The Lois Wilson Story

When Love Is Not Enough

William G. Borchert

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Preface

It's the first Saturday of June, 1983. The thirtieth annual Al-Anon Family Picnic at Stepping Stones, the home of Lois Burnham Wilson in Bedford Hills, New York, is coming to an end. The large crowd in attendance is beginning to pack up for the long journeys back to homes throughout the Northeast, and for some, as far away as Texas, California, Hawaii, Alaska, and London, England.

Dads lift their sleepy children lovingly into their arms while their wives close picnic baskets and gather blankets from the sprawling green lawn that slopes gently from the old brown-shingled house on the hill above.

Most people have spent the morning and early afternoon touring the grounds and visiting or revisiting the house that, as many comment, is almost a historical museum. Lois has filled it with pictures and memorabilia of the programs she and her late husband, Bill, started—programs that are still flourishing around the world, helping millions to find a wonderful new way of life.

On the upstairs walls in particular hang photos and keepsakes of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon members and supporters. The most sought out photos are those of Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, the two men who started AA in 1935. Others want to see pictures of Dr. Bob's wife, Annie Smith, who Lois called one of her dearest friends and greatest inspirations, and, of course, Anne Bingham, who helped Lois organize Al-Anon in 1951. Anne Bingham, Annie Smith, Dr. Bob, and Bill have long since passed on.

The visitors gaze in awe and talk in hushed tones of respect for those who built the pathway along which they now walk to sobriety. The scene resembles a Hall of Fame, in a way, except these fading photos of men and women have nothing to do with a mere game of sport. Here are people who truly won at the challenging game of life.

It's now time to go back outside, where Lois introduces the AA, Al-Anon, and Alateen speakers for the day.

The recovered alcoholic speaker describes himself as a successful advertising executive in his early forties. His bouts with booze had led to loss of family, friends, good jobs, and good health, but after a stint on park benches, several rehabs, and nine years of sobriety in AA, his gains now far exceed his losses.

His wife, the Al-Anon speaker, attests to all the pain, despair, and humiliation. Only today, their three children sit before her on the lawn trying to hold back tears as they smile at a mother who now yells far less and loves them so much more.

The Alateen speaker is a very nervous and very attractive high school sophomore with long red hair and braces. Her mother is still drinking alcoholically, but she and her father are coping better through their programs . . . for now anyway.

The talks are moving to say the least. They are honest reflections of lives shared to help others identify and recover from the very same illness.

The speakers are finished, and it's time to pull up stakes. One senses a touch of sadness mixed in with the warm good-bye hugs and kisses among the hundreds of men, women, and children here for the day. It seems most don't really want to leave.

These visitors to Stepping Stones come from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all nationalities. They are young and old, healthy and ailing, well off and not so well off. And they talk openly and willingly about their experiences and about alcoholism as a family disease that can touch anyone—butcher, baker; lawyer, policeman; hairdresser, housewife; rich man, poor man; pilot, priest. But now they are sober in AA, recovered in Al-Anon and Alateen, and each one seems to emanate an indescribable sense of joy. And even on close inspection, that joy is not feigned. It is very real.

A few begin to straggle off toward their cars parked in the nearby field. Most line the porch of Lois's home to bid farewell to a woman they worship, a woman more than a few feel may not be here next year. For Lois Wilson is now ninety-two and quite frail. She walks with a cane and was forced to give up her driver's license last year. Still, she doesn't seem to have lost one iota of her mental alertness and wit, which she uses mainly to poke fun at herself.

Yes, *worship* is a very strong word. I know. Yet, as I stand here next to the old stone fireplace in her living room on this uplifting June afternoon, I am actually witnessing it for myself.

I first met Lois several years ago. By then my wife, Bernadette, had come to know her quite well. We visited often and Lois spent a number of Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays at our home, where she enjoyed our nine children and they thoroughly enjoyed her. In fact, one Thanksgiving holiday, our kids gave her a beautiful, purring, white-and-rust-colored kitten. Lois loved her and promptly named her Borchey in their honor.

