

Trouble

Alcohol creates trouble. Recovering alcoholics say, “I didn’t get into trouble every time I drank, but every time I got into trouble, I was drinking.” True with me, that’s for sure. My parents raised me to do the right things and when I was sober, that’s what I did. When I was under the influence of alcohol, I didn’t always do that. Now, I wasn’t the total Jekyll and Hyde some active alcoholics are. I didn’t get into fights or beat the wife and kids. In the interest of full disclosure, though, I did beat up a baby swing one time. It was one of those that you wind up and the seat automatically swings back and forth. We were in our basement and I had a pretty good buzz going when I got irritated about something Pat did. I forget what that was now. I picked up the swing and smashed it into our concrete basement floor several times. When the swing was pretty much destroyed, I wasn’t finished throwing my fit yet, so I turned around and kicked one of the iron support posts about as hard as I could. Brilliant move. My toes were black for months.

Destroying baby swings and my toes by kicking iron posts just isn’t me. Not the sober me, anyway. That’s what alcohol does for me. Alcohol also put me in jail a couple of times. The first time was five years after my first drink. The second time was ten years after that. There should have been many more times than that though. I have an ability to be blasted drunk and not act like it, so I often escaped trouble when others might not have. You might think that’s a good thing. It’s not. Avoiding the trouble just postpones the inevitable.

I should have gotten in trouble one night in 1977, but didn’t. Pat and I went to a party, and I followed my usual pattern by getting a buzz before we left so I wouldn’t look like I was drinking much while I was there. By the time we left the party, I was anxious to “get relaxed” again.

We left the party and went to Pat’s house for her to pick up some things before going to my apartment. While I waited for her, I managed to sneak enough vodka into my system to get my buzz back. On the way to my place, I was negotiating twists and turns under a bridge that was under construction when headlights flashed to my left. There was a strangely quiet thud, followed by the world outside the windshield whirling as the car spun twice. When my Toyota stopped in the middle of the road, I sat trying to figure out what had happened. I looked at Pat. She was staring at a Fudgesicle she’d been eating, which was bent from being jammed into the windshield.

“You OK?” I asked.

She nodded dumbly. She was trying to puzzle it out, too.

As I began to realize we’d been hit by another car, I looked to my left. A large, dark colored sedan was sitting twenty feet away in the middle of the road. Smoke was rising from its hood. The driver’s door was open, but with only the dim illumination from the moon, I couldn’t see inside. I tried to open my door, but it was jammed shut from the damage. As I pushed harder, a thin black man emerged from the passenger side of the sedan. His short-sleeved shirt was unbuttoned to his belt and half his shirt’s tail was hanging out of his pants. He moved toward us and tapped on my window. I tried to roll it down, but it would only drop a couple of inches.

The man leaned toward the opening and slurred, “Hey, man, you got a cigarette?”

“No,” I said and rolled up the window. “Let’s get out of here,” I said. I still couldn’t open my damaged door, so I climbed over the gearshift and exited through the passenger side. I looked over at the sedan again. A woman crawled out of the driver’s side, on her hands and knees, and pulled herself up by the rear door handle. She stood unsteadily, and then headed for us. She wore short, straightened hair above her stocky, short body. She walked straight to me, put her hand on my arm, squinched her eyes, and said, “Man, you got a cigarette?”

I had cigarettes, but wasn’t feeling generous. I ignored her question. “Are you OK?” I asked.

The woman closed her eyes tightly and shook her head slightly, then her eyes opened wide and she screamed in my face, “Bobby done wrecked my car! Baaahbeeee done wrecked my car!” She grabbed my shirt and howled again, “Bobby done wrecked my car!”

“Yes, lady, bobby wrecked your car,” I said softly and slowly as I wrenched her hand off my shirt. “Now, be *quiet*.”

I looked up to see an Athens police car with flashing lights pull to a stop between my car and the sedan. A huge police officer, at least six-eight, walked toward us holding a clipboard. As he approached, the woman lunged toward him and screamed again. This time it was, “Bobby done *stole* my car!”

The officer told her, with emphasis, to move over to the front of a store next to the street and sit on the store’s steps. He turned back to us and said he’d been working another wreck just down the street and had heard the impact. That’s how he’d arrived so quickly. We told him what happened. The other car failed to turn and ran into the side of my car. The driver had apparently run away. Another police cruiser appeared with the driver in the back seat. He hadn’t gotten far.

