

The Last Drink

And I hit my bottom. Some people crash into their bottom. I didn't. I didn't lose my family, job, or house. I eased into it by way of locking myself away in my room except for necessary duties and by damaged body parts slowly degenerating. It may sound easier to have a bottom like that. It's not. You'll see that. But first, I have to warn you not to do what I did. I should have gone in for help right away. I should have been hospitalized to withdraw from alcohol under supervision. I'm told by the experts that I was lucky to have survived detoxing without suffering a catastrophic event. You should do it differently.

Fear kept me from seeking help until I was desperate. I am a high school counselor. I was afraid that if it were known I was an alcoholic, I'd lose my job. Who wants their kid to go behind closed doors with a drunk? I have discovered that was a dumb fear. In sobriety, I've been fully open about my alcoholism. I don't wear a sign announcing it, but from time to time it's appropriate for me to discuss it. I've done that with absolutely no negative repercussions. In fact, reactions have been quite positive.

In the end, though, how people react to knowledge of our alcoholism is irrelevant. Survival is all and survival can be iffy if you do what I did. Don't do that. Get some help.

That being said, here's what happened beginning Friday, August 16, 2002:

The day after my last drink begins again with fatigue and nausea. I had spent the night dozing fitfully, lying in the recliner in my office or sitting outside on a bench. Pat and I live in the basement of our small 42-year-old house. We gave the main floor, with its three bedrooms, to the kids many years before. The finished daylight basement has a bedroom, my office/television room, Pat's den, a small kitchen, small bath, and laundry room. A door leads to the bottom of a large double-decker screened porch. A small patio with a park bench sits just outside the porch.

I shower and move outside and sit on the bench. Food isn't a possibility. I look at my palms. At some point during the night I'd Googled cirrhosis again. I'd done that from time to time for years. On those previous occasions, the only symptom I had were those damned red palms. Now I was nauseous and fatigued. Cirrhosis symptoms.

Don't think about that now.

I decide I need to go to work. Maybe I'll get better.

I'm at work and I'm not better.. I keep thinking about strep throat, like the school nurse said. I call my doctor's office. They'll see me later that afternoon. I don't even try to eat lunch. The thought of it is more than I can abide.

Mariah goes to my school even though we live in another district. She had decided to take eighth grade off and should have failed, but her school didn't fail anybody. I'd told her all year that if she didn't do better, she'd have to go to high school with me. She didn't do better, so she was with me. I arranged for a teacher who lived near us to take her home and I went to the doctor.

Because of the short notice, I couldn't see my regular doctor. I have to see Dr. Andrews, the doctor who'd told me about big red blood cells and alcohol two years before. He does his normal thing—comes in the examining room, sits on a stool, puts his

laptop on his knees and starts typing. He asks me to describe my problem. I tell him I'm extraordinarily fatigued and nauseous. He taps away. I add that I haven't had any alcohol since the day before yesterday. Tap, tap, tap. I tell him I was a daily drinker before that. Tap, tap, tap. I tell him about the strep theory. More tapping.

The doctor leaves the room and soon a nurse appears. She swabs my throat and draws blood from my arm. She leaves and I lie back on the examining table. It's too hard to sit up. It's too hard to keep my eyes open.

Doctor returns with printouts. This office does its own lab work. His eyes are wide with concern. I guess he had reviewed my records while he was out because he reminds me of what he'd told me two years previous about big red cells. He says the big red blood cells were even bigger. He asks me about drinking alcohol. I had already told him that I had been a daily drinker and that I'd had my last drink two nights before, but I tell him again. He tells me he was sending my blood to a lab for more extensive tests than their office could provide. The results should be back the next day. He mentions all the things they'd be checking. The only thing I remember is liver functioning. I look at my red palms when he says that.

He adds that I don't have strep. He gives me a prescription for belladonna combined with Phenobarbital. The medicine is a barbiturate. It was to treat the nausea. It would be difficult to think of a worse thing to give to an alcoholic who'd just said he'd quit drinking two days before. Just astounding. He says to come back in a week.

As I leave the office, the doctor opens his laptop.

Tap, tap, tap.

