

## Part One: The End

*"This is the end, my only friend, the end  
It hurts to set you free, but you'll never follow me  
The end of laughter and soft lies  
The end of nights we tried to die  
This is the end"*

*From the song, "The End"  
by Jim Morrison and the Doors*

Damn, I hate the night!

I woke up screaming a little while ago, my heart pounding in my chest. It had been a long time since the demons came to visit, so I guess they were overdue. Things have been going pretty well for me lately, but I know their pattern – they just like to remind me once in a while that they haven't forgotten about me, so they send the nightmares which always arrive in the darkest hours, creeping silently like the fog to steal my dreams.

There's a saying that you hear around the halls of Alcoholics Anonymous that it's always 3:00 a.m. in the heart of an alcoholic, and I suppose to some extent that's true. But the bad guys don't come as frequently anymore, and I know how to handle them now, so perhaps it's just God's way of reminding me that I'm only one bad decision away from returning to that terrible place of loneliness and despair that had ruled my life for twenty-five years.

So I whisper a prayer in the darkness, requesting only that He strike me dead before I take that next drink.

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One day God rang me up, and said, "Write your book, Wes, and I'll take care of the rest."

And I said, "Okay, sounds good to me, God, so here goes - I hope they like it!"

And God said, "As long as you like it, that's all that matters, so just write your book, Wes."

So I did, and then God called again and said, "Cool, now that will be a five hundred dollar consulting fee, and I don't accept checks or credit cards, just cash or precious metals, and you can drop it off in the collection box down at St. Margaret Mary's."

"Such a bargain," I said, then inquired, as was my habit when negotiating matters such as this, "Hmmm, so I don't suppose there's any chance you'd take bitcoins instead?"

And God just muttered something under his breath, then said with more than a little exasperation, "You're pushing it, my son, right to the edge. Why must you always be different from the rest of the flock, why must you always push it?"

I felt no compulsion to answer Him, because we both knew why - that's just how it rolls in WesWorld.

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My name is Wes. I'm a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, and an onion, and I'm a whole bunch of other types of addict as well. I am powerless, but not helpless, sober, but never cured, confident, but not arrogant, recovering, but never recovered, grateful, but never entitled, and when I'm at my best I'm just another nameless face in the crowd.

I'm your brother, your aunt, your student and your childhood friend, your boss and your employee, your neighbor walking his dog and the name on the grave of the can't-miss kid who died before he won the prize, the elderly woman who sits silently knitting in the corner, the twenty-year old junkie shaking it out in his fourth detox and the old man hoisting one back as he sheds a tear over the grave of his Vietnam buddy, the precious little newborn opioid baby, stunted, gasping for breath, whose first day is her last, the nurse who cooled your feverish brow, the policeman walking his talk as he walks his beat, the salesman who sold his soul for a line of coke, the teacher who knew everything except how to say no, the rock icon, broken and burned, who learned too late that death was the loneliest gig of all, and the cabbie who sits quietly smoking at the train station as the evening snows swirl through the lights from the hospital across the road.

And I am the blind man who sees not with his eyes, but with his heart.

I am you and you are me, and I pray, and I pray and I pray that I never consider my battle against addiction to be won, for that will surely be the day that I shall die.

So after all is said and done, and the last call has been made, I'm just a chaos junkie, and what I'm addicted to is anything that has the potential to allow me to avoid reality, and which will put up a great big wall between myself and the rest of the human race.

But for the purposes of this book I'll stick to the alcohol and the drugs, because they're what finally brought me to my knees, nearly killed me and, by the grace of God, gave me a life today that is second to none.

It is a life that I never imagined could have existed, a life of hope, promise, companionship, and integrity, a life that was handed to me in my darkest hours.

I suppose that a head doc would diagnose my condition as a cancer of the soul that if left untreated will devour my humanity, my dignity, and my morality, and it will kill me just as surely as any physical cancer of my body could. I know through painful experience that my only salvation lies in abstinence, and in the maintenance of a physical, mental and spiritual condition that is based upon love and acceptance for my fellow alcoholics and addicts.

So I guess that when we get right down to it what I'm really addicted to is "more," and anything that will fill that great big hole in my soul that's been haunting me ever since I was a little kid. Alcohol and drugs did a swell job of satisfying it for quite a while, until they didn't, and then there was Hell to pay, because when the walls come down they come crashing down if you're an alcoholic at the end of your last run.

It's never pretty, never easy, never fun, but if you've been there you already know that, so you just kept right on drinking and drugging to delay the inevitable reckoning.

If we're lucky, we survive. If not, I suppose it wouldn't matter all that much, except perhaps to the people who loved us once upon a time.

For the rest, well, they stopped caring a long time ago, but in our arrogance and hubris we just never noticed, nor gave a damn.

I ought to know, because I was you once upon a time, lost, broken and forgotten, just as you are me, and either of us can find ourselves back out there in the wastelands with just the snap of our fingers at the end of a bad day.

My name is Wes, and I'm an alcoholic, a drug addict, and an onion, one of the fortunate ones, and these are my heartbeats.

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I was a techie in the late 1990's, and as part of the continuing education process I took a network engineering course in order to acquire some important job certs.

For the most part the course was dry, boring and highly technical, but one evening the instructor gave the class perhaps the most important lesson that I have ever received for not only solving complex computer riddles, but more importantly for solving most of life's challenges.

As is usually the case, its beauty lay in its simplicity, and in its universality.

Dave, the instructor, told us to ask ourselves a short, simple question when the system was crashing down all around us:

"Look back, and ask yourself, 'what changed since the last time everything was working perfectly?'"

Think about that, because if you can track back and locate the nexus, that nearly inaudible click of the key in the lock which arrived just before everything hit the fan, then you'll have a head start for solving just about any challenge that the Universe will ever throw at you.