A tow truck driver working on the sedan hollered at the police officer. The driver pointed toward the back seat and said, “There’s another guy in here.” The police officer walked across the asphalt and opened the sedan’s rear door. He reached in, and shook the man in the back. The man stumbled out of the car. It was obvious he had no idea what was going on. He approached us; and said, “Hey, man, you got a cigarette?”

I still wasn’t in a generous mood.

Failing in his mission with us, the man wobbled toward his companions, who were being questioned by the police officer. When he was through with the others, the police officer offered to call a taxi for us. After it came, and when we were sitting in it, another officer tapped on the window. He pointed toward the people from the other car. “We’re taking the driver and letting the others go. You mind if they ride with you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

Pat and I drove off in the back seat of a taxi. The other driver went to jail. There is no doubt whatsoever that if my blood alcohol had been checked, I would have been going with him. The difference was he acted drunk and I didn’t. I counted my blessings. I shouldn’t have. First, I kept thinking that if I’d been sober, I would have seen him sooner and avoided the whole thing. We were T-boned and he missed smashing into my door by a foot. My buzz played a part in the whole thing happening in the first place. More than that, though, if I’d gone to jail then, maybe I’d have hit my bottom sooner and quit drinking alcohol sooner. After all, that would have been my second trip to jail. I need to tell you about that bit of trouble that had happened four years before.

As I was approaching the graduation date for my bachelor's degree in 1973, I decided to pursue a master's degree in psychology at West Georgia College instead of starting my career. I needed a job of some sort while I went through the application process, so I went to the Georgia Department of Labor. Through the department, I found work with a company that cleared brush, bushes, and trees from natural gas pipelines around Macon, Georgia. I joined two other guys living in a small company owned travel trailer there. Denny and Tom had degrees from the University of Georgia in anthropology and archeology. We were a very well educated crew of brush cutters.

We worked ten-hour days – four days on, a day off, four days on, then five days off. Each morning, we drove in a van to the pipeline of the day, towing an all terrain vehicle behind us. The trip usually took around thirty minutes and when we arrived, the early morning sun was always already blazing hot in the muggy, middle Georgia summer sky. If the land was dry, one of us drove a tractor with a bush hog, but that turned out to be rare. Most of the time we were in swamps or bogs, swinging hydraulic saws attached to the ATV or using brush axes.

The first couple of weeks were rough. During my senior year in high school, my dad had leased farmland with another Eastern Airlines pilot and they began a cattle and hay operation. I had to work on the farm stacking hay. After a couple of summers, I made sure I was in school each summer so I wouldn't have to do that. I wasn't enamored with the work.

Since leaving home a few years before, I hadn't done a lick of physical work. It took about ten whacks with the brush axe that first day for me to realize I was in trouble. That day in football camp when I was a high school senior flashed in my mind—Coach Bass sitting at the table in the mess hall saying, “Aw, Wyrick's just sorry. We might as well send him home.” I refused to be sent home from football camp and there was no way I was going to be sent home from pipeline camp. I whacked and whacked. It hurt. I was dizzy and sick. Kaye came over and told me to take it easy. ‘I'm alright,’ I said. I wasn't, but I kept going. Finally, that first day ended.

We returned to Macon. After cleaning up, Denny and Tom invited me to go with them to Lum's restaurant for beer and dinner. I declined. First, I was completely exhausted. Second, and more importantly, it felt like I was back in football camp. Socializing with strangers still wasn't easy for me. I was too exhausted for the struggle. Even though I was drinking the magical alcohol by then, and even though I drank a lot every time I drank, at that time I could still say no.

For that first nine-day stint on the job, each morning was misery. I'd awaken with the same nausea I'd had all my life in tense situations. The unrelenting heat and humidity drained me, and I was constantly afraid that I couldn't keep up with Tom and Denny. Each morning we went to the day's job site in the step van. Denny or Tom would drive and the other would lie on a bench in the van and sleep. I sat and tried not to puke from the anxiety. Each morning I kept reminding myself that if I quit, I'd be just “sorry.”

During my first interview with Kaye, the foreman, he asked me if I had ever driven a tractor. I said I had. That was the truth, but just barely. I'd driven the tractor on Dad's farm a couple of times for a few feet. The rest of the time, I was riding in the wagon stacking hay. But, when answering Kaye's question, I figured a few feet was good enough. How hard could it be?

