

First-Year Sobriety

When All That Changes Is Everything

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Chapter One

When All That Changes Is Everything: The First Ninety Days

Here are four brief stories about a variety of people in the first stages of their recovery. You'll go first to a large urban hospital and meet a group of alcoholics and addicts in "detox," men and women used to hearing themselves called "hard cases." Then you'll meet Susan, a soft-spoken young woman in the Midwest who's had a hard time convincing her family (and sometimes herself) that she is an alcoholic. Next you'll meet Pablo, a streetwise twenty-year-old man from Detroit who's spent his life trying to be Superman. And Charles, a seventy-year-old newly sober gentleman from Boston who often finds himself feeling like a child.

As different as these people may seem from one another, you may also get a glimmer of what unites them. And what may apply to you.

We're in a brightly lit room in a New York hospital. About twenty-five people, more men than women, dressed in hospital-issued blue pajamas, sit around two long fold-out dining tables that have been pushed together. Miguel breaks the silence.

"This place *sucks*," he says. A tough-looking guy in his mid-thirties, Miguel is full of submerged energy, like a volcano waiting to blow. He stares down at his hands clenched in his lap. His voice is so quiet he can barely be heard, but the people around the table who are listening (not everyone is) seem to be catching it. "I hate this place. I can't stand it. I want to run out of here every minute. I feel like I'm gonna *explode* if I don't get out of here." His glowering eyes lift to scan the room, then drop back down to his hands. "What the *hell* good is hanging around you bozos supposed to be doing for me?"

Sam, a black man of greater bulk than Miguel but with a far more easygoing manner, responds, "Hey man. Stick around to play Monopoly with me. You're the only guy here as good as me at it."

People laugh. Miguel is caught off guard. He lets out a long low *whoosh* of air, which seems to calm him down a little.

"I know what Miguel means," says Theresa, a dark woman who tends to take charge of these sessions. "This sobriety is a bitch. I mean, what did we always do before? We got high. That was how we handled anything and everything. My feelings make me wanna bust out of my skin, too, sometimes. Sometimes all I wanna do is go out and cop and get high." Theresa frowns, then pounds the table with her right fist, which startles two or three men nodding off at the end of the table to her left. They look up at her in surprise.

"But it doesn't frigging *work* anymore," she continues, "and we don't know what the hell else to *do*. So we're here to learn something. I mean, we're not here on vacation, man. Right?" A chorus of "Rights." "Jesus!" Theresa starts to laugh, turning again to Miguel. "I mean—*look* at you, man! I saw you when you were out there. You were a mess. I couldn't understand a word you said, and now here we are, sitting around like all this was normal, talking like regular people. *Something* the hell is goin' on here. It's better than it used to be. Stick around for it, man." She smiles at Miguel again, softens her voice. "Stick around."

An old man named Joseph looks down with watery blue eyes at his spotless pajama shirt and then looks up, bewildered. “I’m even *clean*,” he says, mostly to himself, baffled that anything like that could have happened.

Jorge begins to rock back and forth in his chair. Theresa is annoyed. “Stop that, man! You like a crazy person!” These “group sessions” tend to make Theresa edgy, and she doesn’t like it when anyone acts up. But Jorge won’t stop rocking back and forth. Everyone in the room looks at him, some people out of boredom (a number of people in here dread “Group” more than anything else they’ve got to sit through in detox), some people out of curiosity. A man of indeterminate years—maybe forty-five, maybe sixty—Jorge has never opened his mouth in the whole two weeks he’s been here. He rocks back and forth more vigorously now, his face a frown of concentration. “What the hell you doing?” Theresa is getting angry.

Jorge opens his mouth and makes a sound. Finally, the people around him hear what he’s saying. “My name is Jor-ge”—he draws out the sounds “Hoor-haaay” as if testing his voice, jaws, tongue to see if they work. With a further effort of concentration, he manages, “and—I—am—an—alco—holic.”

Those people who are paying attention suddenly applaud. Even the bored ones look at Jorge and clap their hands. They know something special has happened, even if they aren’t sure exactly what. Theresa smiles and gets up out of her chair to hug Jorge, who doesn’t smile, but stops rocking in his chair.

Susan sits by the bay window of her living room, her troubled look at odds with the peacefulness of the rolling Illinois landscape.

“I think the most unnerving thing,” she says, “is that so many people never thought I had a problem with drinking. They just don’t believe I’m an alcoholic. Sometimes I think even people in AA look at me as if I don’t belong. I imagine everyone thinking, ‘What’s *she* doing here?’” Susan pauses for a moment, looks out the window. “Sometimes this scares me. I mean, maybe I’m *not* an alcoholic. That’s what it seems everyone wants me to believe. It’s certainly what my mother said when I told her. ‘Oh, Susan,’ she said, ‘you’re always making problems for yourself. No one from our family ever had a drinking problem. You’re just blowing it out of proportion.’”