I learned that lesson in 1998, in a computer seminar, and that one simple little concept has stuck with me ever since, and I have solved some nifty conundrums with it.

It would have been swell if somebody had mentioned it to me in 1966, however, because my life might have turned out very differently.

But nobody ever did, so c'est la vie, because like Jagger sang, "You can't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need."

Well, perhaps, but in my case that turned out to be a twenty-five year vacation in Hell, so I probably would have skipped it if had the choice, thank you very much.

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In retrospect, ground zero was clear as a bell from day one, but I was just too young and stupid and arrogant to recognize it for what it was.

I mean, it wasn't like I just woke up one sunny morning when I was sixteen and said to myself, "Gee, Wes, what to do on this beautiful summer day? Oh, cool, I know, I'll start drinking and drugging, and then I'll become a screaming, raging, piss-drunk alcoholic and addict for the next twenty-five years, and I'll see whether I can ruin every opportunity I have for a good life, and just drink and drug myself to the brink of death, or beyond! I mean, why not, I've got nothing better to do today!"

No, the evil twin stepbrothers, Alcoholism and Addiction, don't play that way. As the 12 Steps remind us they're cunning, baffling and insidious, so they prefer to give you a little tease, just enough to con you into thinking that you're the boss, that you can stop anytime you want, and then they'll steal away everybody and everything that ever meant anything to you, and they'll set your dreams on fire and they'll tear out your heart and stomp on it.

They let me get away with it the first time I drank. It was 1966, the Vietnam War was raging, and the Beatles and the Stones were fighting for first place on the charts. I was a "war baby," I had just turned sixteen, and one night my best friend Greg picked me up at my house in his parents' Mustang convertible. I took the co-pilot's seat, and we picked up our friend Steve, and we headed out to the back roads of Westwood, Massachusetts, which was a middle-class suburb of Boston.

Westwood was also a "dry" town, which meant that alcohol couldn't be sold in it, and I have often wondered over the years whether that contributed to my inevitable downfall. After all, what's better than the mystery of the forbidden fruit for lighting a budding alcoholic's fire?

It was a warm, sultry, late summer evening, and we had each raided our parents' liquor cabinets. I had been elected bartender, so I was responsible for mixing up some gin, whiskey, vodka, bourbon, a little of this, a little of that, and for good measure I tossed in a half inch of Creme de Menthe, then

stirred everything up in a quart-sized Coca-Cola bottle, and finally I shook it a half dozen times for good measure.

James Bond would have been proud of me.

For each of us it might just as well have been the nectar of the Gods, rather than a noxious, foul tasting 80 proof bottle of swill, but that jungle juice got the job done. This was my initiation to alcohol, it popped my cherry, and it took me to a world I could never have imagined.

That first hit burned a path to my gut, and I choked, coughed and gagged, but it stayed down, and then it hit me like a ton of bricks, and suddenly it was ohhh, sooooo coooool!

And that was that – Lucifer had turned the key in the lock and snagged another sucker.

Two hours later Greg swerved to a stop in front of my house, whereupon I fell out of his car, then staggered over to the bushes near the side entrance, where I puked, and puked, and then I puked some more.

There, I thought, that should've cleaned out just about all of the poison from my system, so I stumbled inside and bounced off the walls to my bedroom, where I promptly passed out, fully clothed, on top of the sheets, reeking of alcohol and vomit.

Less than an hour later I found myself holding onto the toilet bowl for dear life, hurling my guts out, and then I looked around and saw my father glaring at me, disgusted by what he was witnessing. He didn't utter a word, just scowled and stormed back to his bedroom.

It was then that I heard my mother crying in the background.

Attaboy, Westie, you the Man!

The next day wasn't a particularly fun one for me, but I was young and stupid and a jock, so I quickly recovered from the physical effects of my hangover. The shame and embarrassment lasted a little while longer, as did my loss of driving privileges, but a week later I was back in high school, playing sports, my privileges restored, and with the exuberance, or ignorance, of youth, all memory of that night had been erased from my mind like it never existed.

And that would prove to be rather unfortunate, because that was my last chance to receive a free hall pass from spending the next twenty-five years of my life in Hell.

Ah, but such is youth, the pain so sharp yet fleeting like a summer storm, and soon forgotten, while behind my back my two new best friends, Alcoholism and Addiction, winked slyly at each other, for they knew that they had hooked another rube, and they didn't intend to ever let me go – not alive, anyway.

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So that was my first drunk, but I don't remember my last one.

They tell you in the halls of Alcoholics Anonymous that you should always remember that final drink, and think about it long and hard before you take another one, because it just might keep you sober, and alive.

But I don't recall one single moment of it.

I do know, however, that I was out there for five or six days, but that's the extent of it, because I've never been able to piece together an instant of it, from the minute that first slug of bourbon hit my lips until the moment I finally crawled out of my blackout.

It's all just a blank, gone, like it never existed - poof!

So the way I figure it, the very fact that I can't recall it, and that I lost a rather considerable chunk of my life to that binge, probably means that I earned my seat in AA after all, because if that didn't do it, I'd sure as hell hate to see what would.

But I do know this – it must have been a doozy of a last call.

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It was early June, 1992, and I had been sober for almost two months, since my last thirty day stint at a now shuttered alcohol treatment facility called Beech Hill, which was nestled in the scenic

Monadnock Range near Dublin, New Hampshire.

With somewhat jaded detox humor we “guests” had renamed the place ‘The Irish Alps,’ due to its location in Dublin.

It was quite the rehab in its day.

When I returned home I played the sobriety game pretty well for a while, but that was my customary scam after every one of my amusing little trips to the detoxes, because all I had ever considered them to be were one long series of cons that I ran on the world, and on myself.

Bottom line? These time-outs were great for cleaning the alcohol out of my system, but they were nothing more than a tune-up and an oil change, and I had never remained sober for longer than a day, or a week, or a month after any of them.