I found out how hard it could be. On the second day, Kaye told me to get on a tractor instead of using the brush axe or the hydraulic saw. I jumped on, but quickly discovered there's a huge difference between rutted pipelines and a smooth hundred year-old pasture. I hit put the gear in high, got some speed, then hit some ruts and the tractor started bucking like a wild horse in a rodeo. That's no exaggeration. It was exactly like that. The front end hopped up and down as if it had a mind of its own and the tractor turned in tight circles madly as I hung on for dear life. Somehow, finally, I managed to stop it. I don't remember how. Maybe the tractor just got tired. Kaye, Tom, and Denny were rolling with laughter. Kaye said, "What the hell, man, I thought you'd driven one of those suckers before."

I didn't respond. Just put the tractor in the lowest gear, and drove a good deal slower than one mile an hour. I could hear them hooting behind me over the tractor engine noise. Within a few minutes though, I was driving easy. Then, I discovered another problem. Tractors have studs on the front to hang weights. These tractors had no weights. With a heavy bush hog attached to the back, the front wheels pop up at nearly any uphill incline. The first time that happened, I stopped the tractor and hollered to Kaye, "What's the deal with that?"

Kaye laughed again. "Steer with your brakes, man."

These tractors didn't have roll bars either. OSHA had been in existence for only a couple of years and apparently hadn't gotten around to suggesting to employers that it would be good to keep their employees from being squashed when tractors roll over on them. We'd drive those tractors up hills; front wheels reaching for the sky, steering with the brakes, negotiating the ruts and holes by feel more than sight, without the comfort of roll bars around us. It was difficult to complain since we were making nearly five dollars an hour. That much money meant we were expected to take some risks.

Finally, the five days off came. I went back to Athens, but didn't have any place to stay. I'd given up the house I was renting. My former professor and his wife told me I could hang around their place. I sat in their living room each day drinking Crawford's Scotch, smoking True menthol cigarettes, and listening to Harry Chapin albums. That set the pattern and for the rest of the summer, I'd hang around different friends' homes for the five days off and drink, smoke, and listen to Harry Chapin.

It's got to be the going, not the getting there, that's good.

When I returned to Macon after that first five days off, it got easier. I was getting into shape and finally quit worrying about being a quitter. Soon, if I wasn't driving the van, I was sleeping on the trip out to the pipelines like Denny and Tom. Kaye hired another guy who joined us in the trailer. I was a two-week veteran by that time – an old timer. I felt sorry for the new one as I watched him suffering through his first days just like I did.

When I'd been working a month, we were working on a pipeline that ran through a swamp next to the Okmulgee River. Even the ATV couldn't make it to the pipeline, so each day we'd grab the brush axes and walk a half hour to get to it. Each day, we walked through one spot filled with a moccasin bed. There were hundreds of moccasins all over that small area. The company provided snake leggings for us to wear, but we didn't. They were too hot and heavy in the 100-degree weather. We just stepped carefully through the snakes.

We chopped down blackberry bushes with the round, spinning blades of the hydraulic saws that were attached to a four foot long pole. I was in the bushes one day,

moving along swinging the pole. Whoa! A very large rattlesnake was sitting in the bushes at eye level, two feet away. "Helloooo," I said, and backed away slowly.

Wasps stung us several times a day, every day. Wasps weren't bad. The pain would go away quickly. Yellow jackets were a different story. I was tractor cutting one day, driving blind because of the eight foot high brush. The land started sloping to the left, which wasn't unusual. However, this time was different. The ground kept sloping until eventually the tractor lay on its side. As I approached the ground, I put my hand down to support myself. It went right into a yellow jacket nest. Several of the bees hit me on my hand. The pain was intense and wouldn't quit. Kaye asked me what was wrong. When I told him, he said "Yeah, those suckers hurt. Let's get that tractor up." Kaye wasn't much interested in being a nursemaid.

At the end of each day, we added up our "fuck-ups." That's what we called them. Denny had one when he stuck a tractor in the mud. We didn't have a winch, so Denny attached one end of a cable to the tractor wheel and the other end to the tree. His theory was that if he put the tractor in reverse, the cable would wind around the wheel and as the cable shortened, it would pull the tractor out of the bog. Denny jumped on the tractor and put it in reverse. Unfortunately, instead of the cable backing the tractor out, the cable uprooted the tree and it fell directly onto the tractor. Denny leaped out of the way just in time. That one made the daily "fuck-up" list.

