Ian
Tanner,
this book is for you.
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Author’s note
Some of the names and identifying details of the characters in this book have been changed to protect individual privacy and anonymity.

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Within HIS Grace

Inside his magnificence,
embracing all that is true.
Grace flourishes beyond,
for the world to view.

Dispensing amazing love,
stirring against which lives.
Lovingly understanding them,
gracious love God gives.

He gazes upon everyone,
considers all we do.
Knowing all that is right,
the bad that's in us too.

With softness in His caring,
wisdom from above.
Knowledge only He knows,
an abundance of Pure Love.

Splendor of sheer eloquence,
suffering a world to see.
Forever promising to give,
knowing all we can be.

Embracing His children,
close, next to His breast.
Dispersing a gentle warmth,
those who receive, are blessed.

Being, the reason we are here.
sacrificing for us long ago.
Softly a presence shares,
His Love will always flow.

Out of His Throne Room,
where His Angels reside.
Purity of magnificence,
gathers all the tears cried.

Whispering an angelic message,
go forward, I'm at your side.
Your eyes focused above,
with Me as your guide.

Co-written by: Carter Ellis
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Prologue

Born Broken is the story of my struggle with alcoholism and my journey to recovery. It’s the story of growing up in a poor white neighborhood called Okieville with no way out and no hope for a better tomorrow. As you travel through this story with me, you will discover how alcohol took control of my life while I was still young and vulnerable. Yes, most of my struggles stem from chronic alcohol abuse, a disorder that this story will expose for its true nature. It will reveal insights I gained during my battle with this deadly disease. It tells how God grasped my trembling hands one desperate night and summoned me out of the abyss. Since that night, I have been struggling with alcoholism one day and one step at a time.

Born Broken starts during a time when many believed we only gained from life what we earned through will and determination. I view my world from a very different perspective than
the one I grew up with. In the 1950’s and early 60’s, there was a belief that if you received a high school diploma, and if you worked hard enough, you could reach whatever goals you set your mind to. But I was to discover that the path is not that straight. Mine wasn’t anyway. Sometimes in life things happen for a reason, though that reason may not be apparent.

From the early moments of my birth, everything that happened in my life was inevitable. I needed to experience what I experienced the way that I did. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was on a mission of self-discovery that needed to be accomplished at any cost. This path of self-discovery would have a profound impact on my life, altering its direction many times. This book focuses on lost directions. It is the chronicle of my winding path.

I pray that my story will impart a message of hope and courage to others still suffering from alcoholism. I hope that readers will experience a greater understanding of God’s Mercy and Grace, and a greater understanding of their own capabilities. It doesn’t matter where you came from in life—it’s where you are headed that’s important.

The world of alcoholism is an abyss. It waits patiently, and it devours everyone who dares venture through its gates. Without a powerful and merciful intervention, its victims cannot escape. Once, maybe twice in a person's life, there appears an opportunity with the power to brush against the soul. It can alter what a person is destined to become. It can leave an impression on broken hearts and injured souls. These are the evidence, the footprints that God leaves behind. I am one of those blessed individuals who has emerged from the abyss through God's Grace to share His merciful and gracious message.

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Part_I--What was it like

“When you look into the abyss,
the abyss also looks into you”

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Chapter 1: Okieville

*What the hell,* I thought, hearing the phone ring suddenly. It unsettled us all as we sat on the patio talking, remembering our trip to the flea market earlier that day. We—my wife and I—had been sitting in the back yard next to the swimming pool visiting with our dear friends, Donna and her brother Johnny. They were visiting from out of state. As we stargazed and enjoyed the camaraderie of our visit, the clock approached two and we knew bedtime was near. The end of the night was coming too soon. We’d been appreciating each other’s company and the calmness that falls over certain Arizona desert nights. The moon seemed an arm’s length away and cast silver rays off of the pool’s water like a mirror. We were all happy and the reflections seemed to fashion images of another time, another place. We had been crying and laughing about the silly and sad times of our lives.
Donna and my wife had worked together for a Dermatologist in Lancaster before we’d decided to retire. She was not just a close friend to Jody; over time they had become like sisters. She had decided to come down for a visit and had brought her younger brother Johnny, who we had also become close with over the years. They wanted to celebrate Jody’s sixty-second birthday with us, and we were thrilled to have them there.

They both brought excitement and joy whenever they showed up at our home. Donna has a daring, spunky personality, and Johnny can entertain all night with his stories. They kindle an atmosphere you want to be part of. It was the same that night. We had gotten caught up in the present of each other’s lives and we realized how everyone’s world unfolds day by day. We could feel in that moment that we were creating memories that would live on for years.

Both had traveled a long distance—from southern California to the desert of Arizona—in Donna’s silver and black convertible, colors she loved because she was an Oakland Raiders fan. It was their third day and there just wasn’t going to be enough time to accomplish everything we had planned.

As we sat around the patio table that night drinking sodas and smoking way too many cigarettes, we laughed like we were teenagers again, like kids with nothing better to do. We giggled and talked about all the fun we’d had that day, scrounging through the merchandise at the flea market. We swatted at the night’s mosquitoes and what seemed like a gazillion pesky gnats fluttering their tiny wings, it seemed, for my personal irritation.

We had been out and about that day enjoying one of our favorite spots to share with out-of-town guests. The famous Mesa Flea Market in Maricopa County—snowbirds from all over the nation swarm to it like bees on honey during the winter months. Being late July, with temperatures well into the 100’s, the crowds were minimal. We braved the heat and strolled down the flea markets isles, each feeling about a half-mile long. Our heads swiveled back and forth like oscillating fans, searching for that special prize hidden among the junk.

Barkers promoted everything from playing cards and card shufflers to motorized scooters for the elderly and handicapped. Every once in a while we would get lucky and a warm breeze would filter through the outer walls of the market, making the long stroll down each aisle a little more tolerable.

The telephone had startled us out of these memories. In the manner of unexpected late night calls, it sent chills down our spines.

My wife Jody picked up the phone and checked the caller ID. She informed us that the call was from our daughter Dempsee in Kansas. I wondered what could be so important, what prompted a call at such an ungodly hour. The phone call would just be something routine, I thought to myself. My wife would find out what our daughter needed—some minor worry or complaint—and our night would continue on as it had.

A few uncertain moments passed before my wife handed me the phone. Dempsee had something important she needed to tell me, she said.

Not long into my conversation with my daughter, I found myself thinking back over my own life. As she spoke I remembered all the things that had brought our family to this moment, all the things that had made this telephone call so probable in the first place. My mind raced through all the pain, destruction, hardship, suffering, and sadness that our family had endured over the years. The many unfortunate situations that had affected and altered us all. Providence has had its own way in spite of our best efforts, I thought. It has seemed at times that my life is on its own unknowable track, that it has somehow been fated.
As my daughter detailed her thoughts, I realized that I had been waiting a long time for this moment of admission. I always suspected this call would come, and I wished it could be any other revelation about her life.

I realized that my own challenges had put me in the unique position to assist her on a new path in her life. After much confusion and turmoil, pain and discomfort had driven her to consider living her life a different way. I thought, as she told me her story, that no one really knows what tomorrow—or dreaded a late night phone call—might reveal, or what will be required of us when we answer.

As I listened to Dempsee’s story beneath the moon and its companion stars, I was transported to my life's beginning, over sixty years earlier. I had followed in my father's footsteps, and now my steps were shadowed by Dempsee.

My father’s world seems very distant from today's world. His world was a place born out of the search for hope and opportunity, where dreams were spun out of hopelessness. I remembered the stories my father told me during my youth. How he came from Spokane, Washington with his family—a poor young boy in a covered wagon—to this new place: the Golden State of California, where dreams were said to come true. I am not sure I ever believed the part about the covered wagon, but it was exciting as a little boy to hear about such a grand adventure.

He told me that my mother, his lovely bride, was born in Broken Bow, Oklahoma a dirt-poor barefoot Okie girl. She, like him, came from a poor family. They had migrated to California seeking opportunity. He had hired her to work in the restaurant he started after the war and, as they say, the rest was history. He told me how they had started thousands of miles apart but came together and made the beginning of our clan. It was, as they also say, love at first sight.

My own beginnings were in a place where opportunities flourished, but difficulties still figured prominently in the lives of most people. A place where many had come, as my parents did, searching for hope and a new chance at a different way to live. They wanted the chance for a new life, for things to be better for their families and themselves. Surely, with this new love and enthusiasm, things would turn out differently for them in this place of hopes and dreams.

Located between the beautiful High Sierras on the east, and bordered on the west by the expansive Pacific Ocean—placed almost in the middle between the Oregon Border and Mexico—was a little cow-town called Stockton. It was one of many little farming communities in the San Joaquin Valley. Stockton was a place to which many migrated after the Great Depression and the Midwest Dust Bowl of the 1930s. They came to work the farmland with their bare hands and try to secure a future for their families.

Consider it an interlude, when there was a new sense of rejuvenation spreading across the country, a wild fire of hope and a belief that this town would bring them what they needed for their families to grow. Surely this place was where they could raise their families and have a chance at the success that had been eluding them.

My family probably wasn't much different than a lot of others in those days. Soon after their arrival in Stockton, my parents and their families earned their wages in the fields picking fruit and vegetables. I remember the folklore our mother shared with us, like how our father was the best cherry picker. He was able to pick more and pick faster than any other man in the fields. It makes me smile when I think about how something that simple was so important to me as a child. It was a mantle of honor a man could hang his hat on. In that era, a man worked hard for his bread, and he held those kinds of honors in great esteem.

After the Great Depression, the federal government started programs to help get the economy moving. One of them was the WPA program. It was a federal program designed to
kindle the economy and put people back to work. My parents were both byproducts of the Great Depression and those resulting work programs. The carnage the depression left behind would follow our family for years to come.

I began my problematic journey on a spring day in April of 1949, the third child of four children. I call Stockton my hometown because it’s where I was raised. I was actually born in a very small town just south, about ten miles out of Stockton, in a little place called French Camp. It housed San Joaquin County’s general hospital, a place to which many migrant parents in surrounding areas came to give birth to their children or to seek medical care if they had limited funds. A few years later, the county jail would be erected behind the hospital, and both would become symbols of poverty and hopelessness to those who had to visit either facility.

Located on the east side of Highway 99 in Stockton was the neighborhood I lived in until my early teens. This particular community was three square miles of isolated, unincorporated, largely undeveloped land, home to about seven thousand residents. Garden Acres was the official name given to this old-school cultural sanctuary by the County Planning Department. It was a community where the residents helped each other to survive from day to day. Like some other neighborhoods in Stockton, it was given a nickname that would live on throughout the years. A name that marked forever those who dwelled there, a label that many of us took a certain pride in. To those who lived in the place, and those who were familiar with it, it was called Okieville.

No one knew exactly how this place got its unique moniker—it seemed to always have been there. Maybe one of the Okies settling there during the Dustbowl fashioned it when they first arrived. Or maybe one of the affluent landlords coined it when they came in their fancy automobiles to collect rent. From their car window, they would have looked out and seen a bunch of poor, beaten-down migrant Okies living there. Who knows, but it was definitely a different kind of place, where a different kind of culture would unfold and forge colorful personalities and mindsets different from outsiders.

It was a place where everybody knew everybody else, where people shared what they had with neighbors. Those who lived there knew hard times. They also knew affliction and difficulty, because most had lived with both all their lives. Scattered throughout the community were very few people of color—it was a place where mostly poor white people lived.

Okieville was abutted by a diverting canal on the east side of my neighborhood, a canal that supplied irrigation water for the farms along its banks. It became a stopping off place for migrants escaping the Dust Bowl and the Depression, yet many stayed on even after they could have left. This community and all its unusual characteristics became a way of life for generations of families, a new beginning for those seeking hope and change.

This area of East Stockton could scar you for life if you allowed it to. I knew that this place was different, and that I too was different for having lived there. It was an environment where real scarcity existed, where very few residents had any real money to speak of. They bought their groceries at the neighborhood store on credit, and their homes were filled with worn-out, torn-up, beaten down second-hand furniture. They prayed daily that nothing bad would come their way and that life would be kind to them as they struggled to make ends meet. It was also a community where every sunrise provided a new opportunity to turn their lives in a new direction—it was a place of great hardship and great promise.
I am not sure if it was the Farm Labor Office located just a few blocks from my home, or if it was the junkyards scattered throughout the neighborhood, but something let me know that my destiny was predetermined. Maybe the cars strewn in the front yards left that impression. Or maybe it was the fact that no one seemed concerned about the absence of sidewalks or streetlamps—enhancements so basic you don’t even notice them in most places.

It wasn't uncommon to see outhouses in backyards or dispirited, beat-up trailers wedged onto properties and used as permanent residences for extended family members. Most who lived there didn't know any different, and even if they did they had few choices. It was a different way of life, but that was the way we lived day to day.

Maybe it was just the people who lived there that scarred a person. There was a hardness and hopelessness scrawled upon Okies’ faces. It was the men you saw scrounging around the community for scrap metal to sell, just wanting enough money to feed their families for the day. It was everything combined; it was the harshness and bleakness everywhere you looked.

A great advantage of my youth was that I sometimes didn’t completely understand my surroundings. Being in a place where in winter, because of the lack of sidewalks, I had to dodge mud puddles to get to school really wasn't that bad because I didn't know any different. I was unaware that a front yard with broken cars meant a lack of money for repairs. Maybe it doesn’t seem so strange that grass would hardly grow out of the hardened adobe dirt of my neighborhood. This was Okieville, and we were all proud to be Okies.

For many years afterward, probably until my mid-twenties, I thought being an Okie was a special ethnic group. It was ingrained in us to be proud that we were Okies, and we wore that mantel proudly. Even today, when someone asks about my nationality, I tell them, “I’m just an Okie.”

Despite all the hardships we faced, it wasn’t always dreary and bleak in my neighborhood. We learned how to have fun there too. Our home was located in the middle of the block on Adrienne Ave., almost the dead center of those three square miles of desperation. It was a small rectangular wooden rental house, twenty feet by forty feet, a two-bedroom place with one bathroom for a growing family of six. It was a humble clapboard siding house painted white, with a brown composition tar roof to protect us from the weather. It wasn’t a very big house for two grown adults and four children, but we were able to survive okay in those cramped eight hundred square feet.

Once a month Mr. Chase, the landlord, would come collect the rent in his brand-new, polished automobile. If us kids were outside playing, he would stop and say a few kind words to us. Sometimes he would give us candy as he walked up to collect his money. Most of all though, I remember thinking that he was different than I was. He was also different than the other men who lived in our community. You knew that he was only doing business there, and that he definitely didn’t live there. Maybe, I thought to myself, he was supposed to be different, because he was a businessman.

Just south of us was a farmer’s field. It was owned by the Anthony Silva family. My brothers, Jack and Peter (Jack older than I, Peter younger), and I loved playing in that field, as long as we didn’t get caught. We would play there for hours and hours, using our young minds to create a make believe playground. Sometimes Farmer Anthony would catch us in his field and chase us off. He would scream, “Get out of there you dirty little Okies!” But it never deterred us for long—we’d sneak back time and time again, whenever the opportunity arose. It was easy access and not far from home. If sugar beets were growing, we would play war by picking and throwing the beets at each other, pretending that they were hand grenades and that we were
soldiers in the war. If they were growing wheat, we would tramp it down to make hidden army forts, so no one could ever find us. We loved pretending to be soldiers hiding from the enemy.

If we weren’t in the fields playing make-believe war, my brothers and I would play baseball in the hard, weed-infested lot on the north side of our house. Our baseballs would get torn up on the hard ground, or else we would lose them in the weeds during our games. We had a secret weapon to retrieve the balls we’d lose though. His name was Willy Mays, our little Cocker Spaniel. He wasn’t a big dog, maybe fifteen or twenty pounds. We named him after the great San Francisco Giants outfielder because he loved playing baseball. He tracked down grounders like nobody’s business. During the night, all the baseballs we’d lost during the day would mysteriously reappear in our front yard. We loved Willy and he loved us. He had a knack for finding lost baseballs. One day while we walked through the neighborhood to a friend’s house, poor Willy Mays was run over by a car he’d started chasing. He was killed instantly. When I look back, I guess this was my first experience losing a close friend. The pain and fear I felt was a new kind of pain and fear. It was the first time I thought about how I had no control over how my life would turn out, or the difficulties that might unfold along the way.

Another one of our favorite pastimes was riding down the banks of the diverting canal on cut-up pieces of cardboard, or a beat-up car hood we’d scrounged from a nearby salvage yard. We would pretend we were guiding a speeding toboggan down a snowy slope. Sometimes we would trudge up and down that canal bank all day long, making up fun out of thin air.

When it got really hot we would sneak down to the forbidden canal to go swimming. Our mom always caught us though—she always could tell when we had been swimming. We never figured out that it was the post-swimming redness in our eyes that gave us away. Our mom was a beautiful woman and a fabulous mother. She strove to care for and protect all of her children. She was an intuitive woman when it came to her children. She knew when something was amiss and when her kids were doing things they shouldn’t. She was blessed with those special motherly skills.

Swimming at the canal continued until there was an outbreak of polio in the fifties. Most parents took the canal swimming more seriously after the outbreak and it became truly forbidden to swim there or anywhere else. All public pools and parks were closed throughout the city. For us it was no big deal about the pools and parks: in our neighborhood, we didn’t have public pools or parks.

The seasons, as they came and passed, left their mark on the community, especially the cold winter months. They marked the uniqueness of where we lived. Winter in Okieville was an exciting time in our young lives, especially those winters when it seemed to rain every day. We’d huddle inside the house together, hiding from the blustery weather outside. It brought a sense of comfort and protection to be bunched there all together.

But being near the canal in winter was also a hazard. There was always fear for those unprotected below the levee. Winter storms could spill the levee over its banks, or it could break catastrophically without warning. On many cold nights we would huddle around our floor furnace to keep ourselves warm and wait for the notice to evacuate. Television news or the radio would keep us abreast of the weather outside and we listened, rapt. We waited to hear that the canal had collapsed or overflowed in the torrential rains. “Be prepared to leave quickly,” they always said.

Men in the community would fill sandbags during those times of distress. Those were exciting times to be a kid. There was the exhilaration of impending danger, but a sick feeling of urgency too.
Like clockwork, two or three weeks after the rains ended, spring would usher in new growth. In our community it was namely due to a species of weed. It was a strange kind of weed. It would start seeding out of the hard adobe ground almost as soon as the weather changed. It was a weed known by multiple names in my neighborhood: Sand Burrs or Puncture Vines, but my family just called them Goat Heads.

You knew you were in Okieville when you saw Goat Heads, because they were everywhere. They were alongside almost all the roads and in everybody’s yard. They spouted up in our playgrounds at school. If you stepped on one it could puncture your foot like a nail. They had little sharp-edged prongs, offshoots of the plant itself, and everybody knew to avoid them. As children we paid closer attention to them than adults for the simple reason that we ran around barefoot most of the time in the summer. With limited money, we tried to save our shoes for our return to school in the fall. If we weren’t on foot, we were traveling through the neighborhood on our bikes. Goat Heads were the enemy of bicycle inner tubes as well. Our tires were constantly punctured, but we became really good at patching them. Okieville was a unique place to grow up. With each passing day I learned more and more about myself, and life. The place was preparing me for a future I could not foresee.

It was during this phase of my young life that I realized I was different than others. I was always comparing my life to the sitcom families on television. I knew my life was different than Bud’s on *Father Knows Best*, or Ricky’s on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*—even Dennis, on *Dennis the Menace*, didn’t seem to have the struggles that I did. On television, all the families lived perfect lives inside perfect worlds, but nobody lived like that where I grew up. As a young child, sometimes it was hard to distinguish between reality and fantasy. I had a deep desire for the world to match my expectations, but it always seemed to fall short.

We often visited friends and relatives in different parts of town. During these visits I could tell that those people lived differently than me. I wanted what others had. I wanted all those things that I didn’t have, and I would spend many years of my life chasing illusory goals. I always felt that I didn’t belong where I was, that I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. I always imagined that others were different than me. I wanted my life to become something different than it actually was. The real truth, however, was that things simply were the way they were where I lived. And those people whose lives I envied? I would learn, in time, that they had problems too.

As I look back at that young boy I realize: those early feelings were indicators—warnings of the confusion and distress I harbored. They were symptoms of something not right inside of me. My flaws were hidden deep within me, and they would eventually surface as life brought them forth in its own time.

This was my life, and this was the beginning of an adventure that would span over six decades. It also was where I learned lessons that have ultimately stood me in good stead. I learned self-respect, empathy, the value of hard work, and that a man’s word is his bond. In the hard reality of Okieville, I learned that a person receives nothing for free.

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**Chapter 2: Pioneering Surgery**

I remember certain things from my early childhood not by actual memory, but by way of stories that my family passed down. The two long, ugly scars on the left and right sides of my groin confirm hernia operations my mother said I had at a very young age. Even though I don't
remember having those surgeries, the scars left behind serve as reminders that I was broken at an early age and that I was different than others.

I also know, because my mother told me, that I had experienced three major heart attacks by the time I was five years of age.

I do remember receiving the grotesque scar on my left leg at eight years of age, and how it covered my whole calf from my ankle to my knee. I remember how painful it was when the fire melted my flesh away, almost to the bone, how the fire had touched my life and left its mark. It was a grotesque scar born out of curiosity. Like most children, I only wanted to fit in with the other kids and take part in the neighborhood ritual of fire watching. More than the fire or the scar left behind, I remember the extremes I went through to hide this blemish so it wouldn’t mark me as different.

Most of all, I remember being a chronically ill child during my youth. I was treated differently than my siblings and other kids in the neighborhood. I remember being monitored closely for signs of illness or infection—I remember the scrutiny, how alienating it felt. The fear and shame of the illness consumed me and separated me from everyone around me.

I was born with a congenital heart defect called Atrial Septum defect, also known as “a hole in the heart.” I had an abnormal opening in the walls between the upper chambers of my heart. It restricted the blood flow in and out of my heart. The defect brought about the three heart attacks and weakened my immune system, leaving me vulnerable to infections. When I experienced the heart attacks in 1954, a successful heart surgery had not yet been performed west of the Mississippi.

My early childhood illness and its complications controlled and restricted me. I knew that I was the sick child in our family, and so did everyone else. The other children were careful with me when we’d play, and I’d feel vulnerable and somehow not whole. I couldn’t accept that I was so sickly, so different from the other kids. I refused to relinquish control to my illness.

It wasn't unusual for me to be rushed to a hospital for something as minor as a fever or cough. My parents would rush me to medical care for symptoms as benign as a nose bleed— sometime it took hours or days to get the bleeding to stop. It wasn’t abnormal for me to spend four or five days in the hospital because of a minor cold, as colds usually turned into pneumonia. Every trip to the doctor, I would say the same thing to myself: maybe they’ll fix me this time.

It was during these early years that I realized I was not like the other kids around me. My illness, as it unfolded, made my life uncertain, and left me confused for many years. My fears and anxieties left me embarrassed and self-conscious. They brought forth emotions that I didn’t know how to handle. I couldn’t hide my health from those around me, even though I usually tried. And even if I managed to appear normal, I knew I was trapped inside a broken body.

In my youth I’d often wake confused and frightened under an oxygen tent in the hospital. It was a place that, over time, I’d become very familiar with. I would find myself trapped behind a plastic wall many times in my childhood, a partition that illustrated how different I was. It was like being held prisoner. I could see them, everyone on the outside, and they could see me, but I felt so distant and alone. The hospital visits became a regular occurrence over the years, most visits due to a crippling repeating pneumonia, over and over and over again.

I remember my parents’ voices as I lay under one of those tents: “Don’t give up Steve. Fight hard Steve. You are strong, Steve. Stevie, we don’t quit. I heard them talking and pleading with me every time, I heard every word they spoke. In their own way they were praying that their son wouldn’t die on them, that God, in His Mercy and Grace, would give him another day to live. Yet as I lay there, I had no idea what I was fighting or what I was fighting for.
These early trials would shape my life in ways I could not have suspected. They are, I realize now, the beginning of a tendency to avoid being who I was, to resist dealing with matters that tormented me. I was learning at that early age how to run away and hide, even though I wasn't capable of understanding those impulses. I was learning to be a defeatist and a runner. I ran from the symptoms of my defective heart. I was a fearful boy fighting an unknown and powerful enemy, an enemy that always seemed to win our battles.

A couple of years after the heart attacks, my health took a turn for the worse. It was a period in my life when I was beginning to learn about empathy, and about other people’s difficulties. I had never wished for this sickness I carried, and surely I would never have wished it upon anyone else. I was battling pneumonia three or four times a year. It seemed like all I did was live under an oxygen tent in the hospital. I was frightened constantly. The uncertainty of my future occupied my every thought. I was living in a world I had no control over, and my illness dictated its outcome.

The 1950’s was a time of excitement and high spirits, a period in America when dreams were realized and new inventions and discoveries revealed every day. The color television was invented in the 50’s—the hydrogen bomb. The medical profession was maturing and experimenting with treatments for diseases that had baffled medicine for centuries. The polio vaccine was created, saving millions from the consequences of that destructive disease. The nation was aglow with postwar optimism. Spirits were high. People believed that anything was possible.

To my benefit back then, there were a few extraordinary doctors and hospitals experimenting successfully with open-heart surgery. They wanted to be able to go inside a person’s body and repair a diseased heart—a grand ambition.

During World War II, because of the large number of chest wounds soldiers suffered, medics and surgeons had a unique opportunity to experiment and learn about damaged hearts. Some of those medics and surgeons, including Dr. Frank L. Gerbode, who would be operating on me in the future, utilized their war experience to help pioneer the new field of open-heart surgery.

As luck would have it, in the near future I would be scheduled for one of the first open heart surgeries in the world, as soon as my doctors were confident that the procedure was sufficiently developed and proven. As a boy I was never made aware of my future heart surgery. I was always told that these doctors would one day “help me get better.” One of the surgeons, Dr. John J. Osborn, who would assist in my heart surgery, was a pioneer in the development of the first heart and lung machines.

Prior to my surgery, my mother and I made annual bus trips to San Francisco for appointments with Dr. Saul Robinson, a world-renowned pediatric cardiologist. I never completely understood the trips to these special doctors, but I hoped they would help me get better one day. As a little boy, I looked forward to these special trips. I hoped against hope that they would be able to fix me on one of these trips. I would, it turns out, stay under Dr. Robinson’s care from 1954 to 1966.

I wasn't really aware of the purpose of all those trips, but I remember the ham sandwiches my mom always bought me at the bus terminal. She spoiled me on our trips to San Francisco. A ham sandwich with potato chips was the ultimate treat for a kid like me. We hardly ever ate at restaurants, so a bus terminal ham sandwich seemed like the height of luxury.

My father couldn’t go with us on most trips to San Francisco. He needed to stay home and work every chance he got. Money was hard to come by. We took the Greyhound bus because we
only had one car in our family, which wasn't that uncommon back then. The trips were always a fascinating adventure. To visit bus terminals in Stockton and San Francisco—it felt like I was seeing the world.

I would watch the hustle and bustle of travelers in the terminals, keeping an eye on them as they shuffled around waiting to embark for destinations unknown. As the huge shiny buses pulled in and out of the terminals, you could almost feel a heartbeat, as if the buses had a life of their own. Such a sight—every bus was painted a blue, white, and silver, with the graceful symbol of the greyhound along the side.

I would spot the destination marquees above the windshield of each bus and wonder what it was like in those places. Just when I thought I couldn’t take any more excitement, I would hear the roar of a bus engine as it accelerated and departed the terminal. They always left a black plume of smoke in their wake as they merged into traffic, leaving behind the rancid smell of burnt fuel for all to endure.

As our bus left Stockton and headed out of town, an open expanse of countryside lay before my eyes. There were ranches and farms scattered everywhere along the highway as we drove toward the city. Each estate had its own unique qualities. Farm animals too were scattered across the countryside. Open fields of wheat or corn flashed by my window as the bus sped down the road. Before I knew it, we would be screaming past a horse farm or cattle ranch. I wondered what it would be like to grow up in a place like that. The closer we got to San Francisco, the more congested the highway became. The sparse countryside gave way to buildings, city streets, and businesses.

One of my favorite parts of these trips was the tollbooth on the San Francisco Bay Bridge. I had never seen so many cars in one place. While we waited to clear the tollbooth, I’d check out the huge naval ships to my left, surplus vessels dry-docked after the war at the Alameda Naval Ship Yard. The ships inspired daydreams of naval battles and ships now resting on the ocean floor. Before I knew it we’d pull away from the tollbooth and be on our way across the bay toward the city. On our right stood what seemed like a fancy floating hotel in the bay—the infamous Alcatraz Island. It was rumored to house the most dangerous criminals in the world, but for me it was a site of fascination and intrigue as it slowly disappeared out of sight.

Toward the western horizon, the Golden Gate Bridge would come into view, a bridge constructed to withstand the ferocious winds that blew in and out of the bay each day. As we crossed the bridge my imagination only grew. I was captivated by the enormity of San Francisco Bay stretching further than my eyes could see. Sailboats of different sizes seemed to be scattered everywhere. They seemed to ride the waves across the bay with such ease. There were also huge commercial cargo and passenger ships from all around the world.

About halfway across the bridge, as we descended into the city, a spectacular view of the city’s skyline appeared. It was so different and so much more beautiful than where I came from. As the bus descended the bridge and entered the long city streets, my excitement only grew. My head snapped back and forth like a ricocheting bullet, not wanting to miss anything. Skyscrapers loomed like giants standing shoulder to shoulder. I could see the bus’s reflection in the plate glass windows of each huge building and countless people hurrying into and out of each one. Knowing I was a part of this remarkable adventure thrilled me to no end. Like so many people before me, San Francisco stirred my imagination and captured my heart.

My mom and I would make these road trips regularly in the four years prior to my surgery. I was in dire need of an operation, but the surgery was still underdeveloped and the risks would be great. Medical scientists were still perfecting the “membrane oxygenator,” a primitive type of
heart and lung machine. In 1956, Dr. Frank Gerbode and Dr. John Osborn would perform the first successful heart/lung bypass surgery west of the Mississippi. It was the closure of an atrial septum defect, the same surgery I needed. Both surgeons were pioneers in the fledgling field. During these early days in the development of heart surgery, children like me that became test subjects—either the surgery would save our lives, or we would die in the process.

After waiting so many years, the big day finally came. I was scheduled to report to San Francisco for my surgery, which would be performed on October 13, 1959. I would make the trip to San Francisco Stanford Hospital (Mt. Zion Hospital) on Clay & Webster Streets with my whole family. Many other children died waiting for this surgery to be developed—I was one of the fortunate ones born in the right place at the right time. The doctors had determined that I couldn't wait any longer. My heart had deteriorated to such a degree that the risks of doing nothing now outweighed the risks of surgery.

At the hospital, I was taken to one of the upper floors, a special children's ward for heart patients and terminally ill children. They had a few private rooms for kids coming out of surgery, but most of us would stay in a dormitory like room. I was shocked as I walked into the ward that first day: there were children everywhere, running up and down the ward halls. Many had huge scars tattooed up and down their chests and backs. Some had multiple scars from multiple surgeries—a frightening prospect I hadn't considered. As I was lead to my bed, I couldn’t shake a haunting sense of dread.

Inside this children’s ward were other kids with serious medical problems. Babies going blind, kids quarantined with deadly infectious diseases, and a mixture of other horrible terminal illnesses. Parents whose children were going blind would give them early birthday or Christmas parties, because they knew that their babies, once they left the hospital, would never see again. We were informed when we first arrived that the quarantined rooms with the big signs on the door were off-limits to us. Not knowing what was hidden behind those doors disturbed me. I was afraid to even get close to them. I didn’t understand everything I was witnessing, but the special parties for the kids going blind always bothered me and left me feeling uneasy.

The hospital seemed like a place of miracles, and also one of terrible fate. When a patient showed up, no one could predict their outcome with certainty. They would either leave with their condition fixed, or death would come and visit them. Those cases were handled secretively: it was part of the recovery process to heal without the distraction of death.

I was scheduled for surgery in two days—a very restless two days as I contemplated what was to come. Maybe it was to my advantage, but I didn’t connect those kids’ scars with my own situation. I didn’t realize I’d be receiving my own jagged tattoo.

On my first day, while playing with some toys in a special room, I met another boy and we became friends instantly. He said his name was the Duke of Earl and that he lived in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. The Duke did his best to impress upon me his lack of fear, but I’m sure he was just as scared as I was. In his short life he had already undergone five heart surgeries, painting his chest and back with multiple scars. Poor Duke looked like he was involved in a massacre, but he never complained.

The Duke and I became best buddies. The Duke was only the second black kid I’d ever met. The year before I was playing in the schoolyard when I noticed a boy I’d never seen before mingling with the other kids. His name was James Stevenson, I’d learn. He was my age but different than the rest of the kids at our school, different not because he was rag-torn, but because he was black. In my neighborhood and at Elmwood Elementary, there just weren’t any children of color in those days. There were, especially, no black kids. From the first day, James
wasn’t really accepted by the other children. I felt very empathetic toward him, however, because I knew what it was like to be isolated and alone. It didn’t matter to those other children that James was no different than the rest of us, that he wore the same raggedy patched-up clothes we all wore, that he came from a poor family and lived in Okieville. In my neighborhood, if your skin was a different color than the rest of us, you were automatically rejected. That was just the way it was in the 1950’s where I lived.

I liked James from the beginning and tried to play with him every chance I got. One day during recess I went out to the playground looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found. I discovered later that he and his family had moved out of the neighborhood and left our school. They had to relocate to the Southside of town where mostly people of color lived. They had felt neither accepted nor welcome in our community, and that made me very sad.

He and his family may have been run out of our neighborhood, but my friend James’ memory was burnt into my mind forever. I was beginning to learn that when you’re different than those around you, people often single you out, often enact their prejudices upon you. People are afraid of things they don’t understand. Still, I think of Okieville as a proud place for those who struggled to reside there. People held their heads up proudly, simply because they survived in that indifferent place.

Duke was different than any other kids I knew. Duke was like me. Duke was a sick kid in the hospital. We weren’t trying to figure out whose skin color was better; we were encouraging each other, and fighting to stay alive, battling every day to overcome the enemy, praying that this hospital could fix us so we could be like other children. I’m not sure which one of us went home first, but I’m thankful to have had a bond of friendship in that place. The Duke was a little bit older than me and I looked up to him because he seemed not to be afraid of anything. His courage, even if it was false, gave me the strength to battle with my own struggles.

Surgery morning came soon enough, and before I knew it I was being wheeled through the hospital toward the operating room. I had been prepped for surgery by the nurses and my mom walked alongside me, holding my hand so that I wouldn’t be afraid. Her words of encouragement and the touch of her hand relaxed me and made me feel safe. The nurses stopped at the front desk of my ward. The staff there wanted to wish me luck. We maneuvered through the hospital for what seemed like forever. Then, all of a sudden, my bed was being pushed up against the wall outside the surgery room. The staff left my mom and me to give us a few moments of privacy while we waited. While lying there looking up at the ceiling, I spotted these huge scary pipes and heating ducts hanging down. At first I only felt strange, a sense of eeriness, but then a sudden horrible fear overcame me.

Before I knew it, several nurses were standing next to my gurney. “It’s time Stevie,” they said. “They’re waiting for you inside.” My mom bent over and kissed me on the forehead and rubbed her soft gentle hands over my face and arms. Then, suddenly, I was wheeled into the operating room and people were scurrying all over preparing for my operation. As I lay there scared to death, afraid to even move, I glanced around. Everywhere I looked there was stainless steel surgical equipment. I saw doctors and nurses in green scrubs with green masks. The focus and complexity of it was mesmerizing. I waited in my bed for whatever was to come.

One of the doctors came over to me. He looked like a Green Spaceman, but I paid close attention to everything he said. He told me who he was, and what he was about to do with the oxygen mask that he held in his hand. He let me know what the mask was for and how it would work, taking pains to explain what was about to happen. He told me to lie back as he gently
placed the mask over my face. In a soft voice he said, “Breathe in deeply Stevie.” When I did as he instructed everything went dark.

I was startled into a horrific nightmarish fog. A suction tube was being thrust in and out of my throat, trying to clear built-up mucus in my lungs. The tube made me gag and I pleaded with the doctor to stop. Lying there, I felt more vulnerable than I had ever felt. I had no control over what the doctors did with me. As I pled with the doctor he told me he would stop if I promised to try to cough up the mucus. I immediately agreed then fell back asleep.

I was awakened next by a loud quacking noise, an irritating, scary noise from somewhere in the hospital. I was baffled by the thought of a duck in the hospital. I cried out for someone to please make the duck go away. It was frightening me. Then I realized I was recovering inside my room after the surgery.

My nurse hurried out into the hallway, informing a child pulling a toy duck down the hall that he had to put the toy away. Then there was an unnerving silence as I realized I was under yet another oxygen tent. As I lay motionless on my back and looked down at my stomach and chest, a bolt of terror ripped through me. My chest and belly had been painted red, and two tubes were sticking into the sides of my body below the ribcage. A shiny stainless steel machine—the thing looked like it came from outer space—was placed next to my bed, and the tubes sticking out from my body were connected to it. I could hear a swooshing noise from a pump on top of the machine, as it moved slowly back and forth circulating my blood. I spotted my nurse at a desk in the corner of the room. She was writing in my medical chart. Laying there in terror, I was afraid to even move a muscle.

Then I noticed it, a long frightening scar running from the bottom of my throat almost to my belly button, a horrifying scar like the other kids had. What had happened to me terrified me. I had no idea what to do. My chest was swollen where they had cut me open and separated my breastbone, which exacerbated the horrible scar.

I knew the scar would mark me as a freak of nature. I hated what my malformed heart had brought me. I lay there not knowing how to change what had happened, what I had become. I wanted to be home with my family where I felt safe. I didn’t want to be a spectacle that all the doctors came to gaze at three times a day. It was an insecurity that would haunt me for years.

After the surgery, Dr. Gerbode and Dr. Osborn made daily rounds accompanied by five or six young interns. They would surround my bed and ask me questions about how I felt. The interns would stand there silent, listening to every word those renowned doctors spoke. After they left I always felt sick, like a sideshow freak who’d been gawked at. It was an insecurity that would haunt me for years.

Three weeks later, when I was finally able to leave the hospital, I would take with me one of those exclusive scars—a “zipper.” I could hide the mark with a shirt, but I couldn’t escape it emotionally. It was an imperfection I would struggle with for decades, a stain and a reminder that I was born broken.

Not long after the surgery, I begged my mom to take me back to see Dr. Robinson. I wanted him to somehow fix the deformed chest. I wanted him to make the scar go away. I thought getting rid of the scar would abolish all the sadness and anxieties I’d been living with.

We finally went to see Dr. Robinson for a follow-up examination about two months later. While we were there my mom shared with him how embarrassed, how ashamed I was about my deformed chest, how it consumed my every waking thought. I wanted to know if there was any way to fix the scar and chest. Dr. Robinson wasn’t only a brilliant prominent Cardiologist, but also a very wise man. He knew, just like my mother did, that there was no way to fix my
insecurities. But he wasn’t about to allow me to leave without some sound advice: if I couldn’t learn how to live with the situation that I now faced, he said, how would I deal with more difficult problems as I grew older? Prophetic words. I have never forgotten them.

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**Chapter 3: New School**

In the spring of 1964 my family and I left Okieville for good. We were moving to a place where dreams come true, I thought, a community where everyone lived perfect lives. The move, I knew, would fulfill my longing for a new life, but I was scared of leaving behind all my friends, all my old memories. Even though I looked forward to our new home, the move represented a jump into the unknown. It frightened me. This would become a transformational period in my life. It should have been an opportunity to realize my dreams—instead it would become a nightmare I couldn’t escape.

The period when my parents were house hunting was an exciting time for us children. My mom would bring home colorful brochures of homes. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on those pamphlets. I would spend hours examining them, one at a time, over and over. I daydreamed about what our new home and what our life would be like.

Finally, after months of searching, they found the perfect place for us in a middleclass neighborhood on the Westside of town, on Lucerne Ave. The more they described our new home, the more excited I became. There were concrete sidewalks in front of the houses, they said. We’d no longer have to dodge mud puddles walking to school in the winter. Where we were moving people mowed their lawns regularly, my mom said. They planted flowers and shrubs. It was the first place I lived where people took a recognizable pride in their homes and lawns. Once we settled in, my parents said, we would have to chip in and work hard so we could be proud of our new home too.

We would be moving, as most of my school friends reminded me, to where the “4-0s” lived. Being a 4-0 meant your father had a job that paid a salary with at least four zeros in it. In the 1960’s, if your family was fortunate enough to have a household income of ten thousand dollars or more, you were considered “well off.” My family was in no way rich, but other children’s perceptions of the 4-0’s haunted me. I assumed that everyone that lived over there was rich, that they had perfect lives and perfect families. It was a childish misconception that would soon be proven false.

It would be like moving to a foreign country for my family and me. We had no idea what we would actually face on the other side of town. We would be the dirty Okies living among the rich people. That’s how I believed it would be. I would come to find out that they were really only working class people, struggling to make it like everyone else. The “rich people” misconception was just that: a skewed idea in the hopeful minds of children. It was a powerful misconception though—it carried with it feelings of both hopefulness and inadequacy.

Even though I was confused about what was taking place, I was excited. Now my sister Susan would have her own bedroom. Over the years she had been forced to share a bedroom with my brothers and me. She was sixteen now, and it was time for her to have her own room.

It was an exciting time, a long awaited dream for our family. We would be leaving the cramped eight hundred square feet we had known all our lives. We would no longer be poor
renters visited monthly by the landlord. We would be homeowners for the first time in our lives. We couldn’t wait for all of it to happen, for our lives to be something different.

We were thrilled and excited as we loaded the truck and trailer on moving day. My dad had borrowed both from his friend, Bill Fox. Bill chipped in and helped us with the task of loading too. We teased Bill because his beat up old Ford had primer paint all over it, and the trailer (he’d built it himself) left plenty to be desired. It was sufficient for the task we faced though. Bill was something of a character and all of us kids liked him. He was over six feet tall and towered over us kids, but he loved joking and teasing us. Like my dad, Bill was a longshoreman. They both loved to drink beer, so needless to say, they drank beer all day as we loaded and unloaded the truck and trailer.

Bill and my dad concentrated on loading the big stuff, and our mom and us kids focused on the little things. We packed the trailer with one thing after another until our possessions hung over the sides perilously and we had to create makeshift sideboards. We might not have had much, but our lives were in that trailer. My dad and Bill drove the truck over to our new home to unload it while all of us kids and Shep, our German Shepard dog, went over with our mom in the car. We must have looked like something out of The Grapes of Wrath as we scurried back and forth across town loading and unloading our possessions.

It didn't take more than three trips to get everything moved, but it seemed like it took all day. It didn’t matter to us though, because our lives would be so much better. We would have what we thought we were missing, a better way of life in a new home. We were terribly excited as we got everything unloaded and into our new home that first day. It was ours. We were very proud of the fact that we were homeowners. Susan worked on tidying up her bedroom as Jack and Peter and I moved things around in our own room until we got it like we wanted.

In our new home, things became different for us kids. My sister’s new bedroom was bigger than the old one that all four of us used to share. My mom bought her a secondhand bedroom set to make the room special for her. She had a queen size bed and two nightstands and two lamps and a beautiful chest of drawers along the far wall. Then, on the other wall, she placed her makeup table and chair, with a big fancy mirror on the top of it. She was beside herself with excitement. I am sure she never dreamed that she’d have her own decorated bedroom. We were all proud that she finally had a place all her own.

Off of the kitchen was a door and a stairway that led down into our bedroom. It was once a garage, but the previous owner had converted it before we moved in. We finally had our own place, which my brothers and I would share (with Shep of course). The previous owner had installed a window frame where the front garage door used to be, and placed a light brown piece of plastic inside it that allowed light to filter in. We couldn’t see out the window, but we didn’t care. At the back of our room was a door that opened into the backyard. It gave us a sense of responsibility and a newfound freedom, that door—the ability to go outside anytime we wanted was thrilling!

The yard was nice and neat like our mother said it would be, not like in Okieville. Between the yard and the sidewalk in front of our home was a raised area covered with lush, flowing ivy and three picturesque elm trees. Along the driveway (a luxury we’d never had in Okieville) was a beautiful white rosebush. There were no junk cars in our neighbors’ yards, and all the yards were fenced. In our backyard, which was a double-size lot and nicely landscaped, the previous owner used softball size river rocks to create boarders around the trees and shrubs. There was a storage shed in the yard too, which my brother and I would eventually convert into a bedroom.
quite like the Leave it to Beaver home I was so familiar with on television, yet it was so very
different from where I had come. I already felt a little out of place in this new environment. I
thought maybe I didn’t belong there, or that I didn’t deserve to live there.

It wasn’t long until we had everything unpacked and situated the way we wanted. My
mother was working with my sister on her bedroom while my brothers and I fantasized about
what we would do with our own. We thought we’d get ourselves some street signs or pictures of
our favorite sports stars to hang on the walls. We were excited and giddy that first night; we lay
in our beds dreaming about what we would do.

Then we suddenly realized that we hadn’t seen our dad in a while. He had been gone since
he left with Bill earlier in the evening. It was strange for him to disappear; it wasn’t normal
behavior. He usually worked the night shift at the docks, from 6 p.m. until 3 a.m., but we knew
he wasn’t working that night. It wasn’t until the third day that our mom told us where he had
been.

After many phone calls, she found out that my grandmother had checked him into a hospital
for his drinking and hadn’t told us. We knew my father liked to drink beer, but we didn’t know a
person could end up in a hospital from drinking beer. Until this time, I don’t think anyone,
except our mother maybe, realized that alcohol was a problem for my dad. In the days and years
to come we would realize the scope of his problem, and we would suffer the destruction it would
bring to our family.

