

JOHN BERGER: LIGHT AND MOMENT IN MONET

HARPER'S

HARPER'S MAGAZINE/JANUARY 2011 \$7.99



◆

THE DRUNK'S CLUB

A.A., the Cult that Cures
By Clancy Martin

DISAPPEARING INK

Afghanistan's Sham Democracy
By Matthieu Aikins

THE HARE'S MASK

A story by Mark Slouka

Also: James Fenton and Phillip Lopate

◆

THE DRUNK'S CLUB

A.A., the cult that cures

By Clancy Martin

The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober.

—Eugene O'Neill,
The Iceman Cometh

That winter night the snow was coming down, making halos in the streetlights the way it does, and three or four of us were outside smoking on the temple steps. I met a man named Dave. He was probably two-fifty, two hundred and sixty pounds, he looked like one of the big blue Tann safes we used to have in my jewelry store. Dave's wife had thrown him out and gotten a restraining order against him.

"Another man is sleeping in my bed, sitting on my couch, watching my TV, eating my Cheerios for breakfast."

Dave had all the complicated DUI arrangements many of us have or once had, and because he was court-ordered into county jail on weekends he'd been fired from his job. At his Oxford House—the usual halfway house here in Kansas City, named after the Oxford Group, a defunct 1920s evangelical movement where A.A. got its start—he and the manager had had an argument a few

Clancy Martin is the author of the novel How to Sell. His last article for Harper's Magazine, "All That Glitters," appeared in the June 2010 issue.

nights ago, so now he was out of there too. Dave quietly told me his story without self-pity, anger, or even regret, as snowflakes melted on his brows and lashes. Nietzsche wrote: "Memory says: 'I have done that.' Pride replies: 'I cannot have done that,' and remains inexorable. Eventually, memory yields." Dave was all out of pride. "I must forget the past as much as possible," counsels one of the prayers in A.A.'s *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, and you could see why one alcoholic might offer that self-deceiving advice to another.

I smoked a cigar with him, out there on the steps—I had a metal box of those baby-size Macanudos you can buy at the pharmacy. I'd offered him one, shyly, and was glad when he took it, if only for the extra ten minutes of his company. I was eight days out of the hospital, twelve days sober. I wanted to wrap his arm around me like a blanket. "I got a bus to catch," he told me suddenly, and lumbered away into the dark.

In the summer of 1938, in "perhaps half an hour"—with the help, according to his wife, of a spirit he met via Ouija board—Bill Wilson (or Bill W., as he is more commonly known) rewrote the tenets of the Oxford Group into "The Twelve Steps" at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous and so many other pro-

grams for the assistance of recovery from addiction. The Ten Commandments. The Four Noble Truths. The Five Pillars. Pithy, easily memorized, divinely inspired. Words to live by. That the most influential—and, it is generally agreed, most successful—method for treating addiction would have come in a rush of "jangled emotions" is interesting if unsurprising: religio-moral revelation tends to happen in this way. "As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." The enormous literature produced by Alcoholics Anonymous subsequent to Bill W.'s Twelve Steps—there are hundreds of books, and almost every meeting has a "literature volunteer" to help you purchase the ones you might need at the end of the meeting—is a bit like a gigantic but youthful exegesis of this proto-text. The Twelve Steps themselves appear at the beginning of chapter 5, "How It Works," on pages 59 and 60 of the Big Book, called simply *Alcoholics Anonymous*, from which the movement, program, and society take their name. When you read, just before the steps are laid out, "Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now!" you under-



stand that alcohol is the Devil and the Twelve Steps the Revelation, the Word, the Good News. Thus the zealotry of many A.A. members, the religious atmosphere of the meetings, and the messianic status of Bill W. In 1984, an Irish A.A. member wrote to Bill W.'s widow to ask for a personal item of Bill's; she sent a tie-pin and was disturbed to learn, later, that members of the chapter were holding it to the foreheads of desperate alcoholics and praying over them.

Bill W.—who got sober while chained to a bed undergoing the then-popular “belladonna cure,” during which he suffered a presumably hallucinogen-inspired revelation—had not taken a drink in about three and a half years when he wrote the Twelve Steps: still a baby, if you ask most A.A. “old-timers” today. “It takes five years to get away from the booze, five years to figure out who you are, and then five years to start to become that person,”

Christina D. said at a noon meeting a few weeks ago.

When I go to the temple where I learned how not to drink alcohol, I always run into people who knew me during my early devoted broken weepy Ativan-lithium-Lamictal-and-baclofen-ridden months, and then I look away with “meeting guilt,” which lots of us know. Certain old-timers quickly catch you before you can sneak out the door at the end. “It’s good to see you, Clancy,” they’ll say meaningfully. There’s a tension in their smile that’s asking, “Where you been? When’s the last time you had a drink? Doing any service? *Working the steps?*” Hitting that same A.A. meeting every Friday night would probably keep most of the old-timers happy. But three or four times a week, now you’re elbows-deep in the program, you’re one of us. Even nicer to see you twice in the same day. With regular attendance, Christina says, she begins to suspect that “every meeting is

somehow about me, like God is speaking directly to me.”

At the end of the meeting we stand in a circle around the big old wooden conference-room table and join hands, like we always do, say the Lord’s Prayer, like we sometimes do (depending on who’s leading the meeting), and then shake our hands up and down and chant: “Keep coming back, it works if you work it!”

Like some people grow up Southern Baptist or Orthodox Jew, I was raised Alcoholics Anonymous.

When I was four years old my mother left my father for my father’s A.A. sponsor.

“He was my best friend, Clance, and my sponsor, he was my only grip on reality, and he stole your mother away from me. A man can’t sink any lower than that.”

I remember sitting at the breakfast table in my first home, my little broth-

er in a high chair, so I couldn't have been older than three. My father's face was bruised and unshaven and sad. He limped to the table. Mom left the kitchen when he came in.

"Sons, promise me you'll never take a drink."

I looked at my cup of apple juice with suspicion and pushed it away. My little brother, Patrick, stared at our dad from his high chair and sucked fiercely on his bottle. Funny, I became the drunk, and to this day Patrick has never so much as sipped a beer.