My fellow crewmembers voted my kaolin plant fuck-up as the granddaddy of them all. This was not just any kaolin plant, but the largest kaolin plant in the entire world. Kaolin is type of clay that's used for all sorts of things from paper products to medicine. The plant looked like a giant erector set with huge conveyors running from building to building to building.

I was on a tractor getting ready to cut the pipeline. I looked back to lower the bush hog while I was moving forward slowly. I looked around to see Kaye jump out of the jeep and come running toward me, waving and hollering like a crazy man. The tractor was missing a muffler and I couldn't hear what Kaye was saying. He pointed a finger and my eyes focused on what he was yelling about. The front of my tractor had edged up to a guy wire angling down from a large transmission line. The tractor was still moving forward and the moment I saw the wire, it snapped. The pole jerked away from the cable and pulled down the electrical transmission wires that ran from the pole, across the parking lot, and into the plant. As the wire fell across the cars, windshields popped one after the other from the plant to my tractor. In horror, I watched the entire plant shut down. The conveyors all slowly ground to a halt.

I followed Kaye through the parking lot and into the plant's main office. I sat in the manager's office as Kaye gave him insurance information and the big boss called the kaolin company's corporate offices. When we emerged back into the parking lot, I was greeted with applause. I looked up and the plant workers, all on an unexpected break, were sitting on the conveyors cheering wildly for me.

The next fuck-up came soon after that, but it wasn't on the job. It was with the Warner Robins police. Once I was acclimated to the job and became a veteran, I started joining Tom and Denny at Lum's after work each day. We drank pitchers of beer with the likes of a guy we called Captain Nemo, a long-haired civilian employee of the nearby air force base. That man was about half-crazy. I can't say for sure, but it certainly appeared he might have a problem with alcohol himself. Probably drugs, too. His job with the Air

Force was to program the targets for our military's missiles. Not comforting at all. At Lum's, I followed my normal pattern. Tom and Denny would act crazy as they got drunk, and I would sit as if I were above it all, though I usually drank more than anybody else.

It was a Saturday night and we'd worked our first four days. Our day off was a Saturday that week. Tom left to go somewhere else for the night, and Denny and I went to Lum's. Denny had a girlfriend who made her living singing in nightclubs around Macon. She lived in nearby Warner Robins and Denny planned to drive down to see her that night when she finished work.

I told Denny he was too drunk to drive, but he said he was going anyway. In those days, drunk driving was not seen as being a big deal, but that didn't mean it wasn't dangerous. I was concerned about him, so I told Denny I'd drive him down there.

The problem was, I was drunk, too. Not just a little buzzed. More like head spinning, eyes rolling, drunk. Denny was too far-gone himself to notice, so he agreed. We arrived in Warner Robins well before his girlfriend would be finished with work. I needed gas, so we went to a Texaco station on the main Warner Robins strip. In those days, gas stations pumped gas for the customer, something that doesn't happen anymore, so Denny and I got out and stood in front of the office and watched.

I realized I needed cigarettes, so I went into the office to use something else you don't see anymore—a cigarette machine. When I emerged from the office, Denny was gone. I looked around in time to see him being put in the back seat of a Warner Robins police car.

What? I'd just left him less than a minute before. What could he have done? The cruiser pulled out and headed down the road.

I was still using Dad's credit card, so I used it to pay for the gas and headed out on the main road, still trying to puzzle out what had just happened and trying to figure out what to do next. I couldn't just leave Denny. The answer was obvious. I needed to go find out why the police got Denny.

But, where to go? I saw a group of people about my age walking down the sidewalk. I pulled into a parking space and jumped out of the car, nearly falling down in the process. I caught myself and called out to the people. "Hey, y'all. Can you tell me where the Warner Robins police station is?"

One of the girls looked concerned. "The police station?"

"Yeah. Warner Robins. They got my buddy."

They all looked at each other. One said, "Are you sure you want to go to the police station?"

What's wrong with them? I thought. "Yeah. Do you know where it is?"

One finally pointed in the same direction I'd been going. "Just down there. The second light, I think. On the left. It's a new brick building – kind of by itself."

"Thanks," I said and moved toward my car.