And this most recent little vacation turned out to have been no exception to the rule.

Denial’s a swell way for an addict to avoid reality, but I always knew deep down that I was just biding my time until the next handy excuse came along to let me do what I did best – drink myself to the brink of death.

Hitting the detoxes and treatment centers, and pretending that “this time” would be different, and that I really intended to remain sober, was my modus operandi. But that was all just noise, a lowlife drunk’s stereotypical line of bullshit intended to keep my family, friends and employers off my ass while I set myself up for my next big jackpot.

Naturally, there’d been a woman involved this time – aren’t there always? She was the only woman I had ever loved, a woman with funky blonde hair, a lithe, slender body, and the most beautiful, shy, ice blue eyes that I have ever gotten lost in.

But I had screwed things up royally the last time I had been with her, so I decided to punish myself as only I could do, and after trashing myself unmercifully for a few days I reverted back to form and did what I did best - I said the hell with it all, and I picked up a bottle, and I hid in it.

And so, right on schedule, and for reasons that would only be important to a drunk full of denial and self-hate, I drove to the closest packy, bought a couple of half-gallon jugs of Jim Beam, and a carton of Marlboro reds, then proceeded to cross over to the Dark Side one final time.

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This latest shitstorm had started out pretty much the same way they always did. As I left for the liquor store, my lifelong pal (the con artist who rented space in my head) had convinced me that we (we?) were only planning to pick up a half-pint of bourbon, and a couple packs of smokes. Our goals were modest, so we figured that we’d just nurse one tiny little drink while we did some deep thinking about our future.

But that brilliant plan lasted about four fucking minutes, so when we arrived at the package store and stared at all of those beautiful bottles of liquid magic gesturing seductively to us, my good old pal suggested that I (oh, so now it was “I” again?) might as well pick up a decent supply.

You know, just so we’d have something on hand in case company dropped by during the next year or two, or I stubbed my toe, or somebody’s dog died.

But we both knew that was all a crock, because visitors rarely came by anymore, at least not since I had gone off the deep end in a rather large way, and that had been years ago.

And as to the remainder of my litany of pathetic excuses, who was I shitting?

Not that it would have mattered, however, because I was one of those paranoid drunks who hid all of my booze. That way, on the remote chance that anyone was naive enough to stop by expecting to share a nice stiff convivial adult beverage, and some stimulating intellectual conversation, I could always claim that the cupboard was bare, and my stash would remain safe.

And that was Wes’s first law of addiction - keep the stash safe at all costs, because running out of alcohol and drugs at 4:00 a.m. was not to be tolerated.

Now, on the other hand, if you happened to show up with a couple of grams of coke, then accommodations could always be readily made, and my bourbon would magically appear, because there are always exceptions to every rule when it comes around to maximizing one's high.

But the bottom line is that after I got done with all of my self-serving bullshit and rationalizations, everything evolved into one basic fact of life - simply put, as my AA pal Tony used to say, "I took a drink, then the drink took me, and then I was off to the races."

It was all so linear and logical the way my little forays into insanity played out exactly the same way every time. They always started out with my good little buddy whispering sweet nothings in my ear about how it was perfectly okay to take that one simple little fucking drink. Just one, but then I'd be gone, back out there for one more death-defying thrill ride.

"Go ahead, Wes, you can have a drink, it'll calm your nerves, help you to think better. Things are gonna turn out great, you'll see, this time's gonna be different - I promise!"

Because, like, yeah, "this time" will always be different when you're jonesing for your fix.

You'd think I'd have learned.

Well, actually I had learned, of course. It wasn't like I was fooling anyone, particularly myself, because that's the point of it all, isn't it, to have plenty of booze around when you're making a decent attempt at drinking yourself to death? And wasn't that the endgame all along, to wind up dead? My life wasn't exactly hitting on all cylinders, but even after a lifetime of screw-ups and failures I still didn't have the balls to pull a trigger.

So, enter alcohol - the painless, mindless .45 caliber solution for all of a drunk's problems.

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I had already subconsciously worked the numbers, so I knew that the bourbon would last me perhaps four or five days, and that was just the right amount of time to tie on a proper bender, and take one more trip to the 'Land of Blessed Oblivion.'

So as soon as I returned to the apartment I poured a nice big fat one on the rocks, lit a smoke, stretched out in the recliner, and commenced to nurse that one tiny little fucking drink.

And with that first sip I entered into what I pray was my final waltz with Death by alcohol.

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It was so close, so damned frustratingly close, but I couldn't quite reach it. It was right there in front of me, just beyond my grasp, shimmering in the afternoon sunlight, just inches above the surface of the water, slipping in and out of focus, tantalizing, mocking, calling out its siren song to me, but I just couldn't quite reach it.

It seemed like I'd been trying for several hours, but I had no real point of reference to judge the passage of time in this cold, dark void I was floating through, and it didn't really matter much because the result was always the same. And so I'd take another deep breath, and dive deep, always deeper than the last time, and I'd coil, waiting for that one perfect moment when my heart rate had slowed almost to nothing, and my breathing was strong and steady, my muscles taut, contracting, and then I'd exhale sharply, blasting the air out of my lungs, uncoiling in a powerful, fluid release of all the kinetic energy I had stored in my body, and I'd explode toward the surface, my legs pumping, chest and arms on fire from the exertion, reaching, flailing, straining to get up and out of the water, my hands clawing for that one strong branch that would be my salvation.

And always it was so close, so damned frustratingly close, but I just couldn't quite reach it, and then my momentum would fail me again and I'd falter, and in my nightmare I'd sink once more into the cold and the darkness and the terror.

Man, coming out of a blackout was always a ballbuster!

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That drunk dream was the last thing I could remember until I crawled back into consciousness in my apartment in Norwood, Massachusetts, sometime around noon on a sunny Sunday in early June, 1992.