Not long after that, I remember Dad, the former boxer and medaling weightlifter, trying to break down our front door with his fists and his shoulder while my older brother and mother piled up furniture on the other side. A few minutes later the prowlers arrived and we all watched Dad through the bay window, in the red-and-blue light, tossing the cops like toys until he was submerged beneath their bodies and nightsticks.

When my mom married my stepfather, Blair, there were seven more kids, our new stepfamily. Blair had been a brown-bag-in-the-gutter drunk in his day and then, post-recovery, ran a halfway house called 1835 House. It still operates today. He held family readings some weekend nights—mandatory attendance, eight or ten kids in a circle, our own little meeting right there in the living room—and we listened to him recite passages from Carl Jung or William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Jung and James were two of Bill W.'s greatest intellectual influences, along with Aldous Huxley, who introduced Bill W. to his lifelong LSD habit). We read the A.A. comics like "What Happened to Joe . . .": dark seedy alleyways, wild nights, lurid, promiscuous women in torn dresses. Two or three times a

week my mother and stepfather went off to "their" meeting—I hated those meetings, I was jealous of them—and I don't know how many times the phone rang late in the night and I heard Blair answer it, talking sometimes for hours, being, as he always was, an excellent sponsor. When he

wanted to say because it sounded cool. Until he died, once or twice a month he'd go to a meeting: "I'm off to a meeting of the Drunks' Club, son." "The problem with A.A.," he often told me, "is that it's become a religion. Instead of freeing people it traps them. It's like marriage that



died, more than five hundred people, and half of Calgary's A.A. establishment, turned out for the funeral.

Shortly after his death, one of my stepsisters told me this story: "One time when I was in real trouble, my husband and I tried to borrow a thousand dollars from Dad, and he turned us down. I found out that back when we were kids, when we were supposedly so broke, he gave one of the alcoholics from 1835 House his credit card so the guy could go out to Vancouver to see his kids. He'd give some guy in his halfway house his credit card so that guy could visit his children, but he wouldn't lend his own child a thousand bucks when she needed it."

My (biological) dad took me to my first A.A. meeting in Jupiter, Florida, when I was seventeen years old. It was an open meeting, so I didn't have to say, "My name is Clancy, and I'm an alcoholic," which I kind of

way. It's a great institution, if you want to live in an institution." I think he stole that line from Groucho Marx.

You might wonder if you're an alcoholic. I often did. There are lots of self-diagnostic tests you can take. On all the usual fill-in-the-blanks I always scored high (I am good at standardized tests), but I remained unconvinced. I was raised by my stepfather and mother with the theory that "alcoholism is a disease" (A.A. does not officially endorse this as a medical theory, but it's a very popular view in groups), and it seemed to me that I was always choosing to drink, so I considered myself neither genetically afflicted nor chemically controlled. Just because the question "Are you an alcoholic?" makes you nervous doesn't mean you're hooked; flip side, the certainty that you're a heavy drinker or a "functional alcohol-

ic” (as opposed to a “real alcoholic”) won’t get you off the hook with yourself, A.A., or anybody else who might be observing your drinking with one eyebrow raised.

Once, in a bar together, just after I turned twenty-one, Dad with his club soda and lime and me with a beer, I deliberately left a few fingers in the bottom of the glass. As we walked out he turned to me.

“You know, maybe you’re not an alcoholic, son. I’ve never seen an alcoholic leave the last swallow in his glass.”

Of course he was forgetting how many times he’d told me that a sure sign of an alcoholic is that he always finishes his drink.

In one of the most thoughtful books about alcoholism, *Heavy Drinking*, philosopher Herbert Fingarette argues that the label “alcoholic” may harm the heavy drinker in a variety of ways. It can excuse behavior (“I can’t help it, I’m an alcoholic, my life is unmanageable”). It may interfere with recovery (“I have to quit cold turkey: I’m addicted, I’m an alcoholic”). It has a social stigma (“Poor bastard. He’s not just a real drinker, he’s an alcoholic”). And—most important, for those of us who worry about the relationship between self-knowledge and will—it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: Because I am an alcoholic, my life will always be determined by the stalwart, morally praiseworthy denial or the disastrous, perverse acceptance of this drug. For Fingarette, with help, honesty, and the disciplined exercise of will (this last in particular is anathema to A.A., which insists that we have become powerless before alcohol), we can recover, and even continue to drink.

To its credit, A.A. insists that the alcoholic who cannot recover should not be blamed for her failure. But listen to the language:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty.

It is tempting, here, to bring out Bill W.’s old Ouija board and confront the raised spirit of the author of the text with his well-documented post-sobriety years of infidelity to his wife, and ask him more specifically what he intended by “rigorous honesty.” *Ad hominem* attacks are not logical fallacies for this crowd: what’s at stake is the kind of person you are. You must take fearless moral inventories, admit wrong, confront defects of character, and practice “these principles in all our affairs” (no pun intended).

The point I’m trying to make, with Fingarette, is that A.A. is deeply, perhaps irredeemably infused with a moral view of alcoholism. As one old-timer, Gary R., explained with great solemnity at the end of an Escalade Meeting (so-called because it’s in the most expensive zip code of Kansas City, where the parking lot of the magnificent church is full of expensive SUVs): “Look, folks. Before A.A. we were sinners. Simple as that. Ninety meetings in ninety days is a kind of baptism. We follow that up with daily confession and the complete submission of our will to a Higher Power. And as long as you’re in the program, you’re in grace. The grace of sobriety. It’s not complicated. This is how it works.”

Gary’s is an extreme statement of the moral view; but while few alcoholics would describe “the alcoholic who still suffers” as a sinner, most understand themselves in just that way. “I was a sinner, but now I’m saved” is a centuries-old, proven-effective, hugely attractive attitude, and it is surely one of the reasons A.A. works better than any other sole program of recovery (I say “sole program of recovery” because I believe research will substantiate that a blended program works best).