"Really," one said. "You might want to rethink that."

Back in the car, I was irritated. What was wrong with them? I needed to find Denny and find out what was going on. I couldn't just leave him rotting in jail.

I found the station. No other cars were in the parking lot. It was close to eleven by now. I walked into the lobby and approached the counter. I said, "Have y'all got Dennis Thomas here?"

The officer behind the counter said over his shoulder, "We got another one, George," and jumped out of his chair. Soon he emerged from a door to the left of the counter, grabbed my arm, and pulled me into an adjacent room.

"Hey," I said. "What's going on?"

"Shut up."

Another officer appeared. "Empty your pockets."

I did. I heard one of them say something about somebody breaking into something.

"If you're arresting me, I want to make a phone call." I had no idea who I would call, but it seemed like I needed to call somebody.

"Shut up." I was pushed into a chair.

Soon one of them grabbed my arm again and said, "Come with me." We went down a hall and he guided me into a concrete block cell. The only opening was a one-foot square window with bars looking out to the hallway. The room was maybe eight by eight with a toilet to the right and a bunk along the back wall. The door slammed shut and there I was.

My head was swimming from the events and from the alcohol. I heard a voice from the hallway. "Hey, man, why you in here?"

I grabbed the bars in the little window in the door. "I don't know."

"I don't either, man, and I been here two weeks."

Oh, damn! I sat on the bunk, trying to think. This was Warner Robbins, basically part and parcel of Macon. Macon's mayor was Ronnie Thompson. Machine Gun Ronnie was his nickname. He had bought his police force machine guns in case the hippies invaded his town and threatened to arrest Jane Fonda if she spoke at Macon's Mercer University. My hair was just to my shoulders. Not as long as most hippies, but good enough for Machine Gun Ronnie, I thought.

Man, you're in trouble.

I didn't have time to worry about that long, though. Soon, I was overwhelmed by waves of nausea. There were two reasons. One was the booze. I suspect the other was because I'd become severely overheated that day. We were finishing up a line and Kaye had put me in an area of a pipeline on the other side of a railroad bridge from where the others were cutting. I decided I'd get my part done in a hurry. Reminiscent of the prison gang in Cool Hand Luke who irritated the guards by working hard to finish tarring a road before sunlight had run out, I worked nonstop and fast and got 'er done. But, in the process, I got so hot I'd quit sweating. I knew from football camp what that meant. It wasn't unusual at all for players to get overheated and seem to be OK, but end up spending the night puking. I threw up most of the night and wasn't real accurate about getting it in the toilet. Finally, it stopped and I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I didn't have any idea what time it was. My head was banging and my mouth was sticky and I felt just awful. And, I couldn't see. Everything was blurry. As my head cleared a little bit, I realized I didn't have my glasses. I looked around the cell, which contained basically nothing, and couldn't find them. I couldn't understand where the glasses had gone. Ah, there they are . . . in a corner buried under some vomit.

I sat and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. I went to the window and said "Hey."

Nothing.

"Anybody there?"

Silence.

I thought of Machine Gun Ronnie.

I thought of the other guy and how he'd been here two weeks and didn't know why.

I panicked.

I grabbed the bars and shook them, just like in the movies. I screamed, "Hey! Somebody talk to me! What's going on?"

I heard a door. I heard footsteps. A face appeared. "What's your problem, buddy?" "Why am I in here?"

His pudgy nose wrinkled in disgust and he sniffed hard. "You don't know?"

Relief. They'd said something about breaking into something last night. Being in jail for throwing up was a whole lot better than breaking and entering.

He opened the door and led me to an office.. They told me I'd have to pay a fine – fifty dollars. I had no money. I didn't have a clue as to what to do. There was no way I'd call my parents. I thought of somebody—my minister friend Walton who was living in Atlanta. He wasn't interested in driving down to Macon, but he did tell me what to do – get a bondsman. I called one who took my Omega watch as security for the fifty-buck fine he paid.

When the bondsman paid the fine, I was given a copy of my citation. The vision of the words are etched clearly in my visual memory: "Subject come to jail drunk."

"Subject come to jail drunk."

At that moment, I made a solemn promise to myself, one of many promises I made over the years. I promised myself I'd never, ever, ever again go to a jailhouse voluntarily when I was drunk.