I didn't realize it at the time, but that would mark the day that I finally surrendered to the diseases of alcoholism and addiction, without any reservations whatsoever.

I need to repeat that last phrase, if only for myself, "without any reservations whatsoever," because as Chapter 5 of the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous reminds us, "half measures availed us nothing," and I'm living proof of that. The chain of events that occurred during the remainder of that day took away any last doubts and denial that I may have been desperately clinging to, and it is my belief that by finally letting go of those reservations I was saved by a Power greater than myself, who I chose to call God.

There's just no other way to explain it.

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When I finally came around my head felt like it was stuffed full of cotton, and I was shaking and numb all over, but I sucked down that last half-inch of warm bourbon in the glass in one long, magnificent gulp.

Ahh, the breakfast of champions!

I waited several moments for the alcohol to spread its warm, fuzzy glow throughout my body, took a deep breath, and then somehow I managed to climb out of the recliner and stagger into the bathroom.

Even I, as jaded as they come, was shocked by what I saw, because staring back at me from the mirror was a vision from Hell. I hadn't shaved, showered, brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, or eaten during the entire binge. My eyes had that dead thousand-yard stare, blood red, lifeless and sunk way back into their sockets. I had a week's growth of beard, I was shaking and wobbly, and my clothes were hanging off me like a scarecrow's.

I looked like somebody in a scene from *'Dead Man Walking.'*

Just then a wave of nausea hit me, and I went down on my knees in front of the crapper and emptied my guts. I studied the mess as it filled the bowl, watching particularly for any evidence of blood. I had a buddy who drank like me, and he had survived two esophageal hemorrhages caused by his binge drinking, but the third one finished him off. His last moments were spent lying on a hospital gurney in an emergency room, puking up blood and fighting intubation. The staff couldn't control him, so they finally backed off and he bled out, and that was that. He was forty-seven years old, and he'd been a full blown alcoholic for thirty years.

Lesson learned, I always checked for blood in my vomit also.

This time I got lucky. It was all clear, hot fluid, nothing solid, no chunks of semi-digested food, no sign of blood, just good old American eighty proof bourbon and stomach acid burning my esophagus raw on the way back up.

It soon turned into the dry heaves, and it was another five minutes before I could stop gagging.

Blood, or no blood, my first thought was, "Shit, it's finally happening. I'm dying."

My second thought was "Shit, it's Sunday, it's Massachusetts, and the freakin' liquor stores are closed. How much booze do I have left before the DT's hit, and how the hell do I get my hands on more?"

I'd had the delirium tremens damned near a hundred times over the past dozen years, and they were ungodly, so I'd do practically anything to avoid them, but hitting one of the local Walpole bars was out of the question. No bartenders in their right minds would serve me in the shape I was in, or if they did I'd be face-down on the railing after two drinks.

And, besides, how could I risk driving and a possible DUI stop, because the thought of going cold turkey in a drunk tank was beyond anything imaginable. I'd been "PC'd" a half dozen times over the

years for drunk driving, and I will guarantee that the last place you ever want to wake up from a blackout in is a jail cell that you never remembered getting locked up in to begin with.

That, my dear friends, is the stuff from which nightmares are made, and you can damned well take that to the bank.

Now, on the other hand, it would take forever to get a cab, and then what was I going to do, have him drive me fifty miles each way to the New Hampshire border, just so I could buy more alcohol? Or over to South Boston to find a backdoor bar operation where I could grab a couple of bottles of overpriced rotgut? Or just keep him on the clock while he chauffeured me around the booze dumps down in the Norwood flats, all of which I'd get tossed out of twenty minutes later?

Decisions, decisions, what's a poor lost alkie to do when he's dying for his fix?

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I had one remaining option that I'd been hoping to avoid, but my time was running out, so I would need to come up with a plan, and fast, before the withdrawal sickness really hit hard.

First, however, I had to check whether there was any liquor left to steady my nerves.

I managed to stumble out to the kitchen, then said a silent prayer of thanks to the 'Gods of the Lost Drunks' when I saw that my last bottle of bourbon had three inches of precious lifeblood left in it. I also noticed that there were now three empty half-gallon bottles lined up neatly on the counter, brave little dead soldiers, plus this one lonely survivor that I was polishing off, and a couple of packs from a second carton of Marlboros.

Based on simple math it was clear even to me that I had ventured out at least once for supplies, and God only knows what else. I shuddered with relief that I had made it back in one piece, although now I had to check to see whether my car was out in the parking lot.

How many times over the years had I gone out searching for a missing vehicle after a rough night or weekend? It got so bad at one point that I ended up organizing search parties with my friends. That had worked out swell, at least until they stopped returning my calls.

And then one day I stopped having friends, which pretty much made all of that pain in the ass social stuff a moot point.

But, like they say, God looks after fools and drunks, and I was both, so on this day my car sat shimmering in the sunlight.

I performed some rapid calculations then, and quickly came to the conclusion that it was time to consider that final option I had been procrastinating about. And, thank you God, there was sufficient bourbon remaining to implement it.

I called it my "Backup Plan DT," which was to attempt to be admitted into a detox or treatment facility - that's if I could find one that would take me again, and that might present a problem based on my recent track record.

At this point I wasn't seriously considering another futile effort to stop drinking forever, but I knew that I'd beaten the stuffing out of myself, and that I'd soon be in a beaucoup nasty withdrawal. I also recalled that all of my most recent self-detox attempts had been bona fide nightmares, so I simply didn't have it in me to go it alone this time - I was just too exhausted.

I was already becoming nauseous again, dizzy, twitching and aching all over, and I knew that it would get a whole lot worse as the alcohol leached out of my system.

I could also tell from the pressure behind my eyeballs, and the banging sound in my ears, that all of my vitals were spiking through the roof. It felt like my eyes were about to pop out of my head. My personal best blood pressure reading of all time was 220 over 140 after a week of around-the-clock binging on cocaine and bourbon several years previously, and I feared that I was challenging my record this time around.