It's Wednesday night—two nights since my last drink of alcohol. I'm lying in my recliner. The television's on, but I can't look at it. Movement on the screen intensifies the nausea tenfold. The belladonna's effect doesn't last long. A t-shirt covers my eyes. Pat asks me if I want something to eat. No way. But, I've got to have some kind of nourishment. I ask her if she'll buy some of that liquid stuff. The stuff with the vitamins. "Ensure?" she suggests. Yes. She goes to the store and brings some home. I move outside to the bench on the patio and force down the Ensure. I feel a little better. Maybe I just need something in my belly. Maybe it's food poisoning after all. Maybe that seafood stuff on the buffet in Hiawassee. I move back to my office and the recliner. One glance at the television and the nausea smashes into me again.

Time passes as I lie in the recliner – eyes under the T-shirt again.

Cirrhosis.

The thought's back. I drank daily, save one small period of time, for twenty years. A minimum of a pint a night. I try to remember the symptoms again. My computer is three feet from the recliner. Soon, I'm back on the Internet. I look at site after site through squinched eyes. They all say the same thing: Lack of appetite, weight loss, nausea, easy bruising, weakness; fatigue. I've got everything but weight loss. I wasn't certain about easy bruising, but I have vague memories of wondering about a bruise or two lately.

Other signs included fluid on the abdomen, enlarged breasts in men, and clubbed fingers. Some mention red palms. That symptom is way down the list. Doesn't matter. I've got the palms. I move to the mirror behind my office door and look at my bare stomach. The sign of fluid on the abdomen is a protruding belly. I got that. I look at my breasts. Look at that. I'd never noticed how big they were. They were huge! I look at my fingers. Are they clubbed?

I go back to the Internet and search for clubbed fingers. There are descriptions and some pictures. I look at my fingers and look at the Internet information. Couldn't tell. They could be.

Oh, God, they could be!

No sleep. I move to the bench on the patio. The sounds of the night are deafening. I sit in my robe, elbows on knees, staring at the ground. It's too hard to sit straight. The nausea is unrelenting.

Cirrhosis.

I should know tomorrow. The blood work will be back to the doctor's office. Everything I read says the first real diagnosis comes from the blood work. Elevated liver enzymes.

I smoke. Cigarette after cigarette. I don't smoke inside, so I spend a lot of time on the bench. Sometime during the night I realize I'm getting low. Maybe a pack left. There's still a lot of night left. I return to my room and put on shorts, t-shirt, and flip-flops. Pat's still awake. She stays up very late and sleeps late. She goes to work in the afternoon and can live that way. I tell her I'm going to get cigarettes. She asks me how I'm doing. I lie and say fine.

As I'm paying for the carton of generic cigarettes, the convenience store guy asks me how I'm doing, too. I'm more honest with him. I say, "Could be better."

Back home, Pat says she's going to bed. She pecks me on the cheek. "Hope you feel better," she says. She has no clue as to how much I've been drinking. She has no idea what's happening to me. I go back and forth from the recliner with the t-shirt over my eyes to the bench and back. Cirrhosis is never far from my consciousness.

Finally the night's over. I might have dozed some. At first sunlight, I realize I can't go to work. I need to get Mariah to school. I call Laura. She lives nearby and works at my school. She picks Mariah up, but says she has an appointment after school and can't bring her home.

I sit on the bench and force down Ensure and put the can on the bench, next to the one from last night. I smoke. I move inside to the recliner, television on, t-shirt over my eyes. Still can't watch television.

I move outside and smoke.

Back inside.

Outside on the bench and smoke.

Back and forth.

All the time listening for the phone to ring so I wouldn't miss the call from the doctor's office. The lab results were supposed to be back today. That's what they said.

The phone doesn't ring.

On and off the Internet. I read more about cirrhosis. Once you're diagnosed, you're doomed. That's the message. Early cirrhosis often has no symptoms, I read. Often

means “never” to me. Late cirrhosis has the symptoms I’ve seen. I go to the mirror again and again. Protruding belly. Enlarged breasts. Clubbed fingers? And those red palms.

