

Sober Truths

Chapter 1

It's a sunny Wednesday afternoon in September 1989. I am sitting in one of those awful paper gowns on the examining table of my doctor's office. Cold sweat drips down my chest in the air-conditioned room, and I use the paper gown to soak it up. My head pounds, and waves of nausea rise and fall. They mingle with waves of dread.

My doctor is a young woman, a kind woman, with whom I have developed a good rapport and dangerously little honesty.

"I've been drinking too much," I blurt out when she comes into the room. "I need something to help me get over the hangover." I pause.

"Valium has worked before."

She looks at me for what seems a very long moment, her brown eyes serious. And then she asks me how much I drink.

I have not anticipated the question so I have not rehearsed an answer. A small voice inside whispers, "Tell the truth."

"Four bottles of wine most days—and...and some other stuff if it's around." I sound matter of fact, but in reality I have every finger in my emotional dike. If I break down now, I think, she will never give me what I need.

"How long has this been going on?" she asks.

I hold my breath and blink back the tears. I cannot meet her gaze. The internal voice gets louder. But my relationship with alcohol seems so complicated and my only goal is to get a sedative so that my heart will stop pounding and I can focus at work again. In spite of the mental fog that is my constant companion, my mind races. How little can I reveal and still get the drugs?

She repeats her question.

Numbers roll through my mind. The blackout that occurred at my first college party 25 years before. The last 6 years of Friday night trips to the liquor store for half-gallons of bourbon for the weekend party I was having, the party that was always for one. The 10 years of drinking in the morning. The last 3 years of drinking during the day at work. Hurrying home that morning on my coffee break: 5 minutes to walk to the apartment, 10 minutes to drink most of a bottle of white Zinfandel, 5 minutes to walk back to the office.

The little voice inside me whispers ever more loudly and then speaks through me, the truth tumbling out so quickly I don't even hear it go by.

"Are you ready to stop?" she asks, her face registering sympathy and concern, not the horror I had expected. She puts her hand on my arm and looks me in the eye. "Stop for good?"

Panic twists in my gut. As miserable as I am with the unrelenting hangover, I cannot imagine my life without alcohol. As terrible as it is to throw up each morning, drink a bit, then throw that up too until I can get enough in me to start my day—as tired as I am of waking up at 4:14 am like clockwork, the withdrawal forcing me to the refrigerator to get some relief from the shakes, it's as if she is asking me if I'm ready to cut off my right hand.

Yet there is a glimmer of something else in what she says. A door she is pointing to, a light in the distance. My life had become a morass of shadows, of shades drawn on sunny afternoons, of missed appointments, of excuses and apologies, of worry and middle-of-the-night panic. I don't really live anymore; I cope.

Most of all, as she waits patiently for my answer, I think about the fog: I am a smart person, a word person, and I am losing that. My brain is clouded with an inky sludge that slows my reactions and heightens just one thought: getting enough to drink to be okay. I know deep down that I cannot live this way much longer.

When I finally nod my agreement, she says gently, "I cannot detox you with a prescription. You need more substantial care during this time. There is a place I can send you if you're willing."

I nod again. She leaves the room. And just like that, my old life is lost to me.

For once, my inability to think is a gift. I numbly get dressed and wait until she returns with a small slip of paper.

"They can take you on Saturday," she says. "Call this number when you get home and they will tell you how to get through until then."

I leave her office in the same numb state. Somehow I get myself home, perhaps because I have driven the streets of the little Southern town in so many states of drunkenness that I can trust in automatic pilot.

My fingers are still in the dike of my emotions when I get home, and the momentum of my confession to the doctor carries me straight to the phone to call the treatment center.

"Don't stop drinking until you get here on Saturday," the man on the other end of the line says, his black voice deep and raspy. "There'll be time enough to take care of all that once you arrive. Be here at 4."

When I hang up the phone, I am relieved and at the same time, I am terrified. I have long been a woman who takes care of herself, who believes she depends on no one. I panic at the realization that I am suddenly going to have to trust in the goodness of others.