I always knew this gentle and humble lady was greatly admired, but not until this moment did I realize the depth of that admiration. This was my first Al-Anon Family Picnic, the result of my wife's constant nagging at a guy who always thought himself too busy for such all-day affairs. This was also my first chance to observe people kneel before Lois, kiss her hands, present her with tokens of their love, and hug her with tears streaming down their faces.

As I watch, I wonder what effect this kind of adoration, this kind of worship, can have on someone, even someone as humble and self-
deprecating as Lois Wilson.

It's now late in the afternoon. The last visitor has said good-bye. Even the volunteer cleanup committee has dispersed. I'm seated on the couch with Lois. Harriet Sevarino, her longtime housekeeper and caring friend, has brought us both some tea and cookies, remarking that Lois always overdoes things and that "people don't have the sense they're born with not to see that you're wore out, and if they really cared they'd leave sooner than later."

Lois smiles up at her. “Thank you for the tea and cookies, Harriet,” she says. Harriet shrugs, then looks at me. “I don’t mean you, Mr. Bill. You know that. But maybe you can talk some sense into her. She don’t listen to me no more.” Then she shrugs again and heads for the kitchen.

As Lois and I talk, I’m dying to ask the question that’s been bugging me for almost two hours. So, finally, here it comes.

“Lois,” I begin somewhat falteringly. “All these people kneeling down before you, kissing your hands and feet, telling you how you saved their lives, restored their families. Even God Himself would be flattered by such adulation. How must it make you feel?”

She turns and looks up at me with that cute but patient smile that says, “You’re probably not going to understand, but I’ll tell you anyway.” Then she reaches out and touches my hand.

“It’s not me,” she answers softly. “I’m only a symbol. It’s what Al-Anon has done for them, and I simply represent.”

I want to ask more, but she has answered it all. Here is a woman who truly knows herself and her own significance—and insignificance. If humility really is truth, then I was witnessing true humility. My mouth hangs open, but no more words come out. Then she gently pats my hand and says: “Now drink your tea and eat your cookies before Harriet comes back and gives us both the what-fors all over again.”

Lois Wilson may not have been a “liberated woman” according to today’s definition. “Renaissance woman” might suit her better. Indeed, if style, grace, intellect, and capacity for rebirth are the hallmarks of such a woman, then Lois Wilson qualified in every sense.

She believed deeply in commitment. That belief, and her undying love for her husband, are what kept her with Bill. That belief succored him through his raging torment with alcoholism and supported him in his struggle to recover. And then, after he and Dr. Bob founded AA, she came to understand how she herself was affected by the disease and reached out to help others in order to help herself.

While Lois went on to build Al-Anon into a worldwide fellowship for spouses and families suffering from the effects of alcoholism, there are many recovered alcoholics today who would quickly tell you that without Lois there would be no Bill Wilson, and without Bill Wilson there would be no worldwide fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and the many millions it continues to save.

To that enormous compliment Lois would respond in the very same way: “I am only a symbol.”

Lois Wilson died on October 5, 1988. My wife and I and our whole family, together with millions of other families around the world, miss her dearly. But while she is gone, her “symbol”—her spirit—will always live on through Al-Anon and the many other Twelve Step programs she and Bill inspired.

1
When Will It End?

It was just past five-thirty when Lois Wilson squeezed out of the jammed subway car at the Fulton Street station and elbowed her way through the rush hour crowd up the stairs and into the clamor of downtown Brooklyn under a steady downpour. It was almost dark by now, and the street lamps and colorful store lights glistened in the puddles.

She slid her purse up her arm to open her bumbershoot, the colorful term she liked to call her umbrella, perhaps because it brought back warm memories of her mother and the many "old-fashioned" words she refused to discard right up to the day she died. That was Christmas night, 1930, just two short years ago. Tonight it seemed like yesterday.