Any suggestion of crisis or a negative feeling, Susan says, had always been pushed down, minimized, never talked about in her family. “My dad is a retired army officer,” Susan continues. “The fact that we’re black—and that he had a black family in the midst of the all-white midwestern town we lived in—made him feel we all had to try harder. Be an example or something. We weren’t allowed to fight, express anger, sadness—act in any way other than what he decided was ‘normal.’”

Susan heaves a big sigh. “So I became the best little girl in the world. The best little girl grew up, got good grades, did everything right. And felt less and less human with every passing year. Less and less like there was any possibility of finding out who

I really was, much less being it.” Right after college, Susan married a “respectable” man going through medical school—“someone my father might have picked for me”—and tried hard to become a model wife and later, after one, then two, then three kids (“My husband’s religious background makes him shun birth control—sometimes I think he wants me to populate the world”), a model mother. She discovered, on some evenings out with her husband’s doctor friends and their wives, that she could be a model drinker too.

“It was amazing what a few glasses of wine could do,” Susan says. “It was like it didn’t take so much energy and willpower anymore to be nice, charming, say all the right things. Wine was a miracle; a few glasses and I was all those things without trying. And I was a *nice* drinker. Funny, open, charming. Something in me released—relaxed. It wasn’t such a chore anymore to be alive.”

Susan looks out the window again. “I never drank more than three, maybe four glasses of wine at a time,” she says. “I mean, I wasn’t out of control. The idea that I might have a problem with drinking never occurred to me. And if anyone had suggested I was an alcoholic, I would have questioned their sanity. Alcoholics were people who slept in the gutter. I was doing just fine.”

Certainly the outer parts of Susan’s life continued to appear “fine.” “I don’t have much of a war story, really,” she says. “It’s enough to say that wine was so terrific at dinner that I figured, why wouldn’t it be just as terrific at lunch? Or in the middle of the afternoon? Or after my husband left in the morning for the hospital, the two littlest kids were taking their naps, and my oldest was off in nursery school? These were just ‘time out’ periods for me, I thought. And nobody but me had to know about them. Afterwards, a few swigs of mouthwash and I was okay, good as new. . . .”

Susan eventually realized she wasn’t okay, not because anything terrible happened—“It’s a miracle that something terrible *didn’t* happen to one of the kids, with me half-drunk all day”—but because of an inner despair that the wine couldn’t seem to touch anymore. “After a few years, drinking wasn’t making me feel better. It was deepening my depression, not lifting it. I started to feel suicidal. Something was terribly, terribly wrong with me, and I couldn’t imagine what it was.” Susan made a secret appointment with a therapist she’d overheard one of the neighbors talk about, a woman who turned out to be an alcoholism counselor. “Talk about a Higher Power,” Susan says, smiling for the first time. “That was about a month ago.”

Ever the obedient little girl, Susan followed the therapist’s suggestion that she try AA in conjunction with therapy. “At first, I was appalled by everyone baring their feelings so publicly—in front of strangers! But then, I don’t know, after a week or so of meetings, something started to release in me.” Her brow furrows. “I guess I wouldn’t have kept this up if I weren’t ready for it. But I’m still pretty baffled by what’s happening to me, what I’m feeling. Strangely, I don’t miss drinking all that much now. What’s throwing me is what’s happening to me inside—feelings are starting to come up I never knew were there.”

Susan sighs. “Nobody in my family has a clue what’s going on. My husband treats me like I’m some good-natured but confused little girl. He thinks it’s nice that I go to AA for ‘support,’ but he’s convinced this is just a passing phase and I’ll snap out of it. He couldn’t possibly bring himself to think he’d married an *alcoholic*. As he keeps telling me, he’s never seen me drunk. I’m too much of a lady for that. . . .”

Susan smiles again. “You know why I think I keep going to AA? Not only because I know that drinking was beginning to worsen my depression, but because it gives me people to talk to, to listen to. People who keep telling me I’ll learn who I really am if I just ‘keep coming back.’ What an amazing idea—that I might actually have a self independent of my family, my parents, my husband, the narrow goody-two-shoes life

I've always had! I feel like a sneak, sometimes." She laughs. "All the people who are so patronizing to me in life—'Oh, isn't it nice that she has a group of friends to talk to!'—don't realize how revolutionary this may all turn out to be. Wait till they see the *real* me." Susan laughs again. "Whoever that is."

"I've got some idea that when I hit ninety days I'll get a revelation," she continues. "God will suddenly boom down from the clouds at me and let me know: '*This* is who you are.' And then I'll start being whoever that is. But my recovering friends tell me that probably won't happen. Whatever road I'm on is longer and stranger than I think it is. *Better*, too, they keep saying.