Alcohol abuse is a major cause of the disease. I knew that. But when I’d read about cirrhosis before, I never read further than the list of symptoms. Palms were the only thing I noticed. I figured if I ever got the symptoms I’d quit drinking and I’d be fine. Now I read the rest of the articles beyond the symptoms. Turns out once you got the symptoms, it’s too late. The liver tissue is scarred enough so the liver has quit working right. The only cure once it’s too late is a transplant.

That’s a hope.

Transplant.

But I read on. Livers are hard to come by. There’s a waiting list. You can’t be put on the waiting list until you’ve not drunk alcohol for six months.

Six months! By then I’d be dead from the cirrhosis.

And so it goes. I wait for the phone call from the doctor’s office, lie on the recliner, sit on the bench, smoke, and find another reference for cirrhosis on the Internet. Maybe one would have good news.

None do.

I call school. I need to find somebody to bring Mariah home. I ask for Deb. She’s another counselor at the school. She says she can bring Mariah to Athens, but has a hair appointment. Can I meet her on the north side of town? I say sure. She asks me how I’m doing. I say not good. Nausea. Maybe food poisoning from the buffet on Sunday. I don’t mention alcohol. I don’t mention cirrhosis. Of course not.

Noon time I’m on the bench with another Ensure. The empty can joins the other two on the bench. I have a cell phone, but back then I don’t use it much. It’s too expensive. Only in emergencies. I’m still listening for the landline to ring. . . waiting for the doctor’s office to call. The phone still doesn’t ring.

The nausea is unrelenting.

Pat goes to work. I sit on the bench and smoke. I go to the recliner and put the T-shirt over my eyes, back to the bench.

I wait.

Time to pick up Mariah. I ask her how her day was. She doesn’t say much, as usual. It’s hard to drive. Weak. Nauseated. Tired.

Now it’s close to five. The doctor’s office will close soon. I call and ask if my lab results are back. Long hold.

Come on!

Tell me something!

Bad news or good, tell me something!

Maybe it’ll be good news. Maybe the enzymes are normal. Maybe I’m going crazy over nothing.

The nurse returns to the phone.

What? What?

She says the results aren’t back yet. I tell her they said the results would be there today. Sometimes it takes longer, she says.

Damn.

Back to the bench with a can of Ensure. I don’t want to drink it, but I’m forcing it at mealtimes. The empty can joins the rest on the bench.

I smoke.

Why aren't those blood results back? They said it would be today. Labs can't stay in business if they don't perform, can they? People's lives depend on those reports.

Unless . . .

Unless the report is bad. Real bad. Liver enzymes off the charts. They'd want to double check, wouldn't they? Make sure it's right before they tell me I'm doomed.

I lean forward, elbows on knees, and look at the ground. I see my feet. They're in slippers. I remember the clubbing. The clubbed fingers. I've looked and looked and can't figure if my fingers are clubbed or not.

But, now I remember. One of the websites . . . maybe more than one . . . mentioned clubbed toes, too. I remove the slippers.

Oh, God, I whisper aloud.

No doubt about it.

The toes are clubbed! Narrow stems that spread out into bulbous, hideous, balls.

Electricity courses through me. That clinches it. Nausea, fatigue, protruding belly, big breasts, the vaguely remembered, but now certain, bruising, and now, clubbed toes. No doubt about it. The enzymes were bad, so they're double checking. Or, the doctors don't want to tell me before they tell Pat first. How does that work, anyway? What happens when doctors have to tell a patient he's doomed?

I'm back at the computer. Now that I know with certitude that I have cirrhosis, I quit focusing on the symptoms and move to the prognosis. I'd read that part, but didn't concentrate on it much.

It's not good.

There is no cure. . . just try to slow the progression. Extend life. Once it gets bad enough, go on a waiting list for a transplant. I'd already discounted that. Transplants are for long-time reformed alcoholics or hepatitis victims, or somebody else. Not for me.

Something interesting appears. The liver is the only organ that grows back when a portion is removed. Donors don't have to be dead. Sometimes live donors are used. You have to have a match, but a piece of somebody's liver can be removed from one live person and installed in another. Both livers will regrow to full size.