I’ll admit that I don’t like the tall, lean, wolfish Gary R. and his square dentist’s spectacles. (He’s not a dentist, but he ought to be.) Once, when I had been in the program for about five months, I was in the middle of telling a story and he gave me the “T” for “time.” Maybe I was running long, I don’t know. Two minutes is a good standard to follow. But I’ve never seen anyone call time during a meeting, like a referee.

To accept the moral view of alcoholism—the “I was a sinner”

view (as a secret drinker for three years, I can tell you it felt like sin)—you have to accept that the alcoholic is free to do otherwise. In a paraphrase of (teetotaler) Immanuel Kant’s famous observation, when we say, “You ought not drink,” that implies, “You can in fact not drink.” But A.A., while holding the drinker responsible for her drinking, also insists that there exists within alcoholics a chemical imbalance:

We have an allergy to alcohol. The action of alcohol on chronic alcoholics is a manifestation of an allergy. We allergic types can never safely use alcohol in any form at all.

My sponsor, Greg M., gave me the surprisingly helpful formula he calls “Peanuts”: “Some people are allergic to peanuts, I’m allergic to booze. So just like some people don’t eat peanuts, I don’t drink alcohol.”

But the dilemma is obvious: either I am the victim of my chemistry (whether it’s a disease or an allergy doesn’t matter), in which case I ought best to hope for a chemical solution to my problem; or I have made a series of bad choices about drinking and have slowly transformed myself into an addict. A.A. would like to have it both ways, conceiving alcoholism as a sort of manageable disease, like diabetes. (For A.A., the failing pancreas is located in the soul.)

You see the problem vividly illustrated in the formulas different groups apply to recovery. For Fingarette (and there are many others in the recovery community who hold this view) it’s a matter of willpower: you drank your way into alcoholism, and with baby steps and moderation of your drinking you can drink your way back out again. A.A. invokes willpower while insisting on complete abstinence: to recover, the alcoholic must be making the strenuous effort of working the steps. The will is divided: half of you wants the drink, the other half doesn’t, and you have to consciously find ways to guarantee that the good angel wins.

My first psychiatrist, meanwhile, believed alcoholism was an entirely physical phenomenon that could be cured with purely chemical means. Find the right pills, and you will no longer be an alcoholic. After our initial few sessions,

he would do ten-minute phone interviews with me once a month—seventy-five dollars “a visit”—and then call the pharmacist. Soon my brain was so addled with drugs that I was falling asleep in my office and in meetings; a colleague commented on my “drooling”; and I descended into a depression that was qualitatively unlike any sadness I had ever experienced, even after my father’s death or before my suicide attempt. I was still going to meetings, but even there—where, and this is perhaps the best thing about A.A., there is always someone who has done just what you have done, suffered just what you have suffered, lied just as you have lied, despaired just as you are despairing—I couldn’t see past the next five minutes, the thought of tomorrow was unendurable, and I knew that I either had to drink again or kill myself properly this time.

Im talking to Owen D. about it on the temple steps. It’s warm out. Owen D. is a red-faced, smiling Irishman about my own age with a head of thick, curly hair, who claims that Jolly Ranchers kept him sober. “I bet I ate a pound of those feckin’ things a day. You shoulda seen me. I was fat as a Christmas goose.” For me and lots of other people it’s ice cream late at night. Every alcoholic is a sugar junkie.

“It’s not the cravings so much anymore.” I’m almost ninety days in. “It’s the depression. I really don’t think I can take it. It’s like I can’t even move. I feel like my head is exploding. I want to tear my teeth out.”

“It’s the feckin’ pink cloud, Clancy. For me it lasted thirty days and then I crashed. I was walking on air and then my second month was hell. But it started to ease up about week eight or nine.”

The pink cloud is the initial high the alcoholic often feels when successfully quitting the booze for the first time in the program. As opposed to the pain of “white-knuckling it,” or going it alone, which, in my own experience, and despite being a writer and a loner, really is a bad idea.

I never had a pink cloud. In that way my case resembled that of William Styron, who, interestingly, quit *against* his own will. After forty years of alcohol abuse his body suddenly refused it: “I discovered that alcohol in minus-

cule amounts, even a mouthful of wine, caused me nausea, a desperate and unpleasant wooziness, a sinking sensation, and ultimately a distinct revulsion” (we should all be so lucky, I thought when I first read this). But—as in my situation—things immediately took a psychological turn for the worse, and Styron was plunged into the depression that made his great memoir, *Darkness Visible*.

It is my conviction now that alcohol played a perverse trick on me when we said farewell to one another: although, as everyone should know, it is a major depressant, it had never truly depressed me during my drinking career, acting instead as a shield against anxiety. Suddenly vanished, the great ally which for so long had kept my demons at bay was no longer there to prevent those demons from beginning to swarm through the subconscious, and I was emotionally naked, vulnerable as I had never been before. Doubtless depression had hovered near me for years, waiting to swoop down. Now I was in the first stage—premonitory, like a flicker of sheet lightning barely perceived—of depression’s black tempest.

My own view-in-progress is that there is no such thing as alcoholism as a disease or an allergy or a condition, but that alcohol is a very effective and potentially addictive medication for a whole host of psychological and neurobiological problems. I suspect that my father was right when he used to say: “I was always a drunk, but it took me years to get good at it.” That is, different persons, according to their psychological history and their neurochemistry, tend to become addicted to the drug of alcohol with greater ease or celerity; others may have a relative resistance to (and/or less need of) the drug. To me the Mormon prohibition on alcohol (or any religious prohibition on alcohol) is a bit like a religion that might emerge 150 years from now forbidding the use of benzodiazepines or SSRIs. The problem with alcohol is not so much that it is an addictive medication; rather, it’s that, unlike other addictive medications—to which people will also grow or not grow addicted at varying speeds and in unpredictable ways—alcohol’s so-

cial function and accessibility obfuscate this reality. If you’re prone to overdoing it, the fact that you’re self-prescribing (and choosing your own dosage) doesn’t help.

I changed psychiatrists.

