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Find a House Where the Truth Is Told

I thought I was alone who suffered.
I went on top of the house,
And found every house on fire.

— Baba Sheikh Farid

The very first AA meeting I attended was at noon, a short walk from my office in Boston's financial district, in a dusty room on the third floor of a building facing Boston Common. I'd looked it up on the Massachusetts AA website, so I knew it was a women's step meeting, though I had no idea what that meant. Kacey, a dear old friend from college who'd resurfaced when I was pregnant with Alma, said it should be a good first meeting to try. "Don't make up your mind until you go to at least a dozen different meetings, though, okay?"

It was so hot and humid that day that my violet dress was stuck to my thighs after the five-minute walk. Only one woman was there when I arrived. It was a small but natural light–filled

room lined with built-in bookshelves on the walls, and windows facing the park. It smelled like the church downstairs and also library books. No AC. She was setting up a small round table by arranging folding chairs around it and placing a book down for each person. I strode toward the table like I knew what I was doing and grabbed a seat.

Slowly, a few more women trickled in. They all seemed to know each other: they exchanged hellos or nodded at each other; some hugged. When the clock hit noon, we began. I followed along as best I could while someone who introduced herself as the meeting chair read an opening preamble, made announcements, read from a few different laminated sheets, then asked everyone to introduce themselves. In total no more than eight women were there, most of them much older than I was, including one who had been sober for an impossible thirty-five years — almost as long as I'd been alive.

I tried to stay open but couldn't stop thinking that this could not possibly be my life.

I've tried to write this chapter at least four times now. I've thrown away over ten thousand words trying to get it right. Trying to cover a topic that feels too big to cover in a single chapter — or maybe even a single book. Because it's not about AA, not really. It's about the whole of my recovery. AA is to my sobriety as my marriage was to my heart — it is an avenue through which I explored a becoming, but not my ultimate destination. A place I pushed against, fell into, examined, embraced, accepted, rejected, and projected all my limitations and smallness onto and the big, beautiful stuff, too.

It was my first harbor after the biggest shipwreck of my life,

which means it will always be invaluable, because without it, I'm not sure there would have been anything beyond the shipwreck. AA gave me space to grow, even when I wasn't all in, because it gave me a baseline — a home I could be sure of — even when I wandered. As Freud wrote in a letter to his fiancée, "How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved." Yes, perhaps that was what AA gave me most of all: a place to be bold, a place to push against.

As I write, I keep questioning my motivation. Many people told me not to broach the subject of AA because it can be polarizing, but that's exactly why I *am* broaching it.

As in politics and religion, the beliefs on both extremes of AA are dangerous and limiting. There are those who live and die by the program and can't objectively hear any criticism without jumping into a dogmatic slogan-slinging fit. And there are people on the other extreme, who believe the program is a cult and only a cult. Neither of those perspectives is helpful or true; reality is always much more nuanced.

I once heard a clinical psychologist talk about his philosophy on antidepressants. He said, "If someone comes to me and they're clinically depressed, it's almost always a good idea to get them on antidepressants. *Why?* Because if they die, I can't help them." At the most basic level, simply because of its current prevalence and reach, AA can be the first point of contact for someone who is in deep shit like I was. And for all its failings and imperfections — and there are many, and they are real — the people in AA saved my life. They helped me get my first thirty days of sobriety; then later, in my third year of sobriety, doing the steps saved me again. And — all the while — *I didn't buy into it all.* I still don't. It's okay for things to be complicated. That's what I want you to hear, maybe more than anything.

Kacey was the only friend I'd talked to about my drinking through the years. We'd been college roommates at Colorado State; she'd arrived my freshman year, two years older than everyone else, having toured in Europe as a model before starting school. We both got fake IDs and quickly realized we drank the same way.

Almost everyone drinks hard in college, but budding problem drinkers have a spidey-sense for each other: we drink with an intent that's only perceptible to someone on the same frequency.