Hope.

I think of Charles, my brother. Maybe we'd match. He's eight years younger than me and is in good shape.

A moment of relief.

Not for long. I read that two percent of live donors die. That's not good. On the other hand, 98% survive the procedure. But, Charles has two young children. Those odds aren't good enough. Ok . . . the odds aren't good enough for anybody no matter the circumstances. Imagine living with somebody's liver who you killed when you got it.

Hope leaves as quickly as it has come.

It's after midnight and cigarettes are running low again. I've gone through half a carton since last night's midnight run. My chest hurts from smoking. I think for a minute about that, but give it up. I've got cirrhosis, so what difference does it make to have lung cancer, too? Back to the store to be certain I don't run out. The clerk asks me how I'm doing. I give the same answer, "Could be better."

Back home, I search Google for "personal cirrhosis stories." People who have cirrhosis. It's not good. I go to the bathroom, look in the mirror, and pull the skin from

under my eyes. Are they yellow? Could be. Without doubt, they're red. Maybe yellow. Back to the bench and a cigarette.

And so it goes.

Dawn finally breaks. I've dozed a little during the time spent on the recliner. Not much, though. I make sure Mariah is up so she'll be ready when Laura picks her up. I sit on the bench. The ever present nausea grinds at me. But, I've got to have something. Another can of Ensure. I drink it slowly and smoke. Finished, the empty can sits with the others on the bench.

Back in the recliner, t-shirt over my eyes. It's ten o'clock. I call the doctor's office. Have my lab results returned? I'm resigned to the answer when it comes. "No," she says. "Check back this afternoon."

I look on Google trying to find evidence to confirm my belief that when lab results are bad, they double check. Can't find a reference to that, but that's doesn't mean anything. There are lots of things you can't find on Google.

The nausea is never ending. I take a belladonna tablet and lie on the recliner.

In less than a minute, I feel it.

My throat.

It's closing in.

I sit up and try to swallow. It's hard to do.

I lay back. Try to relax.

You're just panicked, I think.

The throat doesn't listen. It's closing in. Becoming tighter.

Got to do something!

I wake Pat. "I'm having a reaction to the medicine. The belladonna. My throat's swelling. I need to go to the emergency room."

St. Mary's hospital is barely a mile from our house. Amazingly, we are taken to an examining room immediately. Apparently having a drug reaction provokes quick action. The doctor comes in and I tell him I'm reacting to belladonna. My throat is swelling. He examines me and asks questions.

I answer them, then say, "You need to know I have cirrhosis."

Eyebrows up. "Cirrhosis? How do you know that?"

"I've been diagnosed." I don't say they haven't told me yet. It *didn't occur* to me to add that. My cirrhosis was a *certitude*. They were double checking my blood and I had liver palms, big breasts, and clubbed toes. That's all the proof I need.

Doctor examines my abdomen and grunts. He tells the nurse to give me Benadryl and leaves. The nurse goes to get the medicine. Pat and I are alone. She says, "What's that about cirrhosis?"

I tell her, starting with the liver palms. She says, "Your palms aren't red. At least, not any redder than anybody else's."

"Look at them, Pat!" I show her. I take her hand and compare her palm to mine. "It's obvious."

She says it's not. I don't pursue it. I want to tell Pat she's as stubborn as her mother, but things are bad enough as it is. No need to add tension.

I've read a bunch about cirrhosis and the liver. I begin thinking as we're waiting. It's bad to take certain medications when you have liver disease.

Stuff like Benadryl.

My head swirls.

Panic.

I jump off the bed, leave the room, and move up the hall. I see the doctor coming out of another examining room. "Doctor, I need to ask you a question."

"Yes?"

"The Benadryl? Should I take that? I mean, with liver disease, is it ok to take Benadryl?"

He looks exasperated. The emergency room's packed and he's got to deal with a nut case. "It's OK. We're giving you the dosage designed for people with cirrhosis."

I know he's patronizing me. Doesn't matter. Just so he knows. I go back and let them give me Benadryl.