The elevated vitals led me to wonder momentarily whether I had scored some blow during my binge - coke was the cruelest game of all, and it had owned my ass from day one. I had chased it hard

for a dozen years, but I didn't really have any connections these days, and there was none of the usual drug paraphernalia lying around.

No, bottom line, this must have been just another monster alcohol hangover, one of hundreds that I had experienced over the years.

I'd never had seizures while detoxing myself - that I knew of, anyway - but a guy standing next to me on the night before I left the Alps two months previously had gone down like a sack of bricks with a grand mal seizure. It was terrifying to watch, and no doubt it was a lot more terrifying to experience firsthand.

I realized that I was susceptible this time around, and I was in no mood to do any field research on the subject. You die from seizures, all alone, convulsing, swallowing your tongue, choking to death. But, as miserable as I was at that moment, I was still full of enough self-hate to want to remain alive, if only so that I could go on hating myself for just a little while longer.

So the die was cast, and I decided that some R & R was in order, because the more I thought about it, the more I looked forward to taking a nice escape from the World for a few weeks.

There would be decent food, no irritating little phone calls from concerned family, friends, and another soon-to-be-former-employer, and a steady supply of nifty downers to ease my heebie-jeebies.

Naïve, but arrogant to the end, I actually believed that I was still running the show, and that I could dictate the terms of my own surrender.

What a crock, because truth be told I was nothing more than a conniving, clueless drunk on another in a long line of losing streaks.

Talk about pathetic!

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I might have been chock full of the arrogance and false pride that's only found in an alcoholic in denial, but nevertheless I still considered myself to be a rather sophisticated rehab veteran. I had learned through trial and error over the past five or six years which detoxes and treatment facilities would meet my rather discriminating standards, so I began to explore my options while I nursed my bourbon.

First out of the gate were the State of Massachusetts detoxes. For the most part they were roach motels, but they were cheap, and they served a purpose, namely to get you dried out and off the streets for a week.

As an added bonus they were also a great place to hide out from any number of angry, vindictive individuals who might be seeking out the pleasure of my company. I had used one for a week the prior winter, in order to straighten out and disappear from a pissed-off former employer who wanted their company car back for some strange reason that I just couldn't seem to comprehend at the time.

So I'd spent a week at the Framingham, Massachusetts detox back in January. I wore the same ratty bathrobe, pajamas and smiley slippers for the entire stay, slept on a cot in a crowded room that stunk of urine, sweat, vomit and shit, ate two day old donuts, Chef Boyardee spaghetti and meatballs, and Gorton's fucking fish sticks three times a day, then got topped off with 400 mg of Librium daily.

At one point during my fun-filled holiday I leaned over to switch the channel on the 1970's era television in the dayroom, but thanks to the Librium I lost my balance and started falling.

It seemed like it took me ten minutes to hit the floor, but ohhh, coool... it... sure... was... fun... until it wasn't.

It's a strange fact of Nature, but if you're a low-life stinking drunk the ground always seems to rise up and smack you in the kisser sooner or later, so please feel free to call it one of "Wes's Laws of Fucked-up Gravity."

Other iterations of said law relate to major decreases in bank accounts, self-respect, sex appeal, employment opportunities, quality of residential address, and quantity of, and social status of, friends.

But no, I didn't think that I had a problem, even though I looked like Jack Nicholson at the end of 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' when I finally booked my ass out of there a week later.

Because the state detoxes had confidentiality regulations they also attracted their fair share of individuals like myself, who were hiding out, on the lam from pissed-off friends, relatives, spouses, bill collectors, drug dealers, various law enforcement agencies, or employers.

So until you caught the rhythm of these places it never hurt to keep your mouth shut, and to be careful about who you hung out with in there.

But, on the other hand, if you kept your eyes and ears open you might just pick up a few nifty new tricks, if that was your bag. Spend an hour listening to the string of lies and broken promises that flow out of a junkie's mouth like mother's milk when he's two days off the needle and you'll know what I mean.

Talk about effortless, if somewhat pathological.

On a positive note, however, the staffers were all in recovery, real professionals, dedicated to helping any and all sick, suffering alcoholics and addicts who walked through the door, and they brought in local AA groups to put on meetings a couple of times a week.

If nothing else, those meetings broke up the monotony, and in some cases they offered hope to individuals like myself, who had none of our own.

But the bottom line was that these facilities were usually nothing more than crash pads to stop the shakes before you went back out into the world to play your games all over again.

The Framingham Detox wasn't exactly a garden spot, even though it was the best of the State facilities, so I checked it off as last on my list of places to take another fun-filled vacation from Planet Earth.

Well, unless things got *really* bad that is, which after all was the reason I had ended up there in the first place.

I'll tell you, though, God must have been making some long term plans for me during that prior stay, or was just having a chuckle while he screwed with my head, because Pat R., the Clinical Coordinator of the facility, would become my recovery counselor several years later.

Pat conducted my out-take interview at Framingham, and gee whiz, believe it or not, for some strange reason he figured out that I hadn't quite hit my wall yet.

Nonetheless, he was instrumental in my eventual recovery, and I ended up dumping all of my garbage on that poor bastard every two weeks for five years.

I'm honored to call him my friend to this day.

And there were some bonus points there as well. Pat was a scratch golfer, and he built golf clubs for a hobby, so by the end of my counseling years I had a nice new set of handmade clubs, had knocked five strokes off my game, had discovered a new addiction, and was beginning to look for a Golfers' Anonymous meeting.

So who says '*The Great Handicapper in the Sky*' doesn't have a plan for each of us, or at least a sense of humor?

I only wish that He could have given me a hand with my putting, however, because I've still got the fuckin' yips on the three footers.

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Next up on my dance card was the middle echelon of detoxes and treatment centers, where I had been in-patient three or four times over the years.

