

Learning to Fly

By Sybil C.

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My name is Sybil, and I'm an alcoholic. I got to this Fellowship in 1941, and I want to just reminisce with you a little bit about the olden days, what I call the covered wagon days. A couple of weeks ago, my husband asked me if I could recall my last drunk, and I said, "Yes, I can." I was driving along one day, wanting to go home but afraid to because I couldn't face anyone, and I ended up in San Francisco. Now I couldn't go home for sure -- it was the next day. What was I going to do? Shaking, sweating, eyes bloodshot, face puffed up, I'd run out of lies, and I thought, if I go home right now it's going to be too late. I can't think of a lie that will wash.

I parked the car and I walked, and I saw this sign, "Sultan Turkish Baths." I decided I could sweat it out there and get myself in shape, but I thought I'd better have something to read. So I stopped at the newsstand and bought a Saturday Evening Post -- five cents. It was dated March 1, 1941, and on the cover it said, "Alcoholics Anonymous, by Jack Alexander." I was stunned because I had read about AA in 1939, in the Liberty Magazine, I believe, one little paragraph about an inch big. Even that impressed me and I intended to cut it out and save it but I hadn't. But here it was. So I took the magazine with me, had the Turkish bath, and even though I was just too sick to think, I knew there was hope.

I somehow got the impression that there was an AA hospital or clinic or something, but at the bottom of the article it said if you need help, write to Box such-and-such in New York. I rang the bell for the bath attendant and asked for pencil, paper, envelope and a stamp, and I think I wrote a rather pitiful letter to New York. I said, I am a desperate alcoholic and I'll take the next plane back there and take your cure.

The answer came a few days later, airmail special delivery, from Ruth Hock, God bless her. She was Bill W.'s nonalcoholic stenographer and had been for many years when Bill was in Wall Street. And now she was still working for him and she answered all the mail from that Saturday Evening Post article. She answered my letter and said, You needn't come back to New York, there's one group in Los Angeles. That's for all of California. It's very small and it has been a struggle for them. They have met in a couple of hotel lobbies but they are now meeting in the Elks Temple every Friday night at 8:30. And she said, You'll be very welcome, I'm sure. They have no women alcoholics in California.

I seemed to have unbounded faith that it was going to be okay. I got dressed, but I couldn't comb my hair so I tied a turban thing on my head and I poked my hair all up under it, and down I went. When I got to the Elks Temple they directed me into a small dining room, and seated around the table were ten or twelve men, and a couple of women. I made myself invisible, if that's possible, because they all looked so happy and were laughing and talking. I thought, well, they're the doctors and the nurses and so forth and I thought they would be giving me a pill any minute now -- the magic pill, the cure-all.

Eventually a man got up and rapped on the table for order. And he said, "This is a regular meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in California. We are a band of ex-drunks who gather to obtain and maintain our sobriety on an all-time basis with no mental reservations whatsoever." I thought to myself, What an order; I can't go through with it. Well, I didn't have to go through with it that night. I didn't get a chance because he continued with, "But as is our custom before this meeting starts, all you women leave." And these two women that I hadn't even noticed particularly because I was so desperately frightened, they just strolled out into the lobby. I later found out they were the wives -- there was no Al-Anon then, and the women were quite used to leaving the meeting and waiting in the lobby; they came back later for coffee and donuts. But I thought this had been cooked up to throw me out. And it worked, because I put my

hands over my face and I ran out into the lobby. I lurked around in the ladies' room awhile and then I went into hysterics and I got in my car and I headed for a bar and I got very drunk.