After college, we communicated here and there over email and text but mostly fell out of touch. Around 2008, we reconnected on Facebook and soon started chatting over Messenger. My catch-up: I was newly married, living in South Boston, and pregnant. Hers: she was living in Georgia, she and her boyfriend had a two-year-old daughter, and she'd been sober for almost a year.

I had a million questions, naturally. She answered them without hesitation or pretense. There had been a messy fight between her and her boyfriend that turned into an arrest, a brief stay in jail, and then rehab. Not being able to see her daughter while she was in jail and rehab did her in. She surrendered, she told me. Went to AA, got a sponsor, went through the steps, and hadn't looked back. She was grateful.

Neither of us was surprised things had gone that way.

My curiosity piqued over Kacey's story, as it did over all addiction stories. My bookshelf was proof: memoirs were stacked there like a small, private support group — Anne Lamott, Mary Karr, Caroline Knapp, Stephen King, Pete Hamill. If asked, I

would have said I loved any redemption story, and that would have been true — but in those voices and stories I recognized something specific about myself. I wanted to know every little detail of their inner lives, their missteps, how much they drank, and when and why and what it cost them.

The common thread in all these stories, and in Kacey's, and in that of my dad — who stopped drinking for ten years when I was fifteen — and in every anecdotal tale of problematic drinking (labeled *alcoholism* across the board, always) that I knew of was Alcoholics Anonymous. The twelve steps. If this was your thing, that's where you went. It was a foregone conclusion.

This was the repeated trajectory, as I understood it and as it's most often represented in culture: bottom, surrender, AA, sponsor, steps, recovery, gratitude. It sounded sweet, but...I don't know. Trite. Too simple.

From the beginning of our reconnection, Kacey dropped hints. "Your turn," she'd say with a wink in a text. I'd only hinted to her about the state of my drinking — usually after a really bad night when my defenses were down and I was scared. But she didn't need me to fill in the details for her. She'd lived all the stories, too.

When I slept my way through my train stop the morning after a horrible night and returned home at one thirty in the afternoon to a very angry and worried husband, Kacey heard about it. When I blacked out at my company's holiday party and had to be ushered to my hotel room by my boss and later spoken to by the CEO, Kacey heard about it. When I drove drunk with Alma in the car and woke up terrified, Kacey heard about it. When I ended up doing drugs with strangers and waking up in places I didn't recognize, with no recollection of having gone there, Kacey heard about it. And after Alma's birth when I was

so racked with crippling anxiety that I could no longer eat but yet found myself drinking wine every night even though it just made me worse, Kacey heard about it.

Every time, Kacey would gently but firmly offer what she'd learned: that it would never get better on its own; that this was a spiritual sickness, not just a mental and physical one; that I didn't have to live this way; and that a sober life would be better than anything I could imagine. After each new low, she would ask me if it was enough. Sometimes I said it was, but only because I knew it was the right answer, not because it was the truth.

"Just go to a meeting, girl. Try it."

I listened, but I never thought I would actually set foot in a meeting. I don't know how else to explain that other than to say I just couldn't imagine a reality where I'd actually have to set the intention to stop drinking alcohol. Even when my nights started to match the ones I read about in the books. Even when I got the DUI. Even when I struggled to put mascara on in the morning because my hands shook so terribly. Even when I started to notice a tinge of yellow behind the angry red capillaries in my eyes, an indication of liver damage.

Kacey would share her own experiences. She would listen to my thoughts and answer the questions I'd already asked a dozen times: "What exactly did it feel like to you? How do you feel now? Is sobriety actually better? Why?"

Finally, the morning after my brother's wedding, Kacey said: "I think this is enough of a bottom, girl. Don't you?"

And I did. Of *course* I did.

But I still couldn't wrap my head around walking into a

I told myself I'd find one when I got home from the wedding and settled a little. But in the first few days back, I started to detox — something I hadn't anticipated. I'd had no idea I was drinking enough to experience such a potent withdrawal, or that the worst symptoms came not hours after the last drink but days later. In a moment of terror that perhaps I'd actually caught some kind of deadly flu (since these sensations couldn't possibly be caused by four days without alcohol), I googled "alcohol withdrawal" from my bathroom floor in the middle of the night.