That's a promise I kept. The "voluntary" part, anyway. Ten years later, alcohol brought trouble again and I was back behind bars. Alcoholism works that way. I've heard other alcoholics talk about how good their forgetter works, and I understand fully.

By March 1983, I'd been drinking nightly for five years. I was sitting at home, maintaining with my vodka, when my sister called. My parents, who lived one hundred miles away near Newnan, Georgia, had been driving to Missouri that day. They were near Murfreesboro, Tennessee when somebody sideswiped them. Their car careened into a guardrail and my father was badly injured and was in intensive care.

I made a reservation to fly to Nashville. The flight would cost \$400, which was exactly how much cash I had available. I can't remember why I had that much money to spend. That was a rarity then. I called my friend from high school and college, Alan Griggs, who lived in Nashville. He said he'd meet me at the airport and drive me to Murfreesboro. I headed for the airport, ninety miles away on the other side of Atlanta from Athens.

As I made the reservations and packed, I upped my vodka intake. I'd grown up flying airliners and had a private pilot's license myself. Despite that, flying frightened me when I wasn't the pilot. It was that control thing again. That, added to my worry about my dad, created those feelings I hated, so I self-medicated with alcohol. After leaving the house, I decided I hadn't self-medicated enough and stopped at a place on the way out of town and picked up a couple of road beers.

As I approached Rockdale County, drinking those beers, I crossed my normal sobriety line. The road became fuzzy and I was squinting to keep it in focus. About then, I saw the blue lights flashing in my mirror.

Nuts. Why is he stopping me? I wasn't speeding. Would this make me late for my flight? I wasn't worried at all about the alcohol thing. My only problem with alcohol and the law had happened because I went to the police station drunk. Since then I'd been in that wreck and had no problem despite being alcohol impaired. When Pat was pregnant with our first child, she had a craving late one night. I went to the grocery store and was stopped on the way home. Driving too fast. I was also well into my evening buzz, but the cop warned me to slow down. That was it. There were other times like that. On the alcohol thing, I had no worries.

The African-American Georgia State Patrolman approached my door and asked me to get out. He beckoned me to follow him to the back of my Volkswagen bus and pointed to the taillights. "Did you know your taillights were out?"

"No sir."

Relief.

Just a taillight beef. No problem at all.

"I'll have to cite you." He pulled the ticket book out of a back pocket and unsnapped his flashlight. He started hitting the flashlight against his hand, then said something about it not working. He told me we'd have to get in his patrol car so he could see.

That was a ruse. I'm convinced of it. He wanted me sitting down. The moment our doors were closed he said, "You've been drinking alcohol. How much have you had?"

The time between his statement and my response could be measured in heartbeats. Maybe a couple of seconds; But, those moments stretched into hours in my mind. I knew that what I was fixing to say was just plain dumber than grits, and grits are real dumb. When I was an assistant news director at WLBB in Carrollton during my first stint there, I often filled my lonely Friday and Saturday nights riding around with Carrollton's cops. In the days before rampant lawsuits, the officers were happy for the company. I'd seen this scenario played out over and over. The police officer stops a car because of erratic driving. The driver climbs out of his car, wobbles around, and always says what I was fixing to say to that state patrolman. I knew it was an idiot thing to say before I even said it. I said, "I've had a couple of beers."

He grunted and provided some kind of explanation as to why he couldn't do a field sobriety test. He drove me to the Rockdale County jail—a nondescript concrete block building near Conyers. The state patrolman and the deputy laughed about my "couple of beers" and I was embarrassed again. I waited my turn to blow in the machine. The guy in front of me stepped away and I took my turn. As it turned out, the short time between him and me made a big difference for me later.

I blew enough to be arrested for driving under the influence. It was nearly ten o'clock. From my experience at the Warner Robbins jail almost exactly ten years before, I knew I had some options for being bailed out. I could call Pat, but she was fifty miles away, three months pregnant with our second daughter, and two-year-old Heather would be asleep. Without a ride home, calling a bail bondsman that night would have been useless. They weren't going to let a drunk guy get bailed out and drive home. My only viable choice was to spend the night there.