Back home, and drowsy from the Benadryl, but it doesn't last. The nausea returns and now I can't take the belladonna. Apparently I'm allergic. Doesn't matter, anyway. I'd only taken a couple of them. Maybe three. They didn't help that much.

The panic returns. Cirrhosis. Maybe six months. Get all yellow. Bloating.

The kids. They'll have to watch me turn yellow and die.

What a horrible thing I'm doing to them.

I remember the ER doctor. His feeling my abdomen. Examining my liver. Back to the Internet to remind myself. A symptom of cirrhosis is an enlarged liver. That's why he did that. The first thing he did when I told him I had cirrhosis was to feel my liver. His reaction told me he doubted the diagnosis. I remembered something else. When I'd had the colonoscopy two weeks before, Dr. Harris had felt my liver, too. I didn't know what he was doing at the time, but now it was obvious. It must have not been enlarged then. He would have said something. The idiot Dr. Andrews hadn't felt anything. Just tapped on the keyboard. But, today, in the emergency room, it must not have been enlarged. The doctor would have said something if it was.

Hope!

I read on.

Bad news.

As the disease progresses, the liver shrinks. First it enlarges, then toward the end stage it shrinks.

Still got it.

Even worse than before. It's at the end stage.

Somehow Mariah gets home. She's taking care of her own supper now. I have another can of Ensure. Don't want it, but I drink it.

Just before five, I call the doctor's office again.

Still no results.

Check back Monday, she says.

Devastating words.

Another night between the bench, increasingly covered by empty Ensure cans and the recliner. The television show Biography is on as I lie with my eyes covered. I don't remember whose life's story was being told, but an actor is mentioned. He had died in his fifties of lung cancer. He'd been a heavy smoker and drinker and had said he'd rather die than give them up. That's exactly what he did. Die, that is. Upon hearing that, I go back outside to the bench and smoke to attempt to relieve my tension about dying from lung cancer.

Insane.

The nights are long. Interminable. A little dozing, but mostly smoking and listening. Listening to the night sounds outside and the television inside. An occasional trip to the Internet to read what I've already read a million times. Maybe I'd missed something. Movement always brings nausea.

Finally, Saturday morning. The fifth day since my last drink of alcohol.

No relief.

Something's got to give.

I think about the doctor. The lab reports. I remember that the doctor's office is open on Saturday. At 9:00 I call. I ask the nurse which doctor is there that morning. Dr. Harris, she says. My old doctor. Not the idiot Anderson.

I want to speak to Dr. Harris.

She resists.

I insist.

He'll call you, she says.

I sit on the patio bench and smoke, listening for the phone. It rings. It's Dr. Harris. I tell him about cirrhosis. He says, "What makes you think you have cirrhosis?"

"Everything. I have red palms and clubbed toes."

"Clubbed toes?"

"And, doctor, if lab results show bad stuff, do they run them again to be sure?"

"Sometimes."

"My lab results from when I was there Wednesday haven't come back. They must be checking again."

Patronizing. "Rerunning the test would only take a few minutes. Hold on."

I wait.

I smoke.

He's back. "Ed, your lab results are here. They've been here for days."

My stomach flips. "You're kidding!"

". . . and your liver's fine. The enzymes are fine. No sign of any problem. I apologize for the delay in telling you."

My head falls back.

Relief courses through me.

I'm not dying.

But, my toes.

Those clubbed toes.

They were a sign of other things. In fact, more often than cirrhosis they were sign of lung disease.

Bad lung disease.

Cancer.

Oh, God. I've got to have relief. I've got to stop worrying. "I want to come in for a lung x-ray."

"Lung x-ray?"

"I just need to be sure everything's ok."

He sighs. I'm used to that by now. "Come on over."

In Dr. Harris's office he's telling me the lung x-ray was fine. No sign of any problems. I'm relieved again. As we talk, I tell him my last drink had been last Monday. He asks

me how much I'd been drinking. He says something about the time for DTs having passed. I'd read all about alcohol withdrawal between my cirrhosis research. The information on the Internet wasn't as conclusive as Dr. Harris sounded.

He didn't suggest anything else.