Lois's lovely face looked pale and drawn as she paused for a moment to take a deep breath. She had hoped to leave her job at Macy's department store earlier that afternoon, but the onset of the holiday season coupled with staff cuts due to the Depression had every sales clerk doing double duty. After a moment, she turned and headed down Atlantic Avenue toward the quiet residential section of Brooklyn Heights not far away.

Before she had gone two blocks, the heavy rain running off the umbrella and onto her shoulders and back made her coat feel like two tons of wet cotton. That, and the pounding headache she'd had since early this morning, brought tears to her soft brown eyes.

"When will it end?" she thought to herself. "When will life get just a little bit easier?"[1]

The din of the downtown area lessened perceptibly as Lois turned into Smith Street and quickened her pace toward Clinton Street and her home six blocks away. But the headache was getting even worse. She glanced across the road and noticed that Slavin's Drugstore was still open. She hesitated, squeezed her fingers against her nose, then reluctantly crossed and made her way through deep puddles to the neighborhood pharmacy—reluctantly because Slavin's was one of her husband Bill's hush-hush bootleg establishments in this era of Prohibition. And while Barry Slavin, the rather handsome bachelor who owned the pharmacy, feigned ambivalence to Bill's "drinking problem" and never said a word about it, Lois felt rather uncomfortable that he knew so much about the personal problems it created in their marriage. She knew he heard stories—both from Bill and the neighborhood gossipers. In spite of all this, she liked him.

Barry was just pulling down the shade on the front door and placing the "Closed" sign in the window when he spied Lois approaching. He smiled and opened the door halfway. She could see that most of the store lights were already out.

"I was sneaking off early, what with the rain and all," he confessed. "But if you need something, Lois . . ."
"Thanks," she replied. "I . . . I have a splitting headache. I could use some aspirin."

“Sure.” He pulled the door all the way open. Lois entered. Then he locked the door behind her but left the lights out. It was a rather large store with the pharmacy to the rear, a long soda fountain counter on one side, replete with black leather stools, and cosmetics and other sundries across the way. Barry directed Lois to a seat at the soda fountain, then headed for the pharmacy to get the headache pills.

What happened next was something Lois Wilson never shared with anyone for many years, and only then with her husband and her closest friends. It remained one of her deep, dark secrets, perhaps because she couldn’t honestly say whether she had unconsciously invited the incident or was so dispirited at the moment that she simply let it happen. Either way, it filled her with guilt, anger, and shame.

Lois was a product of her time, born near the turn of the century. She was raised by a loving but spartan disciplinarian father and deeply religious mother to be a lady of purity and grace. Certainly the Roaring Twenties had a bit of an influence on her, but now it was the difficult thirties and social morality had come roaring back, tightening behavioral standards for troubled, poor, and struggling Americans. Prohibition was just one example. “Loose women” were few and far between these days, at least in Lois’s small and shrinking world. It wasn’t that she was naive. She simply believed that when a man made “a pass,” particularly at a married woman, it should lead the lady to question her own actions and sense of values rather than respond to such false flattery, which could only exacerbate the situation.

But here at the soda fountain in Slavin’s drugstore on this wet and chilly December evening sat a tense, fretful, lonely, and attractive forty-year-old woman beaten down by recent disappointments, including a husband whose love she questioned and whose out-of-control drinking she could no longer understand or deal with. So when Barry exited the pharmacy and walked toward her with a remedy for her headache, she was not only vulnerable, she had few defenses against any remedies he had in mind for the other problems in her life.

His warm, innocuous smile put her off guard. He went behind the soda fountain, filled a glass with water, then came back around and stood next to her. He opened his hand. She took the two tablets, then the water, and swallowed them. He smiled again, said she could pay next time, and handed her the full bottle of aspirin tablets. She put them in her purse.

“It’s all the stress and tension, isn’t it, Lois?” she recalled him commenting as he moved behind her and began to gently massage her neck and shoulders. It felt wonderful, so tingly and relaxing. No one had done this for her in a long, long time—maybe not since the night after their motorcycle accident when Bill realized her neck was so sore she couldn’t sleep. He began to rub it softly and seductively and, despite all their aches and pains, they made love in that old dilapidated hotel room in Dayton, Tennessee.

