

By a Burden

Before the meetings, she enjoyed the reprieve she got from a walk through St. Mark's tall wooden doors, into the congregation room, where the glass ceilings were so high she felt like she was on some heavenly ship in the clouds. Down the carpeted aisle she moved, centered between the dark wooden pews, with her palms open, toward the statue of the sinewy white man with the cloth around his middle, his arms outstretched and head looking up, thin lines of blood down his face, and she meditated on his burden to forget her own. She sat in the front, alone, and looking for someone else but seeing no one, she lay down. Sun lit the heights, giving the space a clean dimension, and she imagined God's hands reaching down to cleanse her rot.

"Fuck," she said, remembering the call from the doctor, and she covered her mouth and laughed, waiting for the lightning to strike.

She checked the time and stood up, arms up, and stretched through the pain in her shoulders, felt the weight on her knees, and walked through a side door, down a narrow wooden staircase, into a cramped basement. She moved past wooden tables. Some grabbed her arm as she passed; she smiled. Good to see you, too, she said. Welcome, she said. She took a small, white styrofoam cup from a stack and squeezed down on the top of a thermos filled with coffee. She sat down at the front of the room, next to her friend Edith, who said, let's get this started, and after Edith worked her way through the preliminaries, she introduced Sarah B.

Many of you know her and have seen her around, Edith said. Some of you know her story. I'm lucky to get to call her a friend. Please welcome her.

Sarah kept her head down and her eyes closed while Edith spoke, silently begging the Big Man to bring the words.

“OK. Hi. My name is Sarah Blight, and I’m a recovering drunk (Hi Sarah). I use my last name because I want people to find me if they need to, if they ever need to. I’m in the phone book, I’m on the Internet, I’m on the intergroup committee.

I know we’re anonymous, but that’s up to the alcoholic to decide, that alcoholic being, very definitively, me. I decide not to be anonymous because the hand, his hand, has to be there to help, at all times. That’s how I stay sober, that’s how I make it through each day. I wake up and ask the Big Man — my higher power — to guide me, because shit, he knows I can’t do it on my own. God knows I can’t. And he’s always there. And he always was. Even when I was in that shit motel, using my arm as a pincushion, he was there. And when I came to, after a bad night, floating in a river, half drowned, beat bloody, he was there. And yes, I should warn you, I curse. A lot. And I talk about more than just drinking. If you’re uncomfortable with that, you won’t break my heart if you walk out that door right now.

You know, I always say that, and only once did someone take me up on it. A woman. I guess she wasn’t ready. She had this look on her face like, ‘who the fuck are these people? I’m not like them. I’m not like that.’ She wasn’t ready. She was one of us, though. She came back. God has a way. His way. His time. That was maybe one of the hardest lessons of all for me. I wanted it now. Everything. On my terms. Happiness, mainly. How come everyone figured out happiness but me? Did they get a fucking manual? A book? I never got a damn book. I know I’m different but shit, I want happiness, too. But I kept slamming my head into walls. I couldn’t figure out

why I was so unhappy. Well shit Sarah, stop doing that, maybe it would help. No one told me. I had to learn.

This way of life requires honesty. I'm not, by my nature, an honest woman. Not even to myself. I think we all know it's not easy. Looking inside ain't easy. It's so dark in there. So gunked up. You shake yourself to sleep when you look in there. You feel slimy and hollow all at once. We can't do it without Him, it's too hard.

You hear a newcomer say, 'I never been happier,' and I think, yeah, first year is always like that. You know the type. We call that a pink cloud. That don't last. I give 'em a pat, keep coming back, we say. Keep coming back.

I'm here tonight to tell you what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now. I'll start from the top and get to the bottom. Funny how telling a story is just like drinking a bottle. My sobriety date is May 17, 2002. That puts me at about 10 years and change I haven't had a drink, or a drug, in my body. And that's not because of me. It would be a miracle if I could go two hours. Two hours without a drink would be a legitimate miracle in my life.

Let me see. I was a weird kid – weird and lonely. My mother died when I was one? I think. Yes. One or two. I'm an only child. I grew up in small town Starke, Florida. Most people know Starke because of the prison, where they kill killers. It isn't really known for much else.

I was an only child and my dad was a prison guard. He worked a swing shift. For those who don't know, that's 12 to 8 pm, perfect for a good drinking career. And oh yes, Daddy drank. I had a good teacher.

I think my happiest memories are from when he took me to church as a kid. I loved hearing stories about Moses, and Joseph and Isaac, and how God's chosen people left Egypt, and how his servants struggled, just like we do, but kept their faith.