Back home, I feel a little better. Maybe I'd be alright now. Maybe I've been nauseous and weak from anxiety about the cirrhosis. Or, maybe it is food poisoning after all. Maybe I'd be able to go back to work Monday. Maybe I'd be fine now.

I wasn't.

Knowing my liver showed no signs of cirrhosis and that the x-rays showed no signs of lung cancer provides some relief for a while. I doze a little more during Saturday night and into Sunday morning, but I'm still moving back and forth between the bench and the recliner. At some point, I fall dead asleep from sheer exhaustion. I startle awake with sunlight showing through the windows. I lie in my recliner and remember yesterday. That part's good – the part about my lab results and the x-ray. I rise.

It hits me. Nausea. Bad. Wave after wave of nausea. I run to the bathroom and try to heave. I can't. There's nothing there to heave. I move outside to the bench, bent over as I walk, and light a cigarette. Maybe that'll help. Doesn't matter if it helps or not as far as smoking the cigarette goes, though. My body requires the nicotine so I'd have smoked in any event. I move back to the recliner and put the t-shirt over my head. Maybe if I lie still the nausea will pass.

It doesn't.

I've got to get some relief. Just have to. I wake Pat and tell her I need to go to the emergency room again. It's Sunday and that's the only option. I am just so damned sick. And discouraged. I thought after yesterday things would be better. They weren't. My anxiety was diminished, but my physical state continued to deteriorate.

I didn't want to return to St. Mary's hospital in case the Benadryl doctor was there. I didn't want the condescension again. We go to Athens Regional Medical Center. We are admitted quickly. I tell the doctor everything that's happened up until then and that my nausea was unrelenting. In his notes, he describes my visits to two doctors and another emergency room within the "last few days." Then he writes, "Has recently stopped alcohol approximately 1 – ½ weeks ago. He was drinking approximately 1 pint per night. He has not had problems since he stopped drinking."

He has not had problems since he stopped drinking! I had been to two doctors and an emergency room in the past week for unrelenting nausea, fatigue and weakness. *Stopped drinking a pint a night within the past week and a half.*

How many idiot doctors exist in our world?

The doctor gives me Phenergan and sends me home. The hospital has an alcohol treatment center on campus and a psychiatric ward two floors above the emergency room, but he doesn't suggest that it might be a good idea to visit one of those places.

But, if that doctor, or any of the others, had suggested alcohol treatment, I'm not sure I would have done it. Not then, anyway. That would formalize my problem and my fear of losing my career was still strong despite being crazy and sick. That's the insanity of it.

The Phenergan relieves the nausea. I am able to eat a little bit. I feel better. I have a follow-up appointment with Dr. Anderson scheduled for the next morning. I'll go to that and talk to him about continuing my "Get Healthy" list. After the colonoscopy, the heart stress test is next. Then, I'll go back to work.

I doze almost all night, thanks to the Phenergan. I awaken and feel druggy, but not as bad as before. I go to Dr. Anderson's office. I tell him about the emergency room visits, but I'm feeling better with the medication. I ask about the heart stress test. He tells me we need to do a resting EKG before scheduling that. The nurse hooks me up and leaves. She returns and looks at the printout. "Oh, my," she says, and leaves again. Dr. Anderson appears at the door. He has a small box in his hand. "Your resting heart rate is over 100. That's got to come down before we do a stress test." He throws the box on my chest. "These are some beta blockers. Follow the directions on the box and come back in two weeks." He leaves abruptly. Apparently, he's spent too much time with me already and does not want to invite further discussion.

Fear washes over me again. What? Heart rate over 100? No way I can go to work. Instead, I go home to the recliner. I take a beta blocker. What does Phenergan do to the heart? I check on the Internet. Don't take it if you have heart disease, it says. No more Phenergan. I only had taken a couple of them, anyway.

Without the medicine, the nausea returns. The weakness returns. The panic returns, now focused on the heart rather than the liver.

Five years before I'd gone to the emergency room with chest pain. I'd been seen by Dr. Agrawal, the cardiologist on call. There was no sign of heart attack, so I'd been sent home with directions to follow up with him. I did a stress test and all appeared fine. He prescribed Pepsid. Now I called his office and made an appointment for the next day.