This was the beginning. The cracks that would signal the fracturing of our lives.

Our move happened during the second quarter of my last semester of 9th grade. There were
only a few days left until I was to report to my new school and finish out the year. Before we
moved I was a pretty good student. It was easy for me to carry an A/B average. I found school
easy, and I enjoyed it very much. I was usually able to finish my homework during school,
leaving my evenings free to play or watch television. My parents told me I would be the one in
the family to become a doctor or lawyer and I had my sights set on achieving that goal. I wanted
to learn everything I could. I had a purpose in school: to become the professional that my parents
hoped I would.

Susan would be staying at her old school, Franklin High. She chose to do it that way because
she was only a little over a year away from graduation. She decided she would catch a city bus
across town every day, and make the return trip home after school. She wanted, I think, to finish
high school with her friends. My older brother Jack would go to a new high school—Amos
Alonso Stagg—as a sophomore by himself. I would go to Stagg the following year, but for now
my younger brother Peter and I would go to Daniel Webster Jr. High. He would be finishing up
his seventh grade classes while I finished up in ninth.

The following day while we worked putting things in order, we met a few of the
neighborhood kids. We met the two girls who lived across the street. Brandy and Kathy Brody
were the same ages as Peter and I. It didn’t take long for them to fill us in on the neighborhood
gossip and what to expect at school. Two doors down, on the same side of the street, lived David
and Gretchen Campbell. Their father was the manager of a local grocery store. The kids on the
block were as curious about us as we were about them. We found out soon enough that they all
walked to school together, and we were invited to join them on our first day. The school was
about three miles away and it took about an hour to walk there. We agreed we would meet
outside our homes the following morning. We didn’t want to be late for school on our first day,
they said.
The next morning we gathered in front of our homes like we’d planned. We had to be at school by 8:00 a.m. so we didn’t hang around long. We walked down to Wilshire Blvd., which was at the end of our block, and turned left. We headed north toward the Smith Canal, a water-vein off of the Delta Channel. While walking up the incline on Wilshire, we saw a huge black train trestle spanning the canal. The kids told us we had to cross it to get to school, which was exciting for us. On the other side of the trestle, they said, we just follow the tracks until we get to Michigan Ave. After school a lot of the neighborhood kids went swimming off of the train trestle, they said, an idea that excited my brother and I.

We continued our journey down the tracks and tossed rocks at tin cans strewn in our path. It wasn’t long until we were at Michigan Ave., and like the kids told us, we turned left toward our new school, which now was only three blocks away. While we joked and laughed about kid stuff, I was suddenly awestruck by what was in front of us. Beautiful ranch homes on both sides of the street, encased by rows of full-bloom shade trees. Homes like I’d only seen in magazines or on television, one after another, with neatly manicured lawns. There were beautiful, clean automobiles in the driveways and along the curbs in front of the homes—cars that people where I came from only dreamed of owning.

These, finally, were homes like Beaver lived in on TV. I had dreamt all my life of a place like this, but being in it overwhelmed me. I felt out of place. I knew I was somewhere I didn’t belong. The closer we got to school, the more uneasy I felt. It was a culture shock when Peter and I first walked up to the school and entered the grounds with our new friends. Neither of us had a clue about the place we’d just stepped into. We weren’t just entering a new school, I thought. We were experiencing a completely different world.

As I crossed the lawn of the school, I realized it was kept meticulously, just like the tree-lined neighborhood we’d passed through. As I watched the parents drop off their children in fancy new cars, I couldn’t help but notice how nice—how new!—most of them were. My brother and I were accustomed to clunker cars that barely ran. As a matter of fact, at our old school, very few kids were dropped off by their parents. Most walked or caught a bus. These new kids dressed differently too. Their clothes were much more modern and nicer than our own. I expected that people here would live differently than in Okieville, but I was shocked by how differently.

Even with these anxieties, I thought things would probably work out okay for me in time. I was a pretty good student and I was confident I’d be able to transition. I was soon to learn a new life lesson though: never assume anything. During 9th grade, like most children, I took the required classes plus elective ones we were allowed to choose. Math was always my favorite subject because it came very easy for me. I knew if I was planning on going to college, I needed to take a foreign language, so for whatever reason, I chose French. I also enrolled in the band and played drums. To this day my family and I laugh about this, because I couldn't then, nor can I now, keep a beat. I took typing because it was suggested for those going on to higher education. History and English made absolutely no sense to me, so I muddled through them the best I could, trying to get a passing grade.

With only three months before I graduated, how bad could this possibly be, I thought. Yet those next three months became the longest most miserable months of my life. What should have been an exciting time for me, turned out instead to be incredibly difficult. At my old school I was one of the top students, especially in Algebra and French. In this new environment, I wouldn’t have that advantage. It was to be an experience that would shake the foundation I stood on, an experience that would make me question all of my goals.
Since I obtained mostly A’s and B’s at my old school, the new teachers were eager to test my talents. On my first day my French teacher asked me a question in French, and I had no idea what she had said. I could only sit there dumbfounded. The experience left me baffled. I was embarrassed and humiliated. I wanted to crawl under my desk and hide. I knew that every kid in that class was staring at me. I could feel their laser eyes burning into my back as I sat there too petrified to even move. Given my grades, the teacher took it for granted that I would know what she was saying, but I had no idea. I found out that her class was far more advanced than my French capabilities. I simply didn’t belong in the class.

I experienced the same difficulties in Algebra—another class I should’ve been able to excel in, but didn’t. The new classes were further along in their books than I was. It didn’t take me long to realize I wasn’t going to catch up. I experienced the same difficulties in most of my other classes. My fear of failure and loss of control overpowered me and, though I couldn’t recognize it immediately, my emotional stability began to slip. The more I failed in school, the more I hated the situation I found myself in. This was a new experience, and my instincts told me to run away as fast as I could.

I didn’t know how to make the transition from life in Okieville to this new place. I didn’t know how, as a poor kid, to live among the rich kids. I didn’t know how to adjust to the different teaching methods. I realize now that, mentally anyway, I had dropped out of school that very first day. As the fear surfaced, it shook my foundation. I didn't know how to handle it. I was so ashamed of my failures and my emotions that I kept them to myself.

Depression was not the buzzword it is now, and I had no language to describe the emotions I felt. A dark cloud hovered over me for days and weeks at a time. Something wasn't right inside of me. The depression became a place for me to hide, a place where nobody could get to me. I felt protected there. I felt that nobody could know how confused and complicated my life had become, and that the only solution was to bear the pain alone.

To make matters worse, because of my heart surgery, I was assigned to a special ed. gym class for sick or handicapped children. The school didn't want to be responsible for an injury or sudden problems with my heart. The kids in the class had a variety of handicaps. Suddenly I was one of them. I was not like the normal kids, I thought. I felt humiliated and ashamed. It confirmed what I had always believed: that I was different than other children. I didn't feel sick and I could do everything the other children could. Even my old school allowed me to attend regular gym class. But the new school insisted it was for my safety. Again I was marked as different. I was reliving the experience of my heart surgery all over again, and I was having a very difficult time dealing with it. I couldn’t make the situation I was facing go away. I just knew that every kid in that school thought I was sickly and weak. I wanted to run away as fast as I could, but there was nowhere to run.

I did the only thing I knew how to do: I hid. I isolated myself. From that moment on, sports would no longer hold any significance for me. If I wasn’t allowed to be a part of it, I didn’t want to associate with it in any way. I abandoned what I enjoyed and loved. I knew I had to survive this confusion in my life anyway I could, and hiding within myself seemed like the only solution. I would focus my attention on other things now, and most of them would be negative. I was steering my life toward failure without knowing it.

There was one positive thing about this difficult time though: I met some good friends. A couple weeks after our move, my brothers and I hiked over to explore the deep channel about five blocks from our home. We were fascinated with the idea that this vast international waterway, just 83 miles east of the Golden Gate Bridge, was so close to our new home. Stockton
was the largest inland port on the west coast, and it was only a stone’s throw from where we lived. Most days you could see multi-national ships docked on the other side of the channel. It was also where my father worked. It was a waterway that flowed out of the San Francisco Bay and then took many twists and turns throughout the famed Delta Agriculture Region. The San Joaquin Delta originated from the Pacific Ocean, a passageway for commercial and military ships to travel in and out of the agriculture valley with their products. It was an interesting and thrilling place to explore.

While strolling around its banks one day, we saw four commercial ships across the river being loaded and unloaded by Stevedores. It was an awesome thing knowing our father was a part of that industry, knowing this was how he made his living. When we looked eastward, not far up the river, we saw the turning-basin, a vast circular extension of the channel where the ships turned around before heading back out to sea.

While scouting out the area that day, we ran across a kid named Jeff Sinclair riding a motor scooter his dad had built for him. Short of driving a car, this scooter was the greatest thing I could think of. It didn’t take us long to introduce ourselves and become fast friends. At first we thought Jeff was older than us. He stood a head taller than my brothers and me. He wore blue jeans and a white t-shirt, just like we did, but was covered with dust from head to toe from riding his motor scooter in the dirt. He had this frizzy, puffed up hair that went everywhere, but we liked him from the start. He and I were the same age, and we liked the same kinds of things. It was a friendship that would last for many years. In time we would get paper routes together, and wherever one of us went, the other went also.

A couple weeks after meeting Jeff on the channel, I met another close friend, Robert Brown, in History class. It was a friendship I desperately needed in order to acclimate to my new world. He lived about five blocks from our new school with his brother and their divorced mom. In the years to follow, Robert would play a big role in my life. My new school was complicated and frightening, but the new friendships I developed helped. They relieved my anxieties for a time and made my existence not quite so solitary.

The end of the semester was quickly approaching and I counted the long, tenuous day’s one after another. I was dealing with dark complications daily, and I had no one to talk to about the strange feelings and emotions that I felt. I was glad to have Jeff and Robert as friends, but I couldn’t confide in them. I wasn’t willing to share how I felt. Male friendships can be that way, I think. It felt impossible to talk openly about things like shame, anxiety, and sadness. I felt ashamed even at the idea of someone knowing that I felt ashamed. As my fears continued to grow, they eroded the good things in my life and left behind carnage for others to pick up.

School finally came to an end, and none too soon as far as I was concerned. My A and B grades from my old school were my only saving grace. I flunked most of my classes, but the school averaged the grades from the old school, and so I was allowed to move on to high school. If they had held me back I would have been devastated—I didn’t care about much during that time. I was still reeling from the move and battling my emotions. The rollercoaster I had ridden for the last three months had thrown me completely off kilter. Summer was about to begin and I was planning on having fun. I knew I would not have to go back to that school, and the knowledge of that was my only saving grace. High school was next, and how could anything possibly be bad with summer on the horizon? By the end of that term, I had met more kids in the neighborhood and accumulated some friends. We were going to mess around and have some fun. We’d also decided to get summer jobs in order to make some spending money.

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Chapter 4: My first Drink

Even though my academic meltdown had left me dazed, I was actually looking forward to summer. I planned on taking advantage of my vacation and forgetting about the sense of failure that had been troubling me. I’d narrowly escaped junior high, but there was no reason to think high school wouldn’t be better, that it wouldn’t signal a brighter future. But even high school looked distant with three months of summer ahead. These were supposed to be carefree days, and I took them one at a time.

My father’s alcoholism began to worsen that summer, bringing about consequences we didn’t expect and could not understand. We could no longer deny what was becoming apparent: my father was an alcoholic. But we had no idea what it meant to be an alcoholic, what alcoholism truly was. It seemed that all he did was drink—and my family felt the consequences of that drinking. Mom and Dad fought all the time about money or about his drinking or about his gambling, which was also getting worse.

It became necessary for my mother to take a job to help pay bills. My dad, at that time, could make enough money to support his family, but his behavior necessitated a different course of action. Being uneducated and lacking any real work experience (except the work she did in the fields in her youth) my mom took a job doing what she knew how to do best. She became a waitress in a restaurant, serving food to others the same as she did with her own family. She never complained about having to work. She was grateful her family had food to eat and that she could help pay the bills.

Being a by-product of the great depression, she understood hard times—it was my father’s alcoholism that was beyond her comprehension. She would do whatever was necessary to care for her family, even if she couldn’t stop the carnage of my father’s drinking. My mom tried as best she could to hold her family together, to shield us from the damage coming our way. That was who she was: she couldn’t fix all of our troubles, but she would try to tackle the ones she could.

The task before her was monumental, but she never crumbled before the problems she faced. The truck stop where she worked mostly served truckers hauling loads up and down highway 99 in and out of Stockton. Being a new employee, she was required to work the afternoon shift, from two o’clock until ten at night, leaving us children to fend for ourselves in the evenings. She earned minimum wage and minimal tips, but she never complained. She left for work each day in her black skirt and white blouse, kissed us on the forehead, and told us to behave.

A blanket of uncertainty was slowly enveloping our family. My father and mother began to argue more openly. We could only watch and listen as each episode of my father’s rage increased in intensity. His drinking seemed to surge also, and he no longer even bothered to shield us from it. Where once he only drank beer, he now switched to straight whiskey, filling a glass each time he passed the kitchen. An eerie gloominess drew over our family and weakened its foundation. When my dad wasn’t working, we would barely see him. Presumably he spent his free time in bars. A sense of dread and hurt became our companion. We became like a ship at sea with no rudder. The changes taking place were hard to fathom, and I didn’t speak of it with anyone. I could only watch the transformation take place, one day after another.

After school let out, my buddy Jeff, my brother Jack, and I decided we would get jobs working in the fields, either chopping weeds with a short-handle hoe, or picking fruit for one of the farms in the area. By earning extra money, maybe I could buy some new clothes for school. It would be a way to make some spending money, and we had convinced ourselves it would be
fun. After researching how to get one of those agriculture jobs, we set our plan in action. We went down to the county offices and received work permits and found out where in skid row to report. We were excited and thrilled with the prospects of our summer.

Early the next morning we were headed to skid row, where we were told they did the hiring, and where buses would pick us up for work in the fields. My friend Jeff’s mom volunteered to drive us there that first day and promised she would pick us up at quitting time. Skid row was a deteriorating section of the downtown area only a few blocks from where the famed Delta Channel came to an end at Weber Point. Commerce flourished in this part of town for people of little means. It housed many of the braceros that worked the fields during harvest season. It was also a habitat for the homeless and winos without shelter, a gathering place for those less fortunate.

I had learned that by working you could buy things you wanted—what I wanted to buy, I’d decided, was alcohol. My father drank, and so did both of Jeff’s parents. There must be something good about it, I figured. So my brother Jack and Jeff and I decided that the first chance we got, we were going to see what the attraction was.

It didn’t take us long to work out a scheme to get some alcohol. We talked our new bracero friend Jose into buying it for us. If everything worked out like we planned, we were going to initiate our plan on payday. We would finally be able to experience whatever the grownups loved so much about it. We said to ourselves, “If they drink it, how bad could it possibly be?” It is a strange thing to covet something you don’t even understand, but that’s exactly why we wanted it. We were sure we were missing out on something great.

My brother and I had an advantage when it came to secret plans. Our parents both worked night shifts in their respective jobs. We weren’t always sure when my dad would be working, so we would make our plans around his. We could do whatever we wanted after they left for work. They had no way of knowing what we were up to. We had our plan worked out to the last detail and nothing could have deterred us.

After work late Friday afternoon, after being dropped in skid row, we waited for our friend Jose to buy us our booze. We’d made friends with Jose our first day in the fields. He, in retrospect, taught us how to survive the fields. He wasn’t much taller than us, but he had a confidence about him and we suspected that he knew just about everything a person could know. We liked him and he liked us also. Our friendship would grow over time, but for now our deal with Jose was simple: if he purchased us some booze we would buy some for him.

Jack had heard in school that sloe gin was the booze to drink—it was supposed to taste a lot like sweet plum juice—so that’s what we asked Jose to buy for us. Jose strolled out of the liquor store with three pints of Sloe Gin for us and a fifth of Jack Daniel’s for himself. In the parking lot on the corner of Eldorado and Market streets in skid-row, sweaty and dirty, watching cars speed on the road, the sight of Jose swinging our bag of booze next to his leg seemed like a kind of miracle. We were anticipating our night to come. We knew that inside that bag was a bottle of booze for each of us and dreams of another place. We couldn't wait to get home with our booze. Jeff had already gotten permission from his parents to spend the night with us. All we had to do next was wait for my dad to leave for work. I didn't know that my life was about to take a drastic turn, a turn that would, over time, pull me into the depths of a personal hell. I didn’t know that that hell would be a tormenting void that would hold me prisoner. I didn’t know that that night would be the beginning of my journey into the world of alcoholism, a condition I would struggle with for decades.
My parents were off to work and we were free to be whoever we wanted. We were free to experience the forbidden fruits of adulthood. We were about to do what we have been waiting weeks to do. With our recently purchased sloe gin tucked down in the front of our pants, we headed down to Victory Park to get drunk.

We figured by the time we got there it would be dark, which made us feel more comfortable. We were so stupid that we didn’t even think about how we would get home afterward. We weren’t capable of looking that far into the future. It didn’t take us long after entering the park to find a great spot, a spot that would conceal us from law enforcement and neighborhood parents driving by.

We chose Victory Park because, in our minds, it was the perfect place to get drunk. It was a huge, natural twenty-two acre park with large over-hanging Oak and Elm trees, trees that entwined one another and canopied the park. In front of the park facing Pershing Ave. stood the famous Haggin Museum. It was a large brick structure that looked like a southern mansion. The museum held collections of major American and European artists, as well as artifacts of local history. In front of the museum were two postcard-perfect ponds, a habitat where local ducks gathered.

As we situated ourselves for the night to come, we watched visitors feed the ducks and stroll around the ponds. A well-kept baseball diamond and tennis court was positioned along the south side of the park, creating even more obstruction for those who might look inside. The place was perfectly inconspicuous, we thought. Even if a policeman drove by, he would have difficulty spotting us deep inside the park at night.

When we began drinking everything seemed to happen quickly, with instant efficiency. I was mesmerized by the transformation that took place. I had fought all my life to rid myself of my perceived deficiencies and now, not even knowing it, I held the cure in my hand.

The moment I took my first drink of alcohol, I was a changed person. I loved everything about it. It made me feel wonderful. The warmth of the liquor sliding down my throat was exhilarating. I felt a sense of freedom as it infused my life with its warm glow. Control—I felt like I was in control of my life for the first time. I felt a sense of clarity as the booze went down, one gulp at a time. It was like I was transformed into somebody completely different, a person who understood what freedom meant. I felt normal for the first time in my life.

Even though we threw-up our dinners all over the park, we kept our vigil that night under the massive trees, slowly drinking our booze. It was a kind of ritual we were performing, and we felt duty-bound to complete it. After two or three hours we had finished off the last of the booze. Being sick didn’t really bother us, but running out of booze made us unhappy campers. We believed we had found a magic carpet, and as we sat there drunk we planned our next ride. For me, Sloe Gin became a panacea in a bottle, a jug that held the answers to life’s difficulties.

At fourteen, on my first occasion drinking, I also experienced my first blackout—a consequence that would follow me throughout my drinking life, robbing me of memories of my teenage years, and later, my adult life. It was a deceptive charm, a way to escape. Now I had a way to run from the difficult moments in my life, a way to blank out memories I didn’t want to remember.

A beautiful and gruesome relationship was birthed in Victory Park that night. What I didn’t know, what I was incapable of understanding at that time, was that I was opening the door to the abyss. I created a passageway for evil to invade. I surrendered in those magical moments to an overwhelming bliss, but it would become the abyss that would take complete control of my life.
Instantly, every single thing I felt was wrong with my life was fixed, all my personal flaws disappeared. The insecurity I felt about being of short stature, or about being skinny—they vanished in an instant. I was no longer the kid who had been sick all his life—it was like my illness never happened. I believed, under the influence of alcohol, I could accomplish anything. Finally, I am on a level playing field with others, I thought. Finally, I was free from the darkness that had shackled me. It was a distortion of course, a false euphoria—but in that moment I had found something that could make me feel normal. It became my first true love.

God, I thought, no wonder adults love getting drunk.

I was eager for my next opportunity to repeat this bizarre behavior. Even finding someone to buy the alcohol excited me, because it was against the rules. I liked the idea of doing the opposite of what was expected of me. Alcohol became my closest, dearest friend that summer. That experimental night fueled a fire deep inside of me and I was powerless to extinguish it. A new beginning had arrived. Fate opened her doors and I blindly walked through, headed to places unknown. I had entered the world of extreme alcoholism without even knowing it. My obsessive personality fueled a drive that would deliver me to total devastation. Unaware of the negative effects that alcohol would have on my life one day, I gave in to the powerful desire to consume it. I could respond only to the appeals of the present, not the devastation looming in the future. In the present, I knew that booze would take away my inhibitions, but I could not foresee that it would strip me of everything important. Most of all alcohol would rob me of my self-respect, which would be yanked out from under me one day.

With this newfound discovery, I was no longer limited to the confines of a strained and frightening world. Alcohol not only set me free from my bondage, it made me not care—I would not care about anything, or anybody, anymore. I would do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to do it. I was a pleasure-seeking missile.

As the days and weeks passed, the more I got drunk, my “freedoms” sometimes turned out to be stupid, childish ideas. I was continually looking for avenues of excitement, anything that would bring me a thrill. Boredom and resentment became the driving force of my escapades. I had no concept of consequences.

My love of alcohol progressed as the summer drew on. While my friends continued in the fields, I eventually gave it up. The job allowed me to make spending money, but I had money enough to buy booze for the rest of the summer. I simply quit the job. Turnover was high among field laborers, so no one scolded or begrudged me for leaving.

As the summer came to an end, my father’s drinking had escalated as well. The foundation that kept us strong for so long was eroding. Our future was in question. We went into survival mode at home. We did whatever we needed, individually, to survive. As my father’s drinking increased, his ability to control his actions decreased proportionately. He started missing more work than normal, and shortages of money became common. From day to day we never knew if he would be drunk when he came home. More often than not he was drunk.

The bleaker my father’s world became, the more I too sought out alcohol to eradicate the pain. I did the only thing I knew how to do to give meaning to my life. My own alcoholism fueled the darkness and made it darker, and then it took more alcohol to escape the darkness. I’d created a prison without even knowing it. I continued to entangle myself in this web of illusion.

As summer neared its end and high school was looming, I was perfecting my self-medication techniques. I was learning to deal with things that bothered me, but I was dealing with them in the most destructive ways. If anything became uncomfortable for me, I would turn to booze to help me cope with it.
By the end of summer, I knew that alcohol couldn’t fix anything, but it gave me the defiance and courage to not care. If life became too troublesome, booze would numb my feelings, allowing me to escape. My eyes were wide open to a world I didn’t know existed. My childhood delusions were disappearing rapidly, as my decisions pushed me closer and closer to adulthood. Alcohol became my armor against the world, a world I was afraid to face. High school was only a couple of weeks away and I was hoping it would bring some semblance of order to my life. I still dreamt that life would get better, that somehow things would turn around for my family. I still wanted to go to college and to become that doctor (or lawyer) that my parents dreamed I would become. I wanted to be their successful son. I wanted much out of life, just like every other teenager, but I couldn’t see that I was already taking steps that would destroy those dreams. All I ever wanted was a Leave it to Beaver life, the life I thought everyone but me got to live, the life I watched on television every week. I wanted my father to be normal, like all the other fathers I knew. I wanted the pain to go away, but it just wouldn’t go away. I was destined to travel down a road of my own making, an instructive and humbling road.

Chapter 5: High School

From that first experiment in the park, I forged an immediate attachment with booze. I was fascinated by its mysterious appeal, its false euphoria. I woke up every day that summer enthusiastic about the experiences the next drink might hold. As I waited for high school to begin, I embraced alcohol as a means to a kind of enlightenment. When I drank, everything seemed to get clearer. Through the rosy lens of booze, I thought I was coming to understand my life better. We became like a love song, me and booze, but it was a fictitious love. And like any good love song, those drunken insights were romanticized and riddled with embellishments.
After three months of “self-discovery,” summer finally came to an end, but high school still awaited me—a frightening unknown. I would be attending the most recognized high school in the city, the school Middle America sent their children to for their high school educations. A place, as my Uncle Bimbo said, that could “open doors for me.”

Amos Alonzo Stagg was the newest, most modern high school in the city. This could be the opportunity to turn my life in a positive direction, I thought—a chance to become everything I dreamt I could be.

After the previous year’s disaster, I wasn’t sure what to expect from school anymore. I only knew that school had become a place I no longer felt comfortable, a place where I didn’t feel equal. It was a place I preferred to avoid. By this time, my low self-esteem was causing me problems I couldn’t really understand. I’m sure it wasn’t much different with other kids my age, but I thought I was the only person in the world afflicted with flaws and insecurities. School made me feel isolated, which, I realize now, caused me to retreat even more. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy, a downward spiral.

The first day of high school came around soon enough, and we decided we would drive there in my brother Jack’s recently purchased 1955 pink and gray Chevrolet Bel Air Coup. We would pick up our friends Jeff and William Thomas. We liked the idea of driving to school. It seemed like the height of freedom and evidence of our impending adulthood.

William lived a couple streets over, on the other side of the railroad tracks in our neighborhood. We had become close friends with William over the summer. As we drove toward school that day, Jack told us that the first day of school wasn’t that important. Because of the confusion of everyone trying to get signed up, they wouldn’t even miss us if we skipped, he said. We believed him because he’d attended school there the prior year. If school wasn’t that important on the first day, we figured we could spend it just riding around doing whatever we wanted. Maybe even get a couple six-packs to drink while we drove around. So on my first day of high school I did something I had never done before: I cut class. We spent the remainder of the day driving around town drinking beer and feeling pretty cool for cutting class.

It was the first day of high school and I’d already screwed up. It was the start of a pattern of behavior that would hold me back again and again. I was too immature to realize the consequences that my behavior was setting in motion. I wasn’t capable of seeing into my future—though now, looking back, it seems inevitable.

I was over at my buddy William’s house one weekend two or three weeks after we started high school. His parents were both working that day, so we could do whatever we wanted. William was a little taller than me but skinny as a rail. He lived on the other side of the railroad tracks, just a few blocks from me, which made it convenient to visit. When I arrived that day, he was in his bedroom smoking, a temptation I had not yet succumbed to. As we sat around bullshitting, I watched him smoking and thought how cool he looked. I wanted to try it, so I asked him to give me a cigarette. It made William look cool, and sure enough, as I took that first drag, it made me feel cool.
Drinking and smoking, of course, were only the outward symptoms of problems that lay deep inside of me. And it turned out that the drinking, smoking, and cutting class was only a prelude to greater destruction coming my way. I was riddled with uncontrollable fears, and those fears wouldn’t allow me to face my responsibilities, or the uncertainties that came my way. The fear skewed my pride, rendering me incapable of even admitting that difficulties existed. So, in turn, most of my efforts went toward keeping those flaws hidden. I just wanted to be a normal teenager. My self-esteem was shattered, and I didn’t feel worthy of being part of anything positive. I did the only thing I knew how to do: I gravitated toward destructive behavior, toward the negative. I was learning that if I was going to be special, I was going to have to be special in some way that was different than everyone around me. The drinking, the smoking, the destructive behavior: it felt important—it made me feel significant and grown up.

About seven months into my sophomore year, in early spring, my buddy Jeff and I were riding around with our friend Larry Matthews. Larry was a few years older than us and had already graduated from school. We idolized him because he “lived on the wild side.” We had been at the park drinking beers when we decided to take a ride in his new car, a black, 1953 Ford Coupe—he said it could beat any car on the road. He thought it was the greatest car ever made, and we thought so too.

We were cruising down Park Street when he decided to show us how fast the car could go. We were doing sixty in a twenty-five mile-per-hour speed zone. Out of nowhere, a car pulled out in front of us from one of the side streets. Larry slammed on the brakes, but the car went into a slide. We weaved back and forth erratically, crashing into two parked cars along the curb, before coming to a stop. As I watched the crash unfolding, seemingly in slow motion, I bent over in the back seat and laid down, closing my eyes against the inevitable collision. The noise was excruciating. I could hear metal crunching and glass exploding. One of the parked cars was propelled into the owner’s front yard.

I stayed still in the back seat until things settled down, afraid to move a muscle, or even to make a noise. There was a horrible pain in the lower part of my back. I tried to move, but I seemed to be frozen in place. Then, like magic, police appeared. They poked their heads inside the wreckage and asked if I was okay. Somehow, after a few moments, I was able to free myself from the wrecked car. An ambulance was called, and after a brief, painful wait, I was rushed to the hospital.

After three days in the hospital with a fractured back, the doctor sent me on my way with pain medication and instructions to see an orthopedic surgeon as soon as possible. My L-3 vertebrate had sustained a small fracture. With a little rest and exercise, the doctor assured me, I’d be back to normal in no time.

I was settling into high school, but as I did, I was also discovering that the dream of college was slowly fading from my mind. I cut class almost as much as I attended it. What the hell, I figured—I can get away with it.

My dad, again, needed hospitalization for his drinking during this time, so we took him to the veteran’s hospital in Livermore, California. We weren’t allowed to admit him to the county or local hospitals because they refused to take alcoholics as patients in those days. (Under life or death circumstances an alcoholic might be admitted, but never because of alcoholism alone.) We checked my father in and, because long drawn out goodbyes were discouraged, it wasn’t long before we were back on the road home.
We couldn’t have been home more than two hours when the phone rang. A nurse told us to come back immediately, that our father wouldn’t make it through the night. I was horrified to see, when we arrived, that he was strapped down to his bed. He was squirming around trying to get loose, grunting weird ungodly noises and nonsense words. I stood there in shock, trying to understand what was happening. The attending nurse that night was very empathetic, and I’m sure she could see the fear scribbled across our faces. She told us that we were seeing what was called delirium tremens, “DTs”. A condition, she said, that many alcoholics experienced when trying to quit drinking.

That night should have put an end to my own experimentation with drinking, but it didn’t. Even after I experienced similar visits to my father over and over during those high school years, even when I found myself praying that he would pass during one of those awful episodes—I myself continued to drink.

The embarrassment, fear, and humiliation of my father’s condition became too much to bear. Part of me wanted, more than anything in the world, for him to get better. The other part just wanted it to come to an end. I was ashamed and humiliated for thinking those thoughts about my Dad, and I would carry this secret with me all my life. I was not capable, at that time, of empathizing with my father. If he didn’t drink, he wouldn’t be this way, I thought. It was very simple.

If he could only quit drinking, I would think to myself, everything would get better for our family and for me. If only I could understand him or be more sympathetic. If only things were different. If only people understood how I felt, they would be able to understand my behavior. If only, if only, if only. I lived my life in a state of “if only.”

It seemed like all we did was live through one problem after another. The more I experienced these destructive episodes, the more I ran toward the booze to help me cope.

Early in my junior year, I had a little red Honda 50 motorcycle. I bought it to deliver papers on a paper route and drive back and forth to school. I got home from school late one afternoon to find my dad waiting for me. He hadn’t worked that day and had been sitting around in his bathrobe drinking. He wanted me to give him a ride down to the neighborhood liquor store on the back of my scooter. Since I was the first person to show up with transportation, it was going to fall on me to get him down to that store.

I argued and pleaded with him. The embarrassment of someone seeing my dad in his bathrobe, on the back of my motorcycle, shamed me—but he was adamant. I finally gave. I knew I had no other choice. It wasn’t long and we were headed to the neighborhood liquor store to get his booze. I just knew one of my friends would spot us. How would I ever explain this to them? I couldn’t wait to get his liquor and get back home. I was disgusted, ashamed, and repulsed—and I couldn’t wait to go out later that night and get drunk myself.

It seemed like there were always those kinds of difficulties in my life. Three months later, I get a ticket for driving too fast. Within weeks, I was summoned to court to find out my punishment. I was underage, so a parent needed to appear with me, they said. With my mother working during the day, it became necessary for my dad to go to court with me. I begged my mom to go, but it was impossible because of her job.

My dad and I got to court early and settled into our seats. He thought that if we got in early enough we might get out early too. While sitting there looking around, I noticed a few friends from school scattered throughout the courtroom, which made me feel a little better. It was like appearing in court was a rite of passage. What could possibly go wrong, I thought? I would receive some fine or light punishment.
The bailiff appeared from one of the doors on the side of the room and ordered everyone to stand for the presiding judge and to say the Pledge of Allegiance. The whole Courtroom got out of their chairs, stood up, and put their right hand over their hearts. I looked over at my dad. He had refused to get out of his seat. My face turned red from humiliation. I couldn’t wait to sit back down.

My dad, being a longshoreman, needed to be at the union hall by three o’clock that afternoon to receive his work ticket for the night shift. It was around two o’clock and he was checking his watch very closely. The judge called each young defendant and their parents in front of him, one at a time, to hear their arguments and make their pleas. The judge called one of the boys and his father. They happened to be black. My father, witnessing this, went completely ballistic. He stood up and yelled at the judge. He wanted to know why a nigger got to go before him. He went on to tell the judge that he needed to be at the union hall by three o’clock, and that that nigger shouldn’t be allowed to go before him. I slid down into my seat as low as I could go, hoping for my whole world to disappear and for this nightmare to be over. I am not sure, but I think my dad believed that black people didn’t work.

It seemed like there never was a serene moment in my life. There was always some chaos or disruption. It was during this time that my younger brother, Peter, began getting arrested for various offenses. He got involved with kids who sniffed glue and took harder drugs. His behavior eventually landed him in the juvenile court system. There was always an emptiness in our home when Peter was incarcerated, a reminder that our world was deteriorating.

During my teenage years, I sometimes sat staring out my bedroom window late at night, even though I couldn’t see anything through the colored plastic. I would lie there wondering where my father was, or when he might get home. I would also talk to God, though I didn’t understand who God was, or if he even existed—I just wanted someone, anyone, to hear my pleas. I wanted God to help me understand why my father was the way he was. If I could just understand, then maybe I wouldn’t feel like I did. I would also pray to become rich, so that one day I could build a hospital that would fix his alcoholism. I wanted a special hospital that would take in him and others like him, a place that would treat alcoholics and make them better.

During the 1960s if a person was afflicted with alcoholism, there really wasn’t anywhere for them to go. The regular hospitals didn’t want to touch these sick people, and the ones that did didn’t really know how to treat them. If I could have, I would have built a place that would fix every one of them. This was my thinking then. The doctors had fixed my heart, why couldn’t they fix my dad’s drinking?

One spring Friday night during my junior year, my friends, Jeff and Robert and I, thought we would cruise up and down Pacific Avenue and drink some beers. If you were a teenager with a car, Pacific Ave was the place to be on Friday or Saturday night. During the week, we saved all the spare change we could get our hands on in order to buy gas for weekend trips up and down the strip. We would drive up and down, back and forth, all night. The goal was to be seen by other kids doing the same thing. I borrowed my sister’s baby blue, 1961 Pontiac Tempest four-door sedan that night. It wasn’t the sportiest car, but it had a nice stereo, and it got us where we wanted to go.

As the night wore on, we consumed more and more beer. We became drunker and drunker with each passing hour. We cruised up and down the drag all night listening to the radio, blasting the music of Johnny Rivers, the Beatles, Herman’s Hermits, Paul Revere and the Raiders, the Righteous Brothers, etc. My friend Jeff was riding shotgun, and Robert was in the back seat rolling a joint, as I steered the car down the street.
As it worked out on many nights, a kid in another car said something stupid to us. By that
time, we were too drunk to worry about trouble—in fact we were looking for it. We screamed
profanities back at them to show we weren't afraid, and we started chasing them, to show we
wouldn't be intimidated. We chased those guys all over town—from the north side of Stockton to
the south side—throwing beer bottles at them and trying to get them to pull over, but we couldn’t
catch up to them. I have a lot of memories like this one. I was always trying to be the tough guy,
though inside I was constantly afraid.

While chasing the kids, I went around a corner too fast and lost control. The car flipped
multiple times. I held onto the steering wheel for dear life as the car rolled. I could hear the
 crunching of metal as it slid across the asphalt on its top. The front windshield exploded and
glass particles flew everywhere as the roof collapsed.

When the car finally came to a halt, we were in shock and baffled about what to do. We
somehow crawled out from the wreckage. Standing there like the Three Stooges, trembling and
afraid, we realized we were lucky to have survived the accident, let alone without injury. Jeff and
Robert were afraid of trouble and they decided to take off, leaving me to deal with the problem
by myself. Not knowing what to do, when the police showed up, I did the only thing I could
think to do: I lied to them.

I told them that a carload of guys had been chasing me and that I was afraid if they caught
me they would harm me. I told them that while trying to get away from them, I was going too
fast around the corner and lost control of the car. At the time the officer believed my story. I
thought maybe, just maybe, I would be able to get out of the situation unscathed.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, when the car had flipped, the guys we had been chasing
went straight to the police station, just as any responsible person might have done. They reported
what happened, and told the police the whole truth, including who was chasing whom, and us
throwing beer bottles at them.

That night, after interviewing me, an officer gave me a ride home in his black and white
cruiser. I was terrified about telling my parents what happened, and about telling my sister what
had happened to her car. Of course, there was no way to hide the fact that I had wrecked it, but if
another lie could have gotten me out of trouble, I might have employed it. Luck was on my side
when the police officer dropped me off, though. Everyone was fast asleep. I wouldn’t have to
explain the situation until the next day. My sister would be heartbroken. She loved her car and
needed it for work and school. And my parents—that would be a whole other story. I knew
they’d be furious.

I’d had created another mess. My immaturity and irresponsibility had again wreaked its
havoc. I didn’t know how to fix this disaster I’d crafted. My fear told me to just run away.

Then, out of nowhere, I realized how I could fix my problem: I could just kill myself and my
problems would go away.

I thought about that solution more and more as I walked toward my bedroom. A few months
prior, Jack and I relocated our bedroom from the garage to the shed in the backyard. As I
approached the shed, I recalled the bottle of pain medication I kept there. Sitting on the edge of
my bed with pills in one hand and a glass of water in the other, I began to think about the mess I
had made of my life. The pain of confronting that mess was crippling. The fears, the low self-
esteeem, the insecurities, the isolation and loneliness of my life, all seemed to bear down on me at
once. It was a simple enough decision for a complex problem. I swallowed the pills, one after
another, until they were all gone. I lay down on my bed knowing that all of my problems would
shortly disappear.
I awoke the next morning stunned and confused. I lay in bed with a very dry mouth, upset stomach, a terrible hangover, and a sense of complete failure. My suicide attempt hadn’t worked out how I’d planned, and since nobody knew about it, I would just go on with my miserable life. Suicide, from that point on, became an emotional companion, gently massaging me if life got too rough. It became like a safety valve: at times, if the pressure got too high, the thought of ending things would let off some of the steam.

Early in my senior year, my dad and I were sitting in the living room watching television. He was on one end of the couch and I was on the other. My mom was at work and my brothers and sister were gone. I had stayed home from school with a bad head cold that day. While watching television, I suddenly heard an ungodly screeching coming from the direction of my father—a disturbing noise, like an injured animal. He was shaking terribly and staring at me with no expression on his face, and eerie, animalistic noises emitted from his mouth. His face was distorted and his hands were drawn into claw-like knots. His tongue stuck out of his mouth, and I could see he was biting into it. I had no idea what was happening to him or what to do about it. I wanted to run away from what I was witnessing. I was helpless as my father writhed and contorted in front of me.

I tried to collect my thoughts and calm down as best I could. I dialed the operator for help. The moments felt like hours as I waited for the ambulance and paramedics to arrive. They began attending to him as soon as they entered the house. One of the paramedics explained what I was witnessing as the others worked on him. This was my first experience with an alcoholic seizure, though it wouldn’t be my last. I couldn’t wait to go out that night and get stupid-drunk to erase those ungodly memories.

Over the following months, it became more difficult for me to focus on school. With so many distractions unfolding, I found it hard to concentrate. It became a challenge to sit through most school days, but somehow I kept going. The main thing I cared about now was alcohol. I used it to comfort myself for all my problems. I knew that no matter how bad or difficult life became, I had a way to make the problems go away. I knew how to hide down deep inside the booze, how to escape the reality I lived in.

High school went on and I went along with it, slipping deeper and deeper into alcoholism with each passing day. Whenever anything became difficult at school or at home, I resorted to alcohol to escape. After a while, booze became my only recourse for my problems. I didn’t know how to work through them, I just figured I had to escape them any way I could. The more alcohol it took to kill the pain in my life, the more complex my problems became. I was creating a vicious cycle that fed off itself, a cycle that had no exit.

One day in my senior year, my buddy Jeff and I decided to borrow a black Honda 50 motorcycle from the school parking lot. It was a lot like the one I’d owned the year before, except this one didn’t belong to us. We justified our actions by telling ourselves a lot of other kids did the exact thing we were going to do: hotwire it and take it for a quick ride during lunch break, then bring it back before school resumed. We had no plans to keep the scooter, we just wanted to ride it around and have some fun.

As soon as the lunch bell rang, Jeff and I met in the student parking lot. Having owned the same bike, I knew how to hotwire it. It was a simple enough task. All you had to do was pull two wires apart. After I started the engine, Jeff jumped on the back and we were off riding. We were headed to Ladd’s Marina for lunch, a favorite hangout.
I let Jeff drive on our way back from lunch. Everything was going according to plan: we had borrowed the Honda and now we were on our way back to return it. But somehow, on our way back, Jeff changed gears while going too fast and blew the engine. All the excitement and joy we had felt just moments before were replaced by fear and confusion. Neither I, nor Jeff, nor the motorcycle made it back to school that afternoon. We abandoned it on the side of the road in some weeds.

When the kid who owned it reported it missing, it was easy for the police to figure out who was involved in the theft. They simply checked the school’s attendance records to see who was absent from afternoon classes.

Jeff and I were both arrested for joy riding and held responsible for fixing the cycle’s engine. We also spent four weekends at Peterson Juvenile Hall in French Camp. Every Friday, after school let out, my mom or dad would take me out to San Joaquin County Detention Center in French Camp to stay until Sunday evening. The juvenile facility was near the hospital where I was born. Life, for whatever reason, kept bringing me back to this area. It was scary to be locked up in the facility with the other kids—I suspected they must be murderers. Once I was inside and the doors locked, a sense of loneliness and failure overwhelmed me. A creeping, tormenting fear would follow, and recognition of the fact that I no longer had control over my life. Come Sunday evening, one of my parents would pick me up and, for the rest of the week, life would resume as normal. I performed this routine for a month, until I met my obligation to the court.

Despite all of my problems, I never linked them to my drinking. Other kids didn’t experience the problems I did. I thought I was just unlucky. I had definitely been cursed at birth, I thought. While I was going through the court system, they were going to baseball games and school functions and taking vacations with their parents. They were striving to be successful and to graduate from high school. I was striving to self-destruct.

My mom was the greatest mother any child could want, and she loved every one of her children completely. She would have done anything to help us, but she couldn't control my father’s drinking, or my own. My Dad was no different than other men, but alcoholism rendered him powerless over his own life and the family he tried desperately to protect.

On one of many gloomy days in our family’s life, I asked my mom what she wanted out of life. Without even hesitating, she said, "Steve, all I ever want is for my children to know that no matter how hard life becomes, God can fix any problem." During this time, she herself had grown very close to God, and she knew that God was the only answer for any of us. But to convince her children was another story, especially under the circumstances in which we lived.

As she talked to me about God, I thought she was losing her mind. I might have even poked fun at her ideas. I asked her how she could believe in something she couldn't see. How could God be so great when we were living in such pain? With my world so chaotic, it became impossible to see anything positive about it. I was blinded by the darkness that surrounded me. The idea of some God fixing our lives was a joke. Where was He then? Why didn’t He fix our mess?

My mom was a very patient, very wise, understanding woman. She knew that I might have a different perspective about life and about God one day. She kept preaching to us children every chance she got, but we never talked about those dreams of hers again.
Even though my father was an alcoholic, he had a rigid morality, and he tried his best to instill his principles in his children. He was a highly decorated Marine, a hero of World War II. He helped win that war, but he couldn't win his war with the bottle. We loved our dad very much, but we hated what he had become and what he had brought to our family. Toward the end, he sat in his chair all day, dressed in his blue bathrobe, drinking whiskey until he passed out in the living room. We kept our front window curtains closed so no one could see what went on inside our home. His tall water glass was always filled with whiskey on the stand next to his chair, and beside his feet, an empty glass jar to spit his Copenhagen into.

Sometimes he would be coherent in the morning hours, but by afternoon, he would just mumble unintelligible words and slump over in his chair. This was my dad. I loved him. I worshipped him and adored him, but over time he turned into something I couldn’t understand or respect. I was becoming cold toward him, like a piece of metal, like hard, calculating steel.

One weekend toward the end of my senior year, I was getting ready to go out and meet my friends for the evening. My dad was lying in bed because he was too drunk to get up. My mom was at work and my brothers and sister were out doing whatever they were doing. As I got ready to leave my father begged me to stay home that night. He pleaded with me and cried. He was so lonely, he said. He needed someone to talk to.

This was a very normal occurrence, but I hated it. I was standing in the doorway of his bedroom looking at him. A skeleton of a man laid before me, a pathetic crippled human. Out of pain and confusion, I yelled at him and I started to cry also.

“Fuck you. FUCK YOU. How do you think I feel?” I said. “I don’t care how lonely you are or how much you hurt.”

I turned around and walked away from him, never once looking back. I left the house with the heaviness of shame in my chest. I didn’t know whether I felt ashamed of my father or myself. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on some booze. I couldn’t wait to escape those feelings.