Racing heart, fever, heavy sweating, hallucinations, disorientation, vomiting, severe shaking, seizures. Minus the seizures, everything else was right. I did not have the flu. I was going through a process that I later learned can be fatal.

It took every ounce of my remaining life force just to survive those few days, and I'm still not sure how I did it without a psychotic collapse. I wasn't sleeping at all, but I dragged myself to work and barely managed to function.

Adding an AA meeting was too much to manage, I told myself.

Then a couple of weeks passed, and the horror of what had happened in Colorado started to fade. Though I didn't start drinking again yet, I could feel myself stealthily entertaining the possibility. As the days clicked on, I could feel my thoughts around drinking slide from a very black-and-white "no fucking way" to a little grayer "well…maybe…" and that shook me.

So, I ran out of my office during lunch that day in Boston, dress sticking to thighs, to join women gathered around a tiny table, sharing stories.

those women's shares, but I just couldn't. I felt too young, too smart, too pretty, too complicated.

The part of me that knew I was supposed to be humble kept reminding me to be grateful, not to judge, not to assume, not to hate that this might be my new reality. But inside I was dying. *No fucking way*, I thought, even as I smiled and nodded and said, "Thank you."

"Thank you" when they offered me tissues after I shared.

"Thank you" as they pressed their phone numbers into my palm after the meeting.

I felt a tiny slice of relief having gone, though. While a future that included regular attendance seemed as alien as anything, at least it wasn't all a complete unknown anymore. It had been really hard to get myself there, but I'd done it. I sat there and said impossible words. I could tell Kacey I went. I knew where to go next week. It was something.

I wish I could say I never touched alcohol again after that meeting, but that's not how the story goes, as you've probably figured out by now. Over the next couple of months, I continued to show up there, and I tried out a few other meetings, too. Sometimes going helped tremendously, like taking the edge off a blinding migraine, but other times I felt only more desperate and angry when I walked out.

At first, I went by myself — usually showing up late and running out the door immediately after the meeting ended. More than once, I went straight home afterward and drained two bottles of wine in some kind of out-of-body trance. But usually I picked up a little something helpful. I saw the faces of other people who were doing the same thing. I accumulated

tiny bits of new experiences that — whether I welcomed them or not — started to stick.

For months, I kept everything compartmentalized. Sobriety was a background activity I was working at while I tried to carry on with the rest of my life as if nothing had changed. Except for the people who were invested in my sobriety — Jake, my mom, my brother, a couple of friends — I didn't talk to anyone else about it. I didn't engage with people at meetings. I picked apart people's words when they shared. Occasionally, I promised myself I would stay afterward and try to talk to someone, but every time, I got spooked and scrammed out the door.

Eventually, after drinking my way through a work trip to London and subsequently getting reprimanded by my boss, I decided I'd better dig in a little more. So I went to a new meeting — the biggest one in Boston — and promised myself I wouldn't leave without talking to a woman, any woman, and asking her to be my sponsor.

That night, just like every other time I got over myself and stopped being so picky about how I got help, something changed. At that meeting, I met Allison, who agreed to be my temporary sponsor and eventually became my real sponsor. She introduced me to a whole crew of people and showed me the best meetings.

It was a start.

The most important thing that happened in that first year of going to meetings was this: I heard people tell the truth. Before I walked into that first meeting, nobody — not even my ex-husband, who had lived with me for eight years — knew how much I was drinking. And really, since I'd started drinking

twenty years before, I'd been privately storing away the shame I felt about it, how much I relied on it, how much thoughts of drinking or not drinking had consumed me. Even I hadn't acknowledged those things.

I had created a totally separate internal world that didn't match my outsides, and this incongruence left me feeling terribly alone, even when I was surrounded by people.

I had been carrying around one million heavy secrets and was convinced I always would. As it turned out, those secrets were not just mine.

In the meetings, I saw myself in dozens of different faces: all the houses on fire, to quote the epigraph from the start of the chapter. Nothing is such balm for a broken soul as this — to know you are not alone.

