



BLAKE DIETERS

The Closest I've Come To God

LOIS JUDSON

I wake up at 8:50 A.M. and whip around the house frantically, not wanting to be late for my women's Alcoholics Anonymous meeting: feed the cat, grab my knitting, splash water on my face, pour some half-perked coffee, and speed into town.

I am late, and the only parking place left in the church lot is handicapped. It occurs to me that I might park there, because I do, after all, have a handicap, or I wouldn't be here. And I'd be using the space to attend a meeting that, I'm told, is the only cure for my malady. But, being a good citizen, I park down the street and dash to the church.

I've missed the introduction of the speaker, which is no problem, because I know her from past meetings. She has perfectly permed dark brown hair framing a thin, elfin face and is cute down to her corpuscles. "Jennifer," let's call her, is relating her recent drama: Last week she was at lunch with several high-powered attorneys and found that many of the menu items were cooked in wine, or flavored with beer, or soaked in a marinade that contained sherry. Clearly she could not choose these: though the alcohol had been cooked off in the preparation, the flavor of alcohol, even the few molecules left after cooking, could cause her to relapse. To add to her dilemma, she has developed a more subtle symptom of her disease: food phobias. She is afraid that any food she has never eaten — and even some foods she has eaten, but not in certain combinations — could put her into anaphylactic shock. The dishes with no alcohol all had ingredients she wasn't quite sure of, like cilantro. Had she ever had cilantro? Better to avoid it lest she end up under the table choking on her tongue. After much deliberation she was able to order a chicken fillet cooked in a little butter, with broccoli on the side.

The AA members are wildly diverted by her story and

chuckle merrily as she tells it. They understand her fears, because they're alcoholics too! They all have these funny neuroses that are the remnants of their disease. And even when you've been sober for twenty years, your disease is still there. While you are at a meeting, it is outside doing push-ups. It's like a phantom mugger, hanging back, ready to clobber you the minute you let your guard down.

Jennifer reads a few passages from the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book that saved her during this perilous lunch. The passages say that alcoholics often feel uncomfortable in the world. They obsess about unimportant things. They have groundless fears and are uneasy in social situations. They feel self-conscious, alienated, sad, nervous. They think too much. They think that thinking can save them from pain, whereas actually it is thinking that gets them in trouble. What you must do is surrender to your Higher Power and let him or her do the thinking. Jennifer says she finally realized that all of her fears about food were really a symptom of her disease, and that if she surrendered to God, she would be OK.

The audience claps enthusiastically.

I worked as a psychiatric nurse for years, and I think it's entirely possible that Jennifer isn't an alcoholic at all but suffers from some kind of depression overlaid with an anxiety disorder. I know from past meetings that she got sober twenty years ago, at the age of sixteen, having barely drunk enough in her life to float a goldfish. I think she comes to AA because she wants to be part of a group, to dramatize her life, to have an audience.

While the others relate to Jennifer's story and talk about how the twelve steps of AA are the answer, I knit furiously and keep my thoughts to myself, because I'm not sure they are the right thoughts. I want to point out that the people in this

group are pathologizing urges and feelings that are not solely the bailiwick of alcoholics. It's not reasonable to ascribe every negative feeling or experience in one's life to a desire to drink. And the fact that you're helped by going to meetings or working the steps is not proof that you are an alcoholic, because anyone can benefit from imposing a comforting framework or philosophy on life. Throughout history people have gathered together in groups and convinced one another that they have found the answer to the human dilemma, and history has shown them all to be wrong.

Today Jennifer gives out the chips, which remind me of the gold stars handed out in kindergarten. One gets a chip for certain lengths of sobriety: one day, three months, six months, and so on. I don't bother with chips anymore. I have enough twenty-four-hour chips to start a casino.

I came of age in the late sixties, a member of a counter-culture family, so it was natural that I should partake of the smorgasbord of drugs available to me. I began using at the age of thirteen, and by the time I was sixteen, I was drinking and smoking pot every weekend. I had also taken my fair share of LSD and dabbled in mushrooms and mescaline. I might have outgrown this spate of experimentation if not for my family's rampant dysfunction and my mother's death from cancer, which together caused me to seek relief in altered states. I had a high tolerance for alcohol and never had bad trips, so I was able to get wasted on the weekends and still do well in school. I earned a scholarship to Middlebury College and continued the pattern there.

When I graduated from college in 1977, my career prospects were grim. The country was in a recession, and there was not an abundance of jobs for people with a BA in literature who wanted to write. So I decided to go back to school and become a nurse. This delayed the progression of my alcoholism for a decade — first because I was so busy with my schoolwork, and then because working as a nurse gave me a new way of looking at the world and myself. In my white uniform with my hair pulled back in a ponytail, I felt competent, important, skillful, and grounded. I still privately thought of myself as a writer, but when people asked me what I was, I said, "A nurse," with a degree of satisfaction. Nursing gave me financial security and geographic mobility. It also nourished my writing, because it was my entree into a world bursting with drama: accidents, births, illnesses, deaths. I married another nurse. He and I had a child and bought a home. It wasn't till I had everything that my relationship with alcohol began anew.

I started sneaking drinks from hidden bottles of wine and vodka and displaying the morose, erratic behavior characteristic of alcoholics. Aware of the success of AA in treating alcoholism, I began going to meetings and managed to stay sober for six months. I might actually have succeeded in my recovery had I not met a woman at those meetings who was a pill addict and introduced me to the miracle of opiates.

I had never before found anything that so completely eased my mental pain. Opiates did not make me nod off, as they do most people, but instead energized me and gave me

long hours of productivity: one Percocet could keep me high all night. When my friend's supply of pills ran out, I moved on to heroin. At first I just snorted it, but then the man who sold it to me taught me how to shoot it into my arm. For the next fifteen years I stole any opiate I could get my hands on. No medicine cabinet was safe from my depredations. I even stole drugs from my brother when he was dying of cancer. During these years I overdosed three times and went to rehab three times. After each crisis I would stay clean for a few months and then relapse. I divorced my first husband, remarried, and managed to keep my job and my nursing license thanks only to the invention of Suboxone, a drug similar to methadone but with fewer side effects.

Though Suboxone brought some semblance of order back to my life, I was still drinking, and my alcoholism gradually progressed to the point where I awoke every morning filled with an intense, free-floating anxiety that could be relieved only by a full glass of wine or a shot of vodka. I walked to my sister's house for the drink and threw it back as quickly as possible. Since I worked evenings, I would then go home and shower and go to yoga. A few hours later I would have another "dose" of alcohol. (I thought of it as medicine.) On workdays I would not drink anymore, but on my days off I would drink straight through to bedtime, pacing myself so that I never appeared drunk.

In desperation I stole a bottle of clonazepam (a relative of Valium) from the closet behind the nurses' desk at the hospital, in hopes that if I took a couple every morning, they would enable me to stop drinking. When one or two pills didn't work, I took a handful.

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