I couldn't never buy into the idea of hell, though, didn't make sense to me, even as a little girl, that a God so loving would want us to suffer eternally. Seemed uncharacteristically sadistic. We get seventy years if we're lucky, and we're going to suffer for eternity? I'm no prophet, just a lady who sold her body, many times, for heroin, so what do I know? Nothing. But I know I know nothing; there's a difference there.

The only reason I even found Him, and not the church version, but my own version, is from this place. From coming here and hearing all of you.

That's how I found my own conception of God, and he's not mean and he doesn't punish disproportionately and he's not scowling over me with fiery rage. He loves me, and he's always there – never leaves my side. It's me, I'm the one who closes the blinds sometimes. But he doesn't go away, he waits. Imagine that. Me. With a direct line of communication to the Big Guy. We all have that, you know. No matter how small you feel, or how big you feel, he's there. So anyway, I loved church, but we stopped going after they found Daddy passed out in the bathroom. That was my dad, he'd keep doing something bad until he got caught.

I always felt different growing up. I stood around while all the other kids played with each other, unsure of myself. It seemed like they just knew how, and I didn't. Like I had some pieces missing.

We had a thick glass coffee table in the middle of our living room, and if you got real close to it and stared into the edge, there was this blue and green stretched out world. And I would sit and stare into the coffee table and imagine I was weightless, and bodiless, and happy.

I learned how to make myself pass out by breathing heavy and then pressing my hands together on my chest as hard as I could. I did it all the time. When everything was quiet, right before I came to, I felt at peace. That's what I wanted, even as a child, peace.

I read a lot, I still do. I sometimes wish I would've picked a life like that, maybe be a teacher or a writer or something, instead of what I ended up.

My first experiences with alcohol were from my father, may he rest in peace. He always had this smell – a cigarette and stale beer smell. I remember the first time I stepped into a bar, it felt like home because it smelled like my dad.

I didn't like to sleep alone. Still don't, actually. We lived in this two-room house on this leafy street near some train tracks. I slept in Dad's bed a lot. Let's see. Yeah. OK, I didn't talk about this for a long time. But now I tell this story every time I'm asked to speak because this is about honesty. The thing is, my daddy, I know he loved me, I know he did, but when I was around ten, I'd hear the door and I'd be asleep in his bed, and he'd lay down and he would touch me. He'd get behind me and he would kiss my head and tell me how he thought I was the prettiest little girl in the world. I remember how his breath felt against my ear, and how his stubble felt on my neck. And he would touch me in the places that a daddy shouldn't touch his daughter. But I didn't know that then. No one was there to tell me daddies shouldn't do that, so I just thought, hey, OK, it's normal. And I was lonely, like I said. I always felt isolated, and different, and wanted to escape. So I started to wait for him to come home. I would be still and wait and when I heard the

door open my heart popped and I pretended to sleep while he did what he did. And I felt loved. I know it's strange but I ached for the connection I felt with him. I loved him, he was my protector and my father and I wanted to please him, to make him happy. I pretended I was his wife and that one day we were going to have kids. I didn't know any better. I was a child. I look back now and think, my daddy was a sick man. He was a drunk and he was sick, but some are sicker than others. And I know I have no control over him and I can't be responsible for his actions, only mine.

One night, I was probably about thirteen, I stopped pretending to sleep, and I turned around and I kissed him. He jumped. I shocked him. And he kicked me out of his room and I was never allowed to sleep with him again. And that was it. It hurt because I thought that's what he wanted. I thought he wanted me like that. After that he wouldn't talk to me and I was just a kid and I didn't know what to do. I was angry at him, and myself, for a long time. It took a long, long time, but it's only through the grace of these rooms that I can finally say I forgive him.

So anyway, there I was all alone again, and I started in on his beer. He kept beer in the fridge and his liquor in the cabinet. Beer tasted terrible. I remember that clearly. The first few times I couldn't even get it down. But damn if I don't got that special ability to suffer, that mental masochism that classifies most of us in here. That love of the miserable, that hugging darkness.

So I kept at it. I mean, my daddy loved his beer, there had to be something to it, right?

So anyway, the first time I pushed through those first few sips, by sheer force of will, right when that warmth came, I knew. It was magic. I hate to say it so plainly but that's what it was. It was like I had been walking around with my fists clenched my whole life, and when it worked its way through my body, whoosh. Peace. I just let go. This was it. This was the secret. It changed

everything, on a penny it changed. I could talk, I could be social, I didn't care what people thought of me, I didn't care what I looked like, I didn't care that I didn't have a mom. I was comfortable in any situation. I started making friends. I actually started leaving the house. My social life began. I met the right people. You know the ones, they had drugs and listened to the good music, we sat around in the woods and drank and smoked. Most of them were older. Stan was the oldest, probably 19 or 20, and he always had the right supplies. That was an important quality for a man to have. We'd use and it seemed normal, even though I was so young, to date a 20-year-old. He had his own apartment, too. Not that my father paid much attention. So anyway, I spent most of high school drunk, in class, out of class – that became my life. The crazy part is, I pulled in C's and still took advanced classes. I was always smart, well, I could remember things. I had that type of memory. But I dropped out at 17 and moved in with Stan. I was too young to know any better, and he kept me high. By that time, I was smoking pot and doing whatever I could get my hands on, but in my mind, it was just fun.