My dad believed that a man’s word was his bond. If his word wasn't any good, neither was the man. He believed in working hard for your keep, and that nobody owed you anything in life. One of his favorite sayings was, “We might be poor Okies, but we will be clean Okies.” Over time alcohol crippled him, and his beliefs became an empty vessel. He believed them in theory, but he couldn’t enact them in his own life. His erratic behavior became unbearable for us to watch. It was an embarrassment to bring anyone home to visit or to spend the night. We all just pulled inside of ourselves, hoping things would get better.

But things did not get better. The deterioration escalated day after day. When he tried to quit drinking, he became bed ridden. He would stay in his room while he tried to beat the booze. We could hear him from the living room. The bed would shake and bang against the bedroom wall for hours, sometimes days, leaving us to imagine what he was going through. I knew there was nothing I or anyone else could do to make things better. I was in a living nightmare and there was no one to scream to for help, so I screamed inside my own mind. Occasionally he would get up to go to the bathroom to throw up. It made me sick to watch his legs spasm and buckle. It was unbearable to witness these things unfold day after day, but we had no other choice.
As my father’s drinking progressed, he eventually couldn’t work. Money became a big issue in our home. There just wasn’t enough to pay the bills. My father, by this time, was signed up to receive social security disability and pension payments, but he hadn’t been granted them yet. As we waited for that approval, my mother couldn’t pay her electric bill. I remember, so clearly, her calling the Welfare Department pleading with them to help her with the bill. I felt a sense of loss, a sense of helplessness, listening to my mother beg the Welfare Department to help her pay her bills. I felt so sorry for her, but I had no idea how to help fix the problems she faced. Moments like that scarred me deeply. They marked an invisible stain on my soul. I had become like a thermos bottle dropped on the ground: the outside had a few dings, but inside the glass was completely shattered.

By the end of my school years our home environment had collapsed completely. My father deteriorated as his alcoholism increased. As my world crumbled before my eyes, I was helpless to stop the carnage. A father I adored was not capable any longer of guiding his family. He tried to do what was right, but his addiction now controlled every fiber of his being.

He would start to take his first couple of shots in the morning in a tablespoon, until he was able to get two or three of them to stay down, so that he wouldn’t go into an alcoholic seizure. Once he felt stable and knew the seizures weren’t coming, he would fill his water glass to the top with cheap rotgut whiskey. This became our world, day after day, month after month. My family and I were subjected to this horror every day of our lives.

When my dad didn’t drink, he was the greatest dad there was, and our world was okay. But, if he was drinking, it was a living nightmare. It was sad to watch it unfold.

Because some teacher or counselor once told my parents that I was a gifted child, I always felt a terrible pressure to succeed. I was never able to live up to those expectations, and I resented the fact that they were put upon me. Nevertheless, in the last semester of my senior year, I was about to show them how smart I really was.

I was convinced I had the answer that would finally solve all of my emotional and educational difficulties. I was eighteen years old and an adult according to the law, and also a month and a half away from graduating high school. I had been working as a longshoreman on the weekends for about a year, and sometimes at night after school. It was an ideal job for someone like me. I could make extra money, and most of the dockworkers, like me, loved to drink. Why did I need a high school diploma to work on the docks? The truth was, I didn’t.

I dropped out of high school, needing only to finish the last month and a half in order to graduate. My own insecurities, my own black moods and depressions, had finally become too difficult to bear. The guilt I felt about my father ate at me daily. I couldn’t make them go away, no matter how much booze I drank. Quitting and running away from my responsibilities seemed like the only solution. I thought I could outrun my nightmares and the hurt and torment that troubled me. It was foolish thinking on my part, but it was the only answer I had.

I drove to the front of the school, parked, and walked into the attendance office to have my meeting with Mrs. Bolts. She was the lady you checked in with if you missed a school day. Today she would be talking to me about my decision to drop out of school. She had gotten to know me pretty well simply because I cut class all the time and I had to report to her with my excuses in order to get back into school. Mrs. Bolts was a brilliant and wise woman. She wasn’t going to allow me to walk out those school doors without leaving me with a few pearls of her wisdom. As we stood there talking, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Steve, if you run now, you will run the rest of your life.”
I knew Mrs. Bolts was telling the truth as soon as she said those prophetic words, but I was so lost and confused that I couldn't see any other solution. Mrs. Bolts said what she needed to say, and then I turned around with my head hanging low and walked out of her office with shame etched across my face. Every June, when school lets out all over the nation, I remember those beautiful words from Mrs. Bolts. On many occasions I have used them with others, people I have tried to help. There is so much truth in them.

With no school responsibilities left, it was time to have fun and make some money. I was finally free of the shackles of school, I thought. Now I could do whatever I wanted to do, anyway that I chose to do it. So I did what I did best. I went out that night and got stinking drunk to celebrate my new freedom. I was now officially a high school dropout.

I remember the night the rest of my class graduated without me. The sun hadn’t quite slipped down behind the horizon as I drove by the University of Pacific football stadium on Pershing Ave. They were preparing for the graduation ceremonies of Amos Alonzo Stagg High School, class of 1967. I watched as kids and their parents scurried to get inside. They were funneling in from all directions through the main entrance. Everybody wanted to get a good seat to watch the culmination of their children’s accomplishments.

The ceremony was full of high spirits and jubilation, but I myself alternated through a catalogue of pain, anguish, jealousy, fear, rage, hate, and sorrow. I knew that I should have been among those kids receiving their diplomas. Instead I was a quitter, a runner, a dropout, and I didn't deserve to be there or to receive such honors. I knew I was an outcast from the society I lived in.

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Chapter 6: Prison

Jeff was riding shotgun and my other buddy Robert was in the back seat as we cruised up and down the avenue. While Jeff kept an eye out for action or excitement, Robert smoked a joint and played with the 22-caliber pistol he’d just purchased. We decided it was time to call it a night. Besides being stupid-drunk, we were bone-ass tired. Earlier that day, Robert and I arranged to spend the night with Jeff. We knew his parents had gone to their cabin in Mountain Ranch for the weekend. We might not have been the sharpest tools in the shed, but we were smart enough to know an opportunity when we saw it.

After drinking and running around most of the night, we were worn out. It was time to go to Jeff’s house and get some overdue sleep. While driving, we joked and bullshtted and planned our schedule for the following night. Before we knew it we were pulling into Jeff’s driveway and stumbling out of the car. Somehow we were able to stagger to his front door.
Jeff lived in an older two-story home. The house had a huge upstairs dorm-style bedroom that he and his brother Joe shared. Fumbling our way up the narrow staircase to their bedroom, we flipped on the lights and discussed who would sleep where.

Jeff and Robert decided to share Jeff’s bed and I would take the other one. I flopped down on Joe’s empty bed. (Joe had gone to the cabin with his parents.) I squirmed around until I was able to get comfortable. Lying on my belly with my head resting on my forearm, I laughed as my friends’ stories became more ridiculous.

All the lights in the house were off and it was extremely dark. Though we were in the same room, we could hardly see each other. Out of nowhere, a loud ringing noise reverberated through the room. I was caught off guard by the abruptness and intensity of it. As my head cleared from the startling bang, I realized I had just heard a gunshot. I could smell the rancid odor of gunpowder in the air. If you’ve ever heard a gunshot at close range, you know how unmistakable the sound is.

When the confusion of the blast subsided, I realized I’d been shot. I was afraid to move because I wasn’t sure where I was hit. Lying there motionless, I could feel blood trickling down my arm. I thought for sure I had been shot in the head.

In a terrified voice, I told my friends to turn on the lights, that I thought I had been shot. Since we had been joking all night they thought I was teasing and told me to shut the fuck up. I screamed, “Turn the fucking lights on!” and suddenly, the bedroom was illuminated. I lay frozen as my friends came over to take a look. I wasn't sure where I was hit, but I wasn’t taking any chances by moving around.

Robert had his 22-caliber pistol with him when we picked him up earlier that day, a six shot revolver he had been carrying around with him since he bought it. Like a kid with a new toy, he brought it everywhere—this night, even to bed. They stood over me and assessed my situation. After looking me over, they told me I’d been hit in the elbow. I carefully sat up in bed and braced for the worst. I put my feet on the floor to stabilize myself. With my right arm dangling beside my body, I began to drip blood onto the floor with every beat of my heart. Robert stood still in front of me and I could see the color had drained from his face—he looked almost transparent. The elbow was becoming painful, and it was obvious that I needed a hospital. We decided we would just drive down to the hospital and have this little problem taken care of.

As I walked down the stairs toward my car, I realized how lucky I was. The bullet had missed my head by a fraction of an inch. For having just been shot, I was feeling pretty lucky. But I still needed medical attention, and I needed it soon.

Being about three o'clock in the morning, there was no traffic on the road. My arm was starting to really burn as the pain intensified, so I told Jeff to step on it. We arrived at Dameron Hospital on Acacia Street about fifteen minutes later, and by that time, I was mightily glad to be there.

I walked across the lighted parking lot toward the emergency entrance. Even though we were worried, our mood was light and we joked with each other. We thought we were pretty cool that night. After all, I had just been shot, and, having arrived at the hospital, it looked like I’d live to tell my story. It never crossed my mind that things could have turned out differently. It was just another stupid night of drinking and having fun.
There was no one on duty that night who could operate on me, so we had to wait while they called for a surgeon. It seemed like forever waiting for him to show up, but I was thankful to be among medical experts. When the doctor showed up, I was amazed by how young he was. We joked with him and told him the story of our accident. Because he was such a young doctor, it felt like we were all school chums.

Looking at my x-ray, the doctor said the bullet was wedged in my right elbow and had fragmentized into multiple pieces. Medically, the situation posed unique challenges. Severe nerve damage could occur from trying to retrieve the small fragments, he said. He explained that in the process of removing the fragments, it was possible that irreversible damage to muscle and nerve tissues would occur. It would be my decision what to leave inside and what to take out. Having had several extreme medical procedures already in my young life—and also being of age to make my own medical decisions—I made a command decision that night: to allow the doctor to do what he thought best. I would live with the consequences of whatever pieces he couldn't retrieve. I might have been drunk, but I had faith in the doctor.

That brush with death should have been a wakeup call, but not only did it fail to get my attention, but my drinking actually increased. My behavior became more erratic and uncontrollable as the weeks and months past. I was on a fast track toward my destiny. I lived my life as if there was no tomorrow, never realizing that there were consequences for my behavior. I was soon to discover some of those consequences, however, and how radically they could impact my life.

One night while drinking with Jeff, we both concluded that we needed money. As we threw back cold beers one after another, we tried to figure out a way to get our hands on some. A light went on inside my head. It was an idea I’d kicked around one other drunken night, but I hadn’t thought of it since. I would report my 1965 Chevy Impala stolen, then turn a claim into the insurance company. I was tired of making car payments anyways. This solution would solve a couple problems for me. I figured if we stripped it out and sold the parts, we could make a lot of cash, and I’d have the insurance money to boot.

The more we thought about the idea, the more we liked it. Sell the parts for a lot of money and get rid of my loan payments in one fell swoop. It was a brilliant idea, I thought. I wished I had done it sooner!

Before long we were calculating what we might earn from selling the parts. A Purple ‘65 Chevy Impala Super Sport had a lot of desirable parts. I knew a lot of car buffs would want what we were selling. The 327 engine and the automatic trans would bring three or four hundred dollars, I thought. Guys would want it to soup up their hotrods. The chrome rims and tires were like new—that was at least another two hundred, Jeff said. Two leather bucket seats had to be worth at least a hundred each—who wouldn’t want them in their car? The new Bose stereo system I had installed would easily bring a hundred and a half. We calculated the numbers quickly in our heads. With any luck we would make close to a grand. We never had a chance to reconsider—the thought of all that money sealed the deal.

Within a couple days we had begun to put our plan into action. We lined up people who be interested in the parts. We knew a guy named Tony Blake who lived in San Andreas. Tony was a friend of Jeff, and I had met him when I went to Jeff’s parent’s cabin in Mountain Ranch one weekend. We knew Tony would be interested. The following weekend, we arranged to take the car up there and have him help us strip it, then we would disperse the other parts to buyers we’d lined up.
John Harris, another friend, would follow us up to the mountains in his pickup truck. He wanted the seats, tires, and rims. He paid four hundred and fifty dollars for the parts he chose, and we were both very happy with that deal. Tony, who’d helped us strip the car, decided he would take the engine, transmission, and stereo for five hundred.

With the car stripped and its valuable parts sold, it was time to get rid of it somewhere no one would find it. Tony said he knew a place we could dump it, so off we went, deep into the mountains, towing my stripped down Chevy behind Tony’s truck, to hide the evidence of my crime.

We drove through the mountains for what seemed like hours. I kept watch for sheriff’s cars. We turned down a winding dirt road and followed it deep into the woods. Tony said this was the place and we finally came to a stop. He assured us that no one would find the car, once we pushed it over the side of the road. We didn’t dawdle long before shoving it into a deep ravine. It was so dark that night that we couldn’t see where it landed below. The car rolled down the ravine and crashed through the trees. The crunching of metal against trees and rocks reverberated loudly through the night. We listened to the noise for some time, as if there was no bottom to the cliff. Then the noise stopped. I thought to myself: He’s right. No one will ever find this car. After saying our goodbyes, we headed back to Stockton to report the car stolen.

A couple days later, we found out that the place we ditched the car was located directly behind Fricot Ranch School for Boys, a youth camp on the other side of the ravine. The employees working that night heard the car crash through the trees and thought someone had been in a horrible accident, and search and rescue personnel were dispatched to investigate the crash. By the next morning, the car had been located, and the California Highway Patrol was investigating what happened.

Within days, detectives were knocking on my door inquiring about the car. They wanted to know if I had anything to do with its disappearance. I knew it was only a matter of days before I would be arrested. I resigned myself to that fact, as I could see no way to improve my situation.

Before I was arrested, my father offered to help. He said he would help me get an attorney. My family, I knew, didn’t have the money. A couple days later, he called a friend from work and asked to borrow the money. Listening to their phone conversation, it was obvious that the man didn’t want to loan my dad the money. My father began to cry. Finally he begged the man for the loan. The humiliation of watching my father weep and beg into the receiver overwhelmed me. It made me almost retch knowing I had created this problem. I told him to forget the money and the attorney. His begging was too much for me to take. I decided I would take my chances with the court system on my own.

December 27, 1967, a few days after Christmas, a blue undercover police cruiser pulled up in front of my home. Two huge detectives in dark suits got out of their car and walked toward the front door. I kept an eye on them through our plate glass window as they approached our home. I knew it was time to pay the piper. I answered the door and they asked me if I was Steve, and I replied yes. They instructed me to please step outside. When I complied I was told I was being arrested for a felony, P.C. 548, burning or destruction of insured property. One of the Detectives instructed me to turn around and place my hands behind my back. I was handcuffed and led off toward the police car. When we got to the car, one of the detectives opened the back door and I was placed inside.
We were headed toward San Joaquin County Jail where I would be incarcerated while I awaited trial. As we drove, one of the officers asked me if I knew the difference between a misdemeanor and a felony conviction. I told him that I thought a crime was a crime. I figured, if you broke the law you broke the law. For me it was as simple as that.

After a lengthy interrogation at the jail, I was given an orange jumpsuit and was led to the second tier of the main cellblock of the San Joaquin County Jail. I suddenly thought about where I was and what I had done. I was placed into a cell with five other inmates. A cold chill shot through me as the door clanged shut. I made myself as comfortable as I could under the circumstances, then settled in and met my cellmates. Lying there in my bunk with no clue what to expect, my mind reeled at what could happen inside that cell. Would they give me trouble? Would they beat me up? Kill me? I didn’t get the chance to worry long. A sheriff approached my cell door and informed me to pack up my things. He told me I was being transferred and to get ready to go.

It was about six o’clock in the evening and I was being transferred to Calaveras County Jail in San Andreas. After the officer shackled and cuffed me, he placed me in the back seat of his car. We arrived a little after seven—it was a different jail, but a jail nevertheless. I was immediately locked inside a cell by myself, a six by eight room with no windows. It had a stainless steel toilet with no seat and a push button flusher. Next to it stood a small stainless steel washbasin. That cell would become my home for the next three months, until I could be included with the general population.

This felony, which I undertook simply to earn some fast cash, had resulted in life altering consequences. It didn’t take me long, sitting isolated inside my tiny jail cell day after day, to realize that jail was no joke. The tedium was unbearable. The claustrophobia of living caged like an animal made me want to scream.

About three weeks later I was sitting in the Calaveras County Superior Court waiting for the judge to hand down my sentence. I was prepared for the worst. Slowly, the judge read off my sentence: First, there would be a ten year suspended prison sentence. Chills shot through me like cracks through an iceberg as I heard that pronouncement. Second, I would be incarcerated for ninety days in the Calaveras County Jail, with credit for time already served. God it scared the hell out of me, being locked up in a place like that. Third, I would be placed on probation for three years and pay a fine of two hundred dollars. Reality had just slapped me hard across the face, but I was lucky. I wish I realized how lucky I was at the time. I didn’t even know I could receive ten years for my offense. Escaping that fate should have seemed like a miracle.

Besides being a high school dropout, now I was a convicted-felon. I was branded for the rest of my life. Those marks would limit me and restrict me in ways I couldn’t imagine—but my attitude remained: So what? So I couldn't vote or own a firearm. I was too immature to understand or care about the ramifications of being a felon. As far as I was concerned, I paid the price for my crime when they arrested me.

I did my ninety days in jail and was eager to be released. Over those three months, I discovered I wasn't cut out to be a criminal, and definitely not cut out for jail. I didn’t like living in a concrete cell, where all I ever saw were three blank green walls, and going to the bathroom on a toilet with no seat. I didn’t like having no privacy, or the stares I received from sheriffs walking by. I couldn’t stand that I had no freedom of choice, and that others told me how to behave and where to go. Most of all, I didn’t like the fact that I couldn’t do the thing I loved most—I couldn’t get drunk.
Those ninety days went by slowly, but the day finally came for me to be released. I was free to leave, to do anything I wanted—but I would stay a prisoner inside my own mind, and inside my own body, for many years to come.

My first night home after serving my ninety-day sentence changed my life in dramatic ways. I arrived at my family’s home to find a beautiful young woman there. She was visiting Jane, my sister-in-law. Her name was Jody, and she was a good friend of Jack and his wife.

I said my hellos to everybody and hung around for a while talking and visiting. I already had my first night of freedom planned, however. I called Jeff to see what he was doing, and we made plans. We hadn't seen each other in over three months and we wanted to have some fun. We got together and got some beer and spent most of that night just drinking and catching up.

I went back to work down at the docks soon after that, whenever I could get the work. I continued to drink every opportunity I got, which I made sure was frequently. My life was mostly the same as before I went to jail: no direction and no purpose.

The summer months were upon us now, and life was beautiful in its own way. Jody and I started going on dates occasionally and doing things together. Our relationship grew closer with each passing day. I remember telling her that if she were smart she would run as fast as she could, that I was an alcoholic and that her life would be a living nightmare. I might have been a drunk, but I did not want to bring any harm to Jody, who I had come to adore very much.

She didn't believe what I was telling her. I think she thought, as a lot of women seem to, that she could somehow change a person. If that’s what she thought, she thought wrong—and it didn’t take me long to prove it to her. In January of 1969, the year after I was released from jail, we got married with a child on the way. As the saying goes: We didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. But we were madly in love, and that was all that mattered to us. We believed life would work things out for us somehow, if we tried hard enough. We believed all we needed was a lucky break.

Had she had known what her future held with me, she might have run as fast as her legs could carry her. But, like me, she was blinded by love. We thought stuff just took care of itself. In time we would learn that that wasn’t the case, that you get out of life what you put into it.

We moved into a one-room apartment on Park and California Streets, a complex with ten one-room units. Five of the units were on the second floor and the other five on the ground floor. We didn’t mind pulling the bed down out of the wall to sleep. It didn’t bother us that the bathroom had no door. It wasn’t much, but it was a place to live. It was a beginning for us.

Jody was pregnant, and I was a high school dropout and a convicted-felon. I had a part time job as a longshoreman, but I had a broken leg at the time and wasn’t working. Her parents were not happy. Jody had turned down a four-year scholarship to Columbia. A family never knows what they are getting in a marriage, but I’m sure hers, in their wildest imagination, never figured on getting someone like me.

Jody was a beautiful person, inside and out, and she was a brilliantly intelligent girl. She had almost total recall. Jody was studying to major in English when she decided against college, but I would, in time, give her another kind of education, an education she couldn’t have received from Columbia.

In June of 1969 our beautiful baby daughter Dempsee was born. She was a lovely soft bundle of joy for both of our families. My wife was so proud and happy about her new daughter. From the start she was a loving, caring, giving mother. Dempsee became the prize of both of our lives. She was the future we pinned our hopes to.
I was a proud and happy new father, though I didn’t know what it meant to be one. Jody was our mainstay then and kept our family together, but as an alcoholic I put strains and stress upon her that no young bride or mother should have to endure. She could not have guessed what it would mean to be married to an alcoholic.

Chapter 7: Scattered Employment

Shortly after the birth of our lovely daughter, I was able to secure a job with a paper mill company called Fiberboard. It offered everything a man raising a young family could want: paid vacation and holidays, health insurance, a generous pay scale, retirement plan, and most of all, steady employment.

I realized, shortly after beginning the job, that the employees there took their jobs seriously. I should have too, but I couldn’t help but think I should have a better job. They were being responsible, taking care of their families, working to pay their mortgages. I would only be there until a better job came along, I thought. I didn’t want to grow up and be responsible—I wanted a cushy, prestigious, high-paying job. Aside from school, where I had done miserably, it was the first time in my life I would have to report somewhere daily. The responsibility was overwhelming, but I knew alcohol would temper my confused emotions. It would make everything all right.

They had me doing grunt work in the roller room with other men. The roller room was a section of the plant where wet paper was dried before being spun onto huge rolls for shipping. The paper cycled through huge offset steamrollers. If by chance the paper separated or broke, our job was to climb beneath the hot rollers and clear the broken paper. It was laborious, physical work, and extremely hot because of the steamrollers. I didn’t like the work, but it was work. I had a steady weekly paycheck for the first time in my life—my family’s future was looking up.

Being twenty years old however, with the maturity of a teenager, I found it difficult to stay focused on my new adult responsibilities. Many mornings, I would wake up with a terrible hangover. I was often late, and sometimes, absent altogether. I didn’t have the same drive as other adults who worked at the mill, and the unglamorous work didn’t help either. I quit my job about four months into my employment. There had to be an easier way to make a living, I thought. I decided to draw unemployment while I looked for a job I’d actually enjoy. I wanted a job I would look forward to, a job like I had on the waterfront. I liked the dock work—now if I could only find one like that, but more steady…

When I quit my job however, my drinking and depression became worse. As the depression grew, fear began controlling my behavior. Just like Mrs. Bolts told me years before: If you run now Steve, you will run the rest of your life. Her statement was prophetic. I had proved her right by quitting and running, just like she said I would do. But, like all my other bad behavior, I justified my decision. I said to myself: We could get by if I work the docks part time. I like working the docks. It’s more fun. That’s the kind of work I enjoy doing. I always had an excuse.

I knew I needed a way to support my growing family and give them the life they deserved, but I needed to find steady employment to make it happen. I wanted a secure future for them. I wanted stability. Pressures were mounting—pressure to be responsible, to provide for my family, to be something I was ill equipped to be. My family wanted and deserved consistency in their lives, and I knew it was my responsibility to deliver it. The early stages of alcoholism were already manifesting in my life. I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was already preventing me from providing the security my family expected.
I would do longshoremen work at the docks whenever I could get it, and I drew unemployment checks also. We received help from our parents periodically and somehow, by the mercy of God, we were able to squeak by, prodding along day after day, week after week. But my responsibilities still eluded me at every turn. I was immature for my age, and too ignorant to understand the simple truth that my responsibilities—to my family and to myself—were overpowering me. My grip on solvency and sanity were more tenuous than I knew. All I cared about, really, was drinking. It became difficult for me to focus on anything else.

I was fortunate enough, a few months later, to receive a job offer. Western Pacific Railroad offered me a position as a Railroad Clerk. It seemed like a perfect job, the job I’d been waiting for. Job offers didn’t get any better for a person like me. It wasn’t physically hard labor like the mill. I would work inside, out of the elements, most of the time. Pay and benefits were top-notch, and they had a great union to represent employees’ interests. It had everything I thought a good job should have.

From the beginning, I liked my new work. I fit in with my co-workers and everyone bent over backward to help me succeed. I was assigned to the position of Relief Clerk, which meant I would fill in for other clerks when they took a day off from work. What I really loved about the job was that I could work two double shifts and a single shift at the beginning of the week, then have the rest of the week off. I usually had four-day weekends, which allowed me to also work part time at the docks.

In the early seventies, railroad people loved to drink. It was almost a prerequisite for employment, it seemed. This allowed me to fit right in. On most of my days off, I would drink with the boys at a local bar. Spending the day drinking beer and shooting dice—what more could a person ask for, I thought.

I learned during this time that I loved to gamble—to take a chance on a roll of the dice. The thrill of not knowing the outcome excited me. It made me feel grown up. If you were a real man, I thought, you drank booze, you smoked, you gambled, and sometimes even got into fights. I did my best to emulate my father and the way he lived his life. I knew my father was a flawed man, but he was still the definition of manhood I knew best. It wasn’t unusual, on some days, for me to lose a hundred dollars playing dice—the price of passage into manhood, I thought. Several weeks, I lost my whole paycheck.

Railroad jobs were organized by seniority. When a permanent position became available, the most senior “extra” employee got first choice for the job. If you were at the top of the list when a job opened in your district, you were required to take that position.

I had completed fifty-eight days of my sixty-day probation period and was excited to be so close to completing it. On day fifty-eight, I was instructed to report to a job in Oroville, California, a little railroad town about a hundred and twenty miles north of Stockton. It was famous for an early gold discovery and for being home to the twentieth largest dam in the world. Even though it was nestled in the picturesque setting of the Feather River, I wasn’t looking forward to Oroville. It was a long way from home, and I would be around a whole new set of people.

My wife and I decided that I should go there myself for the first week and stay in a motel until we could figure out what to do. I didn’t want to be late for my first day of work, so I showed up a day early to settle in and ensure a snag free beginning to my new job. The night I arrived, after sitting around in the motel most of the day, I decided to find a bar, to have a few drinks and kill some time. Sometime around midnight, I realized I was too drunk to report for my shift the next day, so I called the dispatcher and laid myself off for my next shift. That was
standard protocol for permanent employees when they needed a day off—but not a wise decision for a new employee two days away from making probation.

When I reported for work on the fifty-ninth day, the Train Agent Supervisor told me that my services were no longer needed. I was fired on the spot. I had probably slurred my words the night before, or rambled too long when I delivered my excuse. They were a large, successful company with no shortage of eager employees to fill positions. They had no tolerance for someone who could not complete their probation period.

I knew that my wife and both of our families were proud that I’d gotten the job. They knew it would give us a chance at a future. So it was very hard to call my wife and tell her that I no longer had a job, let alone that I’d been fired because I got drunk.

Well, shit happens, I thought. It was back to Stockton to resume my life as a hopeless alcoholic.

Like Mrs. Bolts predicted, I was running. I was running from my problems and responsibilities, but I was blind to them. It can be hard to know your own problems, because you are so close to them. I could not see what was probably painfully evident to everyone else: The seeds of my actions were bearing their inevitable fruit. I was a hardheaded, obstinate individual, convinced I was just having bad luck. I knew that no one had bad luck like me, that sooner or later things had to turn around. I spent a lot of time wondering when my luck would change, never realizing that it was me that needed changing. I did know that I couldn’t quit. I couldn’t give up entirely. I had a family to support. I had to work through this problem, somehow.

More bad luck was knocking at my door, this time in the form of my father’s drinking. His alcoholism had reached the point of no return. One day, as he and my mom sat home alone, he experienced a grand mal seizure, a debilitating whole-body seizure that she couldn’t make stop. She called an ambulance and he was taken to the county hospital for treatment. He would leave our home that day and never return. He would eventually be transferred to the state mental hospital in Stockton as a “wet brain” patient, a neurological condition caused by extreme alcohol abuse.

Early the next day, the whole family hurried to the hospital to see him. It was something we’d done many times for his many previous hospitalizations, so we were utterly stunned by what we saw when we arrived. They had him lying on his back strapped to his bed. He was there in body only. His mind seemed to have left him. When the doctors couldn’t get the seizures stopped quickly, my father suffered irreparable brain damage. They had finally gotten the seizures under control, she said, but now he was experiencing delirium tremens. The nurse said, trying to comfort us, that he was strapped to the bed to prevent him from hurting himself. As if that made the experience tolerable somehow. My father could not recall who we were that day. We stood over him, heartbroken. This was the man we adored so much—he didn’t even know who we were. It was shattering.

I felt that day that my father had given up. He knew he could no longer win his battle with alcoholism. My dad, my hero, was no longer there. In his place lay a broken man I didn’t recognize and who couldn’t recognize me. It became the day that I too gave up. I was consumed with hate. I gave in to my rage.

I needed to leave. I needed to get out of the hospital before I lost all control. Later that night, I set out with a purpose: to get as stinking drunk as I could. I needed to escape from those memories. I needed to get as far from them as I could.

A few months later, I remember asking my mom about my father’s collapse. Why? Why did it have to be this way? She really was a wise woman. She said, "Steve, sometimes in life one has
to die, so that many others can live.” I couldn’t understand what she was trying to tell me that day.

In the midst of tragedy, for better or worse, life must go on. I felt as unstable as I had ever felt, but I still had a family of my own counting on me to take care of them. They deserved the very same thing that I had wanted so desperately from my own father. It was time to grow up, to take care of my responsibilities.

I immediately set out in search of meaningful employment. We needed a weekly paycheck to support our household. Luck, it turned out, would visit me again. One day, after submitting applications all over town, I got a phone call from Southern Pacific Railroad. They wanted to know if I was interested in working for them. If I was willing, they were ready to hire me as a clerk, they said. I agreed to their offer immediately. I was given a report day and location. I felt very blessed. I knew I would need to handle this job differently than the last one. All I wanted was a second chance so that I could feed my family. That second chance had been laid in my lap, it seemed.

After taking a physical exam, I reported for work. I had an opportunity to make things better for my family. I knew that any normal, sane person would take advantage of such great fortune. For once, I wanted to behave like a normal, sane person. Since I was the new kid, they assigned me to a relief shift that no one else wanted. I only had to work it a few weeks to understand why they didn’t want it. I worked two days, two midnights, and an afternoon shift all in one week. I replaced other workers when they took days off—the same kind of work I did with Western Pacific.

After eight months working those horrible hours and passing my probation period, I thought I would see about transferring into another position with the railroad. I discovered the railroad was in need of brakemen, a job I’d had my eyes on since beginning my career with the railroads—a job, I knew, that would be more conducive to the way I wanted to live. It had more benefits than the clerk position, and the pay was almost double that of a clerk. And the brakemen did some drinking while on the road away from home. As far as I was concerned, it couldn’t get any better: drinking at work and making a lot of money.

My request for transfer was granted quickly, and I was instructed to report for the new position in Tracy, California. After a couple of days of training, I was told to report to the yard office. My new supervisor needed to speak with me to clear a few things up, he said.

Well, we would get it straightened out soon enough, I thought. No problem.

I reported for the meeting the next day with my supervisor. They told me they had some bad news for me, news that they didn’t look forward to giving. I was going to be terminated for falsifying my job application. I had lied about having a high school diploma, but it turned out to be my undisclosed spinal fracture that got me fired.

When I filled out my application for the clerk position, I was asked if I had ever had any back injuries. I did what I did best: I lied to them. I figured they would never know that my back was injured. As long as I didn’t say anything, they would never know about it. When I applied for the brakeman job, however, I was given another exam, not realizing that it included a back x-ray.

When they took the x-ray, the fracture in my lower back showed up. After reexamining my job application, it became obvious that I had lied in it. I once again found myself out of work and with no idea what to do. Because of my foolish behavior, I had lost another job. If it wasn’t for bad luck, I thought, I wouldn’t have any luck at all.

There was a third railroad in Stockton, but I was never able to convince them to give me a
job there. When they realized I had held two previous railroad positions in the span of a year, I think they assumed I was bad news.

Unbeknownst to me, I was about to enter one of the darkest periods of my life. I was about to experience extended unemployment, a dark cloud that would hover over my family for nearly a year. The good fortune I’d experienced earlier came to an abrupt end. It would be quite a while before I would find gainful employment again.

What was wrong with me, I thought to myself one day? Why wasn’t I capable of living like so many other people did? Why couldn’t I get control over my life? The answers to those simple questions eluded me because I didn’t know what was wrong with me. Like so many others suffering from alcoholism, I was blinded. I couldn’t see the forest for the trees.

As I continued searching for employment, my future began to look hopeless. I wasn’t sure that my life, my existence, was salvageable. I knew I needed to change, and I wanted to change, but I honestly didn’t know how to stop the carnage that seemed to perpetually come my way. Hate, fear, jealousy, low self-esteem, depression, and a desire for death now occupied my consciousness.

I knew I had to do something to turn my life into a new direction, so I made a decision. I would go back to night school and get my high school diploma. Not having a diploma was a failure that had haunted me every day since I’d dropped out of school. Maybe this new goal would redeem me from that failure. I thought I should at least do something positive with this free time. So I signed-up for night school and began attending classes twice a week. It made me feel good to be finally doing something positive with my life.

I continued dutifully visiting the unemployment office, as was required to get my unemployment checks. I was hoping to maybe even find a job down there. Any kind of work—by this time I wasn’t particular. Also, I would try and catch a few shifts down at the docks, but work was even slow at the docks. So I took advantage of this down time and continued attending night classes. As long as I didn’t quit, I would have my High School diploma within six months.

One day I went down to the Cement Masons Local #814 Union Hall and applied for an apprenticeship position. A few days earlier, I had heard some men talking down at the unemployment office. The local masons union was looking for apprentices, they said. I didn’t even know what a cement mason was, or what they did. I only knew that it was a Union Job, and a Union Job meant benefits, good wages. Who knows, this could be the chance I was looking for, I thought.

I drove down to the union hall on California St. early the next day. It was a huge, modern complex housing multiple businesses and trade unions. Being early spring, the plants and flowers were in full bloom. All in all, the morning felt hopeful. When I walked inside I was surprised at its size. Definitely not as large as the Longshoreman’s Hall. It wasn’t much bigger than an average size living room. A huge black man named Billy Joe Douglas was in there by himself. He introduced himself as the Business Agent and told me to take a seat. We talked for a moment, and after taking my information, he told me he would contact me as soon as an apprentice job became available. I thanked him for his time and told him I’d wait for his call.

I waited the whole next week for that call to come, then the week after that. Then three more weeks. After about eight weeks it became obvious I would not be getting a call from Billy Joe Douglas any time soon. So after eight months of unemployment (spent drunk most of the time) I decided I couldn't handle the pain of my life any longer. My family deserved so much more than I was able to supply them. I did the only thing that I could think of: I walked into my bathroom and got out a razor blade. I was finally going to do something positive with my life. And it really
did seem like a positive choice. My wife and my daughter could not have what they deserved while I was at the helm of the family ship. Removing myself from that position seemed like a pragmatic, even generous act. I made the decision that day to end it, so that my family could have the life they deserved.

I walked back into the living room and sat down on the floor in front of our couch. I took the razor blade and slowly, deliberately, slit both of my wrists. While watching the blood pump intermittently out of my severed wrists, fate stepped in. My father-in-law called, wanting to talk with his daughter. I am not sure how, but he must have detected some desperation in my voice. He said he was on his way over to see me, and that he would be there as fast as he could.

My father-in-law knew my story. He was smart enough to know I was a failure, but he came anyway. He reached out and tried to help. Without his help that desperate day, I would have succumbed to massive blood loss. I would have died on the living room floor. He was able to get the bleeding stopped eventually, and he stayed with me until I was thinking with a clearer head. Just knowing that someone cared, or maybe even understood, helped me fight back a little bit.

Being a high-ranking official for the City of Stockton, I assume my father-in-law never expected to have such an incompetent, destructive son-in-law. About a week later, my father-in-law called me. He told me he had a job for me with the city, if I was interested. I would work in the garden refuse department for the City of Stockton, picking up leaves and branches from the street. It could be a beginning for me, he said. I knew he pitied me and his daughter and the situation we both were living in, so he reached out and tried to help us.

I was tickled to have a job opportunity—a chance to maybe, somehow, get things right. I told him I would gladly accept the position, and I thanked him for all his help. I would again be able to support my family. I needed the job for more reasons than just money. My sanity, my very life, was at stake. I wasn’t going to wait around hoping to get lucky with the mason’s union. This time I would make my own luck.

A couple of months after accepting the position at the city, I graduated from night school. I received my prized diploma in June of 1971. I was feeling happy with the way my life was unfolding. I was a high school graduate and had steady employment. Maybe, just maybe, there was a way for me to turn this wrecked ship around.

One month after receiving my high school diploma, the mason’s union contacted me and wanted to know if I was still interested in their apprenticeship program. I was required to make a major decision about my life now. I knew there probably wasn't a great future in picking up leaves, so I accepted the offer.

Everybody in our family was ecstatic about our good fortune. In 1971, if you were lucky enough to get a craftsman position in the construction industry, you were truly blessed. I now had a high school diploma and a new career and I was going to be an apprentice cement mason. It wasn’t the doctor or lawyer job I’d dreamt about in my youth, but it was a profession all the same.

I started my apprenticeship program on a sweltering July day. It was 110 degrees in the shade. I wanted to quit after an hour. I had no idea what would be required of me. If it hadn’t been for my long unemployment and desperation for work, I would have simply walked away.

I was somehow able to survive that first day and the miserable scorching heat. I managed to muddle through one hour at a time. Then, sometime in the afternoon, my new boss took up a collection for a beer run. Luck had struck again, I thought to myself. I had finally found a place where people thought like I did.

These construction men loved to have a few cold beers after a hard day’s work. At the end
of most days, they made a beer run. It didn't take long at all for me to fit in with these new friends. I had a great trade now, with wonderful wages and benefits, and life was finally looking up again for my family.

I would complete my apprenticeship program after three years of service and go on to obtain my long-awaited journeyman card. I stayed at the same job while I developed my masonry skills. As those skills increased, so did my self-esteem. It was the longest period of employment in my adult life this far. I was truly proud of that fact.

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Chapter 8: Rehabilitation

By late 1972 my alcoholism was in full effect. It was no longer just a pattern of disruptive and irresponsible behavior—it became a force that threatened to take over every aspect of my life. I found myself undertaking a daily regimen of drinking after work, and on weekends my activities always included alcohol. My drinking wasn’t just out of control—it consumed everything I did. The thought of drinking occupied most of my waking thoughts. No matter where I went or what I did, I made sure I’d be able to drink.

It was hard to admit that I was an alcoholic. Being only twenty-two years old, it was an unfathomable truth, but it was the truth nonetheless. Deep down I knew I was in dire straits, that I needed professional help, but I kept hearing those voices. Don’t give up Stevie, keep fighting Steve, we don’t quit Stevie. My life had spun off of its axis and was careening now, out of control. It was time to make a decision and I desperately needed somebody to help me. I knew that, but I also thought that no one could help me.

The following year, in March of 1973, I finally went to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was the most humiliating and embarrassing thing I had ever done. It confirmed what I already knew: that I was a total failure and a hopeless alcoholic. (Even though, at this time, I had no idea what it meant to be an alcoholic.) “Alcoholic” was a word we construction guys threw around like a baseball, especially when someone we knew got sloppy drunk. The true meaning of the word—the true nature of the disease—were lessons I had yet to learn.

I called an Alcoholics Anonymous phone service one night after coming home drunk. It was a strategic move to deflect the trouble I found myself in. I didn’t really want to call, but I thought it might diffuse some of the trouble I found myself in with my wife. My wife looked up the number in the yellow pages. I sat down in my recliner and listened to the phone ring. It rang until I thought no one would answer, but suddenly an older gentleman, Adriel S., said hello. He and I talked for quite a while that night. Before we hung up, of course, he asked me if I would be willing to give meetings a try. I knew it was coming, but I had hoped it wasn’t. I hoped Adriel S. would tell me I was not so bad off. I hoped he would diagnose me like a physician diagnosing mild hay fever. Some part of me hoped he’d say, “Take two aspirin, lighten up a little on the booze, and get on with your life. You’ll be fine.” Of course, that’s not how it went.

With my wife sitting next to me listening to every word of our conversation, I knew I was stuck. She hung on every word I said, praying for a miracle. When I agreed to make the call, I was only agreeing to the call, not to meetings—but I knew better than to say no with her sitting next to me. I told Adriel I’d be glad to go tomorrow night after work, and that my wife and I would meet him there, if it was okay with him. My wife smiled radiantly at the news. After the call, dumbfounded, still in a drunken stupor, I wondered what to do next. There was no way in hell was I going to any A.A. meeting, I thought.
The next evening though, around five o'clock, Adriel called. He was just checking, he said, to see if I still planned to attend the meeting like I’d promised. Damn, I thought, I’m trapped. He was so nice on the phone when we talked. If I skipped the meeting I would feel doubly guilty now—a disappointment to my wife, and to this Adriel, who I’d never even met. Finally, I agreed to show up. This Adriel guy was pretty damn smart, I thought. He knew to call, or there was no way in hell I would show.

Before we hung up he let me know that his wife Joyce would be there too, if my wife would like someone to talk to. Are you kidding me, I thought? My wife would be thrilled with this plan. I had hoped to attend a single meeting and be done with the whole thing, but that would not fly if my wife began making friends and attending Al-anon meetings. I wrestled with all kinds of excuses for missing that meeting, but I knew how important it was to my wife, how desperately she hoped it would provide a solution to my drinking.

While we waited to go to the meeting, I nearly began to shake. I was scared and humiliated at the thought of attending a meeting, but my wife’s support would give me the strength I lacked. Together, we would venture into unfamiliar territory. Or rather, she would gently shove me. We were determined that somehow we would make this work—at least my wife was determined. I was, I guess, resigned.

A little neighborhood Presbyterian church on the north side of town hosted one of Stockton’s oldest weekly A.A. meetings, called Studio Fellowship Group. In March of 1973, my wife and I would walk, for the first time, into its meeting room filled with beaten looking people, folding chairs, and weak coffee.

When I first entered the room I thought to myself, My god. What in the world have I stepped into. A few people came up and welcomed us immediately and invited us to find a seat. I stood for a few seconds looking around for Adriel, who was supposed to meet us. I knew I had fallen to a new low. It seemed obvious that these people needed to be there, but not me. I was not like these people. These were old has-beens, drunks with no life at all. I was a strong, vibrant young man with my whole life left to look forward to. Shit, if I was their age and worn out and looked like they did, it wouldn’t bother me to go to these stupid meetings, I joked to myself.

I thought that night would be the end of my life. The sad looking people, the sob stories, the bad coffee—I didn’t understand that I was looking dead into the eyes of my future. I didn’t see that night for the opportunity that it was, a chance for my family and myself. I had always wanted a different, better life, but I couldn’t see that this was my shot at it.

To make matters worse, the moment I walked into the room, I became like one of those old peoples’ sons or grandsons. Most the men were dressed in suits and the ladies had on their fancy dresses, and here I was, dressed in my favorite blue jeans and a T-shirt. We had nothing in common, as far as I could see. Yet there I was among them. They swarmed around me and my wife like flies on shit. I wanted to scream at them. I wanted to tell them to back off, to get away. I had never felt so smothered and so humiliated as I did in those eerie moments. I should have seen that all they wanted was to take us under their wings, to show us a better way to live.

It wasn’t long until Adriel and his wife showed up. I could tell he must be someone important. Everyone seemed to know him. After he and his wife and Jody and I made our introductions, his wife Joyce escorted Jody to the next room for their Al-Anon meeting. Adriel led me to a seat as the meeting began.

I spent the next hour and a half checking my watch, wondering if this thing would ever end. After a while, my wife returned with her new friend Joyce, which tickled me to death, because I was so desperate to get out of there. We thanked Adriel and Joyce for meeting us and were out
the door shortly after.

I went to a few more meetings after that first one, but I knew it wouldn’t last long. I didn’t want to go to the first one, and I definitely didn’t intend to make a regimen out of it. Nothing about the program appealed to me. It seemed like a choice of last resort, for the weak and pitiful. Going to meetings only made me feel like a loser. After a short stint, I decided one night that the jig was up. Just as if I’d never stopped, I went out to have a few beers.

I just wanted to be able to have a drink like a normal person. I knew I was different than others when it came to drinking, but I was always convinced I could control it. Through careful willpower, by watching myself, I should be able to have a normal life without resorting to the drastic measure of total abstinence, I reckoned.

I drank for a few more months and things only got worse. My dysfunctional brain refused to recognize the facts. While taking one of my drinking buddies home one night, I was arrested for the first of many DUI charges. I had been stopped earlier that night by a highway patrol cop. If I parked my car and called my wife for a ride, he said, he wouldn’t arrest me. I agreed to those easy terms, but five minutes after the police car drove away, well, so did I. No way was I going to call my wife that late at night and from that far away to come and get me.

After dropping my friend off I was headed home along a new route when I saw flashing lights in my rearview for the second time that night. Like so many other times in my life, I had made a bad choice, and now I was going to pay the price. The officer was very nice about it all. He said he had given me a chance before. Now we were headed off to jail. I couldn’t argue with that reasoning.