My facility of choice here was *NORCAP*, which operated a seven day detox program in Norfolk, Massachusetts, as well as a longer term treatment facility in Foxboro.

I had matriculated to both of them at various times during my career, played the sober game for a while after I returned home, but always ended up drunk on my tits within a couple of months after every one of my stays there.

It wasn't all their fault, however, because at least they tried, whereas I didn't. Meh!

These mid-range outfits were newer, better equipped, the food was good, and they held plenty of in-house meetings, in addition to inviting local AA groups in.

Some of them even had barebones exercise facilities, so there were at least a few creature comforts.

Many were also affiliated with hospitals, as was the case with *NORCAP*, and they had on-staff counselors to work with the patients on developing a recovery plan for when we went back out into the 'World.'

I guess I didn't pay enough attention to the counseling part of the program, considering my .000 batting average every time I departed said premises.

I was also somewhat concerned that health insurance might become an issue here, and certain that it would for the upscale treatment centers if I decided to fly first class.

I actually had health insurance at the time, compliments of a company plan that I had been covered under. I'd been given a six month grace period on it after I was fired by that former employer back in January for, among other things, "a history of inconsistent results, which culminated in disappearing with a company car for two weeks after he was given his last verbal warning."

For my part I had fired back with an indignant letter of my own that challenged their unfriendly comments as "nuance and innuendo, wrapped up in wild supposition."

There, take THAT you miserable turds!

But I did get the insurance, and it financed a much needed thirty-day trip to Beech Hill for treatment of alcoholism just six weeks after my January stint at Framingham Detox.

So, as circumstance would have it, I suppose that my former employer's accusations weren't all that "nuanced" or "wild" after all.

Well, whatever. I still considered them to be egregious slugs, just on general principles, and besides, they hurt my poor little feelings!

The problem now was that I didn't know whether the insurer would be willing to kick in again, just two short months after they blew \$19,000 on my thirty day respite at the Alps.

That wasn't exactly a stellar return on investment, at least not if you're an insurance auditor. But I had a swell time, anyway, and believe it or not it helped build a base that would ultimately save my life.

I was also somewhat wary about applying to *NORCAP* for another reason, however, because I was a three-time loser there, and it occurred to me that my odds weren't all that great for improving the outcome this time around.

I ascribed that concern to the likelihood that I had developed a mental block about their program that would be difficult to overcome.

Please, an effing mental block? Seriously?

That rationale was pure nonsense, of course, like most of my best thinking in those days, but I was as apathetic about the place as I was about Brussel sprouts and bean curds, so I just couldn't get a hard-on about going back there. It left me with the total blahs, so I decided to take a pass on *NORCAP* for the time being, and would instead concentrate on the upper tier facilities.

And, besides, I considered the high-end joints to be more in keeping with my life style and breeding, so why not go first class this time around?

I had four prospects in mind, last of which was the Alps, so I took a deep breath, pounded down another slug of bourbon, lit a smoke, then commenced to smile and dial.

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God mentioned later that He'd been getting a big kick out of my desperate maneuvers and machinations that day. He referred to them as, "a pathetic attempt by the Captain of the Titanic to negotiate with the iceberg."

Happy to hear that, God, I'm thrilled to know that somebody was getting some chuckles out of my misery, because after all I'm here merely to serve at your pleasure!

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Thirty minutes later the shakes were coming on harder, and I was down to my last inch of bourbon, and one final treatment center – the good old Alps.

The other three facilities had refused to consider me because it was Sunday, so they wouldn't be able to receive a confirmation that my insurance was valid until the next business day.

What, they wouldn't take my word for it?

I'd been afraid of this. It wasn't that I didn't want to go back to the Hill, because it was a perfectly good facility, and I had received some beneficial counseling during my prior visit.

I had even made some good friends up there, which was a rare occurrence for me, because I don't trust. Period.

And I had met Blue Eyes there, and we just seemed to hit it off, which was an even rarer occurrence for me because I had always been a "love 'em and leave 'em" type, and because I don't trust. Period.

The big problem, after the uncertainty of insurance coverage, however, was that I felt like I'd be returning to the Hill with my tail between my legs, a failure for all to see. "Pride goeth before the fall," perhaps, but nonetheless it had only been two months since I graduated, and here I was drunk on my ass again, about to go begging for a bed.

But, really, that's pretty much just another steaming pile of cheap rationalization and bullshit, just more crap spewing from the mouth of an out of control, arrogant alcoholic in denial. I had become an expert at conning myself and the rest of the world - well, conning myself anyway, because in retrospect I'm not so sure that 'the World' was still buying anything that Wes was pitching, or even cared whether Wes was dead or alive.

And could I blame them?

The plain truth of the matter was that I'd done a damned good job of destroying my life over the past twenty-five years through a near-fatal addiction to alcohol and drugs, and half the world knew it. But I never gave a good goddamn about them in the first place, and come to think of it I never gave a rat's ass about the other half either.

Because I didn't trust. Period.

Well, at least not until Blue Eyes came along, because she saw through all of my childish nonsense in about two minutes flat, and left me howling at the moon.

The bottom line, however, was that I'd experienced loss after loss after loss, the likes of which I could never have imagined possible once upon a time. Yet here I was coming back to an alcohol rehab for the nth time, and all I could worry about was my damned image? Or how I'd come across to a bunch of suffering people who were still drooling on themselves after a couple days off the sauce? Seriously? Most of those poor souls probably had plenty of worries of their own, so I'm sure that the last thing on anybody's mind that day was having to fret about how another down and out drunk from Boston was making out with his DT's.

Ahh, the indefatigable ego of the alcoholic in full bloom, filled to the brim with lies, arrogance, denial and excuses.

Curiously, I rather liked Beech Hill, although I will admit that some of my rationale was a little bit fuzzy. In fact, make that very fuzzy – unless you're an addict, that is.