One night, I went to a party in this trailer home off some rural highway. I remember it because you could see all the stars, we were so far out into the country the city lights were gone and you could really see. We were in the living room, it was dark in the trailer and the TV was on, and this fat man in a stained white tanktop kept coming out and inviting girls into his room, one by one. He called me, and of course I was curious, so I went and there was a thin line of white powder on his dresser and he nodded at it, and that's how I tried cocaine for the first time. I felt like half of me disappeared, I was light and my heart felt like a balloon, but in a good way. And then he was kissing me and I finished him with my hands, this 40-ish hispanic man with a pot belly, but it's weird, when you're in that situation, everything just seems so normal. Cocaine

made me so happy. That's the thing with drugs, you do fucked up things and you think they're fine, great even.

I got a job at the mall, a cookie stand or something. I took the bus to work. I remember that because I liked listening to music through headphones and watching the world go by, and feeling completely separate. I felt so insulated, like I had this bubble around me all the time.

It was great. It was like, you couldn't get to me. I was invisible and you couldn't hurt me or see me, but I could see you. I could see you and judge you and look down on you, because I had my shields up.

I had sex with the manager of the store in the back because he had LSD, and I wanted some. I traded my body for drugs and again, I didn't even think about it.

I'd say the beginning of the end came when I put a needle in my arm for the first time. When I felt that little pinch, and then the rush, everything else evaporated. It ate me up pretty quick. The timeline gets blurry from here until the end.

I started stripping. To do a job like that you need to stay loaded. The money was good, but it wasn't like I was saving up for retirement. I went from man to man and motel to motel. When I needed more money, I slept with anyone who would pay me for it. None of that mattered. All that mattered was when that needle slipped into my arm and all the noise went away. Every day, I woke up and my first thought was, I need to get high. So I worked and I fucked and I got high. Running a treadmill. All day.

I got old. I got miserable. I had these moments of lucidity, they'd come at odd times. I'd be dancing and watching all the men watching me, and I got this vision: there was a demon in the room and they were all puppets. Why couldn't anyone else see that?

I would be in the motel on the thin flowered comforter and look around, while I was cooking my dope, and everything looked so dingy and gross and I'd have this thought, 'what am I doing, why am I doing this?'

The fun, that carefree youthful fun, was replaced by something dark. I lost control. If I didn't fix, I got sick, and when I got sick, there was no end to the things I would do for money. The word 'no' didn't exist. I used to have all these 'well at least I never did that' rationalizations. At least I never shot porn, at least I never got the shit beat out of me, at least I still brushed my teeth. By the time I got sober, there was nothing left to rationalize.

Of course I wanted to stop. I always talked about stopping. I think God gives you little windows. I really believe that. I'd heard about the program from some of the other girls, it's impossible to not hear about the program when you're around drugs all the time, so in the back of my head I kind of knew. In the back of my head, there was an option, a way out.

We worked a bachelor party on the beach, this was the bottom I hit. It was this house right on the shore, well-to-do fellow, a lawyer or something. The house was big, it was me and a few other girls. We were told to wait in the bedroom and come out when called. An easy five hundred or so. Earlier in the day, I had scored from someone new because my regular dealer was MIA. I went into the bathroom to do it. I remember this poem on the wall. I read it a few times while I cooked the dope, sitting on the tile. It was in a nice wooden frame above the toilet:

As children bring their broken toys

With tears for us to mend.

I brought my broken dreams to God

Because He was my Friend.

But then instead of leaving Him

In peace to work alone,

I hung around and tried to help

With ways that were my own.

At last I snatched them back and cried,

"How could You be so slow"-

"My child," He said,

"What could I do? You never did let go."

So anyway, I walked out and felt so loose but also really high, more than normal, weird high.

That's the gamble. You never know what you're getting. I walked out and the music was playing, there was a song I liked to dance to at the club, it has this really slow bass line, and it's great for stripping. It made me feel sexy.