When they slammed the door on me in the drunk-tank, I knew I’d made a major mistake. I was put into a huge rectangular holding cell, about thirty feet by forty feet—its official capacity was probably forty or fifty people. That late at night though, it was over flowing with all the drunks they had picked up during the day. There was standing room only. As I looked around I could tell that these drunks came from all walks of life. The businessman was there in his suit, the skid row bum in his raggedy worn-out clothes, young kids and old drunks. Working stiffs like myself were represented in spades. There was a hole in the center of the cell in which to urinate, and as you might expect with drunk people, it got used. There was no privacy, but no one seemed to expect it anyway.

While I stood around bullshitting with the other drunks, waiting to get bailed out, I thought to myself: just another unlucky day. The men in the room were in various stages of intoxication, but they all seemed to seethe with anger, anger for their own dumb luck, for having been caught. Within a couple hours, my wife finally showed up and bailed me out. In spite of myself, she loved me very much.

A couple of weeks later, I was in court dealing with the charges against me. I was embarrassment and ashamed as I stood before the judge. I thought back to my first appearance in court, and how I should have seen this all coming. I couldn’t explain to the judge why I got back in my car after the officer gave me a break that night. Stupid, I was stupid. It was the only answer I had, so that was the answer I gave to the judge.

My wife suggested I call Adriel again. Adriel was quite a character—a man of short stature, like me, but a giant in all the non-physical ways. He loved helping other alcoholics. He owned a successful screen arts business in downtown Stockton, though at one time, booze had almost ruined him. By the time I met him, he had been sober about five years. He was in the process of rebuilding his business and life and was very active in AA.

He loved the program because it had helped him turn his life around. Now his passion
seemed to be to use his knowledge and resources to help others. Knowing this, I got in touch with him and shared the story of my DUI arrest. He knew I was a lost and troubled soul with a severe drinking problem, and he told me about a rehabilitation program in San Andreas he thought might be able to help me. Would I be interested, he asked me? If so, he would look into the details and let me know what to do.

The next day, Adriel gave me a call. I met with him a few days later and off we went to San Andreas to have me admitted to Project Faith Brett Heart Hospital, a cutting-edge treatment facility for its time, located in the pristine San Andreas Mountains. At one time it had been a TB Sanatorium, but had been recently converted to a recovery facility. My destiny seemed to be unfolding before my eyes. Someone was trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t hear what it was. Only a few years earlier, I had spent ninety days locked up in these same pristine mountains. The mountains seemed, somehow, to be dictating my future.

During the admitting process, I was screened and examined by the attending physician. He must have asked a hundred questions, about my drinking, about my family life, about my about my job, etc. I wanted this program to have a chance to work, so I was honest with him. But, because I had battled with my moods for so long, I thought I would take advantage of this opportunity to ask him about depression. He looked at me straight in the eyes, with a weird look on his face, and said, “So what?” It wasn't the answer I was expecting to hear, nor was it a hopeful message. His bluntness set me back in my chair. I let him finish his exam and report without asking any more questions.

That doctor, after examining me, wrote in my file that I was manic-depressive and an acute, chronic alcoholic. It completely astounded me. I was only twenty-three years old. It was a hard pill to swallow, but there it was, in black and white.

The more I thought about his diagnosis, though, the more I figured he probably wrote that shit down about everybody who came in. It didn't pertain to me. They had to put something down for my file.

Considering that a person must have a desire to quit drinking, if they are to truly quit, my thirty days at that hospital were probably a waste of time. Through it all I remained convinced that, if I really tried, I could drink normally. I was in the hospital to get out of trouble with my wife, and I had no intentions toward total sobriety. I went to all the suggested group sessions and participated as much as I could, but I couldn't wait to leave and get drunk with my friends. I figured if I didn't drink for thirty days, there was no reason my problem shouldn't be fixed. If I could go thirty days without drinking, it must mean I wasn’t an alcoholic, right?

During our training sessions there was a common assertion among the counselors: If you believed there was someone who caused you to drink, it was okay to leave that person. Well, maybe these people weren’t as dumb as I thought they were. Anyone would drink if they had to listen to all the bitching and crying that I did. From my wife, from my family, there seemed to be a constant assault of criticism being leveled at me. Being the brilliant strategist that I was, I determined I would leave my wife and daughter when I got out. With the burden of my responsibilities relieved, I should be able, finally, to make my life run smoothly.

It was a pathetic, gutless move. I didn't even have the courage to call my wife and tell her I wasn’t coming home. She discovered it only after calling the hospital the day of my release. One of the counselors told her the news. When I got back to Stockton, I moved back into my parent’s house. I wasn’t competent enough to get my own place. My wife, the trooper that she was, stayed with a friend for a couple of days. She eventually broke down and had to be taken to a hospital herself. She moved in with her friend for a while before eventually finding a small
duplex three blocks from my mom’s house for her and our daughter. She set up a new home there and gave Dempsee a stable environment to live in.

During this time, I discovered a cure for my dysfunctional drinking—a panacea that would fix all of my problems. I had smoked weed before, so when a friend offered me a joint one night, I figured, Why not? I discovered that night that I could smoke weed and remain in control of myself. Almost instantly, a love affair was birthed. I couldn't figure out how to control myself when I got drunk, but now, it seemed, I held the answer between my two fingers. Weed and I became like inseparable twins. It was a way to get drunk without getting drunk, a way to experience the alcohol effect without the aftereffect. It was everything I had been wishing for. I didn't have to drink anymore, if I chose not to. And I would still be able to escape my dysfunctional life. It was a different kind of painkiller than the booze, but just as effective and just as addictive.

I missed my wife and daughter and wanted for us to be back together. My guilt and shame were driving me crazy. I wanted my family to have a successful life. That was one of the reasons I didn't go home after Brett Heart. I was smart enough to know they could do better without me. But now things would get better for all of us. I had a way to control my behavior. I could act like a normal husband and father. I would give them everything they deserved.

Four months after our separation, my wife agreed to let me try to repair our family. I just knew everything would be okay this time. I was able to stay off of the booze for over a year, though my weed consumption increased. I no longer stayed out drinking until ungodly hours. For the first time ever, we had a sense of normalcy in our family. In a warped way, things were getting better.

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Chapter 9: Alcohol & Drugs

In late December of 1974 my son Gavin was born. Keeping to his namesake, he created a tremendous scare for all of us when he first arrived. Born with a severe respiratory problem, he spent the first three days of his young life in the intensive care unit inside an incubator at St. Joseph’s Hospital. Yes, he announced his membership to our clan with a little drama. Typical little boy, I thought to myself: toot your own horn so that others will know to get out of the way. He rebounded from his disorder quickly however and was released to us to bring home.

I was the proudest dad that ever lived, that day. My pride was overflowing, just like it did when Dempsee came into the world, but he was of course another responsibility, which experience had borne out, I was not very adept at handling. My substance abuse was escalating slowly and new responsibilities became like insurmountable hurdles. I loved my children very much, but I can't say that I was the kind of father I hoped to be, the kind of father they deserved. There is of course more to being a father than love, and in those areas I was found to be wanting. My children were born, without any say in the matter, to a legacy of alcoholism—and there are sad consequences that come with that birthright. They had to see me drink every day, run from my responsibilities, slip further and further into the grip of the alcoholism. Surely it messed them up. They were forced into dysfunction by my choices, which is no way to grow up. Without my wife’s tender care neither of my children would have stood a chance at a normal life.

My father raised us under a strict hand until his alcoholism wouldn’t let him do any nurturing at all. He imposed unreasonable rules and enforced them with a wild temper. It was a behavior that I would come to mimic with my own children. I lived with a deathly fear that my children would travel the same dark road that I did. It was the last thing I wanted for my
children, and I thought that being hard on them would ensure that they did not fall in the same traps that I did. I was never able to just sit down with them, in a mature calm way, and talk about my fears for their future, my hopes for their lives. I ended up yelling at them frequently, commanding them to do things correctly. If I was too soft, I thought, they would not listen, would not take life’s dangers seriously. They would end up the way I had—they would suffer.

Since my own behavior was so erratic from day to day, my discipline and parenting was also inconsistent. I would overreact to minor situations. Then, out of guilt, I would rush out to buy them something, to atone for my mistakes with gifts. I wasn’t able to provide the loving father/child relationship that all children need. I loved them, but I know now that love is a personal, internal experience. What children need is the real, practical, day-to-day love and devotion of their parents.

Back then I did the only thing I knew how to do: I pushed them toward perfection, not considering the effects that my own parents’ expectations had had on me. The world was an ugly, hard, and dark place, and it would be to their advantage to know it early, I thought. I asked them to be something other than what they were—what God had seen fit to make them—because I thought it would benefit them to see the world as I saw it. That is, ugly and distorted.

My wife was our family’s heartbeat during all of my drinking years. She held our family together under extreme circumstances. She, despite my own calamitous parenting, gave the children the correct guidance, the parenteral support that they needed. She kept their world balanced as best she could under such extreme difficulties. She was the one from whom they sought advice. She was the one who listened, who cuddled and held them. She was the one who understood what it meant to be a good parent. She tried to fill the parental void that I had created.

I could give them the only thing that I knew how to give—I worked hard to make sure we had money. I knew that that much was my responsibility, and so I made sure I at least fulfilled that obligation. I might not have been a great role model, but I could put food on the table. I gave them the material things I thought they needed, thinking it would make up for my deficiencies as a dad.

After finally receiving my long awaited journeyman card, I thought our future was looking brighter. Three years of an apprenticeship program at Delta College was finally over. With my journeyman status, things would change financially for us. I was earning above average wages as a skilled laborer, and so we would at least have security in that respect, I thought. One great benefit of the job was the vacation pay. For every hour we worked, fifty cents was put in a vacation fund we could draw from once a year. We made a down payment on our first home with that vacation money.

The house was located right across the street from the junior high school that had tormented me in my teenage years. It was a three-bedroom post-war ranch with plastered clapboard siding. It was located on Alpine Ave., about a half block off Interstate 5, allowing me easy access to and from work. It was a home like many others built during the post-war era. It was on a double-wide lot, allowing for future additions. It was landscaped by the previous owner, who apparently loved rose bushes—we had rose bushes everywhere. The big plate glass window in the living room created a panoramic view of the lawn and the busy street that ran in front of our home. All in all, I was proud as hell of being able to buy a home for my family.

With two children now and a house, along with alcohol and drug addictions, financial pressures were mounting—and as if that wasn’t enough, I started gambling more often. I discovered soon that I was losing more than I was winning. And—the old gambler’s downfall—
the more I lost the more I tried to win back. Aside from the drinking, it was nothing for me to smoke an ounce of weed a week. I couldn't afford to maintain the life style I was living, but I wasn't willing to give any of it up. Finally came up with a solution for my financial woes however. I would just buy a pound of weed, and then sell half of it to my friends. That should go a long way toward supporting some of my habits, I thought. It wasn't like I was selling the stuff to high school kids or children, I figured. I wasn't able to admit it then, but I had become a drug dealer. My mind worked very simply back then: I had a problem, I saw a solution. The decision didn't really receive any further analysis than that. I had a way to feed my habits and also feed my family. That's all I knew.

Creeping depressions began appearing more frequently in my life. Sometimes, without warning, a brooding darkness would consume four or five months of my life. These depressions were relentless—over time, rather than actively combating them, I learned to let them run their course, to distract myself with pot and booze until they passed. I found myself escaping more and more often to bed, becoming a hideaway. My mental stability deteriorated day by day, slowly eating away at my sanity.

On Thanksgiving 1975, we had been invited over to my sister Susan’s home for dinner. My brother-in-law Gene also liked to drink, so I was expecting a fun day. This was going to be a nice family get together, a time for us to get caught up on each other’s lives and just visit. Our day went well. We shared a delicious turkey dinner together and reminisced about days gone by and tipped a few cold ones to get into the holiday spirit. After an enjoyable day it was finally time to go home. I was drunk and tired and needed to get to bed before I passed out. I am not sure what happened in those next few moments. When I stood up to leave I might have begun mouthing off, saying stupid hurtful things. I'm still not sure what provoked it. My sister and her husband were trying to usher us out the door, while I continued to be belligerent. Though I was worn-out and drunk, I let them know, in no uncertain terms, that I would leave when I was ready.

I found myself suddenly on the ground on my back. My brother-in-law was on top of me, pummeling my face. When he wore himself out beating on me, he got off and I stood up. My blood was splattered all over the house and my clothes were soaked in blood too. Realizing what had happened to me, I went completely out of my mind. I shrieked like a wild animal, I said I was going to kill him and make him pay, I ran outside to my car to get my equalizer and then my revenge.

Inside my car trunk were all my work tools. I scrounged through the trunk looking for one in particular. It didn’t take long to find it. I grabbed up my eight-pound sledgehammer, slammed the trunk closed, and headed back toward the house. Needless to say, they had locked the door, but it would take more than that to keep me out. I screamed at them to “open the fucking door.” When they refused, I beat the door with the sledgehammer until it sprung open.

With each swing of the hammer my rage grew. I was ready to hurt someone, but when I finally got inside the house I couldn’t find anybody. I was determined to get my revenge any way I could, so I went over to my brother-in-laws new yellow Mercury Cougar and beat it to hell with the hammer. I was going to show him I wasn’t to be messed with. Then, out of the darkness, I heard one of the neighbors screaming. The cops were on their way, they said. They had already been called. Out of fear, I began running. I didn't know where I would run, but I knew I needed to get away quickly.

I’m not sure why but somehow I ended up at my mother-in-law’s house that night, about four or five miles away from my sister’s home. After letting me inside they tried their best to calm me down. I couldn’t have been there for more than a few minutes when I heard the cops
coming. You could hear the sirens in the distance as they approached, and I could tell they were coming from all different directions. They had the whole house surrounded almost instantly. I could see the red and blue flashing lights through the front window. As the officers entered the home, my father-in-law grabbed me around the legs to keep me from running. After cuffing me, an officer led me toward his cruiser, then one of them called the station to inform them that the Berserk Suspect had been apprehended, that they would be bringing him in shortly.

I was on my way to jail and back into the court system, but I was so pissed off that night I didn’t care. They booked me on burglary and breaking and entering, charges that made no sense to me. I was thinking, as they locked me in a holding-cell, that these were very serious charges. I was sure I was on my way to state prison this time.

Despite the severity of my behavior that night, luck would be on my side. While I sat waiting to be bailed out, arrangements were being made—without me even knowing about it—to make this all go away. My wife made a deal with all parties involved: if I would fix the damage I’d done, they would drop all charges against me. After being released I made good on my promise to fix everything, and as agreed, the charges against me were eventually dismissed. The arrest, however, would remain on my criminal file forever. Being a convicted felon my criminal history held no importance to me. I brushed it off like it meant nothing.

I found myself retreating inward more and more with each passing day. My life continued to deteriorate. The more I retreated, the more booze and weed I consumed to battle the discomfort. I was losing control of my life, and my fear increased to nightmarish proportions.

Refusing to give in to the complexity of my life, I kept fighting the demons that seemed to follow me. I knew I had the ability to make these monsters disappear, even if it was only for a short period of time. I just ran harder and faster from those demons, hiding deeper and deeper inside my intoxication. I had accepted my lot in life—this was just the way it was going to be, I thought. So I continued working another two years as a cement mason, until one day when fate intervened.

Late in December of 1975, some friends and I had been out bar hopping and driving around smoking weed when a brilliant idea came over me. I decided I wanted to be a Bricklayer. I was tired of being off work every winter—surely Bricklayers worked steadier than I did. Since the Bricklayers Union was right next door to the Cement Masons Union, it would be easy to at least inquire about a job.

The next day, since I was off of work, I drove down to the union to find out about an apprenticeship. It was my lucky day, because there was indeed a local contractor that needed an apprentice. I walked into the Bricklayers’ business office to find, sitting alone, Business Agent Milton Sterns. He was dressed casually in dark business slacks and a sharp looking sport coat. He reminded me of our landlord in Okieville when he came to collect the rent. Mr. Sterns informed me if I could talk the contractor into hiring me, he would gladly allow me to join their union.

I went on a mission that day to find this contractor. I drove around town most of the day, from subdivision to subdivision, missing him several times by only minutes. Late that afternoon I finally caught up with him. He was at a new subdivision being built near my home. He asked me what I had been doing for work and I told him I was a Journeyman Cement Mason. That I spent the last five years doing curb and gutter concrete work, but now I would like to change careers. The thought of being a Bricklayer was very appealing, something I thought I would really enjoy. Before I left he told me he would contact me shortly to let me know if he would hire me. He was looking for a good apprentice, he said. I felt hopeful leaving our meeting and
went home to tell everyone the news.

Most of my cement friends thought I was making a bad decision changing trades. I would have to go back to apprentice wages and do another three-year apprenticeship, they said. To my surprise the contractor called me late that same night. He told me that if I was still interested in the job he would hire me, that I could start work the following Monday. But he needed a decision tonight, he said. He needed to find someone quickly.

I told him I accepted his offer.

I was so overjoyed with my good fortune that my wife and I went out drinking that next night to celebrate. I stayed drunk and loaded on weed all weekend, using the new job as an excuse to celebrate our great turn of events. I couldn't wait for Monday morning to come— finally I would be done laying concrete.

Early Monday morning I reported to work for William F. Saiers Masonry. I was going to be their new apprentice so I arrived thirty minutes early. Within the first two hours of my workday I realized I had made the right decision changing careers. The difference between a Cement Mason and a Brick Mason was a change I could live with. We started work at 6 a.m. and by 9 a.m. we had taken our first break, a luxury I wasn’t use to. Morning breaks as a Cement Mason were uncommon because of the time-sensitive nature of the work. I liked this brick stuff already. The job was physically hard, but mostly because I wasn’t familiar with it. I knew I could learn it quickly.

Toward the end of my first shift my new boss drove up in his truck. He instructed one of his Hod Carriers to get the ice chest out of the back of his truck. As soon as our work was wrapped up the whole crew sat down on the job site and shared a few beers. I’d already discovered earlier that day that a few of the younger masons liked to smoke weed. I had found myself a new home, I thought to myself.

One blessing that came from the new career was financial security. I was able to work more steadily than when I was a Cement Mason. In the cement trade, things usually slowed down when the harsh winter weather showed up, but there was “inside work” during the winter as a Bricklayer. The increase in money was a blessing, but I’d find, in time, it would also become a curse that would eventually take me down.

There was not an abundance of Bricklayers in Stockton during this time, because my employer had most of the residential work under contract. This was a blessing for his masons, as it put them in huge demand. Because of the demand, we could do side-work on weekends, often making more money than we’d make in a week. Money was there for the taking. I could support my family in a nice lifestyle while still enjoying my drinking, my marijuana, and the gambling problem I’d picked up along the way.

I came to admire my new boss. I looked up to him and the way he carried himself. He had gone through the seminary as a Franciscan Priest and was driven to help the less fortunate. He had wisdom that went beyond my understanding, wisdom he employed to try to help me. He taught me how to become a skillful mason, but his actions and behavior taught me a lot more than how to place bricks. My time spent with his company became a turning point in my life, and of all the jobs I’ve ever held, this was my favorite one. He was a role model for me. For the first time in my life, I had someone I wanted to follow, to emulate. He was a decent, good, fair honest man to follow.

William was not just my boss and friend—over time he became a confidant. I looked up to him as the father figure I never had, a person I could talk with about things that bothered and confused me. I stopped at his home one night to talk with him. It was late. Aside from being
drunk as a skunk, I felt lonely, afraid, and lost.

He already knew I was a troubled soul, so he asked me one simple question. “Steve, what exactly do you want out of life?” I told him, plain and simple, that I wanted to be rich. I believed that if I could become rich, then I would be able to fix everything that was wrong with my life. I thought if I was rich I wouldn’t feel so insecure and afraid all the time.

“Steve,” he said to me, “just become successful at whatever you do. If you do that, those riches you want will come.” I have never forgotten those words of wisdom. As a matter of fact, they drove me to become the best mason I could.

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Chapter 10: Rage

My life had finally seemed to blossom. I was working full time and we were accumulating nice things, the things that normal people work to acquire, things that I had only dreamt of. We were living the American Dream—at least it seemed that way. I had a well-regarded job as a professional mason. I was making above-average wages and could afford a few luxuries. We owned a nice home in a desirable location, with an excellent grammar school just across the street for our children. My wife and I both drove relatively new automobiles, and our home was decorated with quality furniture.

In spite of these successes though, I was never able to become a “happy person.” I was still tormented by depressions, anxieties, and grim fears. The more successful I became as a mason, the more complex and dangerous my alcohol and drug use became. I kept thinking: If I could just make more money, then surely my life would get better. I knew there was more to life than money, but I was convinced that money could fix everything. Maybe after I had made enough money, then I could afford to appreciate life’s intangibles. The blessings of contentment and happiness eluded me at every turn. The more I struggled to attain them the more elusive they became.

Despite all the money and success I still found myself unhappy, and filled with an irrational rage. Truthfully, I was ashamed and repulsed by myself, repulsed by what I had become. I had all the trappings of success, but inside I felt like a sick, failed human being. I was a lost soul with a broken moral compass, and I had no idea of how to turn it around.

We were still living in the house across the street from the junior high. In our living room a big plate glass window framed a view of the street and the junior high across the street. Whenever I looked outside I was forced to relive my nightmarish experiences there. It was an innocent place, full of children engrossed in the business of learning and play. For me though it was a symbol of fear. It evoked only sad memories. My Dempsee was going to the grammar school next door to the junior high, but when she graduated she would be attending Daniel Webster just like I did. I was terrified that somehow her experiences there would mirror my own.

Many evenings, after the kids went off to bed, I would sit in my recliner in front of the window getting stoned. Invariably, after a couple of joints and a few beers, paranoia would set in. My mind would conjure threats hiding out there in the darkness. I just knew that someone was going to shoot me through that plate glass window. The world had become my enemy.

The torment of those invisible monsters seemed to grow with each passing day. The paranoia increased with each joint I smoked and each drink that I took. I felt a legion of demons following me everywhere. They kept my emotions in a continuous flux. I could never find any comfort or calm unless I was loaded or drunk. The more I used chemicals to escape from my
demons, the deeper the quagmire of my life became. I remember screaming to myself, many
times, just stop this merry-go-round, and just let me get off.

By this time suicide had become a constant in my life. It became my companion and went
everywhere that I went. The desire to die tugged at me daily. I wanted my life to be over with
and I didn’t care how it happened. I suffered a lot of emotional pain back then, but I was too
blind to see that I was creating it. It never occurred to me that there could be a different way to
live. I just figured it was the way I was made, that I had no control over it.

One night, after I had kicked my family out of our home in a drunken tirade, with guilt
pounding at my soul, I concluded that my behavior must be stopped at any cost. I went into the
kitchen and opened the oven door and turned it on full blast. I laid down in front of the oven’s
door and waited for the inevitable to come. When I awoke the next morning I was sickened to
find I was a failure again at suicide. My failure didn’t stop me from wanting to die—it only
drove me to desire death more. I wanted my family to have a better way of living, and I knew I
wasn’t capable of giving it to them. They needed me out of their lives if they were ever to have a
decent life. I was learning though that life went on, even if I failed at it. The more successful I
became as a bricklayer, the more confusing my life as a husband and father became. The money
distorted my view about my behavior.

We soon learned that new laws passed would require us to bus Dempsee to a different
school, across town on the Southside, and that those same laws would apply to Gavin as soon as
he entered the school system. We didn’t want that to happen and decided it was time once
again for our family to move.

In Stockton this period of educational redistricting was termed the “white flight.” It was a
moniker given to parents in our town, and in many other towns across the nation, who relocated
their families to keep their children in the schools they wanted. The day of the neighborhood
school was coming to an end. Gavin wasn't in school yet, but when that time came we wanted to
make sure he wasn't forced to bus across town every day.

In a little farming community called Lodi, about twenty miles north of Stockton, the school
district boundaries reached to the northern edge of Stockton. They weren’t required under the
new law to bus their school children, so we began a search for a home there. We eventually
found a good house on the North side of town in a subdivision called Stonewood, off Lower
Sacramento Rd. Our house payment would double, but after examining our options we decided
we could handle it.

Pulling into the driveway of our new home the first day I was overcome with emotion. I
looked up and down the street at all the beautiful homes—I was going to be living in a
neighborhood where teachers, professors, accountants, policemen, and business people lived as I
sat in my truck. How this was even possible was beyond me. My children would be attending
the schools where Middle America sent their kids. I couldn’t have asked for anything more.

Until I parked my truck in front of our new home, I hadn’t realized I wanted something
different out of this house. I wanted that new house to give me something I lacked, and I wanted
desperately for it to make me happy. It was something I never realized I was looking for in a
home, until that day. This house was completely different than the one I grew up in. It was a
house people worked their whole lives to achieve. I owned it, and I was only twenty-seven years
old—or I should say, it owned me. It had the most beautiful, professionally landscaped front and
back yards, as perfectly maintained as a golf course. It had flowers and plants that were
strategically placed and bloomed at different times of the year. It was a three-bedroom ranch
with a heavy shake roof that looked like it belonged in a magazine. It had a beautiful appealing
oak tree behind the house. It had spacious family and living rooms and custom tile work in the
top floor level, and custom cabinets, with custom woven-wood blinds on every window. It was a house anyone should
have loved to own, but it only reminded me how miserable I was. While sitting in my truck that
day, waiting to go inside, I knew I hated it. I had high expectations and the house couldn’t
deliver them, it couldn’t make me happy.

I hesitantly walked inside and told my wife I wanted to sell the house, that I hated it. By this
time she was used to my antics. She knew that we didn't have a single friend that wouldn't have
loved to own this home. But she didn’t know what I was expecting from that house, what I
needed from it. I wanted that house to set me free. I wanted it to fill the empty void inside me.
Not only did it not fulfill those impossible expectations, it became an albatross clamped around
my neck. It became another factor confusing my life, an affliction I thought I would never
escape. How was I ever going to become happy and at peace with myself, I thought, if this
beautiful house couldn’t make that happen? From my early childhood I believed that a discerning
home like this (one like Beaver lived in) would give me what I lacked, that it would
prove my worth. Was I ever so wrong?

I settled in the best I could in our new neighborhood and new home, but I knew I didn’t
belong there. My family belonged there, I thought, but not me—I didn’t deserve it. Nothing
changed on my part, as far as my behavior. It only grew worse from day to day. My
consumption of drugs and alcohol increased, and I could never drink enough to escape the
Torment I experienced daily. The hate and resentment I felt had finally become an uncontrollable
rage. Then this uncontrollable fear (rage’s twin brother) surfaced. Not only was it excruciating,
but it drove me toward further isolation. I was no longer capable of seeing anything positive
inside of my life. I questioned my own mental stability as the words of my parents rang through
my head one more time. *Be strong Steve, we don’t quit Steve, fight the good fight Stevie.* But I
no longer was capable of fighting a war I could never win.

I was a big shot now, with a new home, new truck, and a new car for my wife. I had plenty
of money for my addictive pleasures, but too often not enough of it ended up in my wife’s hands
for the bills. The more I made the more I spent, an endless reoccurring cycle of destruction.
Insanity was now a real possibility, a reality my wife reminded me of daily. Whenever she
got fed-up with me she would say I was going to end up like my father, in a mental hospital.
And deep down inside I knew what she said was the truth. My mental states were distorted and
confusion regularly clouded my mind. Even I couldn’t dispute the changes taking place.

One night, in a drunken stupor, I finally figured out what my problem was. It was God’s
fault for making me this way. If God hadn’t made me this way, then surely I wouldn’t act like I
did. It seemed very clear and simple: my behavior was God’s fault. Blaming God, of course,
was a means to divert blame, but it was a convenient and powerful explanation. When I came
home drunk after a night at in the bars I would scream and curse God. I knew that He was the
source of my problems. Though I would never admit to it then, I also knew that He was the one
who could fix this mess. I kept these rants going, day after day, month after month. The more I
deteriorated the worse the rants became. Cursing at Him somehow made me feel better—it
allowed me to avoid being the responsible party.

Early in the morning, the day before Thanksgiving in 1978, we needed to make a trip to the
bank to cover some checks before they bounced. I told my wife I would gladly run to the bank
and take care of it, and that I would be right home afterward. I left around 10 a.m., but it would
be quite a while before she would see me again.

After making my deposits, while driving home, I spotted a little neighborhood bar called the Circus Room on Lower Sacramento rd. and Hammer Ln. It was about three blocks from home, tucked inauspiciously in the corner of a strip mall. What the hell, I thought to myself. I could go for a few cold beers before I went home. I pulled into the parking lot and locked up my truck, then proceeded to go inside and have a quick beer or two and see if anybody I knew was in there.

Around two o'clock in the morning, after drinking beer and tequila shots all day and night, I decided that it was time to get home. As I staggered out of the bar and stumbled toward my truck, I realized a pea soup fog had set in so thick I could hardly see five feet in front of me. After starting my engine and sitting for a few moments while the heater warmed the inside, I wondered if I could negotiate this fog. I had driven before in weather just as bad, I thought. What the fuck. I threw my truck into gear and headed toward the ass-chewing I knew was coming.

I pulled out of the parking lot onto Lower Sacramento rd., and into that blinding fog and steered my truck toward home. Though I was completely blinded by fog and by booze, somehow I managed to make it to our driveway. I was lucky enough to not run into the garage door that night. Someone must be looking out for me tonight, I thought. I staggered down the front walk, opened the door, and went inside.

Once inside, I faced the inevitable screaming. I am not exactly sure what happened in the following moments, but I know that I snapped. I lost my mind. When I came to my senses I had my beautiful wife by her throat, choking her. I had lifted her off the ground and held her against the kitchen wall. I was screaming at her, my face contorted and twisted by hate. I let her know that she was my only problem. I told her that I was going to eliminate that problem this very moment, for now and forever more. I told her I was going to kill her.

While I held her around the throat I looked into her puffy eyes, I could see how her fear had given over to sheer terror. I heard her pray to God. “Please God, help me,” she said. Those words of desperation somehow hit home. I let her go and I collapsed to the floor to face a kind of shame and repulsion I never knew existed.

She hurriedly grabbed the children from their bedrooms and left our home. I watched as my beautiful family left their home that cold foggy night out of fear. The realization was like dying: I had done this. The mess I had made caused her sickening fear. Worse, I might have even hurt her.

I was crying so hard I couldn’t control it. Out of abject desperation I picked up the phone and called the only person who could possibly help me. I called the AA sponsor I’d had five years earlier. I wondered as I dialed the phone if he would even remember me. He not only remembered me, but he also knew all about my life for the past five years. I was to find out later that my wife had kept in contact with him and his wife over the years. I begged him to come and help me. My life had become a total wreck and I needed his help, I mumbled to him over the phone.

It wasn’t long before I heard the doorbell ring and I stumbled to the door, opened it up, and invited Adriel inside. Adriel was in his mid-sixties, but it didn’t stop him from driving through that pea soup fog that night to help me. At least my wife and children were gone now, I thought. At least I can’t hurt them any more tonight. At least they can’t see me now.

I had vomited all over the place from the booze. My house was a total mess, but at this point I didn’t care. I was riddled with guilt and shame. Adriel and I grabbed chairs and sat down to talk. He knew me better than I knew myself, it turned out. He held back nothing as we talked. I don’t remember a lot of what we talked about that night but I remember one thing: He said,
“Steve you come from a family of dysfunctional alcoholics. In my own family someone had to break the cycle of alcoholism, for the family’s sake. There could never be any hope for any of us if something didn’t change. None of us would be able to survive,” he said. “Why not let it be you Steve? Be the first in your family to tackle alcoholism and win.”

I couldn’t get those words out of my mind. Somebody in my family, anybody, needed to break this awful cycle of alcoholism that has prevailed in our family forever. I didn't know it then but my life was about to take a turn, a real turn toward a positive outcome. Not the same old false-steps and missteps. No more of the denials and evasions—a new direction. On that winter Thanksgiving morning in November of 1978, God sent an angel by the name of Adriel to intervene in my life.

After we had talked for a while and I had promised him that I would give AA another try, after promising I would go to a meeting that night Adriel finally left. I sat down in my overstuffed chair by the fireplace. I lit up a cigarette and started thinking. I felt cold inside as I sat there—I wished I had a big roaring fire to take the chill out of me. I realized I had lost the only person capable of warming my heart that night. I realized I had lost my best friend. I felt darker and blacker and more hopeless as I sat there filled with self-pity. I realized I had lost my battle with alcohol. It had once been a comfort, a kind of friend, but even alcohol had rejected me now, had left me to deteriorate alone, one day at a time. I realized I was defenseless against alcohol and against the trials of simply living in the world.

That night was the final indicator of my broken life. My whole existence finally was exposed for the reality of what it had become. I was thoughtlessly staring into the eye of my dilemma, but had not yet grasped a solution of how to fix it. My future and my family’s future looked hopeless. A miserable dark abyss was the only future I could see at this point in my life, as I sat there all alone, completely lost.

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Part II--What happened

“We are who we are, what we are, and where we are
by our prior decisions”

Author unknown

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Chapter 11: I needed a miracle

I awoke early the following morning alone in my bed with a sledgehammer of a headache. When I tried to open my eyes a flash of pain made me quickly shut them again. I lay motionless while I tried to clear my head, and tried also not to vomit. I needed something cold to take away the god-awful taste in my mouth—anything to wash away the aftermath of the previous night. I hadn’t yet remembered the events of the night before, but I was about to. I was about to face, in vulnerable sobriety, the fact that I might have destroyed my marriage. That I might have hurt and frightened my wife so badly that she would never forgive me.
As my mind slowly cleared I could only lay there, motionless, letting the remorse wash over me. Then, of course, thoughts of death overwhelmed me. I wanted, again, for nothing more than to cease to exist.

As I tried to work through the terrible guilt, I heard a rattling noise at the far end of the house. My wife was at the back door trying to unlock it. Then the noise stopped and I heard her enter the house with the children. The silence that followed was somehow more frightening than their absence. Would my wife forgive me? Had she only come to collect some possessions before leaving for good? Had she come to say her last goodbyes? My first instincts were to run away somewhere, to hide, but there was no place to go.

How in the world could I ever make up for my devastating behavior? I had no idea how to correct this mess, or the chaos that I had forced my family to endure for years. They didn't stand a chance in hell at a normal life as long as I continued drinking. I had become, over time, not a husband to my wife, not a father to my children, but the biggest single problem in their lives. Even if I could stop drinking, how could I live with the guilt?

I knew I held my family’s future in my hands as I lay in that bed. Whatever decisions I made this day would determine how my family’s lives would unfold. With my proven history of failure, I wasn’t sure I could change anything. Most of my decisions turned out badly—I was scared that even an attempt to make things better would ultimately make them worse. I wasn’t capable of making good sound decisions concerning my own life, let alone theirs.

I slowly rolled over the edge of the bed and placed my feet on the floor. I put my hands on my knees to steady myself and sat that way for a moment before attempting to stand. Then, begrudgingly, I made my way down the long hallway, out into the living room to meet my fate.

I couldn’t even make eye contact with them. I had no idea where to begin. My heart was breaking for how they must have felt. The look I saw in their faces—sadness, shame, loss of hope—conveyed the gravity of the situation. With no other options, I did what I had always done: I apologized for my erratic behavior and promised I would never drink again.

They must have seemed like empty, meaningless words. They’d heard them a million times before. But they, like me, could also only do what they had always done. They prayed that maybe, just maybe, this time things would be different. This time maybe their father would grow up and become responsible. Maybe this time dad would quit drinking.

We spent the rest of the day lounging around the house, and for most of it I couldn’t bring myself to even speak to them. You could cut the awkwardness, the tension, the sadness and uncertainty with a knife.

I knew these feelings. I knew this pain. I had lived this destruction with my own father’s drinking. It was the last straw. I told my family that I was done drinking, and that that night I would be attending an A.A. meeting. I told them how I had called Adriel, how he had come over and promised to help straighten out my life. I had never taken such a positive step toward change, at least not of my own free will, and so the news seemed to give my family a glimmer of hope. I remembered being a young boy and praying for the same thing with my father. I knew they were skeptical about my seriousness, and I was too, but I knew I could at least try.

To my word, I did exactly what I told them I would do that night. I attended the meeting with my wife. I thought that if I attended a meeting something magical would happen. I hoped that the meeting itself might amount to a life-changing event. Maybe, just maybe, I would understand what they were trying to tell me this time. Maybe it would all go right.

Going to the meeting was my way of admitting that I was ashamed of my behavior, and that I was willing to at least try to change. That I was going to give A.A. one more shot. There was
little awareness back then of alcoholism as a permanent, life-long affliction. It sounds absurd, but I still hoped to find a way to drink normally. I thought maybe A.A. could teach me how to do that. If I figured out a way to drink like a normal person, my problems would be solved. It was, of course, a naïve hope—but that kind of bargaining might have been the only thing that allowed me to attend that first meeting.

The meeting time was approaching so I went to pick up our babysitter, Patty, a neighborhood girl. After getting Patty and the kids settled in with all the rules, my wife and I took off. We were both very quiet on the drive over. Neither of us knew what to expect, really. Would the meeting do any good? I was hopeful, but I couldn’t say. There was no reason to believe that it would be any different this time, yet we hoped.

As we arrived at the church where the meeting was held, I recalled my first A.A. meeting and became terrified. I knew all the uncomfortable admissions and claustrophobic anxiety and hopeless looking people that awaited me inside. I was humiliated and scared that someone might spot me there. But we were going inside, come hell or high water, so we locked up our car and headed toward the church.

As we opened the double doors to go inside, a thick bank of smoke bellowed out. Meetings in those days were universally smoke clogged. Many chain-smoked through the entire meeting. It only occurred to me later that this indicated the presence of people as anxious and frightened as myself.

It was a room the church used for bible studies and seminars, but it was rented twice a week for A.A. meetings. As I walked hesitantly into the room with my wife, I realized that this place was no different than that first meeting I’d attended. All the eyes in the room fell on us. The people inside were old. Old as dirt, I thought. Some sat around tables smoking and others stood visiting.

A good portion of the men were dressed in suits, and the few women in attendance wore dresses. My wife and I had worn our favorite blue jeans, and a sweatshirt to protect against the night chill.

My friend Adriel spotted us walking through the door and hurried over to greet us. Then he did what I’d hoped he wouldn’t do. He introduced us to other members as they passed. I wanted to go someplace and hide. It was just like before; I felt humiliated and ashamed as I tried to figure out why I was there. It was again very obvious to me why those old people needed to be there—they were beaten, worn out losers—but me? How could I have ended up here? I was a young successful Bricklayer. As soon as I learned the trick of drinking like a normal man, I would be out of there.

Adriel’s wife Joyce spotted us also. She came over and said her hellos and welcomed us. Shortly after she escorted my wife to their Al-Anon Meeting next door, leaving me to fend for myself, I felt out of place standing there all alone and scared. I was too embarrassed to introduce myself, so I walked over to a table and sat down. I figured I would smoke a few cigarettes until the meeting began.

After Ralph M., the Secretary, opened the meeting and got it started, my nerves calmed down a bit, as I didn’t have to talk with anybody. Ralph was a successful businessman, an older charismatic gentleman with about seven years of sobriety. I listened to the different people share their stories and continued to wonder how I’d gotten here. As he and others told their grim stories and stated their faith in the 12-step program—how much A.A. had helped them all—I considered telling them to get a life. This wasn’t what I wanted out of my life—attending meetings, professing my guilt, feeling perpetually embarrassed. I checked my watch every
minute or so. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Around 9:30 the meeting finally ended. As I stood around waiting for my wife, all these old men approached and introduced themselves. I felt smothered by their kindness and caring. They seemed to be looking for a grandson. Well I wasn’t volunteering! When my wife showed up I hurried us toward the door.

As we drove home that night we spoke about our experiences. Jody was thrilled with all her new friends and what they’d shared with her. They had given her something she had been woefully short on: Hope. I told her how uncomfortable I’d felt, and how all the old people thought I was one of their grandsons, just like before. But I told her also that I would keep trying. That maybe, in time, things would change.

With Thanksgiving weekend over, I went back to work as usual. When my friends asked me to have a few beers after work, I declined. I said I was busy. I went to a couple more meetings that week, but wasn’t glad about it. If I was going to grow to like A.A., it was clear that it wouldn’t happen quickly. I just wanted to be able to drink normally, to control myself, but no one had mentioned anything on that subject. If I could only drink with some modicum of sensibility, then I could be like everyone else. Our lives could achieve some normalcy. I am not sure why I even thought that was possible. I had tried to drink normally for fifteen years and hadn’t had any success. In fact, each time I drank I seemed to get worse.

The first couple of meetings I attended revolved around people’s stories—how they’d all gotten sober, and how their lives had changed for the better. But their words never resonated with me. In fact, I didn’t believe a word they said. I thought there had to be some different way, something they weren’t telling me. I had always looked for the easy way out, and I was *still* looking. I figured there was some kind of catch, or gimmick, to everything. There had to be a fix for this thing called alcoholism, I thought. Why would no one just share it with me?

After one meeting that week, I collected some of the pamphlets they had lying on a table and brought them home. I resolved to read them front to back, hoping to discover some magic bullet for my drinking problem. Maybe, I thought, I could figure this thing out myself, if I read all the handouts. Then I could skip these awful meetings. At any rate, coming home with all those brochures looks good to the family, I thought. It would let them know that I was trying, at least.

There was one pamphlet called *The Man in the Glass*. It was mostly poetry. I had never expected poetry to be any part of the recovery program. There was a smart limerick written about how a man, when he looks in the mirror, he either respected or didn’t respect what he saw looking back at himself. This poem grabbed my attention. It described so truthfully the relationship I had with my own bathroom mirror. I hated everything that looked back at me from my mirror. This poem hit home hard. It described my daily struggle.

A few nights later I was lying awake in bed. It was around two o’clock in the morning. It had been seven days since I’d had anything to drink or smoke and I was getting squirrely. I couldn’t sleep and I laid there listening to raindrops pound the bedroom aluminum window overhang. I was in the throes of some really deep reflection and some maddening insomnia as the storm ravaged on outside. I was contemplating what my future held, if anything. I couldn’t see past my immediate discomfort, but I didn’t want to give in yet. I was missing alcohol and bars and running around with my friends, but in my soul I knew those things had ran their course. I realized I no longer had control over my actions when I started drinking. Now, looking back on things, I realize I *never* had any control.

As I lay there in my bed with my wife, I realized how fragile my grasp on sobriety really was. I should just get out of bed and go get drunk with my friends, I thought. That is what I
really, more than anything, wanted to do. How to quit drinking was beyond my understanding. I
knew it was not as simple as making a choice to not drink. It was like having to choose at every
moment, to remain sober. And those moments seemed to expand and divide into new, more
difficult moments, each requiring another denial. The task seemed impossible. And the truth is,
I really didn’t want to quit drinking, I just wanted to drink normally. I wanted to drink without
the certainty that it would ruin my life. The temptation of alcohol and drugs was pulling at every
fiber inside of me, but so was my awareness of the misery it would bring me.

I looked over at my nightstand and saw all the brochures I’d collected scattered on top of it.
I had read them already a couple of times each, but I picked up three or four and read them again.
Same as before, I got nothing out of them. Then I spotted a brochure that said “The Twelve
Steps of Recovery” on its cover. I picked it up and stared at it as if it would talk to me. I reread
it too and gained no new insight. It might as well have been written in Portuguese. I wanted now
desperately to understand its message, but I just wasn’t able to.

A part of Step Three stood out to me though. "God as we understand Him…” it said. It
made me wonder if I even believed in God. It made me think about God as I thought I
understood Him. I thought about my mother’s desire for her children to know God. “God can
change a person’s life Steve, if we only allow Him to do it,” she said.

I remembered a neighborhood church I went to as a young boy in Okieville. I remembered
getting baptized there. I remembered attending Sunday school. These were blissful moments in
my life. Was it the presence of God in my life that inspired such happiness? Was it simply
youth? I couldn’t distinguish between the two. I remembered though, moments in my young life
when I experienced feelings I could only call “spiritual,” and how happy I was during those
times. In those moments I questioned everything I thought I understood, or didn’t understand,
and though I couldn’t draw any real conclusions, I felt I was at least asking the right questions.

I’d never really had many thoughts about God, except what my mother had told me, but I
never quite trusted her preaching. She always said her greatest wish was that all her children
would know God, but I had never seen the use in it. I wasn’t sure God existed—and if he did, I
wasn’t sure he wanted to know me. My mother would not live long enough to see her wish
fulfilled, though it would, one day, happen.

If there really is a God, I thought as I lay there. If there really is a God, and if He is as
powerful as everybody says, then He probably understands my life. He should understand that I
don’t want to be the way that I am, and that I am not proud of what I’ve become. He would
know why I did the crazy immature things I did. He would know I was a scared, frightened,
helpless man. The paper said, “As we understand Him.” Well that is how, with my limited
knowledge, I understood Him. He would know and understand everything about me, and why I
did what I did.

Lying there that night, I did something I had never been able to do before. I gave up
completely. I was sickened by what I had done with my life, and the horrendous affliction I had
been to my family. I admitted to complete and utter failure. I couldn’t be strong anymore like
my mom and dad had asked me to be. I couldn’t win this battle—the strength it required just
wasn’t inside me. I was a total failure as a human being—I succumbed, for the first time, to this
simple truth.

I realized that I had been born broken, and that there was nothing I could do to change that
fact. I surrendered to the fact that my family and my destiny would be riddled with pain and
destruction. For the first time in a long time I cried in earnest, clear-minded sobriety.