It’s a quarter after eight, a freezing night, the streets black with ice. I’m about forty days sober and can’t find a meeting anywhere on the west side of Kansas City. I try two places listed on the Kansas City A.A. website, both about ten miles from my house, and there’s no one there, not even a promising door, and I call my wife and ask her to get on the computer (by now I’m almost in tears) and she finds a meeting over on the east side. Kansas City has a scar up its middle called Troost Avenue. Due to blockbusting in the Fifties and Sixties, on the west side of the avenue it’s about 80 percent white, while east of Troost is roughly 90 percent African-American, and has the reputation, among Brooksidiers and the Overland Park set, of being a very dangerous place.

“Do you think it’s safe to go over there this late?” (About six months after this particular night we bought a house east of Troost. Go figure.) It was now approaching nine.

“You need to go. Just be careful.”

“I guess it is an A.A. meeting.”

I park next to a big new BMW in the crowded lot behind a church that has all of its windows covered in bars, find the right back door, and come in about ten minutes late. A prostitute is in the middle of the story of losing her kids to crack. A smiling, round, motherly type in a daisy-print purple dress crosses the room to bring me a cup of coffee.

The next speaker in the circle, Rob M., says: “You know, these meetings are a lot like being in a bar. You sit there with your buddies, the world’s a long ways away. Ain’t nobody gonna get you in here. That’s what I always loved about a bar. Long as you’re in the bar, you’re safe. It’s what’s outside the bar waiting for you that’s got you scared. ‘Cause you can’t stay in the bar forever. You got to get outside and get to business. These meetings here are the same way. You come in here, you’re safe for a while, but then you got to get out there and get into motion. As long

as you're here in a meeting room you're still halfway in the bar."

"Tell it, brother," somebody else says.

I'm feeling very conspicuously out of place, but no one seems to be paying attention to me, and I'm not sure whether I like that or not. Like most alcoholics I prefer to be the center of attention. That's one of the reasons drinking was fun. You're the hero of every story. I can see by the lineup and

Everybody laughs.

"And with that I'll pass."

I look at Rob M., and he's looking over at me too and smiling. After a few minutes he goes and gets the new pot of coffee—whoever emptied the last one makes the next one—and makes his way around the room, topping people off and giving them refills. I choke mine down so that I can get another full cup. When he gets to me

said, 'Hit me again,' but then thought better of it."

A little laughter from the group. I am choking up a bit.

"Go on, now. Lay it out."

"Keep going. It's all right, Clancy."

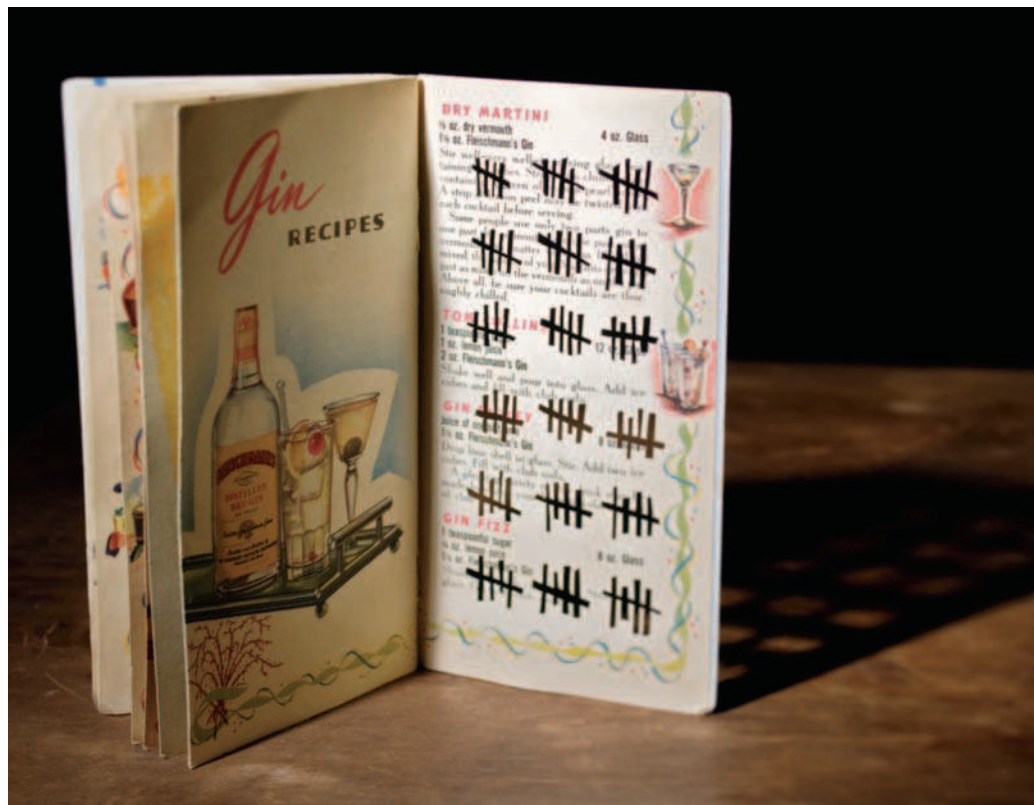
"I found them in a motel room the next day. I tried to quit. But I was white-knuckling it and started hiding bottles. I did that for three years before, a little more than a month ago, I tried to hang myself. That was rock bottom number three."

"Three times the charm. That's the truth."

People are nodding: they've hit their spouses—men and women alike—they've tried to kill themselves, once, twice, more. No one is doubting me, judging me, or asking me any questions. It is like the best bar ever, a bar without any obnoxious drunks who can't hold their liquor. Of course everybody here's a drunk, and none of us, despite years of practice and all our boasting, can hold our liquor.

"My wife cut me down in our bedroom closet and checked me into Research. Then I started the program. I don't even know if I'm past the third step yet."

The third step—in my own opinion, the most important and difficult of all twelve—runs: "3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him." The reason I think this step is crucial is that there is a difference between realizing you don't have the will to control yourself and choosing to release the control of that will to another. On this line, drinking is a way of releasing your will to a drug; attending A.A. meetings is a way of releasing your will to not-drinking. *Letting go*—a funny concept, like the Taoist idea of accomplishing things through not-willing—depends on the idea that somehow your will is the problem in the first place; that as long as you are fighting to not-drink, the booze



the clock that's in every A.A. meeting I've ever attended that the circle will never come round to me. I don't know where the bathroom is, so I can't sidle out to put a sweet Ativan under my tongue (a trick from rehab: they really are like candy, dissolve in a minute, and hit your bloodstream faster that way).