I thought, How exclusive can you get! To kick me out like that. And as I drank and got more livid, I turned to the people beside me at the bar and I said, "I'm a member of Alcoholics Anonymous." And they said, "So what!" Then at 2 P.M., when the bartender was trying to get me out of there, I called Cliff, who's in the book *AA Comes of Age*. Cliff and Dorothy had been taking care of all the Twelfth Step calls for California since the group started in 1939. I was very indignant. I said, "Well, I went down to your group tonight and they threw me out." He said, "Oh no, no, I'm sure they did not do that. Did you tell them you were an alcoholic?" I said, "Of course not. No, they threw me out all right." He said, "Well, we need you, we need you. Please come back. We haven't had a woman alcoholic." When I heard the words "we need you," I thought, well, I am a good typist and maybe I should volunteer my services. Then I said, "All right, now, I've had about enough of this and I want you to send your AA ambulance." He said, "We don't have any such thing. You go back next Friday night and tell them you're an alcoholic. You'll be as welcome as the flowers in May."

I don't know what I did that week. Probably was drunk and sober and drunk and sober, but I know this: that it was a miracle I ever went back, and thank God I did. But I didn't go back alone. Because during that week my brother Tex came to see me. He came in the house and he picked up the pamphlet Ruth had mailed me from New York, the only one that AA had. It was a thin pamphlet and gave a few basic facts on the Steps, and as he read it he had a pint bottle in his hip pocket, as usual. He was reading and saying, "That's good stuff, Syb. They really know what they're doing there. So you're going Friday, huh?" And I said, "That's right, Tex." So he says, "Well, I'm going with you." He said, "I'll tell you the truth -- the reason I want to go there. Those guys that are working for me down on Skid Row. I can't get a regular crew together." He was a vegetable peddler then, with a truck run around four in the morning, and the

winos sometimes didn't show up. He said, "If I can sober them up, I'll make a lot of money. So what I'm going to do is take them all down there and get them all fixed."

So it was with fear and trembling that I looked forward to that Friday night, because Tex pulled up in front of my house in his vegetable truck and standing in the back were eleven winos. I crawled up in the cab of the truck with Tex and down we go to the meeting. There were a few more people there that week, but the full impact of the Saturday Evening Post hadn't hit. But I got to hear the Twelve Steps read, and also the fifth chapter.

At the conclusion of that meeting, Frank R., God bless him -- he was my sponsor and so was Cliff -- reached over and got a bushel of mail that had come because of the article. Hundreds of letters from alcoholics. He looked at that skinny little crowd there with Tex, and his winos, and me, and about fifteen others, and he said, "Well now, we got to get all these drunks down here by next Friday night. So we're going to have to cut this crowd up in sections. And if there's anyone here from Riverside County, come down and get these Twelfth Step calls." Tex went down in front and Frank gave him forty or fifty of the letters to read and answer from alcoholics who asked for help. Then he said, "Anyone from the beaches?" This guy raised his hand, Curly from Long Beach, and he went down and got forty or fifty letters. And this went on -- Pasadena, Santa Monica, and one guy from Fresno, one from Santa Barbara and so forth, until there was one remaining stack of letters, about a fifth of them.

And he said, "I've been saving this stack up for the last because we now have a woman alcoholic. Her name is Sybil. Come up here, Sybil. I'm putting you in charge of all the women." I had to be honest. I went up there and I said, "Well, I'll probably be drunk next Friday. I always have been." And then I said, "What are you going to do tonight? What are you going to say to me that is going to make it different? So that when I walk out that door tonight during the week that I'm out there by myself I won't get those

butterflies and the sweating palms?" I said, "What's going to be different? You got to do something tonight. How can I stay sober for a week? I'd like to be able to go and ring doorbells and bring all those drunks down here. But I haven't read the Big Book." He said, "I know that."

I said, "Truthfully, I haven't read your pamphlet. I haven't felt well enough to read." He said, "I know that. You're not expected to know very much." But he said, "You asked me how you could stay sober until next Friday. Now I'll tell you it's in that Big Book that you haven't read. Somewhere in that Big Book it says that when all other measures fail, working with another alcoholic will save the day. Now I'm going to tell you what to do quite simply. You take this basket of mail and tomorrow morning you start ringing the doorbells, and when the girl answers the door you say to her, 'Did you write this letter asking for help with a drinking problem?' And when she says, 'Well, yes I did,' say, 'Well, I wrote one like that last week and it was answered. I went down there and I looked them over. I didn't find out how they're doing it but they're doing it, and they look good. So if you want to quit drinking as badly as I want to quit drinking, you come with me and we'll find out together.'"