I realized that if I couldn’t do this alone, I would need a miracle. I would need some kind of
help. In that brief, precious moment of time, when I’d admitted defeat, God’s Spirit appeared in my bedroom. My wife never woke during God’s visit, but we communed that night for a long time. I’m not sure how long He stayed comforting me, but it seemed like many hours. I was lost in His divine calmness and presence and felt the peace of His gracious loving arms wrapped around me. In His way He let me know He had forgiven me. He let me know He didn’t resent the times I’d cursed Him and denied His existence. He let me know He understood. And most importantly, He allowed me to know that He loved me, and that I was one of His children. God, in those precious moments of time, burnt inside my heart and soul with conviction, that my life from now on would become something different. I clearly knew I would never ever drink or use drugs again. I knew that my life, from this moment on, would be changed.

I was about to embark on a mysterious journey back toward my life, my real life, into the world I had spent the last twenty-nine years running from. This time though, I would see my world completely differently than I had seen it before. This time I wouldn’t be traveling alone—this time God would travel with me.

God had a plan for my family and me and I was ready to find out what it was. I had no idea what lay ahead but I knew, plainly and clearly, that everything would be okay. I was experiencing clarity I had never experienced before. It was as if I’d been granted new powers of sight, and could now see what I’d previously had been blinded to. I’d had a spiritual experience with God as I lay in that bed of desperation, and had come away from it fundamentally changed.

I made a decision that night. It was the decisions that had eluded me for so long, but that night, with God’s help, it came easily: I would no longer run or quit, no matter how afraid I became. I would face my fears one at a time as they appeared in my life. I would learn to conquer them instead of them conquering me. It was time to get on with living life, instead of getting on with destroying it.

It was around 4 a.m. when I finally fell asleep, and the early morning clock awaited me. I needed to be up by six to start my day for work. I couldn't wait for the next day to begin, and I couldn't wait to see how my life would unfold.

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Chapter 12: Starting the Journey

The following morning was a typical winter morning—bright and cold—but I had awoken with such hope, such enthusiasm, that I felt as if the world was new. This feeling, I thought, must mean that something of the previous night’s revelations had stuck. From the moment I’d opened my eyes, I felt new. I felt reborn—I felt free.

The sun crested the eastern horizon as I drove to work, and I realized I had never in my adult life, until that moment, seen any beauty or majesty or poignancy—any of those feelings so common in Hollywood movies—in a sunrise. I had no idea it actually happened to real people. The cold breeze through my truck’s window seemed designed expressly to remind me I was alive. As I drove, my senses came alive one at a time. The poignancy of being free to make my own fate overwhelmed me. I was driving toward a world I didn’t understand, but for the first time in my life, those unknowns felt good, felt hopeful. Everywhere I looked I saw life. The world had a heartbeat and breath of its own, and I was experiencing it for the first time ever in my life.

As I pulled up to the job-site, I couldn’t wait to begin the day. I spent most of it working like mad, building a fireplace and putting a brick veneer on a new home and getting used to this new feeling of optimism. I usually spent my workdays worrying, grumbling, and itching for a drink,
but as I laid brick that day, one on top of two, I had not a bit of anxiety. I felt none of the old unease, only a freedom I had never known before. I was in a kind of rapture, and hoped it would last forever. Somehow I knew that this wasn’t a trick. I was familiar with all the ways I could deceive myself, and this didn’t feel like one of them. This wasn’t one of the fraught, magic bullet solutions I had spent my life seeking. This was an earnest desire to change, and to change forever.

I couldn't wait to get home to share this new hopefulness with my wife. I wanted to let her know that things would finally be okay for our family. We would make a new start and things would be different for us this time. I was a little apprehensive as I drove. I worried that my wife and family would think this was just another one of my stunts, or a short-term success before inevitable failure.

My workday finally came to an end. After cleaning my tools and saying goodbye to my Hod Carrier, I prepared to go home to deliver my news. I’m sure I had a smile from ear to ear as I drove. I thought about my kids and how I would be able to tell them that their dad would never drink again. That he was going to give them the life they deserved.

When I’d gotten home and settled inside I told my wife that I needed to speak with her. That I had something to tell her, something she would like to hear. She might have been a fool for staying with me all those years (how many times had she heard the same “I want to talk with you in private” bullshit?) but she agreed to hear what I had to say.

As we walked down the hallway, I could tell we were thinking the same thing. We both sensed that we were walking toward a new and uncharted future. I was a little nervous, afraid she might reject what I told her. Or afraid, as we walked, that she thought I was leaving again, or that I was going to break some awful news. Why should she think this would be anything other than bad news? That is my pattern of my behavior, after all.

I asked her to sit on the bed, to please listen to the thing I wanted to share with her. I could see fear scrawled across her face as I began to speak.

I said, “Jody, do you believe in God?”

She looked back at me in a strange way and tilted her head. “Why yes,” she said. “I have always believed in God.”

I began by telling her what had happened while she slept the night before. I could hear the kids in the family room playing, and the thought of being a better father to them gave me courage to continue. I told her I would never drink or take drugs again. That somehow—and I didn't know exactly how—but our lives would change from this day forward, for good and forever. I told her how, out of desperation, I had admitted defeat, and how God’s Spirit appeared to me in our bedroom. I told her how God had communed with me, and me with him, as she slept through the night. How He left me with a kind of hope I had never known before.

She sat there, of course astonished. I could tell she wanted to believe what I was saying, but I could also see the confusion and uncertainty on her face. She asked me a few questions about my experience with God, and I did my best to answer, but I knew almost as little about it as she did. She suggested that we go to the kitchen and finish our conversation while she began cooking dinner.

She must have asked me a million questions about my experience with God. “What was it like Steve? What did God say? How did you know it was God?”

She wanted every detail, so she could, perhaps, believe like I did. I knew it was impossible for her to believe what I was telling her. I was still coming to grips with it myself. I felt a little like I was professing to believe in Martians. I knew though, with utter certainty, that what I was
saying was true. God had visited me and I could, with His reassurance, say that I would change. I knew that my actions in the coming days and weeks would speak volumes—more than anything I could say that night—but somehow I knew I wouldn’t screw up this time. This was such a change from where I had been just a week before, when I expected to fail, expected my life to be poisoned. We talked about it more after dinner while getting ready to go to our A.A. meetings.

I went to that meeting enthusiastically, which was also something new. I had lost whatever resentment and skepticism I had for the program, and in its place was new hope and new purpose. The difference this time would not be A.A. The program itself never changes. The difference this time would be my attitude, my acceptance of a new way of living. For the first time ever, I truly didn’t want to drink or use drugs any more.

I was on the verge of giddiness as we approached the meeting hall. I was about to start my new life. For the first time, Alcoholics Anonymous made sense to me. For the first time, the doors of that church, instead of the bars of a cell, looked like a path to happiness. No longer will I run from my alcoholism, I thought to myself. It’s time to embrace it and learn all I can about it.

It was the same meeting place I’d been to before. Nothing was different that night, except me. The same worn out old people milled around visiting. The room, as usual, was a haze of smoke. This time though, those people didn’t look like my enemies. They didn’t look like the losers I’d taken them for previously. I realized that these meetings were not a place of embarrassment and shame. It was a place of mercy and grace, with people who would help me learn how to live.

I hung onto every word spoken that night. It was incredible. Those people were telling my story, in bits and pieces, through their own lives. My story was theirs. I wasn’t embarrassed to be there that night. As a matter of fact, I felt blessed to sit among those people. They were people cut from the same cloth as myself. I couldn’t help but think: These are the people God has chosen for me. Before, I had been looking for differences between them and me. I learned that night to look for the similarities. Once I made that leap, I gained immeasurably. I discovered people who wanted me to succeed, people who wished the best for my family and me.

By the time the meeting came to an end, I felt great about being there. I no longer wanted to run off and hide. I visited with other members while I waited for my wife’s Al-anon meeting to finish. When she finally showed up we were both very excited. For the first time in our married adult life we were on the same page and headed in the same direction. As we drove home that night we had a new hope and new purpose growing inside us. It was all we could talk about.

We drove home in a daze of excitement and talked an hour more in the family room. We had never shared such a mutual excitement before. It became late as we rehashed the evening over and over. I was tired but I couldn’t wait to start reading a book that I had purchased at the meeting that night. The book is titled Alcoholics Anonymous, but is known popularly as “The Big Book.”

After tucking the kids in and kissing them goodnight, my wife and I snuggled safely into our warm bed. As she drifted off to sleep, I took The Big Book off from my nightstand, adjusted my reading lamp, and started reading. The more I read the more I wanted to read. I couldn’t put the book down. I realized that the book described exactly how I had lived and thought throughout my life. The book might as well have been written about me, I thought. I was so amazed by this discovery that I almost woke my wife to tell her. I thought better of it and let her rest, and for the second night in a row I fell asleep in a near panic of excitement for the next day to come.

I finally had a new purpose in life: to get sober and to stay sober, at any cost. I met more people in the program as the early weeks and months passed, even a few close to my age. I stuck
close to the older members, the ones with long-term sobriety. I kept them close in my life. I needed their wisdom and experience on this road to recovery, and I learned that what I thought of as smothering was only their care, their wish for my success.

Adriel, my midnight savior, became my sponsor. I was not the first person he’d helped. Since the early days of his sobriety he’d devoted his life and resources to helping other alcoholics recover. He was a Scotsman, and short in stature, but a giant among men. He never begrudged my failure five years before, when I ignored his attempts to help. Early in my sobriety he coaxed me to get involved in the program. He understood the importance of helping me gain back my self-respect and contributing something to my community. It was a new beginning for a new life.

As the months unfolded, he guided me and suggested things for me to get involved in that might be beneficial to my progress. He knew the importance of keeping a recovering alcoholic busy and building up their self-esteem. Adriel was the perfect person at a perfect moment in my life. His help, so generous and good, to this day seems God-sent. He was a grateful caring recovering alcoholic, and my friend.

Adriel knew my family’s history, and was aware of my father’s hospitalizations. More importantly, he knew the torment my father’s predicament has inflicted on me early in my youth. He knew that my father received two Purple Hearts and a Gold Star for his service in World War II, among other commendations. He was aware of my father’s condition at the state contract hospital, and how it affected me.

One day, early in my sobriety, Adriel asked me if I would mind if he tried to get my father transferred to the Veterans’ Hospital in Palo Alto. I of course was grateful for any assistance he could offer. I didn’t know it then, but Adriel was very active in the American Legion in Stockton. Before long he was on the task of getting my father to the place he belonged.

I got a phone call two days later. Adriel informed me that my dad would be transferred by ambulance the next day to Palo Alto. He made happen in two days, by telephone, what my mother couldn’t make happen through years of dealings with congressmen. He made a dream come true for our family.

My dad would stay with the Veterans Hospital in Palo Alto until his death in 1990, over twelve years later, from colon cancer and the disease of alcoholism.

Even with all these blessings occurring in my life, it didn't take long for Adriel and others to guide me toward the twelve steps of the program. They knew I would need it. I needed to learn a new way to live. It had been their own experience with the twelve steps of A.A. that had saved them, and they assured me that it could work for me too. Being a professional mason, and having been around construction for the past eight years, I knew a little about building things. Also I knew that old structures sometimes needed to be torn down and replaced with new ones. My case, I knew, would require a new structure.

A couple of new friends, Bob L. and Dave S., who I had met after entering the program, were having success as building contractors. Dave specialized in building new homes and also in painting. Bob built new homes and took remodeling jobs. So whenever we got together to talk we used construction terms to describe things. It was a way for us to custom fit the program to our lives, a way for us to understand it, and make it better for us.

They both knew that as a mason I carried a Tool Bag, and so it was suggested to me that I needed a new Tool Bag. It would be a New Bag that I could fill up with New Tools. The steps of the program would be the new tools I would fill it with, and of course I would need to learn how
to use these new tools. I was going to be an apprentice again, they said. This apprenticeship program would re-teach me how to live, they said, if I wanted that to happen. I was about to tear down the house I had lived in for twenty-nine years and build a newer, better one in its place. My blueprints would be the twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Having conceived it all in these terms, the path before me was clear. Let’s get this project started, I told them. I have waited my whole life for this opportunity. I looked forward to the process of building it, of seeing something rise up, bit by bit, from a formless pile of raw material. Those twelve steps would become my foundation, and my map out of the dungeon that had held me prisoner for the first twenty-nine years of my life. They would become my guide for a new way of living.

With my new friends’ help, and the wisdom and knowledge of many others, I was led gently, with love and care, through each and every step. I discovered that these steps were the keystones of the entire A.A. program, the thing on which the enormity of the A.A. program was supported. And me too: in moments when I was close to stumbling, I found it took my weight as well.

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Chapter 13: Twelve Steps

Late one night, after everyone else had gone to bed, I made a decision to put the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to work in my life. It was time to take a closer look at the specifics of the program, and begin to learn how to enact them. With everyone in bed sleeping, I would be able to concentrate on the task, so I decided to begin immediately. I apologized to Garf, our cat, for disturbing his place on my lap, got up from my plaid armchair, threw another log in the fire, grabbed the A.A. books and a dictionary from the end table, and went toward the kitchen to work.

I sat down at the table and read the first step of the program: “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” I sat there listening to the fire crackling in the fireplace and realized how lucky I was. How I had taken this simple pleasure of a living room and a fire to sit by for granted? I remembered the feeling of God’s presence that fateful night. Since then I had been counting my blessings. It took a direct intervention on God’s part to put things in perspective, but I would never fail to appreciate what I’d been given. Then I realized I had, that night with God, already completed the first step.

I was learning the importance of admitting my own powerlessness, and how unmanageable my life was. As long as I held on to the belief that I could somehow control my addictions, I would never be free of them. I needed to understand that I could never, for as long as I lived, use alcohol or drugs again, and this was the first step toward that understanding. It would mean more than just agreeing with the text in front of me. I had spent twenty-nine years thinking I possessed some control, thinking I could somehow manage my problems. I would need to abandon that belief completely.

That admission would constitute the foundation on which my new life would be raised. As I sat there reading, I realized I was no longer the god, the master, of my existence. He who had visited me that night, He held that position.

Having wrestled deeply with this new knowledge, I was exhausted. I was enjoying the warmth of my fireplace, but it was time for some needed sleep. I closed my books and headed toward bed. I was tired but elated about no longer feeling so isolated. I had relinquished the false idea of control—which was a frightening leap, but it also meant I was no longer walking alone. I
slipped quietly into bed next to my wife and then said a short prayer of thanks before falling into sleep.

I got home from my A.A. meeting around ten o’clock the following night and discovered everyone again asleep in bed. I thought it would be a good opportunity to look at step two. I noticed the fire was almost out, so I threw in a couple logs to restore its flames and warm the room. I’d spent the day outside laying brick in the fog and it had left a deep chill that I hoped the fire would relieve. I almost didn’t see him at first, but there was Garf, curled up in my chair. (He thought it was his chair.) As the fire took hold, I stood with my back to it, warming my bones, before heading again to the kitchen to work.

Just like the previous night, the lights were off in the house, except over my kitchen table. The fireplace threw magical-seeming shadows across the walls and ceiling. The drop-down kitchen lamp illuminated my work area. I read: “We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

I sipped from a soda and smoked a cigarette as I reread those words. The first step had come easily—I had already lived it. This second one seemed more obtuse, but its meaning did seem to reveal itself to me. Until that moment when God’s presence appeared in my bedroom, my life was destined for destruction. I had always believed that if my life was ever to change for the better, I would have to find a way to do it. That only by my own devising could a change be possible. Was I ever wrong. I thought “I” was the god of the universe. But I had no ability to effect change in my life. I simply wasn’t capable. Throughout my life, the ideas I believed most strongly ended up being completely false: That I could learn to drink successfully, that money would solve my problems, or running, or hiding, or blaming. All of it was complete bullshit. I lacked the skills to bring any meaningful change to my life. The more I read the more obvious it became that my actions had been those of an insane person. I repeated the mistakes over and over, hoping for a different outcome.

I realized as I read that the change I had already experienced came from outside of myself. And I realized that my continued success would also depend on God. This is not to say it would be easy, that it was all in God’s hands, just that I needed to trust in a power more capable than myself. Until that cold winter night when God touched me, I wasn’t capable of understanding that there was a power greater than myself. Let alone a power capable of restoring me to any kind of normalcy.

I was enjoying this new insight and I continued to read. God was teaching me that insights were only a rearrangement of the facts. He was teaching me how to look around at my world and see things I had not been capable of seeing before—not because the world had changed, but because I had. He was showing me a different way to live.

Before I went to bed, I reconsidered everything I had just absorbed, and I knew God could restore me to sanity. I was again drained from wrestling with these important questions, but an excitement and joy was growing inside me. Finally, I was doing things that would have positive impacts on my life, and I loved how it felt.

Someone tried to tell me once that we are who we are, what we are, and where we are because of our prior decisions. Back then I hadn’t paid any attention—well now it was time to take note of that truth. It was time to recognize that my decisions had led me to this place in my life. It was time to decide who I would serve and trust with the rest of my life. My understanding of step three came nearly three months into my sobriety.

After a long day at work and a meeting that night, I had arrived home and was ready to settle in. To my surprise my wife was still awake, so we took advantage of the opportunity and visited
for a while, catching up on our rapidly changing lives, how the children were doing, etc. She was on the couch wrapped in her favorite afghan watching television when I walked in the door. Garf was snuggled up next to her, so I grabbed a soda out of the refrigerator and sat down in my favorite chair. The television was on, but we didn’t pay much attention to it while we talked. She told me that the kids were in bed and fast asleep. I should go in and give them a kiss goodnight, she said. After talking for about an hour, we decided it was time for bed ourselves.

Walking down the hallway toward our bedroom, my wife continued on while I stopped in to check on my son and daughter. Gavin had his toys scattered around his room. (He loved his G.I. Joe army guys very much.) When I looked down at him he was stretched out on his back, half uncovered, with both hands clasped under his head. His favorite stuffed bear lay close by. I bent over and pulled up the blankets, covering them both, and kissed him on the forehead as I tucked them in.

In the next room over, Dempsee laid curled up in her bed fast asleep. In her room everything was painted pink or light green, her favorite colors at that time. All her little girlie collections were stuffed into cubbyholes in the bookcase I had built her, and her favorite stuffed animals lay next to her as she slept. I made sure she was covered and tucked in and bent over and kissed her on the head, wishing her sweet dreams. As I walked to my own bedroom I found myself smiling from ear to ear, knowing that my babies now stood a chance at a different life.

After kissing each other goodnight, my wife drifted off to sleep and I switched on the reading lamp, thinking it was a good time to have a look at step three.

“We made a Decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” I began to cry as I realized that God had done for me in one split second what I couldn’t do in twenty-nine years. My understanding of God at this time was limited, but I knew how powerful He was. I realized I had already made the decision that step three asked of me. I had made it the moment He had touched me, three months earlier. My job, I knew, would be to continue to place my faith in God, and to continue to learn what I could about Him and His Will.

By the time I had finished reading the chapter my emotions were bouncing from place to place. I just wanted to live, and to have the destruction and pain of my life disappear. I wanted, more than anything, to break the cycle of alcoholism Adriel had spoken of. I might have only been a bricklayer, but the decision didn’t require a rocket scientist. I already knew the damage I was capable of inflicting, and the pain I had brought upon my family. But I was finally taking responsibility for the outcome of my life, and I was happy with the progress I was making. I was ready to move forward. I felt free for the first time in my life.

I closed my book and placed it on the nightstand. I switched off the lamp, burrowed into my pillow, and said a heart-felt prayer of thanks.

During the next couple weeks my emotions seemed to be everywhere, so I stayed in close contact with my A.A. friends. I had lengthy daily discussions with my sponsor about my plans for step four. My sponsor suggested that I read the chapter pertaining to step four again, and then read the fifth chapter, as it explained the fourth step more clearly. He knew I needed to make my own decisions concerning my recovery, so he guided and suggested, but he never demanded. Then he reminded me about my decision to turn my life over to God. “Well Steve,” he said, “this is the way you will accomplish that task.” He told me that the inventory I was about to do wasn’t about anyone but me. That I shouldn’t seek out the harms and wrongs I thought other people had done to me. I should look for those things about myself that were broken—jealousies, hate, fear, pride, slothfulness, insecurities, ego, and rage. I would be creating a list of the traits that had
caused so much damage in my life, and through that list I would come to understand the complexity of my life and my addictions.

Another of my dear friends in the program, Bob L., a Building Contractor I had become close friends with, shared his own insights. He was a few years older than me and had been in the program for several years, but we became good friends over time. He told me that before anything inside me could be fixed, I would first need to understand what was broken.

He told me that it wasn’t important, at this time, to understand what was broken outwardly in my life—the symptoms. I needed to know what was broken internally—the syndromes. He told me that alcoholism had damaged my soul, and how important that realization would be for my recovery.

About a week later, after I was done with step three and had done all the research I could on step four, I was ready to tackle the task that awaited me. Again late at night, after a meeting, I set to work on step four. At my familiar kitchen-table workspace I took a piece of paper and divided it into three sections, just like the Big Book suggested. I labeled the sections with the words “resentments,” “causes,” and “effects my.” There was no fire in the fireplace that night, but I felt secure and at peace with myself. The more responsible I became with my sobriety, the more my self-esteem improved and my loneliness faded away. I thought about how many other drunks had died before someone devised the A.A. program. I remembered my heart surgery too, and how many children and babies must have died before heart surgery was available. I was very lucky just to be sitting there that night, let alone with a second chance at life.

I remembered what I read about this step the night before, and what my friends had suggested to me over the weeks, “We made a searching and fearless Moral Inventory of ourselves.” The only requirement was that I be honest. I couldn’t turn again to excuses or gimmicks to manipulate the list, I knew. I needed to look for the truth, and only the truth, if I wanted to be set free.

It was time for me to set a bolder course in my new journey, time to start making changes to the way I lived. Before I started writing, I asked myself, Do I want to live, or do I want to die? It was an easy question to answer. For the first time ever, I wanted to live. My emotions were running high, but I began listing all the resentments that I had been harboring. I listed, as the book suggested, all the people, places, and things I hated. I went back to the night of my last drunk. I was surprised to find that most people in my life, and even some I didn’t know, ended up on my list. And I discovered at the end that I hated myself the most. The more I wrote, the more driven I became. I was doing something I had never done before: I was taking responsibility for my own life, and it felt good to expose those resentments.

Then I started on the causes. In this section I kept it very simple, as was suggested. Look for specific reasons why you hate, Steve, they said. Tears of guilt welled in my eyes as I listed each cause in the second column. My heart ached so much I thought I was losing control. I was realizing how petty and immature I’d allowed my life to become. I had to admit that most of my problems were self-inflicted.

Beside myself now, I couldn’t wait to start the last section under “effects my.” The way I was feeling, I knew it could only get better. I got up and stretched for a few moments and refilled my soda before sitting back down. I lit a cigarette and began listing the parts of myself that all those resentments and causes had affected. As I wrote, I discovered that this was where the “syndromes” of my illness lay. Here was the explanation for my destructive behavior. Here I was discovering what had kept my life in shambles for the past twenty-nine years.
As I wrote, a distinct pattern was surfacing. It told of the way I viewed my world. I found myself writing “fear” alongside each resentment. I noticed the frequency of other words too, and what they reflected about myself: pride (lack of self-esteem), hate (inability to control anger), jealousy (insecurity), and rage (misdirected anger.) These admissions were so difficult, so painful, that I knew I was on the right track. I was starting to understand that there was a way for me to change, and that Alcoholics Anonymous and these steps were what God ordained for me to enable that change.

I was getting tired as I finished the inventory. My emotions were all over the place, but in a good way. The freer I felt the more elated I became. It was like I was being cleansed, like the wreckage of my past was being washed away. It was almost three-thirty in the morning now, and it wouldn’t be long before I needed to report for work. As my inventory drew to a close, I was immersed in a new sense of freedom. I was becoming transformed. I felt myself drawing closer to God with each stroke of my pen, with each admission of fault. By the time I was done, I knew I held something magical and special in my hands. The list I had made was the most honest thing I had ever done. I was exhausted and emotionally wrought, and in two hours I would need to get up for work. I slid my inventory inside my book and closed it, then headed toward my bed. I said a prayer of gratitude and quickly fell off to sleep.

The next week I continued my usual schedule, going to work every day and attending my A.A. meetings, but the task that lay in front of me was foremost in my mind. Even at this stage of my sobriety, I had a deathly fear of returning to the booze. I cherished this life I now had, and I was, under no circumstances, willing to forfeit what I had gained. Step five awaited me.

“We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.” I read the fifth step over and over, trying to decide how to begin. I knew it was an important step. It would solidify the insights I’d learned in step four by forcing me to admit my wrongs to another human being. But I didn’t know how to begin. Two of those three requirements wouldn’t be too hard. I believed I had already admitted my wrongs to God and to myself—but to admit them to another human, well that would take some courage.

I asked a friend, one who would not be too judgmental, to do the fifth step with me. My friend’s nickname was Moses. Moses came into the program shortly after I did. He was an older man, and of short stature, like myself. He lived behind me on the next street over. We had become very close friends. He loved to golf, and so we became golfing buddies. In doing this fifth-step together, we cemented a friendship that lasted almost two decades, before he passed away a few years ago.

Moses came over one night after work so we could do my fifth step. Having neither of us done a fifth step before, we knew this would be a learning experience. He visited with Jody and me for a few moments when he first arrived. I think we both wanted to calm our nerves before getting started. Jody suggested that we go into the living room for privacy, so we grabbed our sodas and headed that way.

In the living room, we both squirmed around in the chairs until we became comfortable. I was a little apprehensive about beginning, and my first attempts included a lot of stuttering, a lot of false steps, but I relaxed after that initial stumbling. I found my voice and began to share my list with Moses. Soon enough I was sharing secrets I had kept hidden my entire life. It was like a dam had burst open. I felt like a shadow was being lifted and light allowed to stream into the darkness that had held me prisoner my whole life. It was the first time I had admitted all my dysfunctions to another person. And instead of feeling insecure, as I had imagined I would, I felt thrilled to be relieved of those secrets.
I unfolded my life like a book that night, to God, and to my friend Moses, and to myself. As our camaraderie grew and we both felt more comfortable, Moses shared some of his own dark moments. As we talked we remembered old hurts and old dysfunctions that we’d blocked out or had forgotten over time. Moses recalled episodes in his life that he would perhaps have preferred not to remember, but it felt good. It felt like we were both unburdening ourselves in important ways. Our night was taking on a life of its own and we both got caught up in the feeling of relief that comes with unburdening oneself so honestly. My greatest fear had always been that others would discover who I really was, but I knew I couldn’t allow those fears to get in the way of the gift that God was giving me. In uncovering this truth, I challenged my fears and revealed my uncertainties to my friend, and he in turn bared his fears to me. As the night progressed it came to feel natural to share these hidden truths. God’s Spirit was awakening inside me. It came alive with each admission I divulged.

We discovered that night that Moses felt as blessed as I did, and he decided that when he was ready to do his own fifth step, that I would be the one to listen to him. I learned that night that I wasn’t an “island unto myself.” I learned that night that I needed other people in my world. We were experiencing the true essence of Alcoholics Anonymous: one drunk talking with another drunk.

When we were done with my fifth step, Moses hung around visiting for another hour in our family room. We gathered around the fireplace and Jody mostly listened while we continued to talk—now less seriously, sharing silly stories about some of our drunken escapades. When he got up to leave, Jody and I both hugged and thanked him for being a part of our lives.

I had finished step five, and I trusted in God wholeheartedly, but I was deathly afraid I would relapse. I knew the kind of monster that lived inside me, and I was capable of doing some very stupid stuff. I was willing to do whatever it took to ensure that day never came. I was betting my future on God and those twelve steps. So far the transformation in my life was unbelievable, so I headed on to step six undaunted.

While lying in bed one night, I realized I had never felt so good about myself. I was taking responsibility for my life, and I loved the way it made me feel. I adjusted my reading lamp, squirmed around under my blankets until I was comfortable, and started reading the chapter on step six. “We were entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character.” I was more than ready to have God fix what was broken inside of me, but I wondered if it was possible. I trusted in God’s power, but my problems seemed rooted so deep. How could God get rid of rage, hate, jealousy, pride, fear, and all of my other defects? At that moment a light bulb seemed to come on in my head. I realized it wasn’t important for me to understand how God could or could not do something. Just because I couldn’t understand something, didn’t mean it was impossible. What was important with this step, I realized, is that I be willing and ready for God to do it. Yes, I said to myself, I am totally ready to have God do for me what I am not capable of doing for myself. I ran step six through my mind over and over, realizing that willingness and faith were all that were required from me. I didn’t have to understand the means of God’s action at all—all I had to do was believe in Him and be ready.

When my wife and I awoke the next morning, she told me she had a doctor’s appointment that day. She hadn’t been feeling well, she said, and had been having a lot of stomach pain. It just wouldn’t go away, she said. I asked her what she thought it might be. She said she had no idea, but would hopefully find out from the doctor.

When I got home from work later that evening, Jody told me about her appointment. She’d been given a routine examination—pulse, blood pressure, temperature, some poking around on her stomach looking for sensitive areas—all the usual stuff. When the doctor couldn’t find
anything wrong, he asked her if there had been any major changes in her life. She was proud to share with the doctor a description of our new journey, and how good our lives have been since I’d sobered up. The doctor knew then what was ailing Jody. He suspected that the new changes, even though they were positive ones, would take a while to adjust to. He said that when a person lives in such turmoil and chaos for so long, it takes time for the mind and the body to adjust to a new environment. Her body and mind were not used to the new situation. Time was the medicine that would make her feel better, the doctor said.

I thought the doctor was probably right. Strangely, Jody’s stomach pains were a positive sign in our recovery. I knew that without more changes in my life, we didn’t stand a chance of keeping this beautiful gift. We had no hope unless I altered those things about myself that were dysfunctional. And I wanted what my friend Adriel suggested to me on that cold foggy night—I wanted to be the first in my family to break the cycle of alcoholism. God was the only person I knew that had ever been able to make a difference in my life, and I was ready to allow him to change me.

Reading through step seven on another late night, I knew it was time to move forward. I knew only fear could defeat me, and only if I allowed it to take control. I knew I had come a long way from that night I went berserk, but I knew I was also a long way from where I needed to go. Step seven says, “We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” In the most humble way I knew, as I lay on my back in bed, I asked God to remove the shackles that had kept me bound my whole life, if it was His Will. I asked Him to allow me to be free, and to live life as He intended me to, to help me overcome alcoholism and shake off those shackles that bound me.

I no longer cared how God might change me. I knew the only thing that mattered was that I trusted and believed that He would. I was learning how to have faith in God. He was teaching me how to live, one moment at a time, through His Love and Grace. After saying another prayer, this time one of thanks, I slipped into a much-needed sleep. I was exhausted from the journey I had been on those past months. My world seemed very surreal to me then, almost storybook like. When I considered the events of those months, I found them to be almost unbelievable. I felt propelled toward the sobriety I was fighting for.

Over the next couple weeks I continued my journey, taking care of my personal responsibilities and keeping my eye on the golden ring of sobriety. I read and studied step eight every chance I got, needing to understand what was required of me. I was gaining ground and, knowing it wasn’t a time to get weak, I pushed harder toward my goal of getting and staying sober.

Step eight: “We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.” Not too difficult, I thought to myself. Just another list, like in step four. I knew it would take honesty and some difficult admissions, but I thought I was ready.

I made the list in my kitchen, being sure not to leave off any names. As the smoke hovered in the air above me, I realized how much destruction I had created in my life. It was a daunting pile of rubble. The guilt of confronting all the people I had hurt was overwhelming. I hadn’t thought it would be so difficult. But that guilt, I knew, could be made into a positive thing. I had to make right what I had broken.

Recalling the damage of my past, I realized I had left an important name off my list. I had hurt myself more than anyone over the years. I had never admitted that simple truth. It became clear to me that night what alcoholism had taken from me. It was a hard pill to swallow, the ways I had wasted my life. I wanted to scream out as loud as I could, but I knew it wasn’t a time for self-pity. By the time I finished my list, I was emotionally wrecked. I thought it would be so easy
to accomplish. Standing next to my table, I looked down at my list in astonishment. I slid it into my step book and closed it. I was beside myself with the thought of all the harm I had done. My past behavior weighted heavy on my heart that night, but I felt good knowing I had taken at least the first step toward repairing the damage I had created. Slipping into bed, I said my prayers with a broken and contrite heart.

Step nine was simple enough to understand after I read it and studied it, and read it again over following weeks. “We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” It was very clear what this step was asking of me. I needed to fix the hurt and pain I’d created. It was time to step-up and carry the weight of the damage I had inflicted on others. Going over the list of names again was daunting, but I knew my God would help me get through it.

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” I had heard these words in every A.A. meeting I had ever attended. Those words always stuck in my mind. We would be forgiven as we forgave others, I thought. God would forgive my shortcomings as I became responsible, and as I forgave others theirs. I had resented so many people, places, and things because I felt they had harmed me, but now it was time for me to forgive others and to ask for forgiveness myself.

Taking the list I created, I sought out each individual to apologize to him or her directly. As I went through the list, the guilt, fear, pride—all the negative emotions that had controlled me for so long—began to subside. These acts of responsibility, of course, didn’t make me perfect, but they were a catalyst. They set me on a path toward healing both myself and the rifts I’d made with others. I apologized to everyone on my list, this time with no deceptions and no ulterior motives. When I’d apologized in the past, it had been to effect a short term fix—I had no intention of changing myself or making amends for my behavior. Now, however, I wanted to set things right. I didn’t want temporary forgiveness. I wanted to fix things permanently.

About a week after finishing my list, while outside watering plants in my back yard, I thought maybe I had accomplished step nine. I had, after all, gotten through all the apologies I could think of. But it occurred to me then that even though I had apologized to almost everyone in my life, it would take a long time before my deeds confirmed the sincerity of my words. I would, I realized, be apologizing for some time to come. I would have to continue to apologize by living correctly. And this was not a depressing realization—it was a hopeful beginning. It was a visible path to get where I wanted to go. It was the way God was showing me how to live with alcoholism.

“We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.” I was studying and reading the chapter that described my next step. I had already talked with my sponsor and friends and they had given me advice about what to do next. Adriel told me, “Steve, if the first nine steps worked so well when you did them, what makes you think the rest won’t work?” He was letting me know that step ten was basically a continuance of the first nine steps. What was important with step ten, he said, was to admit to my future mistakes when they happened, and to make amends if necessary. He said, “Steve, if we don’t continue living this way, we will return to the same dysfunctional behavior that brought us to the program in the first place.”

I knew I had a way to handle the difficulties that came my way now, a technique to deal with those things that had baffled and confused me in the previous incarnation of my life. I learned in time to use these steps for anything and everything when my life didn’t seem to be
working. I learned that they had the power to change the way I perceived my world. My life was becoming clearer now. I took a personal inventory daily, and if I was wrong I admitted it.

In the next weeks I read step eleven several times, usually after I went to bed and the family was sleeping. “We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.” And over time, through prayer and meditation, I did grow closer with God. And I am confident now that it was God who enabled me to stay the course of sobriety. I had come a long way, I realized. But it was also clear that my sobriety was not simply a goal to be achieved. It was a life choice I would need to reaffirm every day, every hour, every minute, and that kind of strength was something I would have to rely on God for. God did for me what I wasn’t capable of doing for myself, and through prayer and meditation, I would be able to maintain that bond.

God had given me a new way to live, a way that “worked as long as I worked it.” During my sobriety I learned a useful prayer. I said it daily, to help me when I felt weak. God, Grant me the serenity to except the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Thy will, not mine, be done. I learned by repeating this prayer that the only person I could change was myself. But I also learned that I would need God’s help to make those changes happen. In A.A. this is called the Serenity Prayer, and it became a mainstay for my day-to-day sanity.

One night, after one of our meetings, my friend Bob shared with me his own insights about prayer. He said that prayer isn’t a time for us to talk with God—it is a time for God to talk with us. Praying isn’t a time for telling God what he can do for you—it is a time for God to tell us what we can do for Him. I was slowly learning that there was a way to live a normal life, even if I was a recovering alcoholic. I was learning that there were solutions to life’s problems, provided I was willing to submit to God’s will to achieve them.

After six or seven months I realized that my life had transformed in ways I could hardly believe. Working those eleven steps day after day was actually changing my life! I no longer felt alone or isolated. I wasn’t afraid of the world any longer—in fact I strove to embrace it. By this time it felt important to deliver this information to others who needed to hear it. It had helped me in such far reaching ways that I wanted to shout it from rooftops, I wanted to deliver it to those still suffering. I learned that sharing the program and its steps is the cornerstone of recovery. One drunk talking with another drunk. I wanted others who suffered from alcoholism as I did to know that there was a way out. I realized that this was what the twelfth step is all about: “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to Others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

After finishing the twelve steps and initiating them in my daily life, I reflected on my journey. I realized that fear, rage, hate and jealousy—in their various and extreme modes had prevented me from acting in a normal way nearly all of my life. All the excuses I had made in my life, all the blame I had leveled against others, all the running away from problems—these were just symptoms of the thing that ailed me. It seemed like it should be more complicated than that, but there it was, the truth. Emotional roadblocks had both created my behavior and prevented me from changing it. These were the true “syndromes” of my alcoholism. Having realized these truths, I knew I now stood a chance at a real and lasting recovery.

As for the twelfth step: From the very beginning I put it into practice. I have tried, whenever possible, to be a resource for others struggling with addiction. I consider this book a part of my continuing daily practice of the twelfth step.
Chapter 14: Lessons to Learn

By May of 1979 spring had settled into the San Joaquin Valley, bringing a close to a long and wet winter. I was looking forward to the change in seasons—spring’s promise of rebirth. I was in my backyard performing my bi-annual yard clearing, enjoying the pleasant weather. I had set aside the day for cleaning and putting things back in order, and the day seemed to hum along on a heartbeat and breath of its own. I realized I was happy to be doing these simple tasks, happy to be in my beautiful yard on a beautiful day.

I felt a little twinge of regret, as I sometime did, knowing that not so long ago I was incapable of that kind of appreciation. I regretted the ways I had wasted the first part of my life. But I also knew that my past was a lot like my yard. It had been a long, rough winter, and there had been some damage, but things were not beyond repair. With some work I would get my yard back in shape, and there was no reason I couldn’t do the same with my life.

I began my work by trimming back and pruning my plants, one at a time, and stacking the cuttings into piles. I found myself becoming emotional as I worked. I thought back over the past months, realizing they had flown by faster than I thought even possible, realizing I was accomplishing things that just a few months earlier would have been impossible. I’d undergone the twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program and initiated them in my life. As I continued to practice them daily, my life was transforming, just like this yard. I knew, however, that this was just the beginning of a long journey. In my life, many seasons would come and go, all in their own time. Tears welled in my eyes as I thought about the work that lay in front of me, and whether I was strong enough to stay the course. I wondered how I could live in sobriety. It would, after all, be so easy to fail.

I was beside myself knowing I was headed toward such an uncertain future. I resolved, though, to deal with those problems one at a time as they surfaced. As I finished raking debris from the flowerbeds, I realized that God had issued me back into the world. I had to trust that just as the seasons changed, God would also change me, and that those changes would enable me to face whatever challenges life might deliver.

As I pushed my lawn mower back and forth across the lawn, I realized how good it felt to see myself make progress. I had recently increased my meeting schedule, a decision I felt was having positive effects. I was beginning to feel a sense of pride at what I was accomplishing. On that dazzling Spring Day, by the time I’d finished with the yard and looked around, I felt very much at peace with myself. I loved how my yard looked. It was neat, clean, and in order.

As the weeks and months passed, I discovered a truth about my sobriety: Nothing in life is free, not even sobriety. I would learn soon enough that my recovery, like anything else, would have its own costs. My family was the main benefactors of my sobriety, but they—especially my children—would also pay a price for my new life. I knew that if I were to “slip” (sobriety loses its priority), I could kiss this new way of living goodbye. It tortured me knowing my progress was so tenuous, that it could be undone by a single moment of weakness. I would have to become selfish in my pursuit of soberness. I had to privilege that task above all others. I felt no small amount of guilt for the time I spent attending meetings, time away from my family. But I also knew that the meetings were the very thing that enabled me to stay sober. I had at least recognized the danger of this paradox. In my past life I would have thrown up my hands, admitted defeat, declared the problem irreconcilable.
My children suffered perhaps the most in my pursuit of sobriety. Children have no say in the matter of their parents’ shortcomings, and my own children certainly did not choose to sacrifice time with their father so that he could battle his demons—they simply bore it. They forfeited countless father/child moments—watching television together, homework time, meals as a family, and so many other important things. Most nights, when I went to a meeting, I wouldn’t get home until late. On days like these I might only see them asleep. I knew I was a better parent sober than I was drunk, but I worried that the absence my sobriety cost me was damaging in its own way.

The night I had tried to choke my wife, Adriel told me, “Somebody in our clan has to break the cycle of alcoholism.” I had to remind myself of this advice often. No matter what the cost to any of us, it was imperative that the cancer of addiction be stopped. I had to remind myself of the consequences of weakening my resolve, and have faith also in my family’s resolve. If I am able to gain sobriety, I felt, then maybe the devastation of alcoholism would vanish from of my family. I prayed that my actions might help not just myself, but also my children. I hoped they might be spared my fate. That conviction motivated me to make my new life work, and it has been the driving force of my recovery ever since.

In those early months, our family had an ace in the hole to enhance our probability of success: Jody. My lovely angelic wife. She was, and remains, the mainstay of our clan. She kept us together even during the hard times, and now she would keep us together during these challenging but good times. If our journey has been a success, she deserves all the credit. My own choices were dictated by necessity. Change or die. But Jody earned every bit of our victory the hard way. And she has, to my everlasting regret, all the emotional scars to prove it. Because of her unselfish love and devotion toward our family, I was able to get the help I needed. Because of her strength and support, I was also able to stay strong.

In the early months of my sobriety Adriel kept me as busy as he could. He tasked me with chores and errands for the program. It was busy-work, but it helped me assimilate into this new way of living. And it taught me how to give back to others. He asked me one night to come early to give him a hand making coffee and help set up the tables and chairs. I came about forty-five minutes early. I realized, strangely, that I had never made coffee before in my life. It was a new experience, and to be honest, it felt good to be learning this skill. Adriel showed me how to do it, and as the coffee was brewing, I hustled into the meeting room and began setting up tables and chairs. I couldn’t believe that something so simple could make me feel so good.

The next meeting he told me that if the ashtrays needed to be emptied, it was my job to empty them. “As much as these drunks smoke, if we didn’t keep-em emptied, we’ll have butts and ashes everywhere,” he said. And so I emptied ashtrays. The more I did, the better I felt about myself, and the more I wanted to do it. It wasn’t long before Adriel had me going on twelve-step calls with him. He said it would help me remember where I came from. To talk with alcoholics still suffering was therapeutic, he said. He knew it would be good for my low self-esteem and for my recovery in general.

Many nights I would get a late call from the A.A. answering service, which I volunteered for, and I’d be off to skid row or some other unknown destination. I was always excited about going, even though those interventions scared the hell out of my wife. I figured if God saved my life it had been for a reason, and that he would keep me safe as I carried the message of sobriety to others. When anybody reached out for help, I wanted the hand of A.A. to be there. I wanted to be a part of that. Aside from knowing and believing in the twelfth Steps of our program, I needed also to live it.
My first night volunteering on the A.A. Hotline was an experience I’ll never forget. My first call was a suicide call. I’d attempted suicide many times myself, but trying to convince another drunk not to kill himself was a new experience, to say the least. I was terrified of saying the wrong thing, of not being able to help, but I eventually found the words. I discovered that I knew instinctively where this person was emotionally. I knew the desperation he faced. I don’t know if the caller ever sought treatment, but I was hopeful I’d done some good.

I was becoming engaged with others through the program too. I was meeting people—some with more sober-time than myself, and others who had not yet sought help—and I found myself suddenly with friends and acquaintances.

There was Moses P. who lived on the next street over and who helped me with my fifth-step. Over the years we became golfing buddies and support systems for each other. My brother-in-law Frank was to join our membership only a few months after I joined. He, like Moses, was also a great support and source of encouragement. We three usually rode together to meetings, and we would encourage each other when we had those days when we’d have rather stayed home. These were special friendships because we shared a common bond. The knowledge that we shared many of the same problems and worries, and also the same convictions, kept us strong and determined to succeed. I think sometimes we made it through hard times just to keep from letting each other down. We each had our own personal reasons to stay sober, but we shared a common goal.

I developed many other friendships over the years, each bringing a unique perspective and unique source of inspiration. The people with whom I’d form friendships came from different walks of life. We had Walter C., a great friend who’d come straight from the throes of skid row. Dave S., Bob L., and Herb T. were all successful Building Contractors when I met them in the program. Jim M. was a high-ranking official at a government agency. Jerry C., was born with an intellectual disability, but was an inspiration to us all, and a prominent member of our group. And of course Adriel S., the unofficial father and sponsor of us all, who was a very successful businessman in his own right.

We were alive now and on the road to a better life, all of us encouraging each other every step of the way. We found it beneficial being around other people who understood the situations we faced. We all had a reason for new hope, and new futures. Before I became committed to my sobriety, I felt that a person had to quit living in order to not drink. To my amazement, I found myself feeling more alive than I had ever felt before. My life was busy now, and there wasn’t enough time in the day to do everything I wanted to accomplish.

As time went on I found myself hungering to find out more about myself and the God that saved me. To be honest, I was deathly afraid that my new life would be taken away from me. I remember one night waking up soaking wet from a nightmare. The fear I felt during the dream was paralyzing. It gripped every part of my being. I’d dreamt I’d slipped, that I’d gotten drunk, that I’d lost the beautiful sobriety that had taken me so long to find. The guilt of the dream was so painful and so intense, and it made me realize how much worse it would be to actually drink again.