"I'm not saying don't come to as many meetings as you got to come to. I been sober more than twenty years and you all know me, I still come most every day. I'm saying what counts is what you do after you leave the bar, after you leave the meeting. This meeting's just a bar without the cocktails, that's what I'm saying. And if I'm gonna sit in a bar, I wanna have me a bourbon on the rocks, you know what I'm saying?"

he winks at me and fills me up. Then I realize I haven't been listening, several people have passed, and it's my turn to talk.

"The first time I hit rock bottom was when I stood in a corner of my ex-wife's guest bedroom and took a piss with my twelve-year-old daughter watching. She was crying, and she told me, 'Daddy, that's not a toilet.' The second time was when I punched my wife in the face," I say. I want to explain that both times I was in a blackout and don't remember it, but that's unnecessary here, and irrelevant anyway. "I saw her face the next day, the jawline, the cheekbone, the bottom lid of her eye. The makeup only made it more obvious. She tells me she almost

will always win. Think about having your heart broken. You can't let her go until you really stop trying to win her back—that is, until you stop making yourself *not* try to win her back. You don't forget her, or what you did together; you forget that she is the focus of all your need. And quitting drinking really is like losing a lover. You hear it from Al-Anoners—Al-Anon is the support group for friends and family members of addicts—every week: “It was just like he was having an affair.” You also hear, later, “Now I feel like he's married to his sponsor. I feel like I'm still second in line.” Like Rob M. said: The alcoholic remains an addict; his new drug is A.A.

“And my wife quit the same day I did.” *Mm-hmm*, several people agree, nodding their heads. “If she hadn't, I wouldn't be here tonight. I'd still be drinking. And if I hadn't found this meeting tonight, I think I would have driven to a bar. I was that close. And I'll pass.”

At the end of the meeting we say the Lord's Prayer and the Serenity Prayer (“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”), and a few people come over to talk to me, ask where I usually go to meetings and give me their phone numbers. Normally I hustle out of meetings because I hate the talking afterward. But I am clearly a stranger here and it seems rude to run out the door. I

help fold up the chairs before I leave.

I called my mother the other day from a coffee shop and her first words, before she even said hello, were: “Where are you calling me from? It sounds awfully noisy in the background.” She assumed I was in a bar.

Here is the alcoholic's karma, what I think of as the secret drinker's paradox: while you are secretly drinking, somebody always knows, if only your handful of regular bartenders and your friends at the liquor store and the convenience store (in Missouri you can buy vodka at a gas station), and usually it's a much larger group than you think; when you are sober, nobody knows except you. Even my wife, Rebecca, once said, “Well, all I

can do is assume he's not drinking,” which is, of course, true. If you think about it too much, you want to run out and have a drink; therefore, you don't think about it. Not-thinking about things is one of the secrets to recovery. From *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*: “The alcoholic is absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.” How this squares with rigorous honesty is a puzzle worth trying to piece together.

I've been in jail more than once on account of my drinking, but my favorite time was a weekend I did in Olathe, Kansas, as part of a DUI deferment. The second day of the jailed retreat, the counselor asked us: “How many people here believe you got here because you are an alcoholic?” Of the twenty-five or so of us, I was the only one who raised his hand. I was honestly astonished. The other members of the group looked at me with surprise, dismay, or pity. It turned out, as we told our stories, that for most of the people there “it was my first time driving drunk. I just had bad luck.” I think they were worried that we were being videotaped and that somehow an admission of guilt might be used against us later, in court. But one of the younger women approached me after the session and said, “So you really think you're an alcoholic? I'm so sorry, Clancy. That really sucks.”

I don't mean to suggest that these people were all deceiving themselves, only that I believe—though I may be self-deceived; it's so hard to know these things—that I have become a much more honest person since I quit drinking, and that the cleanliness of honesty is a big reason I don't go back to drinking when it seems tempting. “But then I'd have to tell my wife I had a glass of wine, and then ...” No. It's easier to skip the Burgundy and have an iced tea.

The old rule for making an earnest attempt at recovery is “ninety meetings in ninety days.” I've never been much good at following rules or finishing things and I didn't hit the mark. But in the beginning, meetings were like a drink. Not like a drink used to be—a bottle of

Beaujolais on a sidewalk table with my wife laughing opposite me, the sun in her eyes and hair—but a long, deep, double swallow of Jägermeister from a fifth or a quart I had hidden near the dumpster behind the apartment. A compulsive, dirty necessity. At a noon meeting the other day, Christina D. talked about “hiding in meetings,” when the alcoholic feels she is attending too many meetings in a day.

In Calgary, visiting my older brother, I was about six weeks sober. In the desolate gray night snow, my cousin Anna drove me up and down the hills of the city looking for a meeting: we went to three or four forgotten, empty strip malls and church back doors before giving up. (Because no one officially runs A.A. in any particular city, some websites and hotlines are better than others. A.A. is the world's largest functioning anarchy, and on the whole it performs astonishingly well.) When my cousin took me back to her home and made me tea, I was panicking. I tried not to look at the walls, at the carpet, at the ceiling, at her. There was nowhere to look. Help me, God, anybody, I was thinking. I don't remember what we talked about. I kept going to the bathroom and sitting on the toilet with my head on my knees. The next morning I found a meeting at a breakfast place in a hotel downtown. The owner must be in recovery, I figured. “My name is Clancy, and I'm an alcoholic,” I said, and as I told my story it was like three fingers of vodka straight to the amygdala.