"Oh," I said, "I think I can do that alright." So I took the mail and I went home with it, and I was getting ready the next morning to get in my car and start ringing doorbells, and my brother Tex came over. He said, "I'm going to ride around with you for laughs." Well, it wasn't for laughs. We made all those calls and out of fifty we may have gotten a dozen or more. Some of the letters were from landladies who wanted the guy upstairs not to make so much noise on a Saturday night, and sometimes it turned out the wife had written in for a husband who was an alcoholic, and Tex came in handy there. And some of them were from women who wanted help.

We did take a number of women down and a few men. The meeting grew -- and I mean it mushroomed. But here's what happened. Frank had said, "I'm putting you in

charge of the women." Well, to me that was like a neon sign that was going on and off, "charge, charge, charge." And I could be real big because Frank and Mort gave me a notebook and they said, "Now you write down all the names of women and then you get them a sponsor. And you have the sponsor report back to you. Then, when you look in your notebook, you will know who you gave the call to. You'll have the report on it. That's a good system." And I took it oh so seriously because I'd go down to the mother group -- now we had two, three, four hundred people possibly, microphone and everything -- and as the forty or fifty women came in and they were seated, I could think, "There's Eva. She called on Bonnie. Bonnie called on so-and-so, and Fran, and yeah, yeah." And it checked out perfectly, beautiful. Then I would tell Frank and Mort it was working fine. They'd say, "That's nice. You're doing a good job."

But one night I went to the mother group and a gal came down the aisle and she had six strangers with her and they hadn't been cleared through me. And I walked up to her and I said, "Where did you get these women? You know what Frank and Mort are going to say about the system." She said, "To hell with the system! I have friends who have a drinking problem same as I do, and they found out that I was getting sober and staying sober. They asked me how I was doing it. I told them I joined AA. They said, 'Can I go with you?' I said, 'Yes.'" She said, "It's as simple as that and anytime anybody wants to come to an AA meeting with me for a drinking problem that's the way it's going to be, and I'll never report to you again."

Well, when she told me that, tears came to my eyes and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I wanted to run up to Huntington Park and tell my brother Tex all about it. But he wasn't there, and you want to know why? He had been excommunicated. Because he had started a group. The powers that be, the boys downtown, called Tex on the carpet and said, "Tex, fold the group up. Where's your loyalty to the mother group?" He said, "I'm loyal to the mother group. I'm just sick of picking up guys in Long Beach and driving them thirty-five miles to Los Angeles, so I started a group at the halfway point. Some of my boys are down here tonight. You come out to our group next Friday

night and we'll just kind of visit back and forth." And they said, "No, you're excommunicated," and he laughed and laughed and laughed.

About a month later they called him down. They had a committee meeting and they asked, did he decide to fold up the group and he said, "Nope. Doing fine. Got a lot of the boys down here with me tonight and you're welcome to come to my meeting. It's a participation meeting where alcoholics all talk." Well, at the mother group, we had two speakers, Frank and Mort, for two years. So they said, "We thought you'd say that, so we have incorporated Alcoholics Anonymous in California." And they had. Those that are still around down there will tell you. It took us about a year to laugh that one off, until Tex began to visit the mother group and the mother group members began to visit the Hole in the Ground Group -- it was called that because they met in the basement.

Tex advised me to resign my job of being in charge of the women. He said, "Tell them you're too busy helping your brother with his group and suggest that they have a secretary of their very own." I did that, but how it hurt. But it had been good for me at the time, because I had no ego. My ego had been smashed for so many years, and it was good to feel that I was wanted and needed and that I had this little job to do. It was good for me at the time and it was good that I gave it up.

Several years later, they called me up and told me to come down and be the executive secretary for the Central Office of Alcoholics Anonymous in Los Angeles, and I was, for twelve glorious years. So you see in AA you turn a new page and it's all new again. I want to be a newcomer -- this seniority bit is a lot of baloney. We're all fledglings, learning to fly.

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