I asked to use the phone and was led to a pay phone in the corridor containing the cells, and was left alone. I called Pat first. She wasn't happy. More than that, she was scared – afraid I would be raped or pummeled in jail. I told her I wasn't in San Quinton, just the Rockdale County jail. She didn't need to worry and I would be home in the

morning. I didn't know how to call my mother, so I called my sister and told her the truth. But, I would have failed the "whole truth part." I told her I had a problem with taillights and wouldn't be able to go to Tennessee that night. I thought about paying the fine for a DUI. I didn't know how much that would be, but assumed it was more than a parking ticket. I'd need to save my money for that. I told her I probably wouldn't be able to go at all. I asked her to let my mother know and call Alan so he wouldn't be waiting for me at the airport.

The deputy led me to the cell. Three other guys were in it. The cell was maybe ten by ten with bunk beds to the right and a single bed to the left. A toilet and sink was on the back wall to the left. To the right of the toilet, the back wall had another set of barred doors leading to a back hall. A bare bulb hung in front of those doors, casting a harsh light into the cell. A TV was blasting from that corridor.

The three cellmates and I stood there looking at each other. As the son of an airline pilot, I'd grown up riding passes. The airline required us to dress up if we rode passes, so out of habit, I'd worn a dress shirt and tie for the airplane trip to Nashville. Standing in the jail, I was clearly overdressed. Looking at my dress and my neatly trimmed beard, one of the guys said, "Are you the psychologist?"

"No," I said. "I'm just one of y'all. DUI."

They were still wary, but that didn't last long. I had retrieved four packs of cigarettes from my car before leaving for jail and had been allowed to keep them. I gave each of my fellow prisoners a pack of cigarettes. After that, we were life-long buddies.

We talked for a while, then lay down to sleep. The bare bulb stayed on and the TV kept blaring. It was set to Ted Turner's Channel 17 in Atlanta and it was having a Gunsmoke marathon. By this time, I was stone cold sober and wide-awake and had no alcohol to fix that. It's been nearly 25 years since that night, but I remember that awful night clearly. I couldn't sleep a lick and to this day, when I hear any of the voices from Gunsmoke, nausea hits me. Really. I'm not kidding. At some point during the night, the cell door opened and more mattresses were drug in. More arrestees joined us. By the morning, there wasn't room to move in the cell for all the mattresses on the floor.

I called a bondsman the next morning and was released. My VW bus had been towed to a place several miles away, so I set out walking. And now comes the really bad part – the part I tried to bury, but could never do it. There I was, walking from jail to my VW bus while my dad was lying in intensive care in Tennessee. I couldn't go to Tennessee because I couldn't afford it now. I'd have to use the money to pay the state. What a vile piece of dung I was. Every alcoholic I know has similar stories that chip away at our self-respect until it just doesn't exist anymore.

Two days later, I drove back to Rockdale County and went to the probate court office to pay my fine. The woman asked me if I wanted to talk to the judge. Not particularly, I said. Pat had told me that somebody at her work place knew the judge in Rockdale County and he was a hard case on DUIs. Unusual at the time. I just wanted to pay my fine and be done with it. The woman behind the counter said if I didn't talk to the judge, I'd lose my license.

Whoa. Better see the judge.

I told the judge how I had been home when my sister had called and said my dad was in intensive care in Tennessee. He asked how my dad was doing. I told him he had been moved to a regular room, but his broken hip and other damage would cause him to stay

there for a good while. Didn't know how long yet. We talked on. At one point I said, "I was surprised at what my alcohol level was." I told him about how I'd blown into the tube at the police station immediately after another guy had done the same thing. He said something about maybe the machine wasn't cleared.

Look, I'm a good talker. I clearly wasn't the typical DUI guy he saw. He said, "We're not going to worry about this." After a couple of more pleasantries, I left. I don't know for sure what the outcome was. I assumed the case was dismissed, but he may have suspended the sentence or entered my plea as a nolo contendere, or something else. I didn't ask questions. I still don't know the outcome. A few years ago, I tried to find out, but all the records from that court were destroyed when traffic violations were taken out of probate court in Rockdale County and moved to state court. There is an arrest record, but no disposition on record that I've been able to find..

So, instead of going to see my dad in intensive care, I spent the night in jail. But, as always happened, the angst I felt as I walked to my VW bus after being released faded. If it didn't, life wouldn't be possible. On the way home from the judge, I made a solemn promise to myself – one I kept for many years. I would never, never, ever let that happen again. In the future, I would *always* verify all my lights were working before setting out at night.

My problem wasn't caused by the alcohol.

I got into trouble because of those frigging taillights.