I always had a nasty retort, and then took what was offered. Toward the end I prayed every night for God to take me in my sleep, and I cursed Him in the morning for allowing me to live.

It was never my intention to end up in A.A. If someone mentioned perhaps I drank too much, I

laughed at them. I didn't drink any more than my friends. I never got drunk when I didn't want to—never mind that I always wanted to. I couldn't be an alcoholic. I was too young. Life was my problem. Other substances were my problem. If I could just get a handle on things, then I could drink.

I got a job as a waitress at a local pancake house. Our late hours attracted a wide variety of clientele, including some members of Alcoholics Anonymous. They were not my favorite people to wait on. They, in fact, drove me to drink. They were loud, hard to please. They table-hopped and didn't tip very well. I waited on the same bunch for six weeks in a row before finally being granted the night off.

Now, I had been thinking that my problem was insanity, and what happened on my night off clinched it: I missed this motley crew who had plagued my existence for over a month. I missed the laughter and their bright smiles. I went and had coffee with them.

Through a chain of events I choose to believe were the actions of my Higher Power, they convinced me to go to a meeting. I was told it was a special A.A. anniversary open meeting, which meant that anyone could attend. I thought to myself: What could it hurt? I wait on these people; perhaps it will help me to better understand them.

On the designated evening I arrived to find that the anniversary meeting was the following week, but they took a vote and decided I could stay. I was shocked and humbled. These people wanted me around? It was a concept I had trouble accepting. I stayed and listened, careful to let them know I didn't have a problem.

I attended the anniversary meeting the following week with no intention of ever going to another meeting. I wasn't an alcoholic. I had other problems that needed attention; then I would be okay. The next week a friend, who was admittedly an alcoholic, asked me if I was going to the meeting. My head went into hyper-speed. If this person thought I needed to go, perhaps I did. But I wasn't an alcoholic.

I attended the meeting and decided drugs were my problem. I stopped using them completely from that night forward. The result was a sharp increase in my drinking. I knew this would never do. Staggering home one night, it occurred to me that perhaps if I stopped drinking, just for a while, maybe I could get a handle on things and then I could drink again.

It took about three months for me to realize I was my problem and drinking made my problem much worse. The other substances were simply tools to control my drinking. Given a choice, I'd take a drink over the other stuff in a heartbeat. Angry doesn't begin to describe how I felt when I had to admit I was an alcoholic.

Even though I was grateful not to be nuts, as I'd first supposed, I felt cheated. All the people I saw sitting around the tables of Alcoholics Anonymous had been granted many more years of drinking than I. It just wasn't fair! Someone pointed out to me that life was rarely fair. I wasn't amused, but extending my drinking career simply wasn't an option anymore.

Ninety days sober cleared my thinking enough to make me realize I'd hit bottom. If I were to go back to drinking, it would be just a matter of time before one of two things happened: I'd succeed at suicide, or

I'd start the life of the living dead. I'd seen what the latter looked like, and real death was preferable.

At this point I surrendered. I admitted I was an alcoholic without a clue what to do about it. Many of the people around me wanted me to go to treatment, but I resisted. I didn't want the kids at school to know what was going on. If I went to treatment, they'd all know within a week. More importantly, I was afraid. I was afraid the treatment center would test me and say, "You're not an alcoholic. You're just crazy." My heart knew this wasn't true. My head took a bit more convincing. The thought of having A.A. taken away from me was terrifying. A.A. was my anchor in a sea of confusion. Anything that might pose a threat to my sense of security was quickly thrust away. I didn't have anything against treatment centers then, nor do I now. I simply didn't want to go, and I didn't.

I did stay sober. One summer with people who enjoyed life sober was all it took for me to want sobriety more than I wanted a drink. I will not tell you I did everything I was told, when I was told, how I was told, because I didn't. Like most people new to the program I set out to find an easier, softer way. As the Big Book suggests, I could not.