When I got my sixty-day coin and was asked to explain “How You Did It”—a tradition at the opening of meetings, and a kind of honor, a one-minute birthday speech—I said (having anticipated and mentally rehearsed this moment) that I had “learned how to listen.” Complete b.s., of course: I still sat through every meeting waiting for my chance to talk, watching the clock, worrying that we'd run out of time before they got to *me*. Now in a meeting I really do prefer to listen. But the emotions I experience are confusing. When I listen to Frank R. talk about living in his own apartment for the first time and driving across town to pick up his two-year-old son, I feel

compassion for him and almost begin to cry along with him. After the meeting I talk to him about what it was like when I first left my wife, how I'd drop my daughter off at her mother's doorstep and then immediately go buy a six-pack, drink that on the highway, and be ready for another one by the time I was back home in Dallas, forty-five minutes away. But do I feel superiority or fear when Susan tells us about taking a drink two days ago, after a year of sobriety, and the pain of starting all over again? Can I sort my voyeurism, narcissism, and self-congratulation from my sympathy, anxiety, and fragility? Somehow, in that shadowy, crowded, claustrophobic room smelling of soured coffee and sweat, they all collapse into one another.

I had to quit my 8 p.m. meetings because they attract the late-night, new-to-the-program set (members who want to sponsor someone cruise these busy meetings), and every night became about climbing back on the wagon after someone had fallen off. "Relapse is part of recovery," the mantra goes, and it can be helpful: people will go back to booze, and they shouldn't believe that doing so means their case is hopeless. A dear friend of mine, Rebecca K., relapsed and drank secretly and recovered and relapsed again, over and over, for perhaps fifteen years, hiding it more and less successfully from her family for all that time, but is sober now and has been for a decade or more. But when you keep hearing "Relapse is part of recovery, relapse is part of recovery" each night from a different person, sometimes two or three, and then you leave the meeting and see the neon beer signs of the bar on the other side of Main, well, those lights get a little sparklier. Elbows on the bar, squeezed in, the bartender smiles; that smell of the bar, the smell of self-acceptance, joy, and fellowship—"You want to go where people know/people are all the same/You want to go where everybody knows/your name." The warm-up to that first drink, letting it linger there for a moment, water beading on the glass, stirring the ice cubes with a red and white bar straw, and ah! the first swallow and the honey-fingered sun glows at the back of the head, and

The literary magazine by children



"The New Yorker of the 8-to-13 set."

—Ms.

Inspiring stories, poems, and art by children and young teens—a great gift for budding writers and artists

6 issues per year for \$37

stonesoup.com | 800-447-4569

P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063 USA

HP



"An elegant and intriguing book."

—*The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) June, 1994

In *New York Revisited*, New York City is a living, breathing character—the streets and skylines are rendered in gorgeous, lyrical detail, and the tenements and skyscrapers crackle with energy. Acclaimed writer Henry James was born in New York, but as a young man he left the United States to live abroad. On his return visit to New York he wrote *New York Revisited*, which was published in *Harper's* in 1906. This concise book remains today as rich and beautiful

a description of New York as it was then, and it elucidates both the changes time has wrought and the myriad ways the City remains a constant. This volume is enhanced with period illustrations and photographs and features an introduction by Lewis H. Lapham, National Correspondent for *Harper's*. Handsomely bound with a spectacular illustration of the Flatiron building on the cover, it is a literary treasure.

Order today through www.harpers.org/store

Published by Franklin Square Press

ISBN 1-879957-14-0

Cloth \$14.95

FRANKLIN
SQUARE
PRESS



Distributed through Midpoint Trade Books

now, three swallows later, you order your first real drink, the second one. The night is young and loving. "With me one drink's too many and a million's not enough."

Why do so many people relapse? Why are the recovery rates for alcoholism—maybe 30 percent on the high side, with the help of A.A.—so low?

Here's Bill W. describing his own first couple of drinks at a party in 1917, at age twenty-two:

Well, my self-consciousness was such that I simply had to take that drink. So I took it, and another, and then, lo, the miracle! That strange barrier that had existed between me and all men and women seemed to instantly go down. I felt that I belonged where I was, belonged to life; I belonged to the universe; I was a part of things at last. Oh, the magic of those first three or four drinks! I became the life of the party. I actually could please the guests; I could talk freely, volubly; I could talk well.

Lo, the miracle. I still haven't relapsed (knock on wood)—I was tempted to try it, for the "artistic purposes" of this article, but the spirals of self-deception in that one seemed to whirl quickly down into the ninth and final circle of Hell, so I backed off. But even considering it has me here at an eight-o'clocker and I see my friend Christina again: her long brown hair, her narrow shoulders, and her easy smile; her eagerness to come check on me, to make sure I'm doing all right. Is Christina Thirteen-Stepping me? (When an old-timer preys on a new member for sex.) She sees my wedding ring, but hell it's all broken homes and lost love here. Still, I don't think it's that. Christina doesn't know it, but she's right on the edge of being a "thumper": the A.A. version of the Bible kind. Most thumpers are crafty about not letting on that they're thumpers. You're not really supposed to be a thumper—almost every serious alcoholic has a healthy sense of irony, a survival technique from suffering years of what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "postmortems" of one's behavior the night before—and the secret thumpers are the most dangerous ones.

It's fall, my new psychiatrist has me (shakily) on my feet, and I de-

cide to give the Escalade meeting another try. I cringe when I see that Gary R. is there again. He doesn't even *look* like he belongs at the Escalade meeting: he doesn't look "white, rich, and proud of it" enough. Gary R. looks like a street drunk, scrawny and scarred and angry. He's also a true thumper, the scary kind—he will get in your face—but I've also seen him cry at meetings. He's always the first to volunteer to be a temporary sponsor, and I expect he's helped dozens of people get and stay sober. But even without the "time" incident, Gary R. would be my enemy. There's always been an antipathy between us, for reasons I don't think either of us could specify. If you've been in rehab or in a setting where you are somehow forced together, you know what I mean.

After the meeting, outside in the generous sunlight, he grabs me by the elbow.

"You know, Clancy, everything you put ahead of your sobriety you're gonna lose."

It's a maxim. I think of the things I put ahead of meetings. My wife and daughters. My teaching. My writing. All of these things come before an A.A. meeting. But it's true, I could lose them all if I don't stay sober.

"You're right, Gary," I tell him. "But sometimes coming to a meeting helps you stay sober, and sometimes it doesn't."

He shakes his head.