Monday night, I'm checking my pulse.

It's slow.

Very slow.

Too Slow?

Back to the Internet. I read about Brady arrhythmia, a condition when the heart is beating too slowly. I read about sick sinus syndrome and heart block, things that cause Brady arrhythmia. I call our health insurance company's nurse line. The lady says beta blockers cause the heart rate to slow, but can't say how slow is too low. She says to go to the emergency room if I believe I'm in danger. Great. I called her to find out if I were in danger. I did not want to take a third trip to the ER. I don't take another beta blocker.

Back to the recliner, then outside to the bench to smoke, then back to the recliner. Low on cigarettes again. Sometime after midnight I'm back at the convenience store for another carton.

Tuesday morning, I'm in Dr. Agrawal's office. The cardiologist is a very gentle man. I think he's from India, but don't know for sure. I tell him I had my last drink a week ago last night. I tell him about Dr. Anderson and the beta blocker. Again, I'm on a EKG machine. The heart rate is in the 80s, not great, but in the normal range. Maybe I was stressed yesterday, he says. He's full of praise about my not drinking. He does an ultrasound on my heart to see if it's enlarged. He can't tell, he says, because the lung is expanded and is blocking his view. Probably due to smoking, he says.

Wonderful.

But, from what he can see the heart is fine. I do a stress test on the treadmill. He says I'm OK.

Back at home, I feel some relief having had my liver, lungs, and heart cleared, but the nausea remains. I sit on the bench, and watch the squirrels. Empty cans of Ensure surround me. Except for a hot dog on Sunday after the Phenergan, Ensure was all I've eaten for a week and a half.

I haven't been to work in days. I'm getting no better. I've got to say something to them at school. Deb and Laura have taken Mariah back and forth to school and all I can say is I'm still sick. Don't know what it is.

What do I say?

I know I never want to drink alcohol again. I've been so sick, I haven't desired a drink. That's an amazing thing. But, when I get better, if I get better, I know I'll want to drink again. I remember last time I quit. The trip to Texas was all it took to pick up the bottle again. I've got to make certain I never drink again. The only way to do that is to make sure everybody I know is aware I'm an alcoholic. If everybody knows, then I'm certain I won't drink again. I'm too proud for that. I'd kept my drinking secret, even from my family. At least, the family didn't know how much I drank. I can have no more secrets.

I shuffle back inside to the computer and open the school's email program. I enter the addresses for my principal, the superintendent of schools, and everybody in the counseling office. My note begins, "Let me reintroduce myself. I'm Ed, and I'm an alcoholic." I describe my drinking pattern for the past twenty years. I am kind to myself, pointing out that I rarely missed work and never drank on the job. I assure them I've been a good father. I tell them about my nausea and say I don't know if I'm still suffering from some kind of food poisoning or if it's a withdrawal symptom. I tell them I want to talk to the faculty about my alcoholism.

The responses are quick. All but one expresses surprise. Ironically, the one that isn't surprised mentions clues from previous times that were off base. She picked the moments when I wasn't drinking alcohol as those that indicated to her I was. All believe it would be better not to address the faculty so soon. I disagree, but at the moment it doesn't matter. I'm too sick to go to school anyway.

Nothing changes. Nausea is ever present. I move back and forth from the recliner to the patio bench and back, with occasional forays on the Internet to find more information on detoxing. Thursday morning comes and there is no change. I need a doctor . . . one who isn't an idiot about alcohol. I look in the yellow pages under "Alcohol and Drug Treatment" and find the number for the Commencement Center, a treatment center affiliated with Athens Regional Medical Center. A woman answers.

"Hi. I'm calling to find out if you have a doctor on staff who's knows about detoxing from alcohol."

She says they do.

"I'd like to make an appointment to see him."

She asks if I have a problem with alcohol. I say I do. She says that to see the doctor, I have to come into the program.

I hang up.

I had already missed nearly two weeks of work. Even though I had disclosed my circumstances to my superintendent, my principal, and immediate colleagues, I am still

afraid that if I were to be out much longer, I would be putting my career in jeopardy. In all my training and experience professionally, I'd learned next to nothing about alcohol treatment. I'd heard about 28 day programs and knew I couldn't be gone that long. The treatment center wasn't an option.