I was so frazzled by the dream that I shared it with my friends at the meeting that night. I was to find out that these kinds of nightmares happen to many recovering alcoholics during their early recovery. Some of my friends shared similar dreams they’d experienced. Here again, my new friends were an invaluable resource. They calmed my panic and helped me place the dream in the right context. But I also realized: I had so much more to learn about being sober! I needed
all the knowledge I could obtain. This incident reminded me (and reminds me still) to keep learning about myself, and about the illness.

About eight months into my sobriety, I almost did slip back into the world I had come from. I laugh about it now, and it has become, over the years, one of my favorite stories to share with new people. At the time, however, it was very trying and very frightening.

I had been sober for eight months and everything had been going great. I had just arrived home from work, leaving just enough time to eat a quick dinner and get ready for my meeting. My wife told me while we ate that the washing machine had broken earlier that day, and that the transmission in her car was slipping. To most people these little inconveniences would be insignificant, but to me—on this day—they seemed monumental. A sudden fear surfaced and seemed to strangle me as I ate my dinner. How will I ever deal with this, I thought? Why is this happening now? They were truly minor problems, but I felt overwhelmed and inadequate to the task of solving them. I couldn’t think what to do. I might as well have been asked, on the spot, to cure cancer.

To make matters worse, if that was even possible, I was supposed to take charge of the meeting that night. I planned to show a movie about alcoholism to the group. It was a movie I had watched in rehabilitation and I wanted others to see it. I’d checked it out of the library several days before and had been worrying about showing it ever since. I felt very proud of myself for taking the initiative to get and show this film. I’d conceived of the film as a way to give something back to Alcoholics Anonymous, an extension of my daily practice of the twelfth step.

I knew I was in no state of mind to fix the washing machine or the car, or even make the calls necessary to get them fixed. So I did the only thing I could think of: I prayed. I asked God to help me and keep me sober while I worked through this, then I headed to my meeting as fast as I could and met with my sponsor and friends. Adriel spotted my confusion and anxiety immediately. (I’m sure it was scrawled plainly across my face.) He volunteered to give me a hand and some advice about my situation. It was a classic example of one alcoholic reaching out to another—a cornerstone of A.A.

Adriel took over the meeting and showed the movie instead of me. It went off without a hitch and I felt tremendously relieved. We talked about allowing professional people to look at the car and the washer. We talked about trusting someone else to fix the problems I couldn’t fix myself. I took his advice and—wouldn’t you know it—both problems turned out to be quite minor. Both the car and the washing machine were running fine just a couple days later. I’d learned a lesson and gained some new insight and, slowly, my anxiety disappeared. I learned that night that I needed to understand my limitations. More importantly, I had to admit that I had limitations, and simply except them when they surfaced.

God was teaching me, in spite of myself, that it was okay to admit that I was afraid. And it was okay to admit that I needed help and that my life was unmanageable. And most importantly, it was okay to be Steve. It was a good thing when I humbled myself and admitted to needing help. Through the years God would teach me many things in this same way. Only during this one tenuous moment of my recovery did I ever consider returning to drinking. Looking back it seems like such a small trial, but I learned that these are the kinds of knife’s edge moments that many alcoholics’ sobriety rests on. I learned I’d always need to be vigilant.

Slowly and steady, God was teaching me about life, and I was learning about myself in the process. My job kept me busy during the daylight hours, and many of my evenings were spent at meetings. Even after meetings, a bunch of my sober friends and I might meet at a local restaurant
to rehash everything we’d learned that night—a ritual I would continue for many years. I often joked that these were the true A.A. meetings. We fashioned a kind of solidarity between us—powerful friendships that could withstand life’s difficulties. The friendships I developed during those early months of sobriety reminded me of the huge redwoods along the Pacific Coast, how they had small root systems that alone had little strength, but that when meshed together with other redwoods, allowed them to grow enormously tall and withstand the ferocious winds that blew out of the Pacific Ocean. Yeah, that was our special little after-meeting group: individually we were weak, but together we could withstand life’s storms.

Most nights, after everyone was off to bed, I would study my books until the wee hours of the morning. I could never get enough information, no matter how hard I tried. I was always looking for answers to my questions. I often wouldn't go to sleep until two or three in the morning, and then I would be back up at six o’clock fulfilling my other responsibilities. I was obsessed with getting sober and staying sober. I knew I couldn’t afford to take chances. There was just too much at stake. My family’s existence depended on my ability to stay sober, so I never took my sobriety for granted.

I learned early on that to recover from alcoholism it would take a tremendous amount of effort and time. Even though the gift of sobriety was free, I knew there was a price to pay for it. I knew that I was in God’s hands, and I was headed wherever He wanted me to go. He’d given me a second chance at life, and new friends who were trying to stay sober too. He had given me the tools I needed to become who I wanted to be, and to be successful at it. It was my responsibility now to make sure this thing worked, and being tired or lazy wasn’t an option.

I felt during this time that the training I was receiving from God was just preparation for things to come. I knew that life wouldn’t always be a bowl of cherries. A person had good days and they had bad ones, but I needed to learn and trust that God would ultimately protect me. My hunger to discover more and more about God grew daily, and I didn’t limit myself in my search for His truth.

Depressions had haunted and controlled me for many years during my life, rendering me ineffective at dealing with life’s problems. I wanted now to understand this side of myself better. One night, about nine months into my sobriety, I prayed for God to help me understand my depressions, if it was His will that I understand them. The next morning, upon waking up, I slipped into one of the darkest depression I had ever known. I felt like I was running against the wind. Like I was weighed down by concrete boots. I wanted to just curl up in a ball and hide from the world, to run away and never look back. The isolation and loneliness were excruciating. It was a feeling I’d experienced many times before, but this was the worst I’d felt since getting sober. I told myself that it would probably pass, that it was just a rough morning. But when I woke the following morning it was still there. I didn’t even want to go to work. I told myself I would just have to endure it, and hope it would go away.

About three weeks later I discovered the depression had vanished for no apparent reason. I didn’t know when it had gone. (Had I been depressed the day before? The day before that?) It was simply gone. As I lay in bed I thought about what I was experiencing, and how depression had controlled my life since I was a young boy, and I had a revelation. For the first time, I realized why depression had such control over me. I realized that depression wasn’t something that happened to me—it was a place I went to emotionally, a place to hide. That revelation sent chills down my spine, knowing that, all this time, I was the one responsible for how I felt. When my world became too difficult, depression was my way of escaping. No one could hurt me in
that place, because I’d already imposed the hurt on myself. I realized that morning that God was still teaching me. And I realized that His lessons were different than any lessons I’d had before.

At a meeting one night, about eleven months into my sobriety, my friends excitedly told me some news. They said that A.A. was sponsoring a dinner meeting and had invited an out of town Speaker. The event would be held in Tracy. Tracy, California was a sleepy little farm community about thirty miles southwest of Stockton. I shared this information with my wife when I got home that night and she, like me, was excited by the prospect of a night out by ourselves.

Aside from the speaker and dinner, we found out there would be a dance afterward. The idea of the dance thrilled my wife. She absolutely loved to dance. And it would be an opportunity for us to experience a normal kind of life-activity. It would be the first formal social event we’d attended since I’d begun A.A., and I knew we could both use it.

Adriel told us as we drove that these functions liked hosting out of town speakers. They gave a different perspective about recovery, he said. He told us that Chuck S. from Southern California would be the Keynote Speaker that night. He was rumored to be a charismatic personality with many years of sobriety. Before long we arrived at the Alano Club in Tracy, a facility established to host A.A. Functions. We were amazed at how many people were there when we arrived. Well over a hundred people stood visiting, or were already sitting at their tables. The event was set to begin, so we spotted some friends from Stockton we knew and sat down quickly.

The meeting was opened in the usual manner as the secretary introduced himself. He asked a member present in the room to read the “A.A. Promises.” A section from of The Big Book called “How It Works” was read by one on the other local members. Then they passed around baskets for the Seventh Tradition, a ritual of collecting donations to support the program. We ate our dinners of chicken, baked potatoes, and tossed green salad, and soon after that you could hear a pin drop as the speaker, Chuck S. from Southern California, was introduced. Everyone was on the edge of their chairs anticipating what Chuck would share. Especially me. I felt thrilled just to be there among these people.

I had heard members in regular meetings share their stories before, but never a member of the speaking circuit. As he stood behind the podium and began sharing his story, his warm presence seemed to suggest that you knew him all your life. He shared in such a way that it would be hard not to identify with him. It was a story just like mine, a story filled with pain and misery. He was entertaining and got big laughs—but also, and more importantly, he delivered the message of recovery through A.A.

I identified with everything Chuck shared that night, though he was probably twenty years older than me. I was amazed by his ability to tell a story riddled with such pain and misery in such a humorous way. He understood, as I understood later, that laughter was a great medicine. Sitting there listening I realized something I’d forgotten, something so crucial for me to remember as an alcoholic. I found myself laughing at his story, laughing so damn hard that tears flowed from my eyes. My stomach was in knots and I was afraid I was going to pee my pants. Then I realized what had just happened. It was sad to admit, but I had never in my adult life been able to laugh like this. I loved the way it felt. I felt completely alive, and I knew—really knew for the first time—that I was starting not just to be sober, but to live.

Once again God was showing me how He could make a difference in my life, and how He was able to change my life for the better. He’d used this gracious, humble man—Chuck S. from southern California—to speak with me in a way I could hear and understand. He used Chuck to prove to me that I could be healed, that I could laugh and live again.
After Chuck finished speaking, the whole group joined hands and recited the Lord’s Prayer. Then, almost immediately, everyone pitched in and the tables and chairs were picked up and put away. We had been sitting in the middle of the dance floor the whole time. Needless to say, I felt very awkward and afraid about dancing sober, but I knew this night wasn’t just about me, so I danced. I danced and I enjoyed it! I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so good.

As we drove home after the dance, we talked about how great an evening it was. We laughed again about Chuck’s jokes, and how great the dinner was, and how goofy I looked dancing sober. We were grateful to be able to enjoy that wonderful night together sober.

Every day a new truth seemed to unfold in my life. God, in all of His love and wisdom, was teaching me how to learn and how to listen. I knew I needed more knowledge and understanding about myself and my affliction—there was still burnt in my mind a deathly fear that what I had gained would be taken away. With my one-year sober birthday within reach, the urgency of my conviction propelled me forward.

I had a King James Bible my mother had given me when I first sobered up at home. I had tried on many occasions to read it, but every time I tried reading that book it only left me more confused. Maybe the Bible wasn’t meant for people like me, I thought. I told my wife about my struggle to read the Bible, and she in turn told me about an easier version of the book she had heard about. It was a modern, easier translation of the King James Version, a Bible meant to help novices like me. I wanted one of these new Bibles. I knew there had to be all kinds of new lessons inside, just waiting for me to discover them. I had just celebrated my first sober anniversary and Christmas was a month away, so my wife promised to buy me one as a Christmas gift.

Early Christmas morning, there it was under our Christmas tree—a new Bible, just as my wife had promised. You would have thought I was a little boy unwrapping a new bike for Christmas. In my hands I held a beautiful, black, leather bound New International Translation Bible. I had been waiting a long time for a means to understand God’s message in the Bible, and here I had finally received it.

For my part, I was able to give my family a sober Christmas and a committed father for the second time in our family’s history. God was good and we were going to enjoy every moment of it. That night, after we had all gone to bed, I couldn’t wait to open my new Bible and start reading. I switched on my little halogen reading lamp and bent its flexible tube down low, so the light wouldn’t disturb my wife. I picked up my new Bible, held it in my hand, and stared at it. As I flipped through its pages I remembered someone telling me I should start with the New Testament. Thinking it was as good a place as any, I opened my book to The Gospel According to Saint Matthew.

On that beautiful sober Christmas, as I started reading those transformational words, a kind of compulsion was born in me. I could have read the whole night without stopping, but I wanted to spend a few moments thinking about what I’d just read. I closed up my new Bible and laid it on the nightstand next to my bed, then turned off my reading lamp and snuggled under my covers for some needed sleep. As I said my nightly prayer of thanks, I knew something great was growing inside of me.

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Chapter 15: Getting to know God

After getting home late one evening from work, my wife told me she had talked with our
dear friend Linda Rhode earlier that day. Linda had been a close family friend for over ten years. My wife and I met her and her husband when we moved next door to them early in our young marriage. We didn’t have a pot to piss in at the time, nor a window to throw it out of. We discovered soon after moving in that her husband and she were both Okies, and a friendship was born almost instantly.

During their conversation, Linda had told Jody that she had been attending a little neighborhood church near her home. That information excited Jody very much, as we had been looking for a church to attend ourselves. During their conversation, Linda told Jody that, if we wanted to, we were more than welcome to join her at her church the following Sunday, to see if we liked it. It sounded like a good idea to me, and so we arranged to meet Linda the following week at the church.

While talking with Jody, I thought back and remembered the church that Linda had described. It was a little non-denominational neighborhood church on the west side of Stockton, located on Mt. Diablo Ave., about five blocks from where I grew up. It was the same church that, back in my wild teenage days, some friends and I had broken into one night, thinking we could steal some easy money. I told Jody that I thought this was definitely the church God wanted us to attend.

I had been reading my new Bible for months by then, practicing my new program on a daily and hourly basis. I wanted and needed to know more about God. I wanted to go to church.

I had family members who attended a certain church and denomination, and they had asked, on many occasions, for me to join them. When they discovered that I’d sobered-up and found God, they were eager for me to come be a member of their congregation. But I knew I was looking for something different. I wasn’t exactly sure what church I was looking for, but I would know it when I found it, I figured.

The neighborhood where we lived was owned and built by another religious organization, and in the early months of my sobriety I had visited with people from that organization on many occasions. They would stop by from time to time to visit, and we would have conversations about God and Jesus. They were great people, but I wasn’t attracted to their denomination. I couldn’t explain it, but I felt they didn't have what I was seeking either. I had no doubt that God was directing my life, so I remained confident that I would know when I’d found the right place of worship. I knew God would let me know when I was where I was supposed to be.

I found myself in a complex situation, wanting to attend church and to give worship to the God who had rescued me, but not knowing where to attend. So I did the only thing that I knew to do: I prayed for God to give me some direction. This offer from Linda, to attend the very church I had once broken into was, I knew, God speaking to me like only He could. His answer to my prayers was direct and poignant. I knew I would be going that following Sunday, exactly where I was supposed to go, to the place God had chosen for my family and me to grow spiritually. The irony that God had chosen this specific church was not lost on me—but who was I to question He who had saved my life. Some anxiety surfaced, not knowing what lessons awaited me. But I knew that God had very specific and personal ways of instructing me, and so I knew I shouldn’t worry. He had set me on a new course that would help me to change my life. He had a plan that would work, as long as I trusted and believed in Him.

As we prepared to attend Bethany Community Church the following Sunday morning, I felt very proud. I was ready to do what I had been waiting for so long to do. The whole family had gotten up early that Sunday. We showered and dressed in our best clothes. I was giddy as we prepared to go, with just a twinge of fear about the uncertainty I faced on my spiritual path.
I recall that special day vividly. I remember the exact moment I pulled our car into that church parking lot off of Mt. Diablo Ave. There it stood, just as I remembered it. The church had not changed one bit since my childhood. It was situated on the southwest corner of Mount Diablo and San Juan Ave., a small church painted white, with a steeply pitched black composition roof. It was a humble church. The landscaping could use a little TLC, I thought to myself, but the white cross protruding from the center of the roof toward the heavens and the stained glass windows shining in the Sunday morning sun, left a deep impression on me that morning. Before we got out of the car, I sat thinking for a few moments as a knot formed in my belly and a few tears leaked from my eyes. I was overwhelmed by the realization that this moment was real, that I was attending church with my family for the first time.

As my family and I slowly approached the church, Pastor Stan Hill and his lovely wife Gloria greeted us at the double doors on the west side of the building, as beautiful gospel music resonated from within the church. Pastor Hill was a mature, robust, silver haired man in an immaculate blue suit. His freshly pressed shirt and vibrant red tie lent him an air of authority. His lovely wife Gloria was dressed in a fashionable flower-print dress. They both reached out toward us welcomingly. It was obvious that they were the pillars of this spiritual community. The welcome we received that day from the pastor and other members of the congregation was warm and heartfelt and we knew we were where we were supposed to be.

I had been so apprehensive about going to church—the stigma of my low self-worth still gnawed at me—but Pastor Stan and his wife Gloria made us feel so welcome and special that day that those feelings quickly dissipated. It was a little unnerving in the beginning, but I had no intention of allowing my anxieties to stop my growth, to stop my progress. After meeting and talking with the Pastor and his gracious wife, we strolled inside and found Linda. She had saved a place for us like she said she would among the rows of perfect polished oak pews. After we said our hellos and gave each other hugs, we sat down and made ourselves comfortable. As we sat there checking the place out and listening to the gospel songs, I am sure I was smiling from ear to ear.

The music and songs that day were incredibly inspirational. Listening to the choir, I thought to myself, I hope they sing Amazing Grace. It was a song I had always loved, a song that told my story. To my surprise, only moments later, the chorus began singing Amazing Grace. It touched my soul deeply and made me reflect, yet again, about how my life’s journey had taken me here.

As Pastor Stan gave his sermon, I was awestruck. I hung on to every word he said. I realized as he spoke that we had found our place, a place for my family and me to grow spiritually, a place to lay down roots and belong as a family unit. I thought to myself: what more could an alcoholic father like me want? I couldn’t have expected anyplace better. My life was unfolding before my eyes. I had an unbelievable life, one that not too long before seemed unattainable.

Within weeks my family and I had involved ourselves in our new church, just like we had with Alcoholics Anonymous—and we loved every moment of it. My wife and I attended church services not just on Sundays, but on Wednesday evenings also. Both of our children became involved in church activities, and it didn’t take them long to find new friends. We were living a life I didn’t even know could exist.

On many occasions we would have Preacher Stan and his wife Gloria over for dinner, and we’d discuss God and what he had done for our family. We talked about how He was able to transform our lives one day at a time, the ways he had made a difference in our world. We became very close friends with a few of the younger couples in the congregation, attending Bible and worship studies together. Yeah, we were a full-fledged church-going family! Our lives only
got fuller and busier with each passing day, as we slowly gained the life that God willed us to have.

We had only been attending church for three or four months when one Sunday Pastor Stan told the congregation he had important information to share. We were all very nervous and curious to hear his news. Pastor Stan and his wife Gloria both had the ability to make you feel as if you were the only person in the room. They embodied the concept of Agape Love, and that love transcended any indifference that a person might feel. On this day their unique spirit and love resonated throughout the congregation.

Total surprise wouldn't be the correct term to describe how I felt as Pastor Stan shared his news: I was devastated as he informed us he would no longer be the Pastor of our congregation, that the church’s board of directors had decided his services were no longer needed. I wondered if I had heard him correctly. I found myself totally dumbfounded. If this man wasn’t what the board of directors was looking for in a leader, what in the world did they want, I thought? I found myself crying freely.

Pastor Stan stood at the altar, with his wife there too for support. This revelation was unbelievable. I tried to make sense of this pronouncement, but I couldn’t understand it at all. My heart ached for this man and his wife. He was able to make me feel so special during such an awkward time in my life. I felt certain that he would be the one to teach me in the years to come, about Jesus and about my faith. How much my family—and I’m sure the rest of the congregation felt similarly—would miss his guidance.

We left the church that afternoon after the unbelievably sorrowful service and slowly made our way home. As we drove, we deliberated about what we had experienced and the impact we thought it would have on our lives. The tears that had started at the church continued to flow even after we arrived home, and they continued for what seemed like many hours until I was forced to finally lie down. While lying in bed, out of complete desperation, I did what I had been taught in my program: I prayed for an answer. I was baffled about why I felt this way about a man I had known only a short time. How was he able to have such a profound impact on me, I asked God? And why did he have to go, this man whom I had come to adore and admire so much?

As I lay in bed weeping and lost, however, I found God offering an answer to my humble prayer. God said that He knew I adored Pastor Stan. He knew how special he’d become to my family and me. The lesson here is very simple Steve: Even though it’s so painful, He said. When I came into your life you were dead, but now you are alive. I have taught you how to cry again. I have taught you how to have feelings again! Pastor Stan was a part of that teaching.

I came to realize that when you are alive, it can be very painful. It can even hurt so much it defies our ability to cope or understand. I learned this day that even though Pastor Stan was very special to my family and me, it was God who made all of this possible. The Pastor was only a vehicle for God’s teaching, an instrument He chose to use in my life at this time. The lesson revealed to me the importance of all those people who come and go from our lives, the reasons they are there and the profound ways they can affect us.

I could still remember when there were no feelings or emotions at all inside me—those days when I was filled with hate, jealousy, pride, fear, and rage—and so I found myself thankful even for this pain I felt about the exit of Pastor Stan from my life.

These moments of growth and learning weren’t the end of my church experiences; they were only the beginning. A short time later, after we’d received our new pastor, the church was sold
and we had to relocate our church. With our own hands we built a new structure in a different part of town.

I was able to use my masonry skills to give something special back to God. I helped lay the foundation that held up the enormity of our structure of worship, and the pathways and entrances that welcomed its visitors. I took great pleasure and joy from laying the brick veneer on the outside of the building, and building beautiful brick steps that led up to the altar inside. I was proud to donate my time and labor to building something special for God. My family was very proud also, witnessing their dad give back in such positive ways. We were living life the way we always should have.

Some weekends we would have potlucks in our home with all our friends, always inviting all our church friends, our AA friends, our neighbors, and others. They were a mixed bunch, but with my wife’s people-skills, things always went off without a hitch. I thought to myself how amazing it was, that all these people from different walks of life could get along so well with each other. I had always lacked the ability to fit in, but now I was starting to learn.

I would sit back sometimes at these functions and wonder how my life ended up like this. Why was I so fortunate and blessed in my life? Then I would remember one of the many scriptures I’d learned: “I will take the weak, to show the strong, I will take the poor to show the rich, I will take the blind to show those who can see.” Then it all seemed to make sense. I was just a vehicle for God to use however He chose, just like He did with Pastor Stan.

He chose me, a broken-down, defeated, chronic alcoholic to show the world the powers He possessed and could give to whomever He chose. In me, He had rebuilt a broken man and helped him stand tall again. If He could restore and change my life, He could restore and change anybody—that, I thought, is what He wants others to know. I was living proof that it was possible, a walking living billboard of God’s Mercy and Grace.

Even though we immersed ourselves in the world of our church, my family and I stayed very active in the A.A. program. We were doubly blessed, because we were able to benefit from both communities.

On my third sobriety birthday, my wife, daughter, and son attended my A.A. meeting with me. They wanted to share in the celebration of their father’s third year sober. My daughter and son wrote a letter that they wanted to read to the group that night. Dempsee was twelve years old at the time and Gavin six. This is what they wrote:

Dear Daddy:

November 19, 1981

Happy Birthday, I am so happy you are not drinking anymore. I can remember when you and Mom use to fight all the time over your drinking and I use to cry. And you were never home and I hated when you drank. Daddy, I remember when Mom use to cry at night when you would leave to get drunk and I was afraid you would never come home. I was little then and I guess you thought I didn’t know what was going on, but I did. Daddy, I am so happy that you don’t drink anymore. I have always loved you and I always will. You are the best Dad in the World. I am so proud that you go to A.A. I miss you at night when you go to meetings, but I know that you need them and I want you to go to them. Daddy I don’t have to cry anymore and neither does Mom. You have given us the best life anybody could ask for. You are sober and I am happy and proud. I know you have always loved me even in the bad days. And I loved you in the bad days. Daddy I am so glad you have friends like Adriel and Joyce and Uncle Frank and Moses and Walter in
A.A. I know they have helped you a lot, and so have all the other people in A.A. Thank you A.A. for helping my Dad get better. Daddy, I love you and please never drink again. Love…..Dempsee

P.S. Happy Birthday Daddy,

This is Gavin, I love you, and I will never drink beer and wine because I know you don’t want me to and it don’t taste good and it make you act funny. I love you Daddy........Love Gavin

Out of the mouths of babes—this letter of love and appreciation said it all. When my children read it that night at the meeting, nearly every eye in the room was flooded with tears. The silence was deafening as they read. Those children’s heartfelt words touched everyone. There wasn’t a person in the room who didn’t identify in some way with what my children were saying. You do not get to Alcoholics Anonymous without knowing extreme pain and suffering, and that innocent, heart-felt Happy Birthday letter screamed that message to everyone present.

It was their way of saying: Thank you A.A., for giving us our dad back. We love you and all that you represent. We don’t have to experience so much pain anymore because when our dad reached out for help, you wonderful people reached back and helped him to live again. That night will be burnt into my mind forever. It symbolized, to me, everything I had gone through, and how far I had come. The memory of my children reading that letter was a source of strength I could call upon to remind me what was important in my life. A few years later some difficulties would eventually surface—but for the moment, life was as good as it gets.

With a little over five years of sobriety, all of a sudden I began to feel out of sorts. I couldn’t put my finger on anything in particular; I just knew I had never felt this way in the last five years.

I talked about this problem with a few friends and with my sponsor, people that had a lot more sobriety in there than I did. I was experiencing some kind of deep gloominess, like a shadow of darkness hanging over me. I wasn’t comfortable with these emotions. To be honest, they scared the shit out of me. After sharing my dilemma with everyone I could, I found out that most recovering alcoholics experience similar difficulties around their fifth year of sobriety. Getting this information didn’t make the gloominess disappear, but it was a relief to know that other people felt similarly, that it was normal for alcoholics at a certain stage of sobriety.

God was teaching me that uneasiness and struggle were not signs of failure, but only a sign of growing and maturing. As an alcoholic I just assumed that if I was feeling a little “off,” then I must be doing something wrong, when really it just meant I was a normal person. I was learning that all people experience good feelings and bad feelings, not just alcoholics. And God was not only exposing those feelings, He also offered a solution to fix them.

Shortly after this revelation, I went to visit a friend to talk through this situation one more time. I couldn’t seem to shake this funk that was affecting my sobriety and my life. My emotions and feelings were just out of sorts, and they seemed to be taunting me. Suddenly though, as I was driving, I looked out my passenger-side window. There it stood, larger than life, the answer to the question that I had been asking. Like a huge beacon of Mercy, high above the freeway overpass, stood a billboard. Printed across it was exactly what I needed to hear. In big black bold letters it read, simply: Pray. It Works! I had been slacking off on my prayers, and this was God’s way of getting my attention.

I discovered, after a few more months of discomfort, some revealing truths. Truths that had hindered my sobriety. After reexamining my program and myself, I realized I hadn’t been
working my program with the urgency I had at the beginning of my recovery. Over time I’d
begun to feel safe in my sobriety—I’d begun to take it for granted. I thought I knew everything
and that I’d heard everything there was to hear. After all this effort, all these prayers, all those
meetings—what else was there to learn, I thought? But I wasn’t at the end of my sobriety, I
realized. I was only at the beginning. I was still an alcoholic, and it was imperative that I never
forget that fact. I was still powerless against alcoholism, and my life was still unmanageable to
some degree. My new life wasn’t a one-year, five-year, or even twenty-year jaunt. There was no
magical endpoint where things were all fixed. The realization that this was a forever kind of
arrangement had finally sunk in. If I wanted to stay sober for the rest of my life, then I would
have to work the steps, to the best of my ability, every day for the rest of my life. The sobriety
came free, but there was a price to be paid to keep it.

Even though my life was changing, the program wasn’t changing at all. I still had many
chinks in my armor, and there was still a lot of work to do. It was at this five-year mark that I
realized the true extent of what I was dealing with. I had already learned that alcoholism slowly
progresses until it kills, steals, or destroys everything it touches. But I was learning now that true
sobriety evolves slowly over time. Those first days of sobriety are such a beautiful thing, but like
everything else in life, it matures and becomes something different than it was at the beginning.
This lesson would be a new challenge to my understanding of alcoholism and sobriety. God was
making sure I didn’t miss any opportunities to learn, despite my hardheadedness. He was
teaching me how to become strong, and he was preparing me for things I would face in my
future.

Being a compulsive and obsessive person meant that, when I was still drinking, there never
was enough of the booze, and that my behavior could be mystifyingly erratic. And it was those
same personality traits that drove my initial sobriety. I loved everything that sobriety had given
me, but I selfishly wanted more. I wanted everything that God and the program of Alcoholics
Anonymous had to offer, and I wanted it all now.

Late in October of 1985, I remember lying in bed reading my Bible and thinking back about
all the things I’d had experienced during my life and my recovery, all the different ways that God
had taught me and showed me how to live, how He used the Bible stories I read each day to
teach me different lessons. I came to understand what was meant when that book is referred to as
the “living Bible.” The Bible stories I read had exerted real and tangible power in my life. They
were not just old stories; they had taught me lessons that had changed my life. But they were also
overwhelming. They made me realize my flaws, and the extent of the lessons I had yet to learn.

I continued to lie there and think about all the difficulties and problems I had lived through,
all the hardships that had brought me to this point in my life. What more could I endure, I
thought? How many lessons must I learn? Worn out and battle weary, I held up my Bible toward
the ceiling and yelled at God, “No more! I can’t take any more!” I slammed my Bible closed and
put it down on my nightstand. I couldn’t take any more of the lessons He was teaching me. My
heart ached and my eyes welled up with tears.

I thought about how far God had already lifted me up, and about how much I loved Him, but
in those moments of heaviness, in those moments of doubt and confusion, I still wanted to run
and hide. During those moments, when I felt so isolated, I wondered if I could really endure the
path of recovery. So, out of pride and stupidity, out of a broken heart, I said to God, “What more
can you do to me that you haven’t already done?” I knew as I said it that my mind was already
made up. I had chosen to turn my life over to Him and I would continue to trust his course for
my life. I asked him to take me wherever He needed to take me, for Him to do with me whatever He needed to do, if it would help me grow and understand Him better and become strong again. God, like on so many other occasions in my life, heard every word of my prayer. He felt my pain, my confusion, and my fear. He understood my broken heart. He knew I wanted to learn and become all that I could be as a person, and that I loved life and Him more than anything in the world, that I wanted and needed to be, and stay, completely free of alcohol. I was held prisoner so long in the dark that when His Light shined into my life, I wanted it to shine as bright as it possibly could.

Soon He would allow me to enter a phase of learning and growing, a phase that would stretch and strain every fiber of me. Though I felt weak and defeated in those moments, God was allowing a new strength to grow inside me. He knew what I needed to learn and experience to make me strong again. It would be through His Grace that I would stand tall again and finish our journey—the same Grace He’d touched me with almost seven years prior, on that cold night when we’d started our journey together.

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Part III--What it’s like now

“Get busy living, or get busy dying”

Stephen King

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Chapter 16: Dempsee's accident

Tuesday October 22, 1985 was one of those days. I was glad it was finally over. I was worn out from battling stop and go traffic on the 580 freeway, which I took daily in my commute in and out of the San Ramon/Danville area, but I was arriving home early at least. The traffic was thick but I blasted my favorite country songs on the stereo to relieve the knot in my neck.

No one was home when I arrived, so I thought I would just sit in the backyard and unwind. I grabbed a Pepsi from the refrigerator and my cigarettes from the kitchen bar and headed out the back door. I pulled up a chair from beside the patio table and plopped down to enjoy my soda and wait for my wife to get home from work.

As I sat there, I admired my custom brick planters and barbeque. Both were projects I’d undertaken earlier that year. What a gorgeous day, I thought. I was enjoying the green lushness of my lawn and how neat and clean all my shrubs and plants looked. It was a chore I attended to religiously most weekends. There were a few acorns and twigs scattered in the flowerbeds—nothing unusual considering the huge Oak that overhung the fence. It was a chore I could take care of the following weekend, I thought. I’m not sure how long I had been outside when I heard the garage door opening. My wife had finally arrived and I was looking forward to catching up on her day.

When she was finally inside the house, I stuck my head through the sliding glass door and invited her to come out and relax for a while. She told me that she’d had a nerve-racking day also, so we lingered in the yard and smoked a few cigarettes to unwind. She asked me if I’d heard from Dempsee. Dempsee had, by now, turned sixteen and was driving. She should have
been home already. I could see the worry written across her face. My wife knew our family’s schedules down to the minute, and she seemed to sense that something was not right.

She said today was the day Dempsee was supposed to report for her drug intervention program. She had volunteered to help kids with addiction problems down at the county hospital. Having grown up in our family, it made sense that she wanted to reach out to help people suffering with addiction. Maybe she got tied up in traffic, or maybe the program ran a little longer than normal, I said. But I could feel my wife’s discomfort growing. By now I was beginning to share Jody’s worry. It was unlike our daughter to be this late.

The phone rang no more than ten minutes later. I think both of our hearts skipped a beat when we heard it. I feared the worst as Jody hurried to answer it. I could tell the news wasn’t good by the look on Jody’s face. I stuck my ear next to the receiver and picked up bits and pieces of the conversation:

“…accident…come down to…as soon as…”

Dempsee had been in a car accident near the hospital where she was volunteering, Jody said when she got off the phone. They needed us to come as soon as possible. They said not to rush, that she was ok, and that they would fill us in on the rest when we got there. The nurse had said she was ok, but what did that mean? Did it mean that she was severely injured but would live? We were both acutely aware of how bad the situation could still be. We tried to think only positive thoughts. We couldn’t admit the scary dangers that could be awaiting us.

We contacted Jody’s sister, Shayne, who lived a few blocks away and asked if she’d watch Gavin. We explained briefly to Gavin what had happened and why he was going to his Aunt Shayne’s, then headed straight to the hospital. The trip should have only taken thirty-five or forty minutes, but we drove for what seemed like hours. The Interstate was jammed with rush-hour traffic, but we stayed our course and tried not to worry.

While driving, I found myself reminiscing about my little girl, about how special she was to me and my family. How she had the bubbliest, most charismatic personality of any child I’d met. How she always went out of her way to help those less fortunate. She was a charitable and loving person and that love infected those around her. My little girl. My special, lovely daughter.

My mind drifted to those dark days I had caused in her young life, how she had to grow up in an alcoholic environment with a drunken father. It broke my heart knowing that for the first nine years of her young life I had cheated her out of a normal childhood and a normal father daughter relationship. Then I thought about how I was still cheating her. I robbed her of time by spending so many nights at meetings. And now she was in trouble. I felt a terrible remorse for all those moments I had not been around. As I drove, I thought about my family and how we had arrived where we were. I thought about how life sometimes deals us a bad hand—but then I thought about how life can be sweet and good. I prayed that life would be good to us one more time. I thanked God for my own life and prayed that he would not take my daughter’s.

Jody and I talked as we drove, and we concluded optimistically that Dempsee had probably broken an arm or gotten a little banged up, but was fine otherwise. We decided that the situation would call for some kind of discipline. We would have to ground her. (I realize now that this was just another way for us to believe she was fine. If she was well enough to punish, then surely she was unharmed.)

We sat for a moment or two staring at that humungous old county hospital. It was not the kind of hospital that inspired faith. It was huge and old and a little decrepit. It called to mind horror stories of incorrect limbs being amputated and the many trips my dad made there. As we approached the emergency room, the double glass doors opened automatically. We hurried
through the hallway, dodging other people coming out. Our heads swiveled back and forth looking for the information desk.

We found it and stopped momentarily to speak with the receptionist. I was amazed that the lady behind the desk already knew who we were and what we were there for. She said that Dempsee was okay. But her doctor wanted to see us before we went in, she said. The receptionist must have sensed our fear and uncertainty, as she tried her best to calm our nerves.

The doctor wanted to see us first. The thought kept repeating in my mind. It couldn’t be good, I thought. My wife’s face seemed to indicate that she was thinking the same. What did he need to tell us? What did we need to be prepared for?

From one of the side rooms along the hallway, the doctor emerged. We walked toward him hurriedly, both wanting and not wanting to know what he would say. After we introduced ourselves, he told us we needed to talk. He pulled us to the side, out of the way of people coming down the hall. I felt like my heart was going to burst as I waited for his explanation. I wanted to just sit down on the floor and bawl like a baby.

He told us that Dempsee had rolled her car several times. It occurred at the intersection of Manthey and Wolfe, next to the Interstate. Her little Volkswagen had flipped, creating a dreadful mess for her passenger and herself. Paramedics and firemen had to cut her out of the wreckage with the Jaws of Life. The car was damaged so badly, he said, that she was fortunate to be alive. Was this even real, I wondered? Or was I just having a really bad dream? My mind couldn’t absorb the information fast enough. I’m not sure I even wanted to comprehend what he was saying.

He said she had sustained serious life threatening injuries: a fractured skull, cracked pelvis, torn kidney, broken clavicle, torn spinal cord, and a spinal fracture at T-12. They were in the process of stabilizing her as we spoke. My wife and I embraced to keep each other from falling to the ground. Time felt like it had stopped. I wondered how I would ever handle the hours that would come next. I had never in my life experienced such a dreadful moment, and my wife was worried she would soon find me in a bar with a drink in hand. Then I heard the doctor’s voice. He said, “Come with me please,” and led us to see Dempsee.

As we followed he told us he had already made calls to several local orthopedic surgeons who would consult and operate on Dempsee in the coming hours and days. He said he would let us know as soon as he found an available surgeon, so that we could make some decisions and sign forms. As we continued to walk, I couldn’t help but notice the staff in green scrubs scurrying around. It seemed like everywhere I looked was another machine with tubes and wires running everywhere. Their blinking lights and shrieking alarms horrified me.

We finally reached the bed and found our daughter lying helpless and suffering severe pain. It was excruciating, and the sight of her like that left me feeling powerless. She was hooked up to what seemed like dozens of machines. I didn’t know what to do next. As her father, I wanted to help, but I was powerless against the problems she now faced. I knew I couldn't take away the pain she was experiencing. The only thing I could do was try to comfort her. I bent over the railing of her hospital bed and kissed her on the forehead. I wanted to let her know how much I loved her and that we would tackle this difficult time together.

Moments later the doctor returned with new information. He said, “I have contacted all the surgeons in the immediate area and nobody is willing to take on these injuries.” What in the hell was really wrong with her, I thought. You’re not telling us! I felt angry and like I was being lied to. “Your daughter needs to be transferred,” he went on. “Either to San Francisco Medical Center or to U.C. Davis Medical Trauma Center in Sacramento.”
This doctor didn't know that I was a recovering alcoholic. He didn’t know that I sometimes don't do well with change—especially change where my daughter’s life hung in the balance. My wife and I needed to make a decision immediately. In moments like these you either believe in God or you don't. I knew that Dempsey was in God’s hands now and that what would be would be.

We decided that Dempsee would go to U.C. Davis. It was closer—about 60 miles north of Stockton. We informed the doctor of our decision and told him to airlift her there. One of the biggest shocks was when the doctor told us she couldn’t go by air, that the flight would probably kill her. We knew then that she was injured beyond our comprehension. As her parent, I didn’t want to face the fact that my daughter’s life hung in the balance. I said, simply, “Okay,” then prayed.

We were told she would have to be transferred by ambulance and that arrangements were being made as we spoke. The doctor also informed us that one of the biggest dangers of transporting patients with these kinds of injuries is movement. He said that any abrupt shock could kill her instantly. Why did you tell me that, I thought to myself. I would have preferred to not know. It would have been better, when she left in the ambulance, to have our hope intact.

Just before we left, I walked outside to smoke a much-needed cigarette and talk with God about my family. Standing there alone, leaning against the building outside the emergency room, I looked straight into the heavens above. I wanted so bad to see God’s face for comfort. I wished He would make this tragic situation disappear. As the tears flowed down the side of my face, I began talking with God like I usually do:

God she is in your hands now, and there is nothing in my power that can help her. You know, Lord, how much Jody and I love and adore our daughter and how badly we want for her to get better. God, please don’t take her. And help me to stay sober and strong through all of this. If it is Your Will, Lord, please comfort my family and me in these difficult moments. Thy Will, Lord, not mine, be done. Amen.

With tears still in my eyes, I went back inside and found my wife so that we could prepare for our drive to Sacramento. We walked out to the hospital’s parking lot and loaded ourselves in our car. We pulled up behind the ambulance that would take Dempsee, and we waited. As we stood there and watched the paramedics and nurses place Dempsee into the ambulance, my wife and I nearly broke down. There was nothing we could do except follow helplessly behind the ambulance and hope that she’d make it. They wouldn’t allow my wife to ride along with our daughter. She wanted to comfort her during the long, frightful trip, but it was too dangerous they said. There was no room in the ambulance for anyone but paramedics, who would need to attend to our daughter the whole way.

The hospital complex was lit-up like daytime, and written across the huge main building in big illuminated letters were the words, U.C. Davis Medical Trauma Center. They were blunt words. They seemed to foretell the pain and misery that transpired inside. We tried to process where we were, but we were both in a kind of shock. Those blunt, utilitarian words on the building signaled, at least, that we were in the right place. If your daughter must be involved in a medial trauma, it is reassuring to know that there is a place, a center, built for that condition.

Once Dempsee arrived at the hospital, she was immediately assigned a private trauma nurse. Her name was Sherry Bolden. Sherry was an angel of mercy, a go-to person. Her responsibility was to focus on Dempsee’s medical situation. Also, to counsel, calm, and comfort us, and answer our gazillion questions. She stood before us in her crisp white uniform and told us what we could expect. Her cap was tilted just enough to give her an air of professional confidence. It was a
much-needed assurance. We needed, at that moment, to know that Dempsee was in good hands. Nurse Sherry was a Godsend. She cared for our daughter throughout her stay at the hospital, and she became a confidant for my wife and I.

For the next hour all we could do was wait to hear from Dempsee’s new attending physician. Dr. Dan Benson, her assigned Orthopedic Surgeon, showed up shortly after she was admitted. He immediately began to assess her medical situation. Standing before us confidently, he said that Dempsee needed to be operated on. He was compassionate while delivering this news, but also very matter of fact. His confidence was helpful for our own optimism. We would wait, he said, before operating. They needed to give the swollen and injured areas a chance to calm down before surgery.

He was a great doctor, and he took pains to be gentle with us during these challenging moments. He understood our anxieties and pain, because he had experienced them before with other patients’ parents. He took great care explaining everything we would be experiencing in the days and weeks to come. He let us know that the greatest risk Dempsee now faced would be turning her over to operate on her. If things went badly, he said, it could sever her spinal cord. The worst-case scenario, he said, could result in instant death.

The longer we waited the better Dempsee’s chances would be. This thought kept running through my mind. I couldn’t get those words out of my brain as the hours slowly passed. I had figured we would wait three, maybe four hours at most before they operated—but really, I had no clue what was involved here. I just wanted my daughter fixed and out of harm’s way.

Well, true to the doctor’s word, we waited. And then we waited some more. We waited five more torturous, agonizing days until it was safe and more advantageous to operate. We have increased the probability of a better outcome because of the waiting, I thought to myself, but it has aged me a lifetime in the process. We slept very little during that period. Every moment was crucial and we didn’t want to miss anything. Every moment seemed like it brought something new. All that waiting was taxing our patience and our faith.

Doctor Benson met us in the waiting room early on the morning of surgery. He wanted to give us a heads up about what we could expect during the day. First, he let us know that it would probably take seven or eight hours to do the surgery, and that we would be kept informed at all times along the way. He said that he had great personnel to assist him and that he was praying for a good outcome. As we stood there listening to this fine surgeon, we thanked him for all he’d already done, and then we let him know we would be praying for his success.

After he’d departed, I went into a corner of the waiting room by myself to pray. I needed to ask God for a good outcome for Dempsee, and the strength to help us get through this difficult day. I needed more than anything to feel God’s presence in this situation. I needed the comfort that only He could give me.

While huddled in the corner of the waiting room praying, God showed me a vision of my daughter lying on the operating table. Seven angels surrounded her and looked down upon her. They were huge, powerful angels and they were anointing what was soon to take place in that room. They stood around her in a perfect circle softly fluttering their angelic wings. Then, in a soft, gentle voice, God spoke with me. He told me not to worry, that today He would save my daughter for me. He said He was saving her for another day and that great works awaited her. A calmness and serenity rushed over me in those moments as I thought about what He said. I knew that everything would be okay now, because God told me it would be okay. I had no idea what the future held for us, but I knew without a doubt that Dempsee would survive. It was very
comforting to have that peace of mind, knowing that God’s Hands were involved with her surgery.

I immediately went back to where my wife sat and told her what I’d seen. It seemed to give her some measure of peace also. During these stressful hours I hung on tightly to everything God had told me, especially since I already knew His capabilities. My wife and I both believed in God. We believed in and trusted what he could do for our family.

The first eight hours passed slowly, and before we knew it ten hours had passed. We were becoming worried about how long things were going. Had something gone wrong? Finally, after thirteen long, weary, earth shattering hours, Dr. Benson emerged from the operating room to talk with us. He told us everything that had gone on during Dempsee’s surgery. We stood, mouths agape, listening to his description of the procedure. He started by telling us how bad it was when they first cut her open. It was so bad that they had no idea where to begin, he said. But all of a sudden, things just seemed to go back together easily, he said. He said it was uncanny, almost mystical, how it worked out.

I knew that God had completed what He promised thirteen hours earlier, that he would save my daughter’s life. He’d said that great works awaited her, and I knew that in time it would come to pass.

A few hours later, my daughter was taken out of recovery and placed in a private care room with a private nurse while she recovered. Naturally, we visited with her for a few moments, even though she was still unconscious. Nurse Sherry suggested that maybe we should consider going home and get some much-needed rest. We hadn't been to bed in over five days, and some rest would surely do us good. She assured us that Dempsee, with the medication she was on, would stay asleep for a very long time. She said not to worry, that there wasn’t anything more we could do at that time. We decided it was probably a good idea to follow her advice. We made sure we had all the information we needed, then we headed home. We needed to see our son Gavin and comfort him and reassure him that his sister was ok. We also needed a good night’s sleep.