She closed her eyes and moved her head and shoulders slowly back and forth with the motions of Barry’s strong hands, hoping he wouldn’t stop right away. She could smell the fragrance of his expensive cologne, not the harsh, nosebiting stench of Bill’s bootleg liquor. She could feel her muscles loosen as the tension seemed to ooze down her arms and out through her fingertips.

His left hand continued to massage her neck as his right hand began to move slowly down her back. He said something like, “I don’t understand. A beautiful woman like you letting yourself get into a situation like this.”

Lois didn’t reply, but suddenly she felt the tension returning. She heard Barry continue: “We both know Bill’s problem. And you working all the time to support him. Never going out having any fun. It’s admirable, I guess, to sacrifice like that, but . . .”

She could feel his breath close to her ear. She opened her eyes. His face was next to hers. Then he kissed her gently on the cheek.

Lois’s first reaction was panic, but only for a brief moment. Then she suddenly, almost involuntarily exploded into rage. She shoved him away and leapt from the stool. The pharmacist appeared stunned, wondering how what he thought was an unspoken yes could turn in the flash of a second to a resounding no. “How dare you!” she recalled screaming at him. “How dare you!”

Her hand came up to slap him. Perhaps it was that shocked, I-got-caught-in-the-cookie-jar look on his face that stopped her. Or perhaps it was her own sense of guilt. Either way, she just glared at him for a moment, then turned and charged toward the door. It was locked. She pulled and yanked at it until Barry, now shaken and embarrassed, finally came over and flicked the bolt. Lois flung the door open and stormed out into the still-pouring rain, her unopened bumbershoot clutched tightly in her clenched fist.

Lois half-ran, half-stumbled along those next few tree-lined blocks to Clinton Street, sloshing through deep puddles, almost bumping into people who looked askance from under their umbrellas, probably wondering what emergency might have befallen this poor lady on this terribly dank night. The tension had now given way to sheer anger and was rapidly turning into shame and self-reprisal for allowing such a thing to happen. Her mind was spinning. She couldn’t collect her thoughts. Maybe she didn’t want to collect her thoughts, not just yet anyway.

Her low-heeled black leather shoes were filled with rainwater by the time she reached the long cement steps that led up to the front door of 182 Clinton Street, the large, impressive brownstone that was her birthplace and childhood home, and where she now felt like a sponging guest who had overstayed her welcome, even though she knew this not to be true. But feelings often have nothing to do with truth. The simple fact was that she and Bill had lost everything over the past four years because of his drinking, and they had no place else to go. So, at her widowed father’s behest, she swallowed her pride and moved back into this stately old house. Bill had little choice. Besides, it seemed that he was seldom there anyway once he was able to gin up enough money to get started on another toot.

She grabbed the newel on the stoop railing and stood there for a long moment trying to catch her breath. The rain mixed with her tears as she stared up at the house and its dark, curtained windows. She was soaked inside and out, and her hair hung like a wet mop under the

drenched pillbox hat that now lay almost flat on her head. But she gave no thought to her appearance. It was her insides that were churning, her heart that wouldn't stop pounding, and her stomach that was on the verge of nausea. A chill ran through her, so she turned and pulled herself slowly up the steps to the double glass door entrance still decorated with her mother's hand-sewn lace curtains. Fumbling in her purse, she found the key, then dropped it from her trembling fingers. After several tries, she finally opened the door and entered the large dark foyer as if in a trance.

As much as she resisted them, her thoughts began to come together, and she started to weep once more. Then she yanked the wet pillbox hat from her head and flung it against the wall. It took a few more moments for her to turn on the foyer light and move slowly down the hall and into the kitchen, her clothes dripping water behind her.

Her mind was racing now. She yanked the string on the overhead globe light, grabbed the teakettle, and filled it at the sink. Then she moved to the stove. The water running down her hand from her soaked clothing fizzled the flame on the first matchstick. It took two more to light the gas. All the while she kept thinking, "It can't go on like this. It can't."