"You still don't get it, Clancy. Keep it simple, stupid. How long have you been sober now? Nine months? Well, call me any time. You still got my number, right? Use it."

I've never called another alcoholic when I wanted a drink. I've answered calls, and talked people down, but I'm not really a phone person. I did talk to Don A. once on the phone when my depression was so bad I was about to jump off the roof of UMKC's Royall Hall.

In a meeting in a little town north of Kansas City that I had been invited to by a real old-timer, I met a couple about my and my wife's age. But unlike with us, she was the drunk; he was the Al-Anon husband attending the open meeting. They

both looked frightened, but they were frightened of different things. He feared what he didn't understand. She feared what she knew.

After the meeting I thanked him. "I never could've gotten sober without my wife, man. What you're doing is so important."

Then he wandered into a conversation with someone else, and I spoke with his wife. She had been sober for six weeks.

"It's just so hard to let go of all that," she said. "Sitting on the front porch in the late afternoon, on the swing, with a Jack and Coke. We've got four kids. After I get them to bed, we'd just go sit on the porch and talk." She wasn't worrying about "the alcoholic who still suffers," she was envying her. I could smell the drink coming after her. I hope I am wrong, of course.

I told her, trying to help, "Listen to your psychiatrist. I know people tell you to just get clean. But my first year I took a handful of drugs, and I still take Valium and an antidepressant. It can make it so much easier."

She eyed me dubiously but hopefully. The alcoholic is, we tend to forget, an addict. And addicts like to take things. We are seriously and chronically dissatisfied with our ordinary brain chemistry. Why that is the case is the interesting question. Most of us have a tough enough time getting through the day. Is the alcoholic just more impatient than other people? More sensitive? Weaker? Why does it take hold of certain people and destroy their lives and let so many others be?

Bill W. believed that there were three possible solutions for the alcoholic who was not helped by A.A. alone: 1. a mystical experience, 2. LSD, or 3. niacin, or vitamin B-3. Indeed, toward the end of his life he believed that he would be remembered not so much for the creation of A.A. as for the discovery of the B-3 treatment for alcoholism. Nevertheless, no one ever talks about drugs in meetings except as part of the problem. I've often heard people brag about not taking pain medication after a surgery. "I knew if I took one Vicodin, two weeks later I'd be back at the bar." In the two hundred or so A.A. meetings I have

attended in the past year and a half, I have never once heard another alcoholic mention her or his psychiatrist.

“**T**his is how I did it.” I am getting my one-year coin. I’ve decided to tell the truth. “A year ago my wife found me dangling from a sheet I’d twisted into a rope in our closet. It wasn’t a very good rope and I was strangling slowly but it wasn’t painful. She got me down and checked me into the hospital—I cried the whole way there and begged her not to—and they diagnosed me with depression and bipolar disorder and put me on Klonopin, Lamictal, lithium, and a drug I’d read can help alcoholics with cravings, a muscle relaxant called baclofen. Four days later they released me and that night I crashed my car into a post getting to my first meeting, here.” A little laugh. But people are nervous. I know they’re hoping I get to the part about being really clean. My coin already feels a little less earned. “The Klonopin pitched me into a terrible depression, so I went on to Ativan, which was worse, and then Valium. 40 milligrams a day. I still take 15 milligrams of Valium every day but am trying to get down to 10.”

I’m on 7.5 mg now. When my second psychiatrist told me that her goal was to get me down to 5 mg of Valium a day and then switch me to Librium, I nodded politely and laughed uproariously inside. But she was right, and, as much as A.A., my eighty-year-old psychiatrist, Grace Ketterman, saved my life. (I should add that the majority of the credit goes to my wife: it all would have come to nothing if she hadn’t quit with me, and waited for me.)

“The Lamictal and the lithium made me feel like my head was full of static electricity so I stopped taking them, and for the first ninety days I came to lots of meetings. Eventually I stopped the baclofen when, at about six months, my cravings were manageable, but I was still very depressed, and my new psychiatrist put me on Celexa. Then, about two weeks later, my weather changed. For the first time since I quit drinking, I didn’t want to kill myself. I could imagine a good future. Now I come to meetings when I need to, I see my

psychiatrist, and I take my drugs. I’m sober, and I’m happy.”

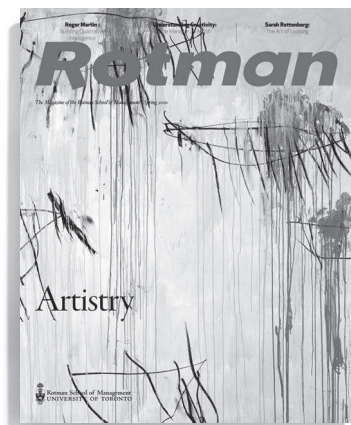
Embarrassed silence. Everyone looking straight ahead or down. It was as though I had stood in that packed, low-ceilinged room and farted like a bugle. We proceeded with the meeting, and no one else spoke about pharmaceuticals or psychiatrists.

But after the meeting, outside—that’s where the real action always is, before and after, smoking cigarettes—five or six younger members came up to me and thanked me. Everyone said the same thing: “I’m on”—fill in your drug, these days the fashion is Lamictal or Seroquel, plus something else—“but I’ve always been afraid to talk about it. My sponsor doesn’t even know.”

Sometimes, if it weren’t for a mistake I made in underestimating the last dose of acid I ever took, at a Grateful Dead concert in Orlando, Florida, in 1987, I’d be tempted to drop a couple of hits of purple microdot before a meeting and explain that, following Bill W., I was buttressing my sobriety with LSD.

You’d better not be flip when you’ve been sober for less than two years and a volunteer program run by people who really understand your addiction takes the time to cure you solely out of a desire to help. Moreover, in writing this article I am breaking at least two important rules of the group that has helped me so much. One of these, “The Eleventh Tradition,” runs: “Our public relation policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films” (it should be added, these days, “and other forms of media”). I was ostracized from my regular group when in a newspaper interview I mentioned in passing that I attended A.A. meetings at a particular location. This tradition is read by most members of A.A. as though one simply cannot say anything publicly about A.A., which reading would make the group, in my mind, a cult. A.A. is strong enough to bear the light of day, to withstand a little self-criticism from the inside. So I’m not as worried about that one.