Even though the drive took over an hour, we were in good spirits. We had survived the surgery and Dempsee was in stable condition. We drove home that night knowing we had just left our baby at the hospital in the care of strangers. We were still terrified for her condition, but not as terrified as the previous five days. All we could do now was wait.

After getting settled in at home, I remember going into the bathroom to wash my face with cold water. My reflection in the mirror startled me. My hair had turned almost completely gray. I had read stories about this phenomenon, where fear had turned people’s hair instantly white, but I never knew they were true.

It reminded me of the poem, “The Man in the Glass.” I’d read it when I first arrived in Alcoholics Anonymous years earlier. You either liked the person staring back at you from the mirror, or you didn’t. Even though my hair was almost completely gray now, I liked what I saw looking back at me. I saw a man confronting life at its harshest, and he wasn’t running away. I was scared to death, but I wasn’t running away.

We couldn't have been home for more than an hour when the phone began ringing. It was the hospital, informing us that Dempsee was having difficulties breathing. They needed us to return to the hospital immediately.

After hanging up the phone I told my wife the details of the call and we prepared to leave again for the hospital. We swiftly locked up the house and turned off the lights and were on the road, headed back to Sacramento. As we drove, my wife and I could hardly speak to each other. We were too afraid. We were terrified and exhausted and uncertain of what awaited us at the
hospital. They said to come immediately. That word seemed to carry with it a sense of doom and foreboding. We couldn’t talk about it, but I think we both thought she would be dead when we arrived. I knew what God had told me earlier that day, but I was exhausted and scared. I feared the worst.

When we arrived at the hospital, I parked quickly and we ran to her room as fast as we could. As we approached Dempsee’s room, we could see the doctor and nurse working over her. It was quite dark in her room, except for a nightlight over her bed. It seemed to create an angelic aura around her. As we walked through the sliding glass door and into her room, we were scared to death. We could see the flashing lights and blinking numbers on the machines. Tubes and wires seemed to be everywhere. The whole situation became unbearable, but we tried to compose ourselves.

The doctor told us that not long after we left, Dempsee had woken up. She started having difficulty breathing and they had been trying to get her stabilized. To make matters worse, in a low, hoarse voice, Dempsee turned to her mother and me and said, “Why did you leave me?” We were momentarily paralyzed by guilt. We told her we would never have left if we thought, for even an instant, that she would have woken up.

Our attention promptly turned toward the doctor. As he talked with us, he instructed the nurse to give her a huge dose of morphine to kill some of the pain. It must have been a lot, judging by the reaction on the nurse’s face. She looked back at the doctor and told him that that much morphine would kill her. She said that she was Dempsee’s nurse and that she knew what was best for her patient. We stood listening to this conversation in complete shock. We didn’t know what to do or think. We knew we had no control over what happened inside that tiny room. We had to have faith that the doctor and nurse knew what to do.

The doctor looked back at the nurse and said, “Give her the morphine, and that is an order.” Then he looked me straight in the eye and said, “I pray I’ve made the right decision.” As he spoke, I thought, I’m praying you made the right decision too, doctor. My daughter’s life depended on his decision. Luckily God was assisting the doctor that night.

I wish I could say that all the hard moments were over after that episode, but like everything else in our life, there was still more to come. These things tested my fortitude and became my defining moments as a father and husband. I knew I was in this fight until the end, no matter what the outcome. These moments also helped solidify my sobriety and build character where once there was none.

After several days, it was time for me to return to work, commuting to the bay area every day to support my family. I needed to keep working to keep our medical insurance valid, and so I would do whatever I had to do. About a week later, Dempsee was moved out of the intensive care unit and placed in a special rehabilitation unit at the hospital. The unit was designed specifically for serious spinal cord injuries. Most patients there were either paraplegics or quadriplegics. It never quite registered in my mind why Dempsee had been placed there—I didn’t want to face the possibility that she could suffer paralysis.

I came home after work one day and called my wife at the hospital to see how things were progressing. I knew by her voice that something was up. I could hear the heartbreak in her voice. She asked me to come down to the hospital please, because Dempsee wasn’t doing very well. She thought I could help cheer her up a little bit. I tried to get her to tell me what it was, but she said she would tell me when I got there.
Dempsee was bawling her eyes out when I arrived, and my wife was sobbing next to her. This had been one difficult time for all of us, so I figured maybe everybody had finally collapsed mentally. I asked what was going on.

Earlier that day, one of the physical therapists came into Dempsee’s room with a wheel chair. He said, “You will have to get used to this chair, Dempsee, because you will be spending the rest of your life in it.” My knees almost buckled as I heard that news. I had to catch my breath and regroup. I looked into my lovely sixteen-year-old daughter’s beautiful blue eyes. Knowing she would be a paraplegic and dependent on a wheel chair crushed my heart. It wasn’t an easy pill to swallow. As I stood there, tears began flooding down Dempsee’s and my wife’s faces again.

A little later Dr. Benson showed up for his evening visit. He saw all the sad faces in the room and looked confused. He asked us why all the sad faces? He didn’t seem to be aware of all that had transpired that day. We told him what we had been told only hours before. We asked him why he’d been telling us she wouldn’t be paralyzed, and why the therapist was telling us something different.

Dr. Benson seemed to be confused about our interpretation of the chair. He told us he was the one who performed the surgery. He personally felt there was still hope that Dempsee would walk again one day. We would hang on to those encouraging words. His belief became our greatest hope in the following weeks.

After thirty days in the hospital, it was finally time for Dempsee to come home. They had done all they could for her. The rest of her rehabilitation would be done at home. Dempsee left U.C. Davis listed as a paraplegic and confined to a wheel chair. Our lives had been altered forever by that horrible car accident, but we had a couple things going in our favor. We had a Powerful God. We had the doctor’s word that she might still walk again. And our daughter Dempsee had an incredible degree of determination and fortitude. She was determined to recover completely.

She had been fitted with leg braces, a complete turtle back-brace shell, and two eighteen-inch Harrington rods down both sides of her spinal cord. She would have a steady regiment of intense physical therapy, once she was in a familiar environment. Her doctor also suggested that, in coming years, Dempsee not have children.

As we drove home that day I thought, somehow we have all survived this ordeal. Even sobriety couldn’t guarantee a person an easy path in life, I learned. Sometimes things just happen. I was grateful that sobriety had given me the tools I needed in order to deal with what life had just thrown at me though.

Soon after Dempsee was home and settled in, she started a demanding regimen of physical therapy. She went to her therapist every other day to stretch her injured muscles and nerves. A way to keep her feet from atrophying, the therapist said. She gained back strength one day and one moment at a time, until one day, about a month later, she wanted to show me what she could do. Her mother and she had devised a plan to surprise me, a plan that almost gave me a heart attack.

One evening after dinner, Dempsee said, “Dad, look at this.” I turned to look at my daughter. There she stood, all by herself. My heart almost dropped out of my body, I was so amazed. I wanted to cry, just knowing my daughter was making progress and that she was on the road to recovery. I knew we still faced a tremendous amount of work, but I also knew, in the depths of my heart, that one day she would walk again.
One week after Dr. Benson operated on Dempsee, he broke his hand in a skiing accident. He was a world-renowned orthopedic surgeon and we couldn’t have asked for a better person to operate on our daughter, so we were terribly sad to hear the news. Our family wasn't through with this fine surgeon yet, however. Our paths would cross again. God had brought this gifted man, Dr. Benson, into our lives for a reason.

Chapter 17: My back surgery

One evening a few years later, while Jody and I were enjoying one of our favorite tv shows, the phone began ringing. She was cuddled on the couch, wrapped in her favorite brown afghan blanket, which she had crocheted earlier that year. I was stretched out face down on the floor in excruciating back pain. A large bag filled with ice lay over my lower back to relieve some of the pain. It had been a grueling day of work and we were both worn out. We relaxed with the sliding glass patio door cracked open, enjoying the cool evening breeze that blew into the valley nearly every evening.

The suddenness of the ringing caught us off guard. Jody jumped up off of the couch and hurried to answer the phone in the kitchen. As I lay there listening to her conversation, I realized that she was talking with Dr. Benson. Dr. Benson said he would like to speak with me, she said.

Carefully, I lifted myself off the floor and wobbled over to the kitchen. Jody handed me our antique Ma Bell replica phone as I approached. The first thing Dr. Benson did was apologize for calling so late, and then he said he had a favor he needed to ask of me, if I wasn’t too busy. “Are you kidding me?” I said. “If there is anything I can do to help, I’m all ears.”

He told me he was in the process of building a new home in the Sacramento area and a problem had come up. He explained that the building contractor couldn't find a specific brick that he wanted. He wondered if I could locate them. As he described the bricks, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to find them either, but I was determined to do my best for the man who had saved Dempsee from death and paralysis. He wanted old, used, wine colored bricks of the kind used on commercial buildings back in the 30s and 40s. I told him that those bricks only showed up in masonry supply yards when someone was dismantling an old building, but that I would see what I could find for him the next day. I told him to give me a call the next night—that I should know something by then.

I didn’t have to work the next day, so I was up early, heading over to a brickyard off of Highway 99, about twenty miles away. I knew if anybody in the local area had the bricks he wanted, it would be this company. As luck would have it, my time and effort were not in vain. Not only was I able to find the brick he wanted, but I was able to talk the salesperson into a discounted price. Two old buildings had recently been dismantled and they in fact had an abundance of used brick. I was very fortunate with the find, and I couldn't wait for Dr. Benson’s call that evening to give him the good news.

That evening I received his phone call at 9:00 pm, just when he said he would call. He was excited by the news that we might have found the bricks he was looking for. He said he would drive down to Stockton the following morning; he wanted to make sure that they were exactly what he wanted. He said he would give me a call the next night and let me know how it turned out. Before we hung up, he thanked me again for my help.

The next night he was so excited he was beside himself. He had drove to the supply yard himself and was amazed at what he saw. The bricks were exactly what he’d imagined. They were perfect, he said. Exactly what he was looking for. He wanted to know what he could do for me,
to show his appreciation. I told him he didn't owe me anything. I was more than happy to help. But just before we hung up, it dawned on me that he was one of the best orthopedic surgeons in the nation. Heck, he’d saved my daughter’s life and made it possible for her to walk again—both of these were practically miracles in themselves. My back was killing me even as I spoke with him, so I decided to venture my own request for a favor.

I said, “Dr. Benson, I know how busy you are and the extreme cases you handle, but if you wouldn't mind just examining my back, I would appreciate it.” I told him that I needed to know exactly what my back situation was, and that I trusted his judgment. I shared with him how afraid I was of back surgery, but I suspected that I probably needed it done. He knew the situation with my back. We used to talk about it when he was caring for my daughter. I didn’t have any confidence in the various doctors’ opinions I’d received over the years. I would hold Dr. Benson’s in high regard, however. I felt confident I would be able to make an informed decision based on what he told me.

After listening to me while I explained my reasoning, he said he completely understood the apprehension I was experiencing. He said that many of his patients feel the same way about surgery, that it was normal to have those anxieties and doubts. He agreed to see me. He told me to make an appointment with his office the next day. After thinking about it for a few moments, he changed his mind and said that he would make the appointment for me. He said his office would contact me in a couple days with a date and time for my appointment.

A couple days later I received a call from Dr. Benson’s office, just like he said. They had a date and time scheduled for me the following week. I was overwhelmed with joy that day, knowing I would finally be getting a good medical evaluation and advice that I could trust. I would finally know how bad my back really was.

I left my home early the morning of my appointment. I knew the freeway would be busy at that time of day, and I definitely didn’t want to be late. Driving my little Nissan pickup, I arrived about thirty minutes early, so I decided I might as well go into his office and get signed in. I was thinking maybe I could get in a little early, if I was lucky. But I was surprised when I walked into the waiting room and searched for a place to sit: I had never seen a doctor’s waiting room so crowded. I was lucky to even find a seat.

Dr. Benson’s patients were numerous, and they had injuries like I had never seen. I was overcome with the diversity and extent of these people’s maladies. I felt a little guilty knowing that I was one of the few who hadn’t been assisted into the office in one way or another. Most patients were either on a gurney or in a wheelchair, and I found myself feeling both sad and lucky.

It didn’t take long for my name to be called, and then a very cordial nurse escorted me back to one of the examination rooms. The nurse informed me that before Dr. Benson saw me, he wanted me to have some x-rays done. She escorted me down to their X-ray Department and waited until they were finished with me. Then she escorted me back to the examination room and informed me that it wouldn’t be long before Dr. Benson saw me.

It was only a few moments before Dr. Benson walked in. After we said our hellos, and after he asked about Dempsee, he told me he’d looked over my x-rays. He said I definitely had a few problems, and he understood why I was having so much pain. He said the x-rays showed the exact difficulties I faced with my back and legs. My lower L3 vertebrae had spilt into two pieces and had separated. That was the main reason for the back and leg pain. I also had a degenerative back problem, he said. To fix these problems, I would need to have my L-1 through L-4 vertebrae fused together. Fusion would give the best odds of success, he said.
As I processed this stark news, sadness overwhelmed me. I either did the surgery or learned to live with daily back pain—not great options. I asked Dr. Benson if he could do the surgery, if I decided to go that way—and if he would, when would I need it done? The decision of when or if to do the surgery was my choice, he said, and that he would be more than happy to perform it.

What was important, he said, was that I completely understood the risk factors that were involved with the surgery. There was a high probability that I would never be able to return to bricklaying. He couldn't guarantee the outcome, and he wanted to make sure I understood what I faced. Before I left his office he told me to call if I decided to do the surgery. It wouldn’t take long to schedule once I’d made the decision.

Driving home that day, I was burdened with the dilemma of making a decision. I had my favorite station on the radio, and even though I heard the noise, I couldn’t hear what they were singing. I was too preoccupied with the news I’d received. I now had the information I needed to make a decision concerning my back—information I had waited many painful years to obtain—but now I didn’t know what to do with it. I knew if I were going to trust anybody concerning my back, it would be Dr. Benson. But the prospect of surgery scared me. I wanted to brick the outside of my home first, if I would never be able to work as a bricklayer again, I thought. I knew that after talking it all over with Jody, we would come to a decision.

Later that afternoon, after Jody had gotten home and we’d had dinner, we sat around the kitchen table and discussed our options. We talked about how the past couple years since Dempsee’s horrible accident had been uneventful, but all the trips to doctors and physical therapists had worn us out. We wondered if my surgery would force us to confront those same challenges again. We knew life was unfolding in its own way, and that we were being blessed as it unfolded, yet we had to think long and hard before we made a decision to disrupt our lives with another surgery. We were very aware of the dire uncertainty we now faced. If I couldn’t work as a bricklayer, I didn’t know how we would make it.

Surgery seemed like a last-ditch option. But then again, the pain in my lower back and legs was pretty severe. The pain itself affected my ability to work. It had grown to the point of extreme discomfort, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could take it. The abuse of working in such a strenuous occupation had finally taken its toll. Over the previous ten years I had visited several orthopedic surgeons, physical therapists, and my regular family doctor because of my back and legs. I even used chiropractors, hoping they would get me by and allow me to keep working. The reality of my deteriorating lower back insisted that something be done, however. I was running out of time and options.

Retirement sounded great, but in all honesty, we didn’t have the money to retire. My skills for any other type of employment were limited. My masonry skills were valuable, but they were almost impossible to use in a different career. I knew that soon my options would soon become very limited, if I couldn’t find a solution to my problem.

We had both heard horror stories about people’s backs never being the same after surgery. And we both knew what was entailed with back surgery, because we had just experienced it a couple years earlier with our daughter. As I helped Jody pick up the dirty dishes off of the table, I told her I had made up my mind. I was going to have the surgery. She agreed that it was probably the right choice. She then asked me if I still planned to put the brick on our home, and I told her that I would start the project by the end of the week. I would work on the house on weekends and after work until it was finished. When we got near the end, we could schedule the surgery.

By the end of the week I had started work on the house, a project I knew would take several
months to finish. I would work day and night, seven days a week, for about six months, veneering the outside of our home. The pain increased daily, but I continued with the project after work and on weekends. I worked into early December, until I was almost done with the project, discovering that my back deteriorated daily. It frequently caused me to drop to the ground in pain. At that time, without any other options, I asked my wife to call Dr. Benson’s office to schedule the surgery as soon as possible. Within about three weeks (after the house project was finished in early January), I would be on my way to Sacramento to be operated on.

On surgery day, while lying on the operating table waiting for them to put me out, I thought about my heart surgery and how I had survived that at ten years of age. I wondered how bad could this back surgery really be—*Hell,* I thought to myself, *it couldn’t possibly be any worse than a heart surgery.* *This should be a walk in the park.*

When my anesthesiologist showed up, I had a conversation with him just before he placed the syringe into the tube in the top of my forearm. I said to him, “Let’s get this over with so I can get home. Look at Joe Montana. He’s back playing football,” I said. “This should be a fairly simple operation.” He looked at me like I had lost my mind. He said, “I don’t know who you have been talking with Steve, but Joe Montana’s surgery was like a fingernail operation compared to what you are facing.” I barely had time to register that news before he pushed the anesthesia into the IV. Immediately my world went dark.

I don’t know if it was that night or early the next morning when I finally woke up, but a couple of doctors were hovering over me, coaxing me to wake up. They were talking with each other and I heard them say that I had finally woken up. It seemed to surprise them. I was to find out later that they had a hard time getting me conscious after the surgery. They said that my lungs were saturated with the anesthesia, and my smoking didn’t help.

Once I was awake and the pain medicine wore off, an excruciating burning pain shot through my entire body. I screamed in agony. It seemed like every inch of my body was on fire. I didn’t even know it was possible to hurt that badly. Maybe the doctor was right after all, I thought. This surgery definitely wasn’t the cakewalk I thought it would be.

Well, life goes on, no matter what situation you find yourself in. This might be painful, but it wasn’t the end of my world, I knew. I hurt so bad that day that I was afraid to even move. I thought that if I moved, even a little, I might somehow break the fusion lose. I wasn’t going to take any chances. I knew there was no way in hell I could do another one of these surgeries.

I was kept under high dosages of Demerol for the pain until it was time for me to leave the hospital. They needed to fit me with a back brace, which I would have to wear for several months. It was identical to the one my daughter had to wear after her accident, except mine extended down my right leg, to just above the knee. About a week later, after I was fitted with the brace and had had my first bowel movement, they said I could finally go home. I couldn’t wait to call my wife with the good news and ask her to come and get me. I was more than ready to leave the hospital, to be back in my own home with my family. I had had enough of lying in bed and I was ready to start the next step of my recovery.

When Dr. Benson told me about the operation, I thought he said I would be off work for about nine weeks. Somehow I’d misunderstood what he had said: I was to find out that it would be at least nine *months* before I could return to work. Those nine months were a reality check, about my life and about my body. They were a wakeup call that would force me to look at my situation differently.

About nine months later I was able to return to my occupation, but I knew my days as a brick mason were numbered. Somehow I would have to figure out a way to make a living in a
different field. I knew that time and my body would dictate my future, and that I would continue my same course until life redirected me. God’s footprints were already visible in every aspect of my life, and I knew that events would unfold exactly like they were supposed to.

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Chapter 18: Going to prison

After sliding into my truck and starting it, I turned the heater on high. Frost covered the windows and I couldn’t see a thing. When I flipped on the wipers they created twin arches through which I could see, and I pulled away from our home. About thirty minutes later I was looking for a place to park my truck. After circling the block a couple times, I found a parking place off of Center St. on Fremont Ave. I was about a block away from the unemployment office, so I hurried to get inside out of the chill.

Strolling around inside the building with all the rest of the unemployed people made me a little uncomfortable. The unemployment office always seemed to make me a little uneasy. It usually meant that my income and my family’s future were less than certain. As I stood around people-watching, I realized that all walks of life were represented in the unemployment office. The businessman was there dressed in his business suit. Construction workers like myself shuffled around bullshitting with each other. Others in less distinct uniforms gazed around aimlessly. But all of them funneled toward the same destination: the unemployment window. How many years had I been doing this, I thought to myself?

I spotted a state jobs bulletin board attached to the outer wall. Posted on the board in bold black letters was a bulletin for a Vocational Masonry Instructor position at Chuckawalla Valley State Prison in Blythe, California. The posting grabbed my attention immediately. I was a Journeyman in two trades, and I had completed two different state apprenticeship programs. My excitement grew as I thought about the possibilities. Here was a job where I could keep using the skills I had gained, but where the physical demands might be manageable. This might be just the opportunity I had been looking for. As I stood there, I allowed my mind to wander and to imagine what the job might be like. I thought about how blessed I had been since sobering up, and how nice it would be to make a difference in other people’s lives. This job could be a double blessing, I thought, a way to change careers while helping others. With over twelve years of sobriety, it was time to give back, I thought. I took the bulletin off of the board and grabbed a state application. With both papers stuck in my back pocket, I filed my unemployment claim, and it wasn’t long before I was on my way home. I would reread the bulletin again when I got home.

Once I settled in at home, I grabbed a cold soda and my cigarettes and sat down at the kitchen table. While reading the bulletin, I discovered that the job required a certified California teaching credential. I didn’t have a teaching credential. Nor did I have any idea how to get one. The two journeyman cards I held weren’t enough. I will need to look into what it takes to get this credential, I thought. Sitting there for a few more moments I thought, What the hell? I decided to call the phone number listed on the bulletin.

By the end of the week, I had received the credentialing packet in the mail. Within days both the credentialing and the state applications were completed and sent. Following the requirements the packet suggested for getting a temporary credential, I signed up for the required history class at San Joaquin Delta College the following week. I wasn’t going to leave anything to chance—I knew this could be the best opportunity for a career change.

Two weeks later, I receive a letter from the credentialing department in Sacramento, inquiring about my prior arrest record. Come on, I thought to myself as I reread the letter for the
third time. It saddened me to think that my past might ruin this opportunity. I figured, being an ex-felon, that I had just lost my shot. I made up my mind right then: I wasn’t going to let that stop me from trying. I would send all the paper work they required, keep attending the required class, and I would see what happened.

While waiting to hear back about my credential and about the prison job, sad news paid me a visit. After getting home from work one day, I received a phone call from my mother. The veterans hospital in Palo Alto had contacted her. She said my dad wasn’t doing very well. They only gave him hours to live. We needed to come as soon as possible, they said. She wanted to know if I would go there for her. She couldn’t handle the stress of what was about to transpire. My heart broke in a million ways as I spoke to my mom. “No problem, Mom,” I told her. “I’ll gladly go down there.”

I told my wife what was happening and prepared to make that unwanted drive. We talked about it and decided that she would stay home with the kids. None of them needed to experience the sadness that awaited in Palo Alto. I got in my truck and drove as fast as I could. I wanted to be with my dad before he passed.

As I crossed over the busy San Mateo Bridge, not far from the hospital, an overwhelming sense of fear and anger gripped me. For my father, all those years of living nightmares were finally coming to an end—but I wanted to scream as loud as I could, or hit something. I knew that the legacy of his disease would keep haunting us even after he was gone.

After arriving at the hospital and parking my truck, I hurried to my dad’s room where the attending nurses filled me in about his situation. I was there about an hour, growing more fidgety and nervous as each moment passed. Since he was unconscious, I decided I would go outside and smoke a much-needed cigarette. I couldn’t have been outside for more than five minutes when a sudden calmness came over me. Something told me it was time.

My dad had been with the veterans now for almost twelve years. When he passed that day from colon cancer, I was happy and relieved for him. He would no longer have to fight a war he couldn’t win. It was a battle that left behind destruction and misery. He was allowed to die with dignity and mercy in a place that cared for and protected him during those vulnerable stages of his life.

As I drove home that day, saddened and lost, I remembered the words my mom spoke to me so many years before. “Steve, sometimes in life one has to die so that others can live.” I now understood what she meant when she first said those words twenty years earlier. My heart ached to think about how my father never got to live a life like a normal man. How destruction had come to him and his family, all because of alcohol. My dad had really died many years before. If anything, his physical passing only brought to a close a process that had begun over a decade earlier.

Shortly after my father’s passing, I contacted the credentialing department in Sacramento. I needed to find out if my felony conviction was going to keep me from getting a teaching credential. After a little inquiry, I received great news. My felony conviction wouldn’t keep me from being certified. Their concern, the lady said, was that they needed to make sure my crime didn’t involve any children, and that it wasn’t a sex crime. The lady said I would be granted my credential as soon as I met the requirements.

In early December, 1990, I was finally scheduled for an interview in Blythe, California. They were ready to fill the teaching position I had been seeking. The day I was set to leave Stockton for my job interview, a major winter storm engulfed California. My interview was scheduled for eight o'clock the following morning, and I couldn't allow a storm to stop me from
attending. My wife and I discussed the situation and the odds of getting the job. We both knew that things were continually getting worse in the construction industry, and that this opportunity was worth driving the 1200 miles round-trip.

When I left Stockton a little after one o’clock that afternoon, rain was pouring down hard on my truck. The windshield wipers had to work overtime just to keep the windshield clear. Once I was on the road, I felt sure the rain would let up, but I had misjudged the storm. It would rain and storm the whole day as I made the ten-hour, almost 600-mile journey. While driving through Fresno and Bakersfield, not only didn’t the rain decrease, but the wind picked up and began blowing my truck around the road. The worse the storm got, the more I wondered whether I had made the right decision. Finally, I was heading east along highway 10 out of Los Angeles toward the desert, as daytime slipped into the Pacific Ocean, ushering in the night. I knew there was no turning back now. I had come this far, and I would finish this trip in spite of the weather.

Late that night, around midnight, I finally pulled into Blythe after the long, weather-beaten trip. Blyth was a small, isolated town near the Colorado River on the Arizona California border. It looked like a place that time had forgotten. About the time I arrived, the weather finally let up. I drove around looking for a place to spend the night. Along the interstate’s frontage road, I found a place to stay. I needed to get out of my truck and stretch my legs. It wasn’t long before I was checking into a Motel 6. It felt great to be out of the truck and off the road, and I felt anxious and hopeful about the interview the following morning.

The chirping 6 a.m. wake-up call startled me at first. I wasn’t sure where I was as I forced my eyes open. I was hungry and needed to eat something. After eating breakfast at one of the local restaurants, I headed out toward the prison. I soon realized I was in different surroundings than where I came from. When I drove in the night before, it was storming and pitch dark outside. I had no clue what it looked like out here in the Sonoran Desert. On my way out to the prison, I was in total shock about how isolated and remote the place was. The prison turned out to be almost twenty miles southwest of Blythe. It was complete barrenness as far as the eye could see.

Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, a medium security institution, was built in 1988 on 1720 acres of desolated, barren land. It housed over 3,500 inmates. During the night, you can’t miss the sight of the prison. It is so illuminated, it kind of reminds you of an outer-space military facility of some kind. But during the day, you definitely get a different perspective about the place. There is nothing near the institution, besides cactus and tumbleweeds. I knew the place had to be home to scorpions and rattlesnakes and every other creature that crawled through the desert on its belly.

Driving down the three miles of remote Wiley’s Well Rd. toward the prison, I could see the guard shack and the Chuckawalla Mountain Range behind it. It looked very intimidating and surreal as I pulled up to the guard barrier and came to a stop, remembering the ten-year suspended prison sentence handed down to me twenty years prior. I could have been living here instead of applying for a position, I thought to myself as a correctional officer checked my ID. After the guard at the entrance verified my I.D. and asked what business I had there, he instructed me to a place to park.

After making sure to lock my car like the correctional officer said, I headed to the administration building where my interview would be held. I hadn’t been in the waiting area very long when one of the supervisors came over and introduced himself. He said he was there to escort me to my interview. He said his name was Bill Savage, Supervisor of Vocational Instruction (SVI). He was a tall, robust, middle-aged man. After our introductions and
pleasantries, he accompanied me to the interview room where two other people were waiting. After I introduced myself to them, I sat down. Mr. Bob Sloan, Supervisor of Correctional Education Programs (SCEP), took charge of the interview and made sure I was comfortable before we started. He was a gray-haired older gentleman, but very cognizant of the fact that this was an unfamiliar environment for me. Associate Warden of Education (AW), Susan Blanchard, sat quietly and observed the proceedings. Both individuals were very nice and pleasant. Mr. Sloan had a charismatic kind of personality while Ms. Blanchard seemed more subdued. It didn’t take long, only about twenty minutes, before the interview was over. They had asked me maybe ten or twelve questions. I would wonder all the way home that day why I’d spent so much time and money for an interview that was over so quickly.

Late that evening, after two long days on the road, I finally arrived home. My wife and I sat down in the family room and she asked me a million questions. I told her there was no way in hell I wanted to work in that place. It was desolate, barren, empty land. It was isolated from the rest of the world. We joked about how, because I didn’t really want the job, they would probably give it to me. I had no idea where Blythe was located until I took my trip out there, and it was an experience I wouldn’t soon forget. If nothing else, it opened my eyes to a different kind of world.

About a month later, I was home sleeping in late one morning. I had the day off because of a storm that had come through the night before. The telephone rang, startling me awake. When I answered it, I discovered that it was Mr. Sloan, the Educational Supervisor from Chuckawalla. He said he was calling because he wanted to offer me the position I had interviewed for. Dang, I thought to myself as I tried to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

As my mind cleared, I told him that I was certainly interested in the position. I told him I would like a couple of days to think it over before I made my decision, if he didn’t mind. I wanted time to think the decision through completely, before I committed myself to it. Mr. Sloan said that he understood my concerns and my situation, but that I had exactly four hours to make up my mind. The State of California was getting ready to freeze all hiring. They didn't want to lose the position to a hiring freeze, so if I wanted the job, I had to let him know that day. I told him I would call back within four hours and let him know my decision.

After hanging up, I immediately called my wife at work to tell her the news. We talked about the work situation in Stockton and how it was only getting worse. We talked about how if they were going to have a hiring freeze, it probably would be a smart decision to take the job. I told her I would call the supervisor back and let him know I would accept the position. We both agreed that it would be a great opportunity for our whole family. This was my chance to change careers, to get out of the bricklaying trade that was literally breaking my back. The job had good wages and great benefits. I knew that I would probably never get another opportunity like it again, and I managed to get excited about the new prospect. I couldn’t wait to call Mr. Sloan back and tell him that I accepted his offer.

When I did call, Mr. Sloan told me I had one week to report to work, and that he would be sending me pertinent information in the mail. I told him I would be there the day he wanted me to be and then hung up the phone. It was time to make some preparations for my family.

Gavin had about a year and a half of high school left before he would graduate. There was no way in hell I would move my son out of an environment he was comfortable and successful in. I would do whatever it took to make sure that he didn't experience the awkwardness I had experienced in my own youth. I wasn’t willing to gamble his future on such a move. He was involved with one of the local fire departments as a volunteer fire fighter, a program his high school sponsored. He played on the school football team and held a good grade point average.
Gavin was a good student and all around good boy. If anyone was going to sacrifice because of this job, it would be me.

Dempsee was already married and settled into her new life with her husband by this time. Her life was going along great and my job change wouldn't disrupt it at all. She had her life in Stockton with her husband and my first grandchild, Jacob. She would be kept very busy as a young mother and wife. Knowing that both our children were in good places, I would do whatever it took to make things work for our family.

My wife and I agreed that she would stay home with Gavin, and I could fly home on my days off. With any luck, I would be able to transfer to a prison in the Stockton area within two or three months. We had our plans down and we knew that they would work out in the end, that they were a blessing from God.

The following Sunday morning I was off to Blythe, a life change I could not have expected. I was on my way to prison to start a new chapter in my life. After fifteen years in a successful career as a bricklayer, I would never return to that occupation again. Now I was going to be instructing convicts in the state prison system.

This career change would alter many things in my life. Some changes would be for the better and some for the worse. I quickly discovered that I would have no way of knowing what the next day would bring. As an alcoholic, I knew I didn’t do well with change, but I refused to allow my fear to stop me from building my future.

I still remember my first day of work at the prison, how anxiety and fear gripped and overtook me. Besides being a new work environment, the fact that it was a prison was a little overwhelming. It would take me awhile to get adjusted to my new surroundings. CVSP was structured like most of the modern prisons in California: four prison yards each with five housing units. Each prison yard housed approximately 1000 inmates and each housing unit inside the yard housed about 250 inmates. The vocational shop I would be teaching out of was located on the backside of Yard D. They kept the prison yard and classes separate from each other for security reasons. They were in close proximity however, allowing the inmates to go back and forth through a “work change,” from their housing units to their shops.

The first time I had to walk across the prison yard alone (which was the only way to get to my shop) I was terrified. I thought my legs were going to collapse on me while walking. It was an intimidating experience, especially when I looked out over the yard and could see hundreds of convicts. They were shuffling around in their prison blues and had muscles bigger than basketballs.

I wanted this new career real bad. I wasn’t about to allow fear to change that fact, so I did the only thing that I could think of: I picked my head up, threw my shoulders back and went where I had never been before. I strolled out onto the yard like I owned the place, like I belonged there. The further I walked into the yard, the more comfortable I felt. By this time in my life I had already fought back against many other fears when they surfaced. I knew that conquering fears was a choice. I had no intention of allowing my fear to overcome me again, because I still remembered the promise I’d made to God and to myself that night long ago.

I wasn’t at the prison very long when, while working, two Hispanic inmates approached me, trying to intimidate me. One, nicknamed Loco, stood in front of me while the other, nicknamed Joker, stood behind me. They both had brick trowels in their hands. They raised them up and one put his trowl next to my neck in the front, while the other put his next to my neck in the back. Not sure how to handle the situation, I did the only thing I could think of—I called their bluff. I looked Loco straight in the eyes and told him that if he was planning on sticking me with that
trowel, he better stick it all the way in. This wasn’t what they were expecting, and I think it made an impression.

They both thought my reaction was funny. I passed my initiation into the California Prison System that day. From that point on, I was respected by the inmates on our yard, a respect that didn’t come easily. I now found myself in a world a bit different than bricklaying, but it was exciting and challenging. I was at a crossroads—but it was where I needed to be. God’s changes were working out for me just fine.

Even though I thought I would be able to transfer from Chuckawalla in a couple of months, it didn’t quite work out that way. Until the state activated a new prison in a different location, it would be twenty-two challenging months before I was able to transfer. I made the 1200-mile round trip home every weekend, however, to spend time with my family. My watch ended at 2200 hours every Friday night and I would drive out of Blythe around 0300 hours to Ontario. It was a long, lonely three-hour drive every Saturday morning to Ontario, to be able to catch my flight and spend time with my family. I would then fly into Sacramento, where my wife would pick me up for the hour-long drive to our home. We would usually get home about one o’clock in the afternoon on Saturdays. Come Monday morning, I would make the reverse trip back to Blythe, usually arriving just in time to start my 1400 hr. Monday watch. It was one hell of a commute, but it was worth every hour and every mile.

One night at work during the monsoon season, a different kind of challenge presented itself. A monsoon had slipped into the Blythe area that night. It was about three hours until quitting time. Majestic lightening ignited the night sky. Seventy mile per hour winds blew sand everywhere, dropping visibility to near zero. The sand was so thick it became scary. Then, all of a sudden, all the lights in the prison went out.

I had thirty convicted felons in my shop that night. Each had in their possession brick hammers, hardened metal trowels, four-foot-long metal levels—and besides that, the shop was filled with thousands of bricks and block. It was so dark when the lights went out that I felt completely blind. As I stood there waiting for the lights to come back on, I never once felt threatened or afraid. I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be at that time in my life. I knew that things would be okay. About ten minutes later, the lights came back on.

Even though my new career created many challenges and difficulties, it also brought many benefits. It didn’t take me long to discover that I had a lot of free time during the day—extra time to do whatever wanted. I thought I would sign up for some college classes. Not only would it keep me busy, but it would create a new challenge.

Located in the middle of Blythe was a small community college. It was called Palo Verde Community College. Soon I was enrolled as one of their students. As I sat in on an algebra class my first day of school, I thought, I am teaching in a prison and going to college. Unbelievable. I would never have thought my life would unfold like this when I showed up at my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

During my time in Blythe I was able to secure my full California Teaching Credential and a Supervisory Teaching Credential. I was very proud of those accomplishments. They somehow diminished the sting of being a high school dropout.

With the new challenges I now faced—going back to school and my long commute home every weekend—I faced a new predicament. I was discovering that time had become very valuable for me. It seemed that there were just not enough hours in the week. I realized that I didn’t have the time or the opportunity to go to A.A. meetings anymore. With over thirteen years of solid sobriety, I was very strong in my beliefs about God and the A.A. program. I knew I was
building a future for my family. I also knew I would have to sacrifice something to accomplish these new goals. But Alcoholics Anonymous had become a way of life for me. It had become my identity. I had to accept the reality that I would no longer be able to attend meetings. I wasn’t happy about the situation, but it had to be. The program and its way of life is what allowed me to have this great opportunity. When the opportunity came again to attend meetings, I would do just that. For now, I would have to carry on without them.

During the early nineties in California, there was a huge expansion of the prison system. The “three strikes” law had passed, creating a shortage of bed space for incoming inmates. This was great news for my family and me, because with the expansion came more job opportunities. They were going to be opening a new facility in Lancaster, allowing me to relocate out of Blythe.

Just like Blythe, I had no idea where this place was located. As a matter of fact, I had never even heard of the city of Lancaster. After getting out my map, I learned it was in Southern California, in the Mojave Desert. When I heard about this new prison opening, I submitted my resume and application for transfer to this new facility. Within weeks I was informed that my transfer was granted. I would soon be heading to Lancaster, California to start a different chapter in my life.

After twenty-two months of employment, and commuting almost 1200 miles a week, I was leaving the low, hot Sonoran Desert for the high Mojave Desert. I would be helping to facilitate the opening of this brand new maximum-security prison, the only state prison in Los Angeles County. It would be an endeavor I was very proud to be a part of, a chance to face new challenges and to mature in my sobriety.

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Chapter 19: More opportunities

In late February of 1993 I loaded up my little Nissan pickup with my sparse possessions and returned my key to the manager at Ocean View Apartments in Blythe. I had fulfilled my obligations at Chuckawalla, and now the new prison in Lancaster was my destination.

It was a warm, beautiful day. The temperature was in the 80’s and I was dressed in my favorite Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt. It was a little sad to leave that place. I’d collected great memories and friendships in the two years I’d spent in Blyth. I remembered how desolate and bleak I thought the place was when I’d first arrived. As I left, however, I realized that the place had grown on me. I felt fond of it and was sad to leave.

About three hours into my trip, as I drove through Palm Springs, my new anxieties began to weigh on me. The closer I got to Lancaster, the worse those worries became. What was I heading toward? I would have to learn the ropes all over again at a new job. There would be months of uncertainty and fear to face down before I would be comfortable. As I drove out of San Bernardino, I spotted a gas station at the Crestline turnoff on Highway 138. I figured this would be a good time to stretch my legs and get a snack. Stepping out of my truck, I was hit with a blast of freezing wind. It felt like it had blown in from the North Pole. I had forgotten it was still winter in other parts of California.

I pumped a tankful of gas, ran inside to get a Pepsi and a Snickers bar, and it wasn’t long before I was headed again down 138 toward Lancaster. It was a dangerous, twisting road that had more blind turns than I really wanted to deal with. The road made for perilous passage for commuters driving in and out of the Lancaster and San Bernardino areas. I would have never called it a freeway myself—it was just a deteriorating little two-lane road.
Finally, after about five hours on the road, I pulled into Lancaster just in time to watch the sun sink behind the San Bernardino Mountains and into the Pacific Ocean. I located easily the Motel 8 that would become my new home for the next couple months. I was tired and road weary, so I was glad to step out of my truck and toward a bed for the night.

In my room, I smoked a cigarette and thought about what I wanted to do next. *Just a typical motel room,* I thought to myself as I sat there alone. It had the usual double bed in the center of the room, two reading lamps on nightstands next to the bed, and a 24-inch color television on a dresser in front of the bed. Clean, but still a motel room.

I figured it would be a good time to call my wife and let her know I’d arrived safely, so I picked up the phone and dialed home. She was relieved to know that I was settled into my room. (She always worried about me whenever I traveled.) We talked about the kids and how everything was going at home, and then we tried to hash out what weekend she might come to Lancaster to visit. It would be a good time to scout out the local area and to make plans about our future. After we both were satisfied that the other was okay, we said our goodnights and I promised to call the next night and tell her about my first day of work.

I hung up the phone and sat on the bed smoking another cigarette and reminiscing about the times I’d had since getting sober. I’d learned an important lesson since sobering up: Never underestimate what God can do. I couldn’t tell what tomorrow would bring—and I definitely couldn’t see into the next ten or fifteen years—but knowing the future wasn’t that important. Trusting God was the only thing that mattered. I thought about how I’d had a successful five-year career as a cement mason, a prosperous fifteen-year career as a brick mason, and now almost two years as a vocational teacher with the State of California. My life had unfolded in unimaginable ways and had been filled with blessings I didn’t deserve. And now, I had been hired by Lancaster State Prison to activate their new facility, the only state prison in Los Angeles County. I was going to be a part of their activation team, and I would help bring that new prison online.

Los Angeles County State Prison (also known as LAC-SP), would give me opportunities I never could have dreamed about. Upon its opening in 1993, this prison was named Lancaster State Prison, but within a short time the name was changed to Los Angeles County State Prison. Lancaster political leaders disliked the stigma of having a prison associated with their town—the name change was a product of that anxiety. It had a staff of approximately 1,500 employees with almost 5,000 maximum-security inmates. The facility was located on 262 acres and had a budget of over 100 million dollars. It was, at that time, an economic windfall for the city, which had lost many of the aerospace jobs that previously comprised much of its economy.

As the prison opened for business, inmates flowed in from all over the State by the busload. Most of those convicts came out of Old Folsom Prison, which was being downgraded at the time from a maximum-security facility to a minimum-security one. We received quite a few inmates from Pelican Bay State Prison also—mostly inmates they wanted to get rid of, inmates with disciplinary problems. We were a maximum-security prison, and so we got all the troublemakers other facilities didn't want. That was the way it worked whenever a new prison opened up: all the prisons in the state dumped their problem inmates on the new facility. It made no difference to me who was incarcerated there. I wasn’t aware how those things were done until much later in my career anyway. At that time, I was just tickled to be living once again in a larger community, and to know I’d be living with my wife again very soon.

One afternoon, about two months after arriving at Lancaster, while walking through the administration building, I spotted a job bulletin for the position of hostage negotiator. The words
grabbed my attention: hostage negotiator! I copied down the information. I figured I didn't stand a chance in hell of getting a position like that. But I also figured I had nothing to lose. I would submit my application and resume, and then I would just wait and see how things turned out.

I had plenty of challenges already. I had to prepare my shop for inmates and attend daily staff training. But what I didn't know at the time was that positions on specialty teams (positions like hostage negotiation) were highly coveted. They were great career enhancers and everybody wanted them. With the prison just opening, there were opportunities for career advancement, and this was one of them.

It was only a couple of weeks before they interviewed, and I was just excited for the opportunity to apply. The day of the interview, I showed up about ten minutes early. I wanted to calm my nerves a little and get settled in. Before I knew it, I was approached by Sgt. Patricia Banks. She was the Assistant Team Leader and would be taking me to be interviewed. As I walked into the interview room, I was instructed to sit in a specific seat, then introductions were offered. Lt. Jan Storm was in charge of the interview. She let me know that she had been chosen to lead the new Hostage Team. She had a very commanding and professional personality, and she seemed to exude confidence. Sgt. Patricia Banks, who I’d just met previously, was her Assistant Team Leader. Both of these women, I was to discover, were hostage negotiators at prior institutions. They were in the process of establishing a team for this new institution. After the introductions, we all settled in.

They had a lot of questions for me. During our interview, they asked me why they should choose me for the position. Well, you are only who you are, I thought. Simple as that. So I told them about what I thought I had to offer them, which were my assorted life experiences. I told them that most inmates came out of dysfunctional surroundings and that that was something I was familiar with. I basically told them my whole life story, even the ugly parts. Though I did leave out the part about being a convicted felon. They never asked me about it, so I didn’t volunteer it. Like I said, I wanted the position.

I told them that I grown up in an alcoholic environment and that I was a recovering alcoholic myself. That at this point in my life I had almost sixteen years of sobriety. I told them that I knew 95% of all crimes were committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. I even told them about my suicide attempts, and many of the abnormal behaviors I had to conquer in order to gain my sobriety. I told them how I had gone back to school to get my diploma after dropping out. I told them that I was still continuing my higher education. I didn’t know what they were looking for, so I just tried to describe myself, my experiences, and what I thought were my talents. It would be up to them to decide if I was qualified. We wrapped up the interview and I thanked them for the opportunity. As I was leaving they told me they should know very soon who would be selected for the team.

About three weeks later I received a phone call from Lt. Jan Storm. She called, she said, to inform me that I had been chosen for the position. “Welcome aboard!” she said. I was simply stunned. I didn’t believe I had heard her correctly. How was it even possible, I thought?

I became a chartered member of the Los Angeles County State Prison Hostage Negotiation Team (N.M.T.), a position I would hold until the day I retired. Again, my life was reaching levels I never would have thought possible, levels I would never have even dared to dream about not so long ago.

Soon after that, my son graduated from high school. Soon after that, my wife moved down to Lancaster and we found ourselves, for the first time in several years, living together once again. And we were both secure in the fact that our children were exactly where they needed to
be. It was our time now, and we planned on enjoying it. We agreed that we would probably never live in Stockton again, so we purchased a little condominium. We settled in and got comfortable in our new environment and started looking toward our future.

Gavin would live with his married sister, allowing him to stay where he had grown up. He would enroll at San Joaquin County Delta College in the fall, giving him the opportunity to continue his education with the kids he’d grown up with. Jody and I would be living in Lancaster together, and I wouldn't have to make the 1200-mile weekly commute home any longer. We were all truly blessed, and we never took that fact for granted.