A case in point, one big kicker for me was that they handed out the blue 10 milligram Valiums to bring you down, rather than Librium. A minor detail you say?

Not to me!

I freakin' hated Librium, because it turned me into a zombie, but I'd always had a thing for Valiums, because they let me float along in my own safe little cocoon, oblivious to the world.

They were also a great hangover cure, and sometimes I mixed ground-up 5 mg. yellows with my cocaine to take the edge off when I was getting a little too jacked up toward the end of a forty-eight hour binge weekend. I nicknamed the concoction 'Yellow Snow,' after the Frank Zappa song.

That was one of a dozen nifty little drug combinations I had perfected over the years, that were capable of killing every single emotion I had ever felt, and I suppose it's one of the reasons why my first alcohol counselor had mentioned that I should have been a chemistry major in college.

But really, when you came right down to it, I was merely a pathetic coward who thoroughly disliked the pain of coming down off a bad drunk. So, thanks to the blue 10's that they pumped into me, re-entering Earth atmosphere had been a fairly easy ride when I arrived at the Hill in full blackout mode back in March.

And that was a very good thing, and certainly an experience I endeavored to repeat this time around.

So my thinking was that if it ain't broke, don't fix it - just keep feeding me my blues, please and thank you, and let me go into a corner to suck my thumb and sulk until I'm ready to rejoin the world.

But just how does one argue that case to the admittance director of an alcohol and drug rehabilitation facility? I mean, aren't I supposed to sound like I'm just a little bit repentant?

"Well, sir or madam, I'm applying to your fine institution so that I can get my hands on an almost unlimited supply of my favorite pharmaceutical, in order to bring me down slow and easy off my latest jackpot. Oh, and yeah, to cop a free high just for shits and giggles. So please, may I have a few fistfuls of your blues, just to keep me level until the pain goes away? I really do want to get clean and sober, but I can't concentrate on sobriety when I've still got the screaming horrors. I promise that this time will be different, really!"

Yeah, right!

Like I said, fuzzy logic at its best, another addict needing to get high to get straight. But that was me, always trying for an angle that would keep me floating along, immune to the pains of reality, without any of the downside.

And always failing miserably.

To round things out, however, the staff and counselors at the Alps were compassionate and caring professionals, and I had benefitted from some of their suggestions - that is, when I wasn't checking out Blue Eyes' perfectly formed derriere.

And, adding to the attraction, the food and the rooms were well above average, the views of the Monadnock Range were spectacular, and for the physically fit drunks there were some scenic walking trails that wound throughout the surrounding forest.

One other strong point was that they had some great AA meetings at the Hill, including a Saturday night barnburner that brought in recovering alcoholics from throughout the region. There were always some strong, entertaining speakers in those crews, which made for a nice change of pace - not that their inspiration had done me any good, of course.

And, no shit, they even had an outdoor swimming pool, and it was June so most of the ice would probably be out by now!

And last, but certainly not least, to top it all off with a great big juicy red cherry, the piece de resistance was that they had a great phlebotomist who always hit your vein just right when he was doing blood draws to check your liver enzymes. That may seem a bit trivial, but you'll know what I mean if you've ever had a nervous, shaky phleb poking around your veins with a sharp needle for ten minutes, trying unsuccessfully to get a good stick while you're coming down hard off a screaming, raging, binge drunk.

Trust me on that one.

So to sum it all up, what more could a low-life stinkin' drunk with delusions of grandeur ask for than a nice vacay in the Alps?

Aye, laddie, the Hill was the next best thing to a month in the Caribbean!

I stared at the bottle. There was one nice big fat warm fuzzy drink left, so what the hell - I picked up the bottle and I picked up the phone and I drank and I dialed.

Little did I know, I had just saved my life.

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It was a foregone conclusion how things would turn out, but we had to play the game, so we performed our traditional dance. It was a farce, but as always everything worked out in the end.

Practice makes perfect when you're negotiating the terms of your own surrender. I had learned that lesson the hard way a couple of years previously when I was applying to *NORCAP*. I had been blowing about a dot three four on the breathalyzer, drunk out of my mind and speaking in tongues. The only way I could get admitted was to hand the phone over to a slightly less drunk friend of mine, now deceased, thank you Demon Rum, and he had successfully conducted the interview on my behalf.

But even then things had almost bombed out at the very last minute, when they requested my credit card information as a deposit, because I gave them the numbers off an expired Texaco gas card.

Oh, in case you're wondering, my deceased friend's name was Doc. He was a great drinking buddy. He was a PhD psychologist with one of the highest IQ's I have ever known, and he had a long and distinguished drinking career, but in the end the booze beat the IQ hands-down like it always does. So Doc drank his multi-million dollar clinic into the ground, and eventually wound up sleeping on a wooden cot in a filthy old basement, next to an ancient washing machine.

The last time I saw him alive he weighed somewhere around one hundred pounds, down from two hundred, and he was lying on the cot shooting cheap vodka into his gut through a feeding tube. He had lost most of his mouth and jaw and throat to cancer from the drinking and the cigarettes, so the tube was his only viable delivery system.

What can I say, you do what you need to do when that cold-hearted monster owns your ass, and I ought to know, because I would have done the same damned thing if I was in his shoes.

So now I was conducting my own negotiations. I had a high degree of confidence, because I'd practiced the lines I planned to use so many times, on so many admittance directors, that I could have recited them in my sleep, or even blind drunk like I was now.

Or so I hoped, anyway.

For Beech Hill's part I was certain that the staff would soon be turning down the covers on my bed, and leaving a mint on the pillow, while they waited breathlessly for the six hundred dollar per day insurance authorization to arrive.

But the bottom line was that none of this polite, formal bullshit that we were about to engage in really mattered much, anyway, because at the end of the day it was always just about the Benjamins.