And so, even if I agreed with nothing else, I found others who occupied the same quadrant of hell as I did. I heard people describe my inner life when they shared theirs. And even when I rejected their methods, their honesty alone breathed fresh air into the dark, twisty parts of me that had been so long knotted up.

Over the course of about a year, despite myself, I grew to know a pretty large circle of sober people, mostly in AA and a few who weren't — like Holly. Some became close friends, some were acquaintances, and many were just familiar faces. But by all, I was known as a person who was trying to get sober. A new identity was forming, and its foundation — unlike all the others I'd built and destroyed over time — was rooted in the most naked, honest space of my being.

Even though I hardly ever wanted to go, I started getting invited to sober things. Parties. Dinners. Coffee. 10Ks. Ski trips. People kept saying, "Come hang with us," and even if I didn't go or even want to, it was really nice to be asked.

When I got up the nerve to admit I was angry about everything, uncomfortable as fuck, and sad, they nodded. I didn't have to explain. They told me to call whenever and picked up their phones when I did and didn't ask why I was calling. They smiled when I showed up at a meeting after going missing for a few weeks and didn't say "Where have you been?" but instead "It's so good to see you."

Anne Lamott talks about how at some point in her recovery process, she'd developed relationships with so many people who were invested in her sobriety that she couldn't just disappear anymore. If she went off the radar for more than a day or so, she'd get calls, or people would show up at her house. She called them "The Interrupters." I eventually created a crew of interrupters myself. They kept tabs on Laura. They sent texts and called. They kept inviting me to things. They didn't let me disappear, even when I tried. They kept me accountable, which I eventually learned was a wise and necessary thing, not the insult to my sovereignty I'd once perceived it to be.

I was held. This was not about a doctrine or methodology but about finding a space where I could be seen, if I wanted — and allowed to just be.

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I think I've made this clear, but it was not all a lovefest. Many people in AA drove me fucking crazy. I often found myself pressing the palms of my hands into my eye sockets during a meeting, *willing* someone to stop talking. I walked out of meetings because I just couldn't listen to the drivel someone was spewing for one more second. I wanted to punch people right in the face for being so dogmatic, depressing, or exhausting. Some men were creepy. Some women were petty (and creepy). Sometimes

it felt like the worst parts of high school, all cliquey and insecure. I loathed the idea of being twenty years sober and *still* going to meetings, hearing the same stories — telling the same stories — and the repeated notion that if I didn't go to meetings, I would fall into drinking again. I didn't buy that all my problems were because I was an alcoholic — I found that absurd. I didn't even *call* myself an alcoholic outside of the meetings, and not because I had any illusions about whether or not drinking was a problem for me but because I found it — still find it — punitive. And while the God thing wasn't a barrier for me, as it is for many, I had a hard time reconciling the insistence that this was a disease *and* that this was the one disease that only God could cure. *Really?*

Many times, when I wanted to argue my way out of sobriety, I threw the baby out with the bathwater and told myself the whole thing was idiotic and not for me. I told myself I didn't need it, that I'd do it alone — my way. I decided that all these people were idiots, and I bounced. Inevitably, I would end up drinking again. And eventually, I'd end up back at a meeting or texting/calling someone from AA because I didn't know what else to do.

Again, for better or worse, I didn't have anywhere else to go.

In the year that followed my initial meeting, I was drinking far less, except that when I did drink, it was darker, scarier, and more secretive. I totaled my car. I blacked out and drove in the middle of the night. I never knew what was going to happen anymore once I started. I knew if Alma's dad found out I was drinking like that, I risked losing custody of her. My job was in danger, too.

Another thing happened over time, though. I saw people whom I'd met when we were both new get their six-month,

nine-month, and one-year chips. I saw people get better, or at least stop drinking, which both showed me it was possible and also slapped me awake. After a year, I still hadn't pulled together thirty consecutive days. My excuses were so good and real and justified. And yet, I knew most of my resistance was an argument against being sober, not AA itself.