I have been a woman living a life of deception and lies about who she is and how she is. I am now going to have to confess again and again the truth of my weakness and the depth of my shame.

The enormity of the decision I have just made begins to sink in. It isn't just the logistics, which are daunting enough. How am I going to disappear from my life for 28 days? Who is going to teach my college classes or feed my cats? What am I going to say to the supervisors of my three part-time jobs? I have worked at these jobs for less than a month. And where am I going to come up with \$8,000? But all of that pales in the face of the deep inner fear that spreads through me.

For someone who is not an addict, who looks at alcoholism and addiction rationally, it is not possible to describe the pleasure we get from our poison. The sweet relief of having more than enough—for the evening, for the next morning, for the whole weekend. Of having time lie open so that you can sip slowly or guzzle quickly, as fits your need. Of having all distractions and responsibilities fall away so that you and your poison can be alone together. Of having this soul-soothing anesthetic make you right with your world or, even better, make your world disappear. Giving this up seems impossible.

Fortunately, a sort of grace descends upon me in that late afternoon and in the recurring moments of terror that come over me the next three days. I am mysteriously able to lean into the willingness of that small internal voice and let it carry me away from the old seduction and further into the newness of the truth. I begin for the first time in decades to tell that truth—and the sweet spirit of the universe opens all the right doors.

The next day I have a series of difficult conversations. I must ask for what I need: a month away and my jobs waiting for me. And in four of the conversations, the answer is yes. These four lives have already been profoundly touched by alcoholism before I even speak my need: one supervisor has an addict son-in-law, another a relapsing husband, a third has a boss struggling with his own recovery in a famous treatment center, the fourth has a close friend who cannot stay sober. Each so admires my decision that I am able to openly weep for myself and watch my shame be transformed into the kind of courage that my dark nights of despair have led me to believe I don't have. These kind folks will not only hold my jobs, they will help me find substitute teachers for my classrooms, they offer to house-sit my two cats, one even redates my job application to make me eligible for insurance coverage.

Only my lover of 10 years sets himself against it.

"Why can't you just quit like you have before?" Bruce asks as we sit in his office. "I don't see how this is any different. And I can't take you Saturday afternoon. I have other plans."

The all-too-familiar other plans. Her name is Brittany, she is a senior from Raleigh, and his relationship with her has been going on for a few weeks.

The little voice in me isn't quite so little now. "I'm not asking you to take me. I have that already arranged. I'm just telling you what I am doing. I wouldn't want you not to know."

I am painfully aware of the irony of what I have just said. There is so much he doesn't know—like how much I drink, like how drunk I already am most times when I see him. Like how much his affairs both wound me and have bound me more tightly to him. In that moment, I see that there are two roads ahead and I begin to suspect that we will not take the same one.

The last night at home before the treatment center, something jolts me out of a dream. My heart is pounding and my lungs heave in a desperate attempt to bring my breathing back to normal.

In the dream, I am a child, standing outside my parents' bedroom door in the dark. I am trying to get my courage up to go inside, to wake my mother, to ask her to comfort me and relieve me of my terror. I know she will not be glad to see me, that she will only begrudgingly leave her warm bed and climb the stairs to my attic room, tuck me in, and tell me to think pleasant thoughts. She will not cuddle me or climb in bed with me and tell me a story. She will put me back in bed and leave me to my demons.

The dream is achingly familiar, achingly real. I wait a long time with my hand on the doorknob. The panic does not subside. I calculate how many nights it has been since I woke her. Only two. But I cannot stand the way I feel and I know I cannot take care of myself this time. At last, I open the door as quietly as I can and I tiptoe to my mother's side.

Again I stand for long moments next to my sleeping mother, afraid to touch her, afraid to wake her, yet wanting desperately to do so. My fear bubbles up, boils over, and I reach out for her shoulder, but at that moment something jolts me out of the dream.

I sit up slowly, my body soaked in sweat though the room is cool. I look at the clock: 4:14 am. I lie back a long moment, and then roll over and sit up. My breathing has slowed, but my head throbs and my throat is parched. I go to the kitchen, open a cold bottle of white wine, and drink down a full glass. Then I carry the bottle and the glass back to my bed, prop myself up against the headboard, and wait for relief from the fear.