So I conned them, and they conned the insurance company, and everyone was happy, even that poor fuckin' auditor who had taken it up the ass for nineteen large on my previous Alpine adventure.

And, besides, now that the auditor had been burned once he would no doubt lay off his bets to a half-dozen reinsurers this time around, so what was the big deal? Life goes on, the wheels turn, the rivers still flow to the seas, everyone grabs a piece of the action, and this game wasn't any different from the way the Vegas bookies arbitrated their own risk.

Hell, the way I figured it I was just boosting the economy and spreading the wealth around a little, so I should receive a medal for that, comrade!

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After five minutes of shuffling papers, and keeping me on hold, Dave finally picked up. That was just 'The Man,' letting me know who was in charge. Fine, Dave, I'm sure yours is bigger than mine, so can we get down to effin business now?

"So, Wes, why now? You just left here two months ago, and obviously things didn't go too well. What's different this time? Why do you want to get sober now? What do you hope to accomplish?" *This oughta be good for a chuckle!*

*Jesus H. Christ, what's this, a freakin job interview?* "Well, Dave, I, ahh, I worked really hard last time, *uurrrppp*. It's just that I caught a couple of bad breaks when I got home an I screwed up an I didn't hit

enough meetins... oh, yeah, an I never got a sponsor or went to counseling. But I want sobriety more than anything else in the world right now, an I ahh, ahhhh, an I know what I did wrong, an I just need one more chance, so please help me, please.” *Blah blah blah.*

“Are you willing to do everything we suggest to remain sober this time? I mean it – everything?” *You’ve gotta be shittin’ me - better get the Fishbowl ready again, we’ve got a live one here - he’s as ripped as the last time around!*

“Absolutely, Dave! I know that I don’t have a lot of chances left. I just need to get away from the, ahh, noise fer a while, so I can get centered an work on a strong recovry plan. Beech Hill has all the tools an I know I can learn how to use them this time, you’ll see... yer my last, ahh... hope. I’ve surrendert.” *Blahdee blahdee blahdee.*

*What the hell is this guy on, he sounds like he’s on a nod.* “You have to understand, Wes, you’ll be admitted provisionally until we can get your insurance straightened out. We should be able to pick you up in a couple of hours, and we should get an approval from them by tomorrow. But if they decline you, for any reason, you’ll need to take a bus home on your own dime. Agreed?” *I’m sure as hell glad I’m not the poor sucker who has to drive this whackjob up here.*

*Yippee, the rube’s buying my shit again!* “Yes, of course, Dave, I understand, and that would be fine. Thank you so very much for givin’ me this chance again... ahh, I’ll, ahhh, work really hard an you won’t regret it. Thank you thank you thank you!” *Blahdee fuckin’ blah.*

“It’s two o’clock, so the driver should be able to get down to your place sometime around four, four-thirty.” *And they call this a freakin’ career?*

“That’s great, perfect! Ahhm, ahhm, thank you, so much... I’ll be ready! See you soon!” *Now how the hell am I gonna get the driver to stop once we get over the New Hampshire border so I can snag a bottle of vino for the ride?*

“Ok, Wes, we’ll see you in a few hours, and please try to get some food in you,” Dave said, about to hang up.

*Time to go for the gold!* “Oh, by the way, Dave, I was wonderin’, my Doc has specified that I should only be given Valiums. I believe they’re the blue ten milligram ones, to assist in my, uh, ahh, my detossification. He says Librium is not an appropriate drug in his perfessional opinion, too many dangerous side effects. Do you, ahh, see any, uh, any problems with that?” *Please, God, help me, just this once! I promise never to lie again!*

*Jesus H. Christ Allfreakingmighty, do you want us to wipe your ass too, you arrogant shit?* “Sighhh, no problem, Wes, I’m sure the doc can accommodate your needs.” Click.

*Oh yeah, Baby! I’ll snag the vino as soon as we hit New Hampshire. I can nurse a quart for an hour, keep a nice buzz on, and I should have my first blues an hour after I’m through the door. Yesss! It’ll be a nice smooth glide slope, comfortably numb for the rest of the day! I wonder how long I can drag out the scrip for the blues? At least a week, I should think.*

Victorious, I took a long, slow, loving swallow, and polished off the last of my bourbon.

“Rest in peace, Mister Beam,” I said, “it’s been a pleasure to know you, but hopefully we’ll soon meet again.”

I still had a full package on as I stumbled into the bathroom for a shave and a quick shower - after all, I wanted to look presentable for my new fun adventures in ‘Rehab Land.’

First, however, I had to take care of another case of the dry heaves, which meant that I’d probably lose all the therapeutic benefits of that last mouthful of Beam, and perhaps a small piece of my esophagus as well.

Shit!

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The bathroom break cleared me up, somewhat, but I was becoming more squirrely as my buzz began to ease off. This was the dangerous part, because the scary stuff would be hitting me soon, and

it would be close to three hours before I could scam a jug of wine, and probably four before I could pop my first valiums.

And those damned shakes had no intention of waiting that long.

I hated them, and all the rest of the crap that came along with alcohol withdrawal – the puking that morphed into the dry heaves, the dizzies, the insomnia, the blinding headaches, the blood pressure spikes, the cigarette burns all over my body and clothes, the paranoia, the sweats, the shits, the stomach full of razor blades, the mysterious cuts and bruises, the fuckin' Brahms rhapsodies playing over and over and over again in my head even when there was no music on, and worst of all the pure hating myself for having to go through this nightmare all over again.

This had the makings of a very long day shaping up, and I couldn't wait to get my hands on that bottle of wine that was already calling out to me from just over the New Hampshire border.

I had just forced myself to start packing my duffel bag when the phone rang.

Uh oh, a snag this soon with Beech Hill? Did that freaking insurance company decline me already? Who the hell else could be calling?

I was in for a surprise, and it broke my heart, but it changed my life.