During this time, I often thought of a phrase my friend Brooke said to me when she was going through a divorce. Her husband had a years-long affair, and when they were separating, he kept picking at certain details of their history — like how they'd spent Christmas ten years before — that seemed irrelevant to her given the bigger picture. She said, "It's like he's arguing about the furniture when the house is burning down."

It occurred to me at some point that nitpicking about AA was also a little bit like arguing about the furniture while the house was burning down. I figured that after I had actually been sober for some time, like maybe a year or two, I could critique things then and decide to stay or go. Until then, the reality was this: meetings provided me with a safe place to be, the people there were the only sober community I had, they were willing to hold me through this process, and I had to admit that *maybe* people who'd actually walked this path might have something to teach me.

So, I started paying less attention to how I felt about AA and more attention to the facts: was I still drinking, or not? I took a few suggestions: soliciting a sponsor, texting or calling sober people every day, going to more meetings. And over time, it grew to be something like a long-term relationship when you've reached that place where your commitment to the thing — the respect and reverence for the larger whole — trumps the inevitable and lesser ups and downs. The benefits started to drastically outweigh the costs.

Specifically, I found a couple of meetings that I liked, and I stuck to them. One was a noontime meeting in Boston that was mostly men. The other was a Saturday-night beginners' meeting in my hometown. I let people get to know me, and I started to know them. I got used to seeing their faces and looked forward to hearing about their lives. I joined, in my own way. And I realized my identification with the community didn't have to come at the price of my individuality.

It's probably the most overused aphorism in AA, but I abide by it — and not only in relation to AA but as it applies to all of life: "Take what works, and leave the rest."

There was so much wisdom and beauty to be gained in those gatherings, and when I focused only on who and what was useful, the rest didn't rub me so badly, or at least I didn't have to take that rub so personally and seriously. I could reject whatever the hell I wanted so long as I was staying sober.

In July 2014, a full year after I'd started going to AA, I went to a sober party in Boston — with Alma and a bottle of vodka in the car. I'd been drinking much of that day, and I can't explain my decision to go to that party with my daughter any more than I can explain any other decisions I made while drinking.

Shocker, but it didn't take too long for people to figure me out. And when they did, all that happened was this: a few people kindly ushered me outside, gathered up my daughter, elected someone to drive, and took us home. A woman whom I'd met only once or twice drove us forty-five minutes north of the city to my home without saying one unkind or judgmental word, and then she drove forty-five minutes back.

She just got us home safe. No questions asked. The end.

It took me a while to even acknowledge what had happened when I saw the people from the party, and some I never had the nerve to talk to again. Writing these words, I can still feel it all over my body: the heat of the shame, the urge to cover my face, my heart sinking into my chest. I know I don't need to feel that way anymore, but believe me when I tell you it's *not* a common occurrence for people to show up drunk at an AA party. And I had my daughter with me. And I drove.

They got me home. They loved me. They loved her.

It's been five years, and it still makes me squirm to think about that night. It was one of those things I thought I'd just lock up in a box and never write about. But I'm telling you because for any kind of critique I could write about these people or this program, there will always be that night, and other times, too, in which I was held so tenderly and without question.

If there is anything it takes to heal, it's that. Find those people — wherever they are. Let yourself be held in undeserved favor.

And I can tell you that it happened that way not because those people are saints but because they learned service in those meetings and in that program. Most of them were probably just passing on what had been done for them, even if they didn't want to. That's what is taught. And because they did it, I lived and was safe, and so was my daughter. Because they did it, I did the same in the years that followed.

So, underneath any junk I may have about AA, there is that night, and all the other moments I was carried, impossibly, and there is the lesson that I will never lose and that will contribute to my life and my peace inextricably, forever: *put yourself in a*

house where the truth is told. I don't care if it's in the rooms of AA or somewhere else. What I know is such a place exists for you — be it a room full of people or in the heart of just one other human to start. Find that place. Go out onto the roof. See all the other fires. And stay there. Stay, until you are carried to the shore of a different life — until you become a house of your own.