She knew instinctively that Bill wasn't home. She would have either tripped over him in the doorway, or he would be lying unconscious on the hall stairs, unable to make it up to their bedroom on the second floor. That's the way it was. That's the way it had been since . . . she tried to remember, but too many thoughts were coming all at the same time.

The chills started again, this time running deep into her bones. She had to get out of these soggy things before she caught pneumonia. First the coat. She hung it on a hook above the large washbasin to let it drip dry. Next the shoes. They needed to be stuffed with newspaper so they wouldn't shrink too much. The newspapers were piled next to the old vegetable bin in the corner. It took only a few moments to do the job, but it distracted her mind from the things she didn't want to think about. Now, upstairs and out of the rest of these wet clothes.[2]

Her bedroom flashed memories almost every time she entered it, particularly since moving back into this old house . . . God, what was it . . . almost three years ago now? She couldn't believe it. This had been her room growing up on Clinton Street. She shared it for a while with her little sister Barbara, because, well, after that horrible accident, somebody had to watch over her every night. Being the oldest and most dependable, Lois was assigned that task. She didn't mind. She loved Barbara and felt so deeply sorry for her.

Lois was eight years old when it happened. She was playing near the lake at the family's summer place in Vermont when she heard screams coming from the cottage. They were so terrifying she was afraid to go inside. Barbara, who was two, had found a vase filled with long, decorative stick matches and was playing with them under the kitchen table. She managed to strike one on the table leg, and the beautiful colored flame that flickered from the match immediately set her white lace dress on fire. Fortunately, Annie the cook heard the child's agonized screams, pulled her out, and covered her with towels to douse the flames. Annie was burned herself, but she saved Barbara's life.

It would take some years of treatment and skin grafts to fix the deep burns on her sister's face and hands, but she eventually recovered surprisingly well. Meanwhile, Lois would lie here in her bedroom every night watching her baby sister toss and turn and often wake up crying. She'd bring her a glass of water, stroke her soft brown hair, and perhaps read her a story until she went back to sleep.

As Lois slipped out of her dripping dress and undergarments, she thought how ironic it was to be back in the same room, taking care of a drunken husband in the very same way.

She put on her warm cotton bathrobe over a flannel nightgown and was brushing her hair in the dresser mirror when she heard the teakettle whistling through the empty house. Hurrying downstairs, she stepped around the puddles in the hallway, making a mental note to wipe them up as soon as she had something to eat. The nausea had gone, and she knew she needed something in her stomach to keep that pounding headache from coming back.

Suddenly she spied her pillbox hat. It was leaning against the far wall where she had flung it. As she picked it up to hang it on the nearby coatrack, the face of Barry Slavin flashed before her. She stood there frozen, her jaws clenched. Then, telling herself she didn't have to deal with this anymore tonight, she turned and headed down the hall.

The wind was whipping the rain against the kitchen windows. Lois sat at the white cast-iron table bobbing the tea bag in her cup and staring down at the vegetable sandwich she had thrown together on whole wheat bread. If only Mother were here now, she thought. How much time there would be just to talk, to get things out, to listen to her pearls of wisdom cultured from years of experience and a deep faith in her God. Matilda Burnham was a kind, loving soul who had great and usually very practical insight. It was she who told her daughter that Bill was sick, that his craving for drink was the devil's curse, and that God Himself must find a way to shake it from him. But in the meantime, if Lois truly loved her husband, she must do everything in her power to help him, to pray for him, to encourage him to seek the Lord.

Lois believed Bill truly loved her mother. At least he always said so and showed her great respect and consideration when he was sober. But then why wasn't he there when she died? Why wasn't he there for her funeral? Why didn't he express much deeper regret and remorse four days later when Lois bailed him out of the drunk tank once again? She knew what her mother would have said. A man who does this kind of terrible thing to a wife and family he loves has to be a very sick man who needs a great deal of love and help himself.