Shortly after Jody moved to Lancaster, she secured a job as a billing professional with a local dermatologist. With both of us working now, and no more travel expenses, things would be easier for our family financially. I was happy just to be living with my wife again, to be able to see her every day and live a normal life. We laughed about our new job locations though, because neither of us commuted more than ten minutes to work each way. Life was calming down and becoming easier for us, allowing us to focus on our careers and on each other.

The prison opening kept me very busy. I was still setting up the new vocational program. It seemed like all I did those first months was go to meetings and training sessions. There was much to learn in these new surroundings. My wife stayed extremely busy too, trying to deal with the demands of her new job. She was also in a new environment and had many new responsibilities for her work. If that wasn’t enough, we had to find out where all the stores were, where to eat, and we had to become familiar with the streets of our new town. The relocation meant plenty of relearning, but it also helped keep us busy and buffer our lives during that transitional period. It was the first time in our adult lives we were living without the children. We were experiencing a little empty nest syndrome.

As soon as I could, I went back to college. I was at the point in my life where I actually liked going to school. I wanted to see if I could get a college degree. When I’d dropped out of high school as a teenager, it left a bad taste in my mouth. I now had the money and time to fulfill that dream.

My son Gavin and I actually graduated from college on the same day in June of 1995, albeit from different schools. He graduated from S.J. Delta College, where I started almost five years prior. I graduated from Antelope Valley Community College in Lancaster. It was a pretty neat experience for the both of us. And I was tickled that neither of my children were going down the road that I had traveled. As a parent, I couldn’t have asked for anything more than that, especially after the environment I had subjected them to in their early years.

Gavin graduated from school with a degree in fire science and para-medicine. But he was soon to discover what others before him have learned about becoming a fireman: it’s not the easiest profession to gain entrance to. After graduating from college, he came to Lancaster and moved in with my wife and I. It wasn't very long before he had a job with one of the big ambulance companies in Los Angeles. He kept that job while trying to break into the firefighting field. He eventually took a job as a conductor for the Sante Fe Railroad, one of the major railroads based out of the Los Angeles area. He was making more money than he could have dreamed, but it was a job, he learned quickly, that he hated. After he got married he realized that working on the railroad did not make for a great family life. But while on a trip with his new wife to visit her family in Arizona, destiny would pay him a visit. While in Arizona visiting his new relatives, he discovered that his brother-in-law was a police officer with one of the premier departments in the Phoenix area.

When he arrived back home from his visit a few days later, he informed me that he was
going to become a police officer. He had submitted an application with a police department in
the area while he was visiting, and he was waiting to hear from them. One month later, he and
his family were moving to Arizona to start his career as a police officer. He would be entering
their academy once he settled in.

I laugh sometimes when I remember what he told me just before he moved to Arizona. He
said, “Dad, isn't it ironic that you are a convicted felon, and I am on my way to police academy?”
It was ironic. But I told him that I had worked so hard those past years so that he could have just
this kind of opportunity. I might have cheated them out of a lot in their youth, but during my
sobriety, I worked hard to give them every advantage I could. As I talked with Gavin, I realized
that none of us really knows where or how our lives will turn out, or where we will end up. My
son becoming a police officer and me working at a maximum-security prison—no one could
have anticipated those accomplishments.

For the moment life was good. But even with all this good fortune coming our way, our
family’s challenges were not over. Within a few years’ time we would see another tragedy visit
our clan. Fate will visit whenever it chooses to—this is something I have come to learn. The best
we can do, maybe, is to adjust as best we can when it arrives.

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Chapter 20: Unwanted visitor

It was late 1997 and winter had swept into Lancaster and tossed a blanket of freezing air
across the desert floor, just like it did every year for the previous five that I had lived in
Lancaster. As I drove home that day the sky swirled with cumulonimbus clouds that threatened
to bring freezing rain and snow. With a wind-chill already sitting below freezing, I knew we
were in for a cold night.

Arriving home from work, I parked my car in the garage—a detached set of garages that
were located around the perimeter of the condo complex—and braved the short walk inside
where it was warm. Before I settled in to relax, I checked to see if I had any phone messages. I
was expecting a call from Jack, my older brother. We had talked the previous night and I was
hoping he might have left a message.

With no message, I decided to check the weather channel. I wanted to know if a storm really
was going to blow in that night. After grabbing my cigarettes, I went over and sat down in my
favorite chair in the living room. While sitting there listening to the news and smoking, I thought
about the disturbing call I’d received from Jack the previous night. I had sensed some
desperation in his voice when we spoke. He said that he was having difficulties at home. He and
his wife Patty had separated about a month earlier, he said, and his world was in total disarray.
The whole family was under threat of being torn apart.

I had been thinking about our conversation, and how desperate he sounded, all day. I
wondered how I might be able to help him. When we talked the previous night, I suggested that
he consider coming down to Lancaster until he figured things out. Maybe he could make a career
change and start anew. He told me that he would think about it and that he would let me know in
a few days what he’d decided. It turned out I would never hear from him. The conversation we’d
had the night before would be our last.

As I waited for my wife to get home, with my mind running over all kinds of worries, the
phone suddenly rang. It caught me off guard. I answered it, thinking it might be my brother. I
quickly discovered, however, that it was my sister-in-law, Patty. I wondered what she could
want. It had been years since we’d spoken. I guess there is no easy way to tell someone that their brother has committed suicide, but the way she did it bothered me for years.

She said, very matter-of-factly, “Steve, Jack just offed himself.” Maybe it was the only way she knew how to handle the heart-wrenching news. Her nonchalant attitude didn’t completely surprise me though—that was the way she had carried herself since I had known her. And she didn’t know that I had just talked with Jack the night before and had a pretty good idea what was going on between them.

After we hung up, I couldn’t help think about my own suicide attempts. Then I got mad. I was painfully hurt, and I was angry as hell. Though my emotions were all over the place, I tried to think and act clearly. I remembered how I tried to slit my own wrists, and how one night, desperate, I placed my head in the oven, and the multiple times I’d tried to take my life with an overdose of drugs. It didn’t take much imagination for me to understand my brother’s actions. I had more experience with suicide than any human should. That understanding didn’t lessen the pain I felt though; it only augmented the heartbreak. It made it harder in some ways too. I could feel my brother’s loneliness, isolation, desperation and pain. As I sat there thinking about his actions, I realized he’d left behind such a tragic mess. He’d destroyed any chance at tranquility or surety that his family might have ever had the chance to know. Sitting in my chair, I was alone and broken hearted. I knew that death would come visit us all some day, but I just wasn’t ready for his death. My brother’s suicide left a horrible scar.

I’d learned a valuable lesson from my own experiences with suicide. I learned that I never actually wanted to die. I just wanted to live without pain. I was fortunate to live long enough to figure that out. I thought maybe Jack had found himself in the same position, only he didn’t get the opportunity to figure out the truth that I had.

I found out later that he was home alone. He had shaved off all his hair, like he did when he was in Boot Camp, then went out into his garage and sealed all the windows and doors with duct-tape. He sat down in the middle of the floor with a six-pack of beer and began drinking. Desperate and alone, he cranked up his riding lawn mower and just waited for the inevitable.

His life—how he must have felt—came to me in waves. I felt the fear and pain he must have felt. I could almost hear the desperation screaming from deep within his soul. Death had become the only solution he could imagine. At that moment, he was incapable of seeing alternatives.

As I sat uncomfortably in my overstuffed chair, all my family’s pain, fear, rage, and loss became crystal clear. Alcoholism, had snatched another life from my family. It had again won the battle, in spite of all our efforts. And despite all our efforts, it will continue, if it can, through yet more generations, as far as its tentacles are able to reach.

I had tried to break the cycle of alcoholism in my family, but the monster had just moved on to someone else. I had long ago come to terms with the misery in my life, but in that moment I wondered how I would ever face the tragedy of my brother’s death. I knew I had to do more to stop the monster of alcoholism from growing and flourishing in my family. I knew that left unchecked, it would continue to bring misery and devastation wherever it could.

I didn’t want the responsibility of bearing this tragic news, but my wife needed to know. My brother Jack and my wife had been close friends since they were in high school, so this news would be devastating for her too. She was still at work, and I wasn’t about to share the news over the phone, so I decided to go down to her job and tell her in person. She needed to be told, and I needed badly to be with her in those dark moments. I needed her strength and understanding. After composing myself as best I could, I went out to the garage and got ready to make the drive to her workplace. As I drove I became profoundly frustrated. I was confused about how to break
the sad news to her. The closer I got to her work, the more I didn’t want to go. I decided I would just go into her office building and tell her I needed for her to come outside to talk.

Before I knew it I was parking my car in front of her office building. I put the car in park, pulled the parking brake handle, and prepared to go inside. I felt like my shoes were made of concrete. I could hear my feet clopping heavily with each step I took. As I approached her desk, she looked up and asked what I was doing there. I asked her to please come outside for a moment and said I needed to share something with her.

Receiving the news, she was naturally distraught. I thought she was going to collapse on the ground, so I held her close to support her. Like me, she was overwhelmed and heartbroken. She said, “Steve, take me home.”

She walked back into her office and let her boss know what was going on, and then we immediately left for home. We would deal with this situation in our own way, in our own time, and in our own home.

After getting home, I was thinking to myself that there was at least one merciful thing about this whole terrible mess. Just two months earlier, my mom had passed away from cancer. It was a horrible cancer that had ravaged her entire body. I was so grateful and pleased that she didn’t have to feel or experience the hurt of her firstborn son taking his own life. His suicide was a desperate attempt to fix problems that had grown out of our family’s tragic past. It was part of the sad after-effects of alcoholism, the ugly truth that no one dares talk about. My mother didn’t need to experience any more of that kind of tragedy.

As I ran the whole thing through my mind over and over, I remembered what my mother told me years before. “Steve, sometimes in life one has to die so that many might live.” She said that to me when I was a young boy, when my father went into the mental hospital. It had taken me all those years to really understand what she was telling me. She was a very wise woman.

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Chapter 21: Hostage Profiler

Late one night in 2004, while attending our monthly Crisis Response Team training at the prison, I found myself tired, bored and ready to go home. Dealing with inmates who didn’t want to learn, who resisted instruction at every turn, made for a vexing day behind the walls to say the least. And now, when I would normally be heading home, I had to sit through this training session.

Sitting around elongated portable tables with the rest of my team in our “team bungalow,” I was bored to death. We were going over a different version of negotiation techniques I had heard a thousand times. It wasn’t really a bungalow so much as a small apartment in the back lot of the prison. It was one of thirteen apartments on the lot. The warden had assigned this one to us as our permanent command center. The remaining twelve were used by inmates and their families for conjugal visits, each apartment separated and secured by concertina wire.

I remember thinking how fortunate we were to have such a great place to train. We had a TV and tape recorder to review training films, a small refrigerator to keep our drinks and perishables, a microwave to cook food if we got hungry and small bedrooms to crash in if we were caught in a long seize. The Department of Corrections had prepared us well for whatever we might face—everything except boredom. As my mind wandered away from the training at hand, I wondered if there could be a better way of negotiating with a hostage taker.

Driving home around midnight, I couldn't shake the idea of a new training technique I had sketched out in my head earlier. I wanted to figure out a way to give our team an advantage,
something that would enhance the probability of success when we found ourselves dealing with hostage takers or barricaded suspects. As I pulled into my garage, I couldn’t shake those lingering thoughts. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to forget it. I felt like I was really on to something, and I went to bed that night with my gears still turning.

A few evenings later, I was sitting at my computer doing research in my home office. It wasn’t really an office so much as a guest bedroom with a computer in it. A room with a single bed, a television, and my computer stuck in the one empty corner. Riley, our tortoise shell tabby, loved to hang out in there. She loved rubbing against my legs when I was on the computer. I banged away on my computer doing research on hostage negotiations and thinking about when I first started working at LAC-SP. Specifically, how the prison sent all its new employees to a training session to learn about different personalities. I began to wonder what advantage knowing a hostage taker or barricaded suspect’s personality would be to a negotiation team.

If we knew how a person thought—if we knew why a person did what they did—it should give a negotiation team a huge advantage, I thought. I recalled when I first took the class on personalities almost ten years prior, and how impressed I was after the class was finished. I couldn’t forget how the instructor illustrated my personality almost perfectly with his test. It had amazed the hell out of me. I couldn’t wait to share my ideas with my team members.

But then, as it has so many times in my life, doubt and fear showed its ugly face. No inmate would ever agree to take a personality test like I did, I thought. Maybe the plan wasn’t feasible. Maybe I was barking up the wrong tree. I knew the challenge in front of me would be daunting, but it was something I had to try.

I wondered if it was possible to get a significant number of hostage takers to take personality tests, to establish some baseline data. Then I thought maybe a test could be administered without them knowing it. Isolated in my office, a million different ideas ricochet through my head like a bouncing bullet. I knew it was a good idea, one that needed to be figured out. Every hostage team needed this weapon in their arsenal, and I knew I wouldn’t give up until I figured out a way to make it work.

The next evening after work, I met with my Team Leader, Lt. Bruce Frank, and Robert Davis, our Asst. Team Leader. Both had degrees in Psychology and both possessed brilliant, inquisitive minds. We agreed to meet in Bruce’s office after work. Besides being our Team Leader, Bruce was the Employee Relations Officer for the prison. Bob was a Correctional Counselor from A-Yard, and we all got off duty about the same time.

As we sat in Bruce’s office that evening, it wasn’t long before they were both as excited as I was about the idea. They liked the idea of being able to profile someone over the phone without them knowing, and to be able to use those profiling skills in our day jobs inside the prison. We decided that we would all three start researching everything we could about profiling. We’d see if we couldn’t create a profiling concept for our team.

After months of research, I ran across an article that made reference to a guy named William Moulton Marston. He was the author of a book called, *Emotions of Normal People*, a book I wanted to read. The book was first published in 1928 and it outlined his research on personalities. After a trip to the bookstore, I discovered I’d have to special order the book, as it had been out of print for some time. It would cost me $165.00. I had no idea what to expect from the book, or whether it would be worth the investment, but I bought it anyway. Being a risk-taker, I thought *what the hell, I’ll give it a shot.*

The book not only answered a lot of my questions, but it changed my view of the world. I discovered that Dr. Marston created the first lie detector machine. I liked this guy already! And I
learned that Marston was a man before his time, an open-minded, brilliant individual who adored women and wasn’t intimidated by their gender. He created the character Wonder Woman. It was his way of showing how magnificent he thought women were. He used his knowledge and his intense research into personality studies to fashion the character. Her demeanor and unique personality traits were based on his research on personalities. She portrayed a matchless Super-Heroine personality, which was a little exaggerated, but which stayed true to a mixture of the traits and behaviors found in most women.

I discovered while reading *Emotions of Normal People* that I didn’t need to figure out how to profile six billion people. All I needed was to learn how to profile four. Even though there are six billion people on earth, everyone falls into one of four main personality groups. The task that I now faced was considerably narrowed, but I still didn’t know how to administer a personality test without their knowing.

Bruce, Bob and I usually met every week to discuss what we’d discovered. We knew if we could observe a person and their behavior, we could figure out their personality type with a high probability of accuracy. We knew, in the worst-case scenario, that if we were a little bit off in the beginning, we would be able to improve our accuracy over time.

We made a decision: wherever we went, we would profile the people we met. (For learning purposes only, of course.) It became our way of experimenting with our concept, practicing until we knew we had it figured out. I used my work environment many times as a laboratory for our experiment, and nobody ever knew that I was studying them. Usually after we profiled someone, we would just ask him or her about their personality. It was amazing how many people actually enjoyed sharing the information with us, and it gave us feedback on the accuracy of our predictions.

Over the following months, we profiled everything that breathed or moved—ourselves, our friends, our co-workers, our bosses, even our families. It was of the utmost importance that we got this right before we tried to introduce our concept to the law enforcement community.

There was a hidden blessing in all this work that I wasn’t expecting. After almost sixty years, I discovered answers to questions I had about my own behavior. I was learning why I did what I did. I was able to come to grips with who I was, which was a beautiful outcome that I didn’t anticipate. I knew that even if nothing else came of our work, it would not have been in vain.

I gained a better understanding of who I was, and why I was driven toward behavior that was different from others’. I learned why control of my environment was so important to me, and not control of people. I wasn’t as goofy as I thought I was, even though I sometimes acted goofy. I was just a certain type of personality, and I reacted to my world according to my personality type. There was a reason I did the things I did. I was wired to function that way. The alcohol and drugs I abused in my youth only exaggerated my personality traits, causing my behavior to become irrational and dysfunctional.

I discovered during my research that I was a “visual learner.” And I knew this to be true because I had always learned best by watching others. I have spent a lifetime trying to answer the questions *what* and *why*. *What* was I witnessing and *why* did people do the things they did. Those were answers I needed in order to function inside my world. The two main emotions that drove me, I learned, were fear and rage. Fear being the main external emotion, and rage the internal emotion. The more extreme the fear becomes, the more pronounced the rage. If the two are ever wacky *together*, then I lose the control of my environment. Just like the night of my last drunk: when I lost control of my emotions because of fear, an uncontrollable rage took over. This was a
new weapon in my arsenal of sobriety, another tool to help battle my alcoholism. I finally had
answers for behaviors I hadn’t completely understood before.

I discovered also that my wife's behavior made more sense to me. As a matter of fact, as
time went on, I became more sensitive and tolerant toward her behavior, because I now
understood why she did what she did. She acted the way she did for very specific reasons, just
like I did. Just like everybody does. She was wired to behave a certain way, and now I
understood why. She was not as goofy as I once thought; she was just living life the way she was
created to live it. God gave her—just like he gave me—the specific tools she needed to function,
to survive in her environment.

We were ready to introduce our concept to the police world. For me, personally, it would be
a way to pay society back. Early in my life, I only took from society, and so it was very
important to me to contribute something. Bruce and I wrote an article about the concept and got
it published in the *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations*—an international journal for police
personnel—in the spring of 2005.

Our first true experiment took place with an attorney out of Newport Beach. My friend Bob
had known him for quite a while. He was a successful trial lawyer that Bob was involved with in
the California Staff Assault Taskforce, a taskforce Bob created that benefited correctional
workers and assisted in victims’ rights. At the time, our new lawyer friend was representing a car
accident victim. Bob convinced him that we could be an asset to him during his negotiation
process. He was a little apprehensive, but he decided to give us a try and see how it worked out.

During the last days of negotiation with the opposing attorney in the Superior Court of San
Luis Obispo, we were able, in a time span of about eight hours, to help him increase a settlement
from $650,000.00 to over $1.2 million. The day before, I had profiled the opposing attorney, the
judge, all twelve jurors empaneled on the jury, and the insurance company responsible for the
liabilities. The following day, as I sat quietly in the courtroom listening to the judge hand down
his final findings, I was amazed and overjoyed to know that we played a significant part in that
settlement. As the opposing attorney left the courtroom that day, he stopped and asked for my
business card. He was wise enough to have realized the difference we’d made in that case, that
our influence had changed the outcome of the settlement.

This was all very exciting for my friends and me, but I was still wondering whether law
enforcement would accept our concept. After the success with the trial, I knew what we had to
do next: if the FBI liked our concept, then maybe it had some real merit. So my next task was to
figure out how to get an interview with the FBI guys that dealt with this kind of work daily.

Through a lot of work, persistence, and a faith, I was about to meet a very important person.
We were having our annual Hostage Negotiators Conference in Monterey, California. It was
being held at the beautiful Hyatt Regency hotel. Every police agency in the state had
representatives there, and a majority of the hostage negotiators in California would be attending.

Prior to this conference, I was in contact with a personal friend who was a high-ranking
危机 response official with the Department of Corrections. We shared this concept with her and
she loved it. She just happened to know the Bureau Chief of the Behavioral Analysis Unit in
Quantico, Virginia. She told me that she knew him personally and that he would be in Monterey.
She said she would see if he was interested in hearing about what we had.

Within a couple of days she emailed me to let me know that he was interested in hearing
what we had to say. She said he would be glad to meet with us at the conference in Monterey.
Thrilled doesn’t begin to describe how I felt.
Wednesday, the third day into our training in Monterey, we were set to meet with Special Agent Jack Ward, Bureau Chief of the Behavioral Analysis Unit. The FBI was finally going to take a look at our profiling concept. Wednesday morning, Bruce and I went to the morning training session in the conference room of the Hyatt Regency. Jack Ward was scheduled to give a seminar on hostage situations that he had been involved in. The room was packed, but luckily we had arrived early enough to secure seats up front. We’d decided the night before that we would profile him. Then, when we had our meeting with him later that evening, we could share what we discovered by watching and listening to him.

All of a sudden Jack walked into the conference room. The speaker who was speaking at the time recognized him and began to introduce him. The whole room gave him a standing ovation, and then erupted into a deafening applause.

Jack meandered toward the podium and absorbed his deserved accolades. Jack, being much taller than most in attendance, adjusted his microphone to fit his height. He was an imposing man, standing at least 6 foot 5 inches tall. He was dressed immaculately in a tailored, light colored suit. He wore a starched shirt with a vibrant tie. Bruce and I had our eyes glued on him from the moment he entered the room. We didn’t want to miss anything about his appearance or behavior. By the time he was done with his lecture, we had both reached the same conclusions about his personality type. We were confident we had profiled him correctly.

Bruce and I were to meet with Jack later that evening in the visitors lounge. With the day’s activities over, it would be a good time to discuss our concept. The lounge was spacious and decorated with plush furniture and plants. The hotel had cordoned off areas for business meetings like the one we had planned. We chose a secluded spot that afforded some privacy and separated us from the hustle and bustle that seemed to surround us. Unbeknownst to us, Jack was bringing along two detectives, a female detective named Sherry from Lake Tahoe and a male detective from Semi Valley. We settled into our chairs and shortly after our introductions, Jack asked us to go ahead and share what we had. He made no bones about the fact that he expected us to present just another personality test. He said that personality tests were well known in the psychology field and already used in law enforcement. Specifically the Briggs-Myers test, most agencies embraced its capabilities.

As we discussed our concept with him and the detectives that night, they were all a little leery. That is, until we convinced them by profiling them. After that they became believers real quick. They were amazed that we were able to do what we did with the little information gathered by simple observation. We shared also how the concept could work in regular police work, even for the patrolman on the street. We explained how we had figured out that certain types of criminals do certain types of crimes, and that there was a high probability that those individuals had specific personality types.

The sad news about all of this though was that Jack would soon be retiring. He also told us that most police agencies won't just adopt a new concept, even if it’s great. He said that we also needed to be aware that there were many legal concerns that came with profiling people. He suggested that we get involved with our local law enforcement and do our best to share this concept with them.

After about three hours of that exciting meeting, Bruce and I thanked everybody for taking the time out of their busy night to meet with us and listen to what we had to share. They seemed to be just as excited about the concept as we were, and they thanked us for our time as we said our goodnights.
Jack Ward, at that time, was the number one hostage negotiator in the world. His acceptance and approval of our concept was the ultimate confirmation of what we strove for. We felt very honored and privileged to meet with him. And more importantly, we were sure we had developed something very unique and special.

Chapter 22: Sliding into Retirement

I was utterly worn out. My life’s compass seemed to have gone sideways. As I neared retirement, I found myself in a place of emotional and spiritual deterioration. It became harder and harder to report to work each day. I’m not sure when it happened, but I realized that my job no longer appealed to me. I also found myself reaching out less often to those less fortunate than myself. It was something I had strove to do since I’d first sobered up, but helping others now seemed like a great burden. My wife and I argued more frequently about silly things. Over time, a gulf was emerging between us, a wedge separating me from the woman I loved and adored more than life itself.

I found it difficult to admit to myself these stark realities. After twenty-five years of unbelievably successful sobriety, my life should have been more tranquil, more serene. I had a beautiful, loving, caring wife who was even more successful in her career than I was in mine. Our life afforded us all the creature comforts we could want. We both drove new convertible sports cars. We took trips and cruises whenever we felt like it. Our children were on track with their own lives. We couldn’t have asked for anything more. I had everything a man could want at my age—so why did I feel like I had nothing? I was a lost soul on the precipice of total ruin, and I was too blind to see the impending storm. With all my knowledge of personalities and human behavior at my disposal, I still wasn’t able to see what was happening to me. Once again I found myself filled with the same hate, rage, and fear that had almost destroyed me so many years before. Dysfunction had slipped back into my life.

I made multiple efforts to regain my serenity and peace of mind, but it only led to more confusion. Behaviors arose that mirrored the last years of my drinking. I wasn’t drinking, but I may as well have been. My state of mind was similar. The purchase of my beautiful brand new black Mustang GT with its parchment colored roof didn’t bring peace of mind. The Harley Davidson Sportster, an expensive toy like the convertible, gave me no joy. Nor the membership at the local 24-hour gym I frequented three or four times a week, seeking that illusive calmness.

I guess one might consider these behaviors signs of a midlife crisis, but I thought of them only as symbols of a successful life. I was accumulating things I’d never had before, gathering nice possessions where once there were none.

My beautiful wife Jody would be the first to attest to my shortcomings. She reminded me of my tendencies daily, usually after one of our arguments about nothing. Her reminders, well intentioned as they were, only pissed me off. I thought she should be more grateful toward me, and less judgmental. Couldn’t she tell how much I had done for her, I’d think?

One day, in a fit of gloominess, I came to the conclusion that I was no longer needed in any of my family’s lives. As experience has borne out so many times in my life, I needed to be needed. I felt I wasn’t needed by my family, my co-workers, or my friends. I became despondent. My family had been successful in their own right. They were capable of taking care of themselves without my help. I questioned what my worth was, now that no one seemed to need me. I had never realized how much I needed to be needed, until the day I thought I wasn’t, and I blanketed myself in self-pity.
As time passed I was able to work through that confusion. I realized that the perception of not being needed was just a distortion. It was my mind playing tricks on me. I knew that I was way off-kilter, and I assumed it was my negative environment that caused it. I came to the conclusion that I needed something to make me feel balanced again. I didn’t care what it was. Anything to help right the slanted ship. I knew something was missing in my life, and I thought maybe retirement would fill that void. I just felt out of sorts. I never considered that it could be me or my behavior that needed fixing.

I was only a few months from retiring, and as the days grew closer, my excitement grew. Unbeknownst to me, another challenge awaited me before I would walk out those prison doors. While at work one day preparing my shop to relocate it to a different yard, I tripped over an obstacle lying on the shop floor, severely injuring my right shoulder. I tore my rotator cuff and detached my right shoulder bicep. So my final weeks at my job were spent mostly trying to deal with my injury.

After what seemed like a lifetime, retirement day finally came. I hoped it would give me a new beginning. With work responsibilities over in our lives now, Jody and I were excited about the new adventures that awaited us. I left the Department of Corrections with a little over seventeen years of service and with some very nice benefits. My wife also retired from her long and successful career, the corporation she ran for a dermatologist of the stars out of Beverly Hills. Her work had also taken its toll on her and she too was looking forward to the rest.

After months of intense physical therapy, it was determined that the damaged to my shoulder would soon need surgery to rectify. With a detached right bicep and torn rotator cuff that needed repair, a home already purchased in Arizona—with surgery scheduled in two months—my plate was full. We weren’t about to allow these challenges to detour our retirement, though. It was just another bump in our long journey. We went ahead and moved to Arizona where our children were living. Our golden years now awaited us. We had been blessed over the years, we knew, and these challenges couldn’t change that fact.

Shortly after settling into our home in Arizona, we had to drive back to Lancaster for the surgery. Within hours on waking up from surgery, after I was given thorough instructions about caring for my shoulder, we were headed back home. Jody drove while I reclined in the bucket seat next to her, well medicated by morphine.

As we drove home that night—me in and out of lucidity—I thought about how I’d gained another ugly scar on my body. I had so many scars that this one really didn’t matter, it was just more evidence of a life well lived. Yes, even though I was in the la-la land of morphine, I realized that all those scars were just that, scars. I knew that the only thing they represented was a very full and merciful life, a life gained with God’s help. Somehow I’d survived. As I lay in the passenger seat partially reclined and staring into the heavens, I knew I had been blessed beyond anything that I could have ever imagined. Even though scars and surgeries sometimes make for great conversations, I knew that I had definitely been over-paid.

Jody and I talked about how blessed we had been over the years. Even in this surgery, we were lucky. We were fortunate to be able to afford it. We were fortunate to have insurance to pick up most of the medical bill. We were fortunate to be able to pick our doctor and hospital. I knew that sometimes things just happen, which was a good indicator of the fact that I was still alive. Just before the medication caused me to doze off, I realized that if I ever got to a point in my life where I had no more pains or challenges, there would be a high probability I was dead.

A few months after my surgery, while sitting in my back yard in the middle of the day, I found myself enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun beating down on me. Suddenly reality
slapped me across the face. I realized that even though I hadn’t drunk any alcohol in over thirty 
years, I could still exhibit alcoholic symptoms in my behavior. I had been doing it for years, but 
refused to notice. I had been away from the A.A. program for so long—for almost fifteen years 
—and I had quit going to church when I moved to Blythe. I had convinced myself that I was 
stable and on the right track, and I’d justified my behavior by chalk ing it up to the pursuit of 
success. I wasn’t even aware that the same dysfunctional behavior had slipped back into my life 
until the very moment it had reclaimed me.

I was to discover during this period that I was lacking something, something I needed more 
than anything in the world: serenity. It would take me quite a while to even understand what I 
was searching for. It turns out that it wasn’t the success I’d achieved since beginning my career 
with the Department of Corrections. With time I discovered that most of my problems stemmed 
from refusing to work the twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. I had learned 
years ago that the steps had the ability to balance my life when it went out of whack, but I had 
become complacent. I’d forgotten the impact they could have in my life. I only wanted to work 
them when I thought they benefitted me—which, when left to my own devices, was sporadically 
to say the least. Serenity, for me, didn’t mean a path out of the storm; serenity meant achieving 
peace inside the storm.

As I looked back I realized that I had been going through a “dry drunk,” a unique occurrence 
that alcoholics experience from time to time. I never thought it could happen to me. I thought I 
was beyond that kind of relapse. “Dry drunk” is just an AA term to describe a recovering 
alcoholic who is no longer drinking, but who still displays drunken behavior. A person whose 
thought processes are distorted by the patterns of addiction, an alcoholic who, even though not 
drinking, still follows an irregular or undisciplined lifestyle, like that of a drunk. Yep, that was 
me.

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Chapter 23: Telephone call

It was the second or third time I heard Dempsey say, “Dad. Dad! I am a drug addict.” It 
snapped me out of my reverie. I gathered my thoughts, realizing the severity of what her 
pleading meant.

This was my daughter, I thought to myself. My beautiful little girl who survived a horrific 
car accident. My baby girl who I walked down a lush, grassy walkway five years later with leg 
braces on, supporting her wobbly feet as I gave her away to be married. This was the girl who 
had given me four beautiful grandbabies, children that her surgeon suggested she never have.

Her frantic pleas for help ripped at my heart. This was my daughter, my beautiful lovely 
daughter, and she was in need of my love and understanding. She now had my complete 
attention. The sad part about this phone call was that my daughter had, multiple-times over the 
years, tried to get this kind of attention from me. It took realizing who I was, and the addiction I 
had brought into my family decades before, to jar my attention. It made me realize how far 
reaching and cunning addiction was, how in spite of my best efforts it had now attacked my 
daughter.

Her desperate words echoed throughout my mind as I realized the situation she now faced. I 
knew exactly what it meant when she said that she was a drug addict. My heart broke as she 
spoke. I felt helpless and powerless, because I knew I didn’t have the power to change her 
situation.
What she shared with me was by no means a glorious story. It was a story riddled with grief and pain. It was a story about desperation and fear ending in a plea for help. I had followed in my father’s footsteps, and now how my daughter had followed in mine. She laid out the exact nature of her problems and then looked to me for help.

I had waited for almost twenty-five years for this phone call and it was haunting to actually receive it. I’d never wanted to admit it, but somehow I always knew it was only a matter of time until we had this talk. Even though it was sad, it didn’t completely throw me. I still remembered God telling me he would save my daughter for another day, that she would one day do great works in her life. I’d hung on to those words over the years like a vise, and I wasn’t about to let them go this night.

I knew this was only the beginning for her. I knew that a larger destiny awaited her. Even in the current darkness, I knew the seed of something better had been planted for my daughter. It had been pollinated by sorrow, pain, loneliness, isolation, fear, rage, and suffering. Her call that night became the start of a wonderful journey for her, an opening to allow the light to shine in and start the growth of her new life, allowing her to go toward the purpose that awaited her.

I knew it was imperative that God get her attention first, to awaken the spirit that lay under the falsehoods of addiction, to jar her with the reality of what she now faced, and to open her eyes to what her future might hold on the other side.

She told me she had been addicted to oxycodone for a very long time. She had been taking approximately 225 milligrams a day, equivalent to about fourteen or fifteen pills. She had been using the medication because of the pain she experienced from her car accident. She was also taking other medications for various other problems. I knew this was a serious amount of the drug—as much as street addicts use on a day-to-day basis. As we talked and shared, I realized that we had a huge challenge in front of us, a complex task that would take every bit of the skill at our disposal. Even more importantly: it would take the Grace and Mercy of God.

I knew the battle she faced would be long and hard, but I also knew there was hope. I knew that with God’s help anything was possible. If there is breath there is always hope. I remembered my mom telling me these same exact same words a very long time ago, when I was so young and sick.

As I listened to her share with me, it was like looking into a mirror. She talked about the exact same things that had haunted me for so many years. The depression, fear, uncontrollable emotions, low self-esteem, hopelessness, desperation, isolation, loneliness—all the syndromes of an addict or alcoholic.

Listening to her speak made me reflect on my own life. She was walking in the same shoes that I had walked in over thirty years earlier. This is my daughter, who I had almost lost to a car accident. I didn't lose her then, and I had no intention of losing her now. We fought hard back then, and we would fight as hard as we needed to now. The God that saved her life in that horrible accident would spare her one more time. We have been a very blessed as a family, over many years and through difficult situations, and this problem that we now faced didn't change that fact. We weren't about to give in to it or be defeated.

I shared with her the same things that other drunks had shared with me when I first showed up in AA. If it worked for me, it could surely work for her too. I let her know that she no longer had to fight this fight alone. She had help now and we would get through this together.

I shared with her that the medication was only a symptom of her problems, and that she could later deal with the other issues that she carried around. Dempsee has her father’s personality though. She might be down, but she wasn’t out. One is good, two isn't enough, and
there aren’t any boundaries—yeah, she reminds me of myself. I knew I would relive the horrors of my life through my daughter and that I would need to revisit many of the nightmares that had haunted and disturbed me for years.

We talked for quite a while that night, about everything it seemed. We left nothing off the table. This was a serious situation and we took it very seriously. Addictions have been birthed through many generations of my family. We knew first-hand the complete destruction that it could bring to any family.

In AA it is suggested that sponsors should not be of the opposite sex. Definitely a father should never be a sponsor for his own child. He should be what he is: a father. I knew that. I knew it could undermine the whole system of recovery. Sometimes it’s necessary to do the unrecommended thing though. This was one of those rare instances. The day would come when others would take over my place, but for the moment I knew that I could be of more service to my daughter than anyone else. Her addiction had grown so bad that she had isolated herself in her bedroom. She had cut herself off from the world. She needed help desperately and I had the answers she was seeking at that time.

As the years had gone by, the pain caused by her accident had grown. She needed a way to deal with that pain, and in the short term, prescription drugs were a way to deal with it. Then, as with all addicts, the drug turned on her. It took away who she was. It became her living nightmare. The unstoppable cycle had begun and only a miracle from God would be able to stop it. She needed a miracle like I needed one so many years before.

So the very thing I had always prayed and hoped to never happen had happened. But I knew, in time, as things got better for her, she would be led to gain other support and to become stronger. And I knew God had had his hand in this from the start, because he told me this day would come.

It was a great talk we had that night, I think we both felt in those moments that we were truly blessed. As a father and daughter, we grew closer that night. This was only a beginning, a new challenge that we would fight to overcome with God's help. As we talked that night, just before we hang-up, she asked me if I would pray with her. She wanted to know if I would ask God to help her with her problem, just like he helped me she said. I was honored to pray with my daughter. It tickled my heart that she asked me to do such an intimate thing with her.

We said our prayer together over the telephone, asking God to send His angels of mercy to help us with the situation our family now faced. A peacefulness came over our moments together as we said our goodnights to each other, and she promised to call the next day to stay in touch with me.

I was dazed by everything that I had just heard. I was drained spiritually, physically, and emotionally. To realize the destructiveness of the addiction I had perpetuated in my family was shattering. Dealing with anyone who is recovering can be very taxing and exhausting, but with my daughter it was heart wrenching.

When I was through, my wife and our guests, Donna and Johnny, wanted to know everything, so we talked for a while about Dempsee. Johnny had shared with us earlier about him being a meth addict, so we talked about that for a while too. He and Donna were very concerned for Dempsee. They were both aware of our family’s history. They shared words of support and concern and by the end of the night we all felt hopeful rather than dejected. We were excited, but we were also worn out. The whole night had been one emotional episode after another. At 5 a.m. it was finally time to go to sleep.
When I awoke the next day, my daughter’s situation was at the forefront of my mind. What would I need to do? I knew that I needed the best, the very best, help I could get for my daughter’s situation. I sat there for a few moments contemplating that. I knew my experiences with these types of drugs were nothing like hers, and that we needed an expert with unique abilities. This is my lovely daughter we are talking about here. I would do anything it took to help save her life. I picked up the phone and called the foremost expert I knew.

I didn't call the high-dollar rehabilitation facilities in Kansas, or even look up any renowned therapists in her area. The person I contacted had a history of dealing with these exact problems. This person would completely understand what we faced as a family. He was afflicted with similar problems over the years. No one would claim he was a world-renowned therapist, but I knew he could help. This person was a full-blown heroin addict by the time he was fifteen years of age, and he was my person of choice to help my daughter. He had grown up in dysfunctional surroundings similar to my own. Most importantly, he would be celebrating his eleventh sobriety birthday in December of that year.

This person I am talking about is my younger brother Peter. He was a product of the same surroundings that gave birth to my own disfunction. To accomplish what he has accomplished is almost beyond imagining. He would be a fabulous support system during these difficult times. After spending some time on the phone with Peter that morning, we talked about the situation that Dempsee faced. He promised to contact her as soon as he could and to be a support system for her during her recovery. I thanked him for his willingness to help, and then we said our goodbyes.

Later that afternoon we had lunch with Donna and Johnny and my son Gavin and his family. Dempsee was the topic of most of our conversations that day. Every one of us loved her, and we were very proud of her for what she was trying to accomplish. She called while we were all visiting. My son couldn't wait to get on the phone with her. He wanted to give her his complete support and encouragement, to let her know how much he respected and loved her for what she was attempting to do. My wife and I took turns talking with her for a while. We wanted to let her know we were there for her in this fight. We wanted to encourage her in any way that we could. We both understood the challenges she faced.

Like I said earlier: I love and respect both of my children. They both mean the world to me. Gavin is a kind and gentle person, just like his sister Dempsee. His heart went out to her in a very supportive and understanding way. Even though there is a six-year gap in age between the two, they adore and love each other very much. During our visit, Gavin informed us that he had just been promoted to Detective in his department. We let him know how happy and proud we were of his achievement. His mother and I especially where thrilled that he would be getting out of the patrol car. With his new assignment he was granted a better work shift than he had before, which would mean a lot to his him and his growing family.

My son and his family finally went home after our day of visiting, and everybody else was worn out and so headed toward bed. I was also tired, but I wanted to go outside and sit in my backyard and unwind for a few moments, to relax and think while I smoked a cigarette.

While sitting under the illumination of a beautiful full moon, I reflected back over the previous days and my whole life in general. My daughter, of course, was in the forefront of my thoughts. I was so saddened by her predicament—it completely broke my heart—but I knew, as her father, that I needed to stay strong. She would need as much support from her family as we could muster during her challenge.
I remembered the words of my mother and father as I lay under that oxygen tent as a child. Don’t give up Steve. Those words resonated inside of me that night as I contemplated the challenges that lay in front of my family. I knew I couldn’t win this battle for my daughter. Only God has the power to fight these demons. But I could be there to support her. Then I remembered again what my mom told me so many years before, “Sometimes in life, Steve, one must die so that others can live.”

Still, inside of this ugly darkness I was able to see the blessings and the unique people God had brought to our lives over the years. I have received so much out of this muddled life, much more than I have ever put back into it. Even in the terrible reality that lay in front of my daughter, I was able to be grateful for everything my family has been given over the years. Nobody ever promised that life would be a golden brick road, and I have never expected that it should be.

Sitting there in the dark, under the vibrant night stars, I began to cry. I realized that this battle with alcoholism would continue well beyond my lifetime. It may always continue. Millions of lives will be forfeit in its wrath. But I also realized that the fight has to start somewhere, even if it is only one drunk or one addict at a time. The cost of its destruction is so enormous for any society. The loss in human potential is unfathomable. When one of us loses, we all lose as a people.

I remembered the prayer I used to say about my father—that somehow I would understand what made him do what he did. Now I understood why he was like he was. I had walked in the same shoes that he walked decades before. My mom’s prayer came to mind—that all her children would come to know God. Even though I never became rich enough to build that hospital for alcoholics that I dreamed about in my youth, I did come to understand alcoholism and to know God.

I remembered something I learned from a book I’d read by John Douglas, of Mindhunter fame: “When we look into the abyss, the abyss looks back at us.” Then I thanked my God for this underserved beautiful life that He had given me. I knew in my heart that I was only sitting there that night because God had had His hand on my life all those years. I also knew that I might have been born broken, but that the good Lord patched me back together so I could live this amazing life. I owe a debt to Him that I can never repay, because He paid a debt for me that he never owed.

If you or anyone in your family is suffering from the devastating disease of alcoholism, why not make the decision to break the cycle? Why not become the one to beat alcoholism and win? This is my story of battling the unrelenting, devious opponent of alcoholism for over sixty years, and of my unlikely life in all its ugliness and beauty. Through it all though, I learned to trust in Jesus, I learned to trust in God.

“Who we are never changes. Who we become forever changes.”

Author Unknown

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Epilogue

One year later Dempsee had been off of her pain medication for eight months. Over the course of four months, she went from 250 mgs. of Oxycodone per day down to zero. During this withdrawal process, morphine patches and percocet were used to help alleviate the withdrawal
symptoms. Then she reduced the morphine patches from 50 mg down to 0 mg, until she was free from all opiates.

As of March 2013 she has been completely clean, without any pain medications, for three years. Attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings gave her support during these tumultuous times. Her progress is beyond amazing, and watching this transformation has been unbelievable. She just informed me the other day that she had two tattoos of angel wings put on her back next to her scar. She said, “Dad, God’s got my back now.” What this young woman doesn’t realize yet, but will one day, is that God has always had her back.

My brother Peter never reached his milestone of eleven years of sobriety. With the excruciating pain he was experiencing from hepatitis C, kidney disease, diabetes, and liver problems, he sought relief from his difficulties with methadone. He has been struggling to regain the control over his sobriety, a sobriety that he enjoyed for over ten years. I will never forget how, when I called him for help, he reached out to my daughter in her most vulnerable stages of recovery. He was able to instill in her a new hope and belief that she desperately needed, and imparted the encouragement she needed to keep battling her battle. If there is breathe there is always hope, so we pray that God will touch his life again in a very special way. He has a great story to share with the many who still suffer from addiction. Though he is struggling currently, he has the constitution required to pull out of his addiction, and the fortitude to persevere with his battle.

My son Gavin was just involved in the largest investigation and series arrests in his state’s history. He contributed to the apprehension of over one hundred suspects under one arrest warrant. His achievements go beyond my expectations, and his future looks very bright. For his age, he is wise beyond his years, and is a very insightful young man.

Like he told me a long time ago, isn’t it amazing, Dad, that you are a convicted felon and I am going off to the police academy? Him and his sister will do wonderful things in their lives. Their mother and I are very proud and grateful for our children, and we have been so blessed that they both showed up in our lives.

I have returned to attending A.A. meetings on a regular basis, after an absence of over fifteen years. I am beginning to realize how much I had forfeited with my absence. My sobriety has always been contingent on my spirituality, a truth that somehow I had forgotten in the pursuit of success.

In January of 2014, my beautiful wife and I celebrated 45 + 1 years of marriage. The one year is the illegal year that we lived together before we married, “We call that our best year ever.” My loving wife Jody is still doing what she does best: being the mainstay of our family and keeping an eye on all of her brood. Her selfless giving over the years is what made my sobriety possible. Without her support, I would have never achieved my sobriety. Her gracious love of humanity, combined with a charismatic personality, makes everybody she meets or knows adore her.

On November 25, 2013, I celebrated my thirty-fifth year of continuous sobriety—over 12,600 days, one day at a time, one step at a time. It is the underserved gift from God I received that cold winter night so long ago, and this story is my gift back to Him.

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**Numbers to call for HELP!**

Alcoholics Anonymous
Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to except the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.
“Thy Will not mine be done”

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About the Author- “Born Broken”

Steve possess unique insights concerning this subject matter that set him apart from other authors. His vast personal knowledge and understanding about alcoholism qualify him to pen this story. His experiences have been gained the hard way, living them day after day. He is a by-product of the alcoholism in his childhood surroundings, and regretfully, he generated the same dreadful settings for his own family to suffer through.

By overcoming and conquering incredible difficulties, he has been able to transform a life of defeat into one of success. His enthusiasm about sharing his story, depicting the destruction he witnessed alcohol unleash in his family, is what motivated him to bring this story to life.

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