At first relief doesn't come. The dream clings to me as tenaciously as the drops of sweat that are slow to cool from my skin. This dream is not a mystery. It is a body memory come back around, a memory of nightmares and needing my mother and not getting what I needed. I drink another two glasses of wine, and the dream and its panic fade. Everything fades but the familiar sweetness that relaxes my limbs and stills all the voices. I do not let my mind go to the coming afternoon and the treatment center. Instead, I finish the bottle quickly and sink into oblivion.

And then I wake at 10, sick and panicky. How will I survive the days that lie ahead, 4 whole weeks of them? Will I have DTs? The man on the phone had talked about the possibility of seizures.

I keep busy. I fix some food; I pack my clothes. I have been told to bring no reading material other than a Bible—this increases my fear. Who are these people at Memorial Baptist Hospital? What am I getting myself into?

About noon I take a shower and get back into bed with the last bottle of wine and the four little beers that are my emergency stash. I have kept a batch of student compositions to grade so that I can keep busy, keep my fears at bay. I snuggle with my cats a long last time as well.

I don't get drunk. That happens rarely anymore, no matter how much I drink. I have long since passed that milestone in the progression of the disease, which has simplified itself over the years. Now, at one end, there is withdrawal with its sickness; at the other end, there is only passing out.

I feel terribly, pathetically alone. I don't let myself think about my lover and his choosing not to be there for me. Nor do I let myself acknowledge that I am not going to drink anymore. I haven't fully realized yet that my drinking days are ending for good.

A few minutes before 4 that afternoon, my landlady Ann comes up from downstairs, takes my bag as if I were an invalid, and drives me over to the treatment center. It is a mile from my home, part of the hospital campus I jog by four times a week.

Any number of memories from the treatment center have stayed with me. The lovely fall weather, day after day of sunshine and low humidity, the nicest time of year there. Sitting at the little table by the open window in my dorm room writing in a journal. Polly, my roommate, waking up with hallucinations late into the night from Xanax withdrawal. The middle-aged boys whose lives have been decimated by pot and alcohol and cocaine. The skeletal black woman in treatment for the fourth time.

But the most indelible memory occurred in the shower on day 10 perhaps, or day 12. I had been feeling better physically and had been weaned off the beta-blockers to bring down my blood pressure and the tranquilizers to take the edge off my nausea and the massive shots of B-vitamins to repair my frazzled nervous system. What's more, the mental fog was clearing. I was beginning to think again after years of firing on very few cylinders.

As I stood in the dreary tin shower stall with its concrete floor and felt the water wash over me, I knew with dreadful certainty that “one day at a time” was a sham. There was no one-day-at-a-time of sobriety, no I-can’t-drink-today-but-I-can-drink-tomorrow as if it were a diet I could go on and off. This was it. No more wine with a good meal, no more champagne toasts at the holidays, no more hot whiskey and lemon for a cold that might conveniently drag on. No more sweet poison. It was over. I had drunk all mine.

Even worse, there would be no more anesthetic to ease my way through time, through tedious social occasions or lonely weekends or dark nights of the soul. I would now be with myself for better or worse, in sickness and in health.

As it was, it took me a year to extricate myself from my lover, and in the end he left me. It took me a year to find another good job and resurrect my career. It was a year of restless energy, of waking at 4:14 a.m. and praying for the daylight, of leaving town most weekends to escape my apartment and its ghosts of whiskies past. It was a year of 450 12-step meetings, two sponsors, and at least a truckload of midgie Tootsie rolls. And I stayed sober.

But in that awful moment in that very ordinary confessional of a shower, the little voice of helpful truth was silent and I was left with the despair of the newly bereaved, a despair as profound as any that had visited me in the shame-filled remorse of the dark of night. At that moment, I had to confess to myself that I had been seduced and abandoned, and I now had to let go of a life that could have gone no other way and step into another that I could not yet imagine.