But how far must one go? How far do you let a man drag you down, force you to wallow in the muck he brings home? Did her mother really understand what she had gone through? What she was still going through?3 Her father, on the other hand, would just as soon have Lois leave Bill. "You can't help this man anymore," he would half-shout at her each time Bill roared off on another spree. And now here they were, living with Dr. Burnham in his home, Lois witnessing the pain and confusion in her father's eyes each time she returned from work, fearful of what the night would bring. And here was Dr. Burnham, with no idea how to comfort his own dear daughter.

There only conversation topic now was his forthcoming wedding to a lady he had known and was seeing on occasion even while Matilda lay dying. This had upset Lois greatly, but how does the pot call the kettle black when the pot has no answers for herself and is currently sponging off the kettle? Soon, however, Dr. Burnham and his wife-to-be would be moving into their own place, and at least that source of household tension would come to an end. But then who would help her, she thought, when Bill made another of his feeble attempts to stop drinking on his own and began to shake and sweat? Who would inject him, as her father frequently did, with a strong sedative or give him a dose of that horrible smelling paraldehyde to calm his tremors?[4]

Then again, maybe she was worried for absolutely no reason. The way things were going, Lois felt almost certain she would get a call one night and learn that Bill had been found dead in the streets, hit by a car, beaten to death, or dead from an overdose of liquor. Such tragedies were in the newspapers every day. Every single day. She grabbed her forehead and wished her mind would stop racing like this.[5] Lois glanced at the kitchen clock. It was almost quarter to eight. Perhaps she'd take a hot bath and then start that new Somerset Maugham novel that had been on her night table for weeks. Her bones actually ached when she cleaned the few dishes at the sink and put them back in the cupboard. She turned off the kitchen light, left the one on in the foyer, and went back upstairs to fill the tub.

It was well past midnight when Lois came to with a start. A loud noise from downstairs had awakened her. The bedside lamp was still on, and the novel she had been reading lay across her chest. She sat up and listened. Then she heard another noise, like something being pushed across a carpet, followed by those familiar grunts and groans and loud curse words. She didn't have to hear anything more to know that her husband had finally arrived home, and in his usual condition.

Lois slipped out of bed, put her bathrobe back on, and walked slowly down the stairs to the entrance hall. Bill was lying halfway into the parlor. He had knocked over a lamp table, broken the shade and bulb, and was reaching for a nearby chair to pull himself erect. The trouble was, each time he clutched at it, he pushed the chair further away. His "goddams" and "Jesus Christs" were getting louder as his frustration grew. Lois switched on the hallway light to see better. What she saw was nothing worse than usual, but the brighter light stunned her husband momentarily and made him fall back down on his side.

He looked up at her. Bill, too, was soaking wet. There was a cut and several scrapes on his face, his nose was running, and saliva drooled from his mouth, across his chin. That terrible stench of cheap booze filled her nostrils. Suddenly she watched as her husband reached his arm up toward her, smiled that stupid drunken smile, and mumbled in a hoarse whisper: "There's my lady. She's always there. Come on, Pal. Give your boy a big kiss."

The shame and revulsion from the incident at the pharmacy, the pounding headache she had suffered all day long, the ever-present pain of losing her mother, and now looking down and seeing the Bowery being dragged into her home once again—it all seemed to strike her at once. She couldn't hold back. Lois later recalled slumping to her knees, leaning over her

husband, and pounding him on the chest and arms, lightly at first, then harder and harder. She grew hysterical, saying, “I lie for you. I cover up for you. I can’t even look my own father in the face because of you. Every time you get drunk, I’m the one who feels guilty. Like it’s my fault. Because I couldn’t have children. That I’m not a good enough wife. But it’s not my fault! It’s not my fault! You can go to your bootleggers, your speakeasies. Where can I go? Tell me! Where can I go?”

The next thing she recalled saying haunted her for some time after that. In fact, Lois said, it haunted her right up until the day Bill finally found sobriety in Towns Hospital and began to get well.

“I thought tonight,” she recalled shouting through her tears, “that maybe I would never see you again. But you don’t even have the decency to die.”[6]