Back to the routine. All day Thursday, Thursday night, and Friday morning.

Unrelenting nausea.

Unrelenting hopelessness.

Unrelenting fear.

And then something happens.

It's approaching noon. Time for another Ensure, just to stay alive. I don't really want it. I'm on the bench and gaze out into the backyard I've been staring at for almost two weeks.

I look up into the trees.

I look beyond the trees and into the sky.

I give up.

Simple as that. It was time.

Tears come.

"God, I give up." I say it out loud.

I'm talking to God, not just saying His name.

I've hardly spoken for days and my voice sounds strange to my ears.

Elbows on knees, I lean forward and put my face on my hands.

"I give up."

I cry, quietly, tears of submission. A quick cry.

I'm not cured. Not at all. The nausea's still there. My fear's still there. But, there's a new thing. A kind of peace. Something I hadn't felt for years and years.

Three hours later, I'm back on the recliner. The television's off. The phone rings. Shortly, I hear Pat's voice. "There's a man named John Hammes on the phone. Do you want to talk to him?"

John Hammes? A momentary memory search and I connect. Dr. Hammes. A professor in the psychology department I'd had for two courses nearly twenty years before while in my doctoral program. I'd taken one class and liked it so much I took another from him. We had talked some shortly after the last class, but not since then. What could Dr. Hammes want?

"Dr. Hammes?"

"Hi, Ed. Do you remember me?"

"Of course. How are you doing?"

"Very well, thank you. I'm retired now, a circumstance I'm enjoying." Dr. Hammes always spoke precisely and softly. He adds, "I've been keeping busy writing a book."

"About what?"

"The life of Christ. It's a challenge, but a good one."

"I'm sure," I say. Interesting topic for him, I think. He is the most Christ-like man I'd ever met aside from my father. Not pious, just a genuinely good man.

A pause.

"Ed, I'm calling because at lunch time this afternoon I decided to clean off my desk. When I did, I found a clipping of the article you wrote about your dad."

It takes a moment, then I realize what he's talking about. I'd written a piece about Dad's World War II experience as a civilian flight instructor for the Army Air Corps. It was short, so I'd managed to get it done. The Atlanta Journal Constitution had used it in their Memorial Day edition three months ago in May.

Dr. Hammes continues, "I cut it out because I thought you might like another copy. Unfortunately, it was buried under other things on my desk and I uncovered it this afternoon. I called for your address so I can send it to you."

I thank him for his thoughtfulness. He asks me how I had been doing. I didn't hesitate. "Dr., Hammes, I'm an alcoholic. I'm ending my second week since my last drink and I'm pretty sick. I don't know if it's from the alcohol, or some sort of other illness, but it's been hard."

"An alcoholic?"

"No doubt."

But he did doubt. In his gentle way, he suggests maybe I just have a drinking problem. But, in any event, it would be good not to drink alcohol at all, he says. After some small pleasantries, he wishes me luck, genuinely, and we disconnect.

I lay back in the recliner. It was really good to talk to him. Just the contact was comforting. Despite his questioning the depth of my affliction, I have no doubt whatsoever about my alcoholism. I have known that and had accepted it for years. But, the peace I'd nibbled on earlier expands. Isn't that something? At the same time I surrendered, Dr. Hammes finds my article he had misplaced months ago. He decides to call me.

Coincidence?

Maybe, maybe not. But it doesn't matter. His call led me in the right direction. Something has changed, but it takes a couple of days to act on it. Saturday and Sunday are no different, other than I don't feel quite so desperate. I believe I'd decided, but was just waiting to act.

Monday morning is Labor Day. Another restless night, but I doze off at daybreak. I awaken with the ever present nausea. It's nine o'clock. I look in the phone book for the Commencement Center again. I call. This time I say, "I'm an alcoholic and quit drinking two weeks ago. I'm sick and can't get better. I need help. Are you open today?"

The woman says they never close. She tells me to come on over.

Finally, after all these years, my recovery begins.