"Well," Susan says as she looks out the window again, "I'll have to see for myself."

Pablo sits sullenly in his chair.

"Who the hell decided that 'ninety days' was the magic number?" he says. "I mean, why not sixty-four days or eighty-seven days or one hundred and sixteen days?"

Pablo is long, lean, and about twenty years old. His hair, dyed a stark "neo" black, is cropped off about mid-skull, shaven from there down his neck. Three gleaming silver studs adorn his left earlobe. Taut with energy, he's not someone who's happy about having to sit still. "This Twelve Step shit gets me, sometimes," he says. "Those *slogans*—it's like frigging first grade." Pablo continues in a whiny falsetto, wagging his finger like a schoolteacher: "Easy Does It—But *Do It!*" His eyes roll up and he groans.

"And Christ, all this *God* shit. I'm supposed to turn my life over to *who?*!" He groans again. "Are they crazy or what?" Pablo has been in and out of "the rooms" a half dozen times. "Never made it past thirty days," he used to say proudly. But he's got seventy-five days now, a record, and he's not able to hide a slight tone of amazement: "Okay, it's pretty bizarre that I'm off my usual shit for this long," he says softly. "I mean I was mainlining at thirteen, a fuckin' heroin addict all my life. Pot was like Coca-Cola to me—something you sucked up as a little kid. And, hell, booze—getting drunk was just something you did, like breathe."

Pablo grew up and still lives in one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods of Detroit. "I was a goddamn little Superman," he says. "Nothing I wouldn't do." High on any number of drugs, Pablo would jump from five- or six-story buildings onto moving buses, trucks, and cars, "scaring the shit out of the passengers"—somehow, miraculously, without ever getting hurt. He was a master thief and a persuasive panhandler. He was also something of a lady-killer. "Had a rep," Pablo says, beaming, now. "Had some ladies woulda *paid* me for it, you wanna know the truth."

But here he is now, off drugs and booze for seventy-five days. What's it like for him?

For a moment, his eyes soften a little and it looks as if he'll answer. But this isn't territory he's used to, and he doesn't like talking about it. "I don't know," he says. However, the next day, his seventy-sixth without drugs or booze, he decides to let out something of what sobriety is beginning to mean to him.

"It's not like I was *scared* or anything," he says. "It's just—I don't know—it just wasn't the same anymore. I kept doing stuff and not getting really zonked out like I used to. It's like there was this part of me I couldn't *get* to anymore. I couldn't put out the light." He pauses, looks down at his hands, curls them into fists.

“You know, I have this dream sometimes. I’m in the ring, pounding and pounding away at some chump. . . .” He throws a few quick jabs and uppercuts into the air. “Once I almost joined a boxing gym, thought I’d go pro, you know? I’m a pretty tough mutha.” His eyes flash for a moment, then grow distant. “Anyways, so, this dream . . . There I am trying to knock this guy out, and he’s still standing there, getting the shit beat out of him, but he doesn’t go down. No matter how hard I hit the guy, his head flips back, the sweat flies, my arms are getting so friggin’ tired, and the guy’s still standing. His eyes are open, and I take a good look at him still standing there and I get this freaked-out idea that, you know, he’s me. I mean, he doesn’t really look like me, but it doesn’t matter. Somehow I know he’s me anyway.”

Pablo’s defenses gather; the wall shoots back up again for a moment. “Don’t, like, do any shrink shit about this, huh? It’s just some crazy stupid dream. Doesn’t mean anything.” He looks back down at his hands, now, as his fists slowly relax into open palms. “Except it does mean something, I guess,” he says quietly. The wall recedes and he opens up a little. “I get so fed up sometimes. So damned tired. I keep thinking there’s gotta be some other way, you know? I look around at other guys, even guys older than me, and I feel like I’m older than them sometimes. Yeah, I know, I’m supposed to be twenty, but sometimes I feel like I’m a hundred. I’m tired of this shit.” He looks up. “It’s like, if the guy can’t get knocked out, maybe it’s time for him to get out of the ring. Maybe the guy even wants to.”

Suddenly his eyes flash again, his energy roars up—time for a mood change. “So, hey, man—back to first grade! And I got friggin’ *seventy-six days*.” He smiles, a softer light in his eyes. “Never had that before.”

Charles adjusts his tie and laughs a little.