I walked into the room and there were maybe five or six men, no big deal. But then, their faces changed into these scowls – these skin melty ugly faces – and they had horns and red skin, and steam came off them. I passed out. When I came to I was on a bed and there was a red-faced man on top of me with the rest of them cheering him on, this row of evil. I threw up. Someone slapped me, another one punched me and flipped me. I was still so high. They raped me and

when they were done they dragged me through the house, yelling. They dragged me through the sand and threw me in the water. They kept screaming at me: 'wake up you drunk bitch, sober up you bitch.' They left me there. So, I'm in this water, floating. Everything is sore, and I'm barely treading. I'm fighting to stay afloat and losing. I remember thinking how easy it would be to just stop. I saw my life, the whole thing in my head. I guess maybe your brain does that when you're about to go, it shows you your whole life. And mine was shit. What did I have to show for it? I don't know why but I called out to God. Help me, I said. I don't know where it came from. I just said it as a last resort, and I stopped fighting right then and there. I was so high, and so out of it, and so beat up I didn't even realize I was only in a few inches of water. I had a good laugh at that later. Then, one of the girls got me out. I can't explain things like that. I don't try to. I asked for help and He was there. Or She. I don't know.

So anyway, when I wake up, I'm sick and I need dope, and the girl, my friend, rest in peace, Darlene, said no, I shouldn't. She stayed with me the whole night. In the morning, the sun was shining in this motel room, and it was disgusting and I didn't want to do it anymore. It was enough. I had a window and I jumped through it, and Darlene, bless her, took me to my first meeting, and I met you guys for the first time.

I sat in the back and I didn't speak, I couldn't speak, I was shaking so hard, I needed to fix. When we joined hands for the prayer at the end, my legs gave out and I cried. I cried in the middle of that room in front of everyone. I cried because of my father and my mother, because of all my choices, because I let it get so far, because I had so much potential and I gave it up, because I had no hope. All those years, all that emotion, I had never cried like that before.

An older woman named Jane C., some of you know that Jane passed recently, Jane saved me. She hugged me and held me after the meeting, she sat me down and came up with a plan. She called a state-run detox and got me in that night. I didn't know it then but Jane had that kind of pull. Jane, rest in peace.

She bought me cigarettes and visited me every day. She brought the big book with her and we went through it line by line. I swear, every single line in that book was underlined, one, two, three times. She'd read something to me, something about hopelessness and powerlessness and then she'd look up at me and say something like, 'now doesn't that remind you of someone?' And I'd just be floored. That's me, I'd tell her. I'm just like that.

It was eye opening, that whole thing. It was eye opening because I had felt so unique for such a long time. So used to blaming others. So used to feeling like I was the only one in the world suffering. Me me me. It was all about me and what I could get from you.

One day, she said, you know Sarah, you're just another bitch on the bus. And for some reason, that thought comforted me.

I'm lucky, by the grace of the Big Man, I have a decade of sobriety under my skin. It wasn't easy, getting sober. I had to learn to live all over again. I had to learn how to be a human being, a real one.

So what's it like?

Well, it's better. Some days, it's easy. Others are difficult. But my hardest day, and I know you all have heard this but for the newbies that haven't, my hardest day sober, I'd take it over any day I was using. Because I was trapped. I'm free now.

I learned that in order to beat it, I needed to surrender. To give up. I couldn't do it on my own. I needed to learn that I didn't run the show, that I'm not in control. It was scary, at first, to relinquish that.

But when I did, when I worked through it, when I learned I wasn't the boss, and I didn't have to be, it was just like letting go of my fists again. There is so much power in surrender. I don't have to feel disgusting all the time. I don't have to compare myself to anyone. I can lean on Him.

But when I really got it, when it really hit me, was when I started helping other women, the way Jane helped me. That's when I figured out what it was all about. That's when the obsession truly left me, when I sat with another woman barely sober and saw myself in her eyes. That's what I'm all about today. Who can I help. What can I do to be of service.

But that's the thing, it is what it is. I live life on life's terms. Not my terms.

Today, I got a call from my doctor. He said I have breast cancer. He said 'it's genetic.' How's that for irony. I spent 15 years doing every possible thing I could to kill myself and the genes get me. So anyway, I'm scared, but I'm going to fight it. I have the people in this room. And I have Him. And I'm at peace with what I've done. I don't hate myself today. That in itself is enough of a miracle for me.

I went from living for myself, to trying my best to add something positive to the world. Here's what I learned, hard won lessons bought with my youth; I don't get caught up in bullshit, I try and be a good person and respect myself, I lean on a higher power, and I don't drink or use.

For fuck's sake, don't drink or use for the rest of the day. And if you think you're gonna crack, talk to somebody, or call me. That's what I'm here for."

Edith clapped first, and there was a moment of one, two, and the room caught on, and they all clapped for her politely and she tried to shrink. Afterward, a few thanked her for her service, some hugged her, some kissed her, what could they do to help, they said. She didn't know, actually. Cancer was an unopened door. All she could do was walk through it.

After the meeting, she sat in a pew in the sanctuary of the church for a long time, staring at the statue of the sinewy man, concentrating on his burden to forget her own.