When I couldn't find an easier, softer way, I looked for the person with the magic wand, the one person in A.A. who could make me all better, right now. This was a frustrating task, and I finally realized that if I wanted this life, I was going to have to do what the others had done. No one made me drink, and no one was going to make me stay sober. This program is for people who want it, not people who need it.

If everyone who needed A.A. showed up, we would

be bursting at the seams. Unfortunately, most never make it to the door. I believe I was one of the lucky ones. Not just because I found this program at such a young age; I feel fortunate that I found A.A. at all. My approach to drinking brought me to the jumping-off place described in the Big Book much faster than anyone could have imagined.

I'm convinced if I had continued on my course, I wouldn't have survived much longer. I don't believe I was smarter than anyone else, as I'm often told by those who came in at a later age. It was my time, my chance to live, and I took it. If there had still been joy in my drinking or even a remote chance of the joy returning, I would not have stopped drinking when I did.

No one who drank as I did wakes up on the edge of the abyss one morning and says: Things look pretty scary; I think I'd better stop drinking before I fall in. I was convinced I could go as far as I wanted, and then climb back out when it wasn't fun anymore. What happened was, I found myself at the bottom of the canyon thinking I'd never see the sun again. A.A. didn't pull me out of that hole. It did give me the tools to construct a ladder, with Twelve Steps.

Sobriety is nothing like I thought it would be. At first it was one big emotional roller coaster, full of sharp highs and deep lows. My emotions were new, untested, and I wasn't entirely certain I wanted to deal with them. I cried when I should have been laughing. I laughed when I should have cried. Events I thought were the end of the world turned out to be gifts. It was all very confusing. Slowly things began to even

out. As I began to take the steps of recovery, my role in the pitiful condition of my life became clear.

If asked what the two most important things in recovery are, I would have to say willingness and action. I was willing to believe that A.A. was telling me the truth. I wanted to believe it was true in a way I cannot relate in words. I wanted this thing to work. Then I began to take the course of action prescribed.

Following the principles laid out in the Big Book has not always been comfortable, nor will I claim perfection. I have yet to find a place in the Big Book that says, "Now you have completed the Steps; have a nice life." The program is a plan for a lifetime of daily living. There have been occasions when the temptation to slack off has won. I view each of these as learning opportunities.

When I am willing to do the right thing, I am rewarded with an inner peace no amount of liquor could ever provide. When I am unwilling to do the right thing, I become restless, irritable, and discontent. It is always my choice. Through the Twelve Steps, I have been granted the gift of choice. I am no longer at the mercy of a disease that tells me the only answer is to drink. If willingness is the key to unlock the gates of hell, it is action that opens those doors so that we may walk freely among the living.

Over the course of my sobriety I have experienced many opportunities to grow. I have had struggles and achievements. Through it all I have not had to take a drink, nor have I ever been alone. Willingness and action have seen me through it all, with the guidance of a loving Higher Power and the fellowship of the program. When I'm in doubt, I have faith that things will

turn out as they should. When I'm afraid, I reach for the hand of another alcoholic to steady me.

Life has not heaped monetary riches upon my head, nor have I achieved fame in the eyes of the world. My blessings cannot be measured in those terms. No amount of money or fame could equal what has been given me. Today I can walk down any street, anywhere, without the fear of meeting someone I've harmed. Today my thoughts are not consumed with craving for the next drink or regret for the damage I did on the last drunk.

Today I reside among the living, no better, no worse than any of God's other children. Today I look in the mirror when putting on my makeup and smile, rather than shy away from looking myself in the eye. Today I fit in my skin. I am at peace with myself and the world around me.

Growing up in A.A., I have been blessed with children who have never seen their mother drunk. I have a husband who loves me simply because I am, and I have gained the respect of my family. What more could a broken-down drunk ask for? Lord knows it is more than I ever thought possible, and ever so much more than I deserved. All because I was willing to believe A.A. just might work for me too.