A more important principle I’m



“Rotman magazine tackles real ideas with a verve and style that I have not encountered anywhere else.”

—Peter Day
BBC Radio Presenter,
“In Business” and “Global Business”

Try a risk-free issue:
rotman.utoronto.ca/must-read

Rotman School Artistry Experts Series

March 29, London, UK
April 27, Boston
June 20, San Francisco
17h00-19h00: discussion, cocktails

Hilary Austen
Adjunct Professor, Rotman School;
Author, *Artistry Unleashed: Pursuing
Great Performance in Work and Life*

Roger Martin
Dean, Rotman School;
Author, *The Design of Business:
Why Design Thinking is the Next
Competitive Edge*

To Register:
rotman.utoronto.ca/events

Rotman
a new way to think

breaking is a saying often repeated before meetings: "What you say here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here." To that end, I've tried to quote directly from meetings as little as possible. But a bit of it is necessary, and I'm justifying it to myself because storytelling is essential to the therapeutic effects of Alcoholics Anonymous.

We all know about writers and booze. Although Richard Yates had no patience for A.A. ("Is just functioning living at all?"), an awful lot of good writers have been or are in the program. Mary Karr, in her recent memoir of alcoholism and recovery—recovery with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous and a religious conversion—relates the story of how she met her future friend and sometime partner David Foster Wallace in one of her first A.A. meetings. Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim kept the "Serenity Prayer" on his office wall. And you'll notice that A.A. has developed a lot of very catchy slogans over the years. This is no mere coincidence: even in the very earliest days, when Bill W. was writing the Big Book, advertising executives and former *New Yorker* editors were involved in its crafting. So it's not surprising that storytelling became so fundamental to the culture of A.A. What is more interesting is what it contributes to recovery. "It's just confession," you might think, or, "It's just free psychotherapy." And that's partially right. But it's not just confession or psychotherapy when everyone in the room is doing it, and it turns out that listening to stories is just as important—maybe more important—than telling them. Stories break through loneliness. And perhaps the worst thing about alcoholism—and the reason I tried to kill myself that night—is the conviction that you deserve your loneliness, that no one needs to be cast out more than you do.

"I've never met a stupid alcoholic," my father used to say, and I think there's something to that. My wife, a former Al-Anon junkie who still goes to meetings whenever she's seriously stressed out, likes to tell people the standard line about the difference between the two groups. "Stand

in the hall between two meetings and listen. From inside the A.A. room all you hear is laughter; from inside the Al-Anon room all you hear is tears."

I am in San Francisco and I catch a ten o'clock meeting. It's easy to find a meeting almost any time of day in San Francisco. It's a speaker meeting, where an honored member of the A.A. community (usually a local, but sometimes a well-known visitor) takes the full hour, and I listen to this twenty-year veteran tell his story of heroin and alcohol. He's one of those members I struggle to comprehend, someone who lost everything—family, career, home, even his health—and yet still cleaned up. No reason to go on, and not only did he go on, he recovered. As strong as the death drive is in any addict, sometimes the will to live wins. He didn't reclaim all of the things he'd lost, but he was still standing, in fact he was very pleased to be standing in the cold San Francisco night after the meeting with the smokers and the people heading out for coffee or ice cream.

I go into a restaurant to ask for directions back to my hotel. I stand at the bar. A woman a few seats down looks at me. She looks a bit like Salma Hayek with a softer chin, and I figure her date's in the bathroom.

"What's your drink?" she says.

"What?" The restaurant, a small, hip Italian place, maybe twenty tables, is very noisy. I'd heard her, but I was surprised by the question.

"She asked what you're drinking," the bartender says in a thick accent. The bartender is even more striking than Salma, I notice.

"Jägermeister," I say, and laugh. "That's my drink."

"Jäger? Isn't that for frat boys?" She laughs. I see then that she is drunk. "Do you even have Jäger here? I doan think they get a lot of orders for Jäger here."

The bartender nods.

"Pour him a Jäger."

"Excuse me, I was joking," I say. The bartender is already pouring the drink. Salma pats the chair beside her.

"Sit here, next to me," she says. The black shot of Jägermeister, purple at its edges, is poured in a rocks glass.

Three fingers. A quarter pint. Two big graceful swallows, or one mighty gulp. I can drink a quarter pint in one gulp, if I hear the wrong door opening at the right moment. Two swallows is a perfect half pint, I think, even though you try to stretch it to four.

I sit down.

"Whatcha doin'?" she says.

She leans close to me. I think, The devil himself has come to San Francisco. My wife is four hours away by plane; my hotel room, fifteen minutes on foot, five minutes by cab.

She makes as though to toast, and I lift the glass and clink with her wineglass. I think, "You'll drink this one, stand up, and leave. You'll be polite, you'll drink it, buy her another glass, and then go. You don't want it, and that makes it different. It's German NyQuil, that's all it is, it's cough syrup. You're not breaking any promises. You're not going to cheat on your wife." I think about John Travolta in Mrs. Marsellus Wallace's bathroom in *Pulp Fiction*. One drink.

Then I put it down. The beautiful Italian bartender in her low-slung jeans gives me a strange smile that I still haven't figured out.

"Tha's bad luck," says Salma.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry," I say. "I've got to go. I don't drink," I say.

She stares at me. "Then why'd you sit down?"

I pay for another glass of wine for her.

"The shot's on me," the bartender says.

"That's a deal," I tell the bartender. "I don't know," I tell Salma. I have the absurd urge to kiss her on the cheek.

When I get outside I realize I still don't know where my hotel is. I call my wife. I want to tell her the story immediately. She doesn't answer. Asleep in bed with the kids. I am very thirsty, I can admit that much. I think about taking half a Valium—I have one in my pocket, as I always do for a meeting—and then think, No. I need a Diet Coke. For maybe an hour I walk along the high cold bright busy streets of San Francisco, until I find that hill with the red hanging lanterns of Chinatown, and from there I know my way back. ■