“I don’t know why this should pop into my mind,” he says. “But I saw a comic strip this morning, something about a thirteen-year-old girl and her travails—you know, she’s ‘average,’ not too pretty, has a bratty older brother, no boyfriend, she’s exasperated by her parents, hates school, the usual stuff—and she’s just had her first period. Pretty progressive little comic strip! Anyway, she’s strutting around her messy room in the first two frames: ‘No more Barbie dolls!’ she says, ‘no more stuffed animals, no more kid stuff—move over, Madonna, here I come!’ That sort of thing. And then, in the last frame, she looks around at the wreckage of her room, all her dolls and teddy bears strewn across the floor, and a little bubble of thought appears over her head: ‘*Wait a minute . . .*’”

Charles’s blue eyes are thoughtful, sad. “Here I am,” he says after a moment, “nearly seventy years old, comfortable financially, supposedly all grown up—and I feel just like that thirteen-year-old girl. I miss my teddy bears, my cradle. I miss—” He clears his throat and assumes his more usual stance, that of a competent, elegant, well-turned out “older” man. But he can’t entirely hide his sadness, his feelings of loss. “I miss alcohol—sometimes it can knock me over, how much I miss it. It’s like my best friend died. Or I’ve been kicked out of the only home I ever knew. And now I’ve got to fend for myself, according to a God-knows-what new set of rules.”

He rubs his hands together and frowns. “Who’d have thought ninety days of abstinence would do this to me—turn me into this frightened, vulnerable little child? God, it was never like this for me before. *I* was the one people thought had all the answers; *I* was the person who seemed to have it all together.” Charles was a respected art historian and appraiser; his eye was one of the most trusted in the business. “I’ve always rather enjoyed the bowing and scraping I got, even from some of the better-known curators. I liked leaving the impression that my intuitions—not only about art but about life—were somehow inexpressibly subtle, omniscient. Even,” Charles’s eyes gleam, “godlike. I always *seemed* to be someone virtually untouchable. At least that’s the image I assiduously—and frankly, quite successfully—managed to cultivate.”

“Seemed” was, indeed, the operative word in his life, Charles says. “I knew, secretly, that I was never really who everyone thought I was. I had whole dark spaces in me I kept secret. Whole lives I lived when I drank that would have shocked my Martha’s Vineyard friends. For one thing, being gay—I mean, I suppose nearly everyone in my life *knows*, but there’s this sort of discretion about it: hostesses at dinner parties still provide me with ‘eligible’ partners. Most of whom,” Charles says merrily, “are lesbian. But nobody knows the debauches I’ve been through drunk—the dark bars and parks and . . . well, the important point is that I’m finding ways to let some light and air in on all that now. I’m discovering I can actually begin to *talk* about those dark spaces—to complete strangers I wouldn’t have dreamed would be in my life four months ago!” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“Sometimes I look around ‘the rooms’—that’s the generic term AA people use for meeting places, isn’t it?—and I think, how extraordinarily well behaved everyone is! And how god-awful it would be if, somehow, through some weird science fiction quirk, we were all returned in an instant to the selves we were when we drank. The chairs thrown, the sulking, the yelling, the crying, the fights. . . . None of these people would have gotten along with each other for a minute! I wouldn’t have given the time of day to seven-eighths of the people I now regularly spend hours with.” Charles snorts an abrupt laugh. “Now I find myself baring my soul to them!”

“Them,” Charles says, covers a good big territory. “Meetings in Boston are quite a cross section, I can tell you. And my sponsor, God help me, is a *plumber*.” Charles laughs. “A damned good one too. I use him regularly. Interesting phenomenon to have your sponsor fix your pipes. There’s a metaphor there somewhere. . . .” Charles evidently feels the need to apologize for his “classism”: “I know I’m a snob. You would be too, if you had the kind of blue-blood thrashing of an upbringing I had. But—well, things have changed.”

Charles recounts an experience he had the previous morning, leaving his elegant building on one of the most exclusive streets of Boston’s Beacon Hill.

“There’s a vestibule in my building, the door to which is almost always locked, but which had been left open by some negligent tenant the night before. A little man, reeking of alcohol—his red puffy face tucked into his arm, his body in a heavily drugged fetal position—had camped out on the marble parquet floor. At first I was terrified. I’m not a young man, and I’m an awful coward. But this little creature was dead to the world. As I saw, drunk as he was, how little a threat he posed, I got terribly self-righteous. Did a mean, bellowing Orson Welles: ‘Get the hell out of my building!’

“The little creature opened his eyes, painfully, slowly, and, God, I remembered all those hundreds, thousands of mornings when I felt exactly as I knew he felt then. This sudden softening came over me. This little, smelly, pathetic drunken man and I were the same. I found myself saying, ‘I know how you feel. I’ve been there. I used to drink like you do.’ The man looked up at me, slowly registering what I’d said, and I saw this indescribable sweetness in him—this *humanity*. He was no longer something to be discarded, which is, frankly, how I’d always seen homeless drunks before. He was—well, *me*.”

Charles’s eyes mist for a moment, then clear. “Of course, like me, he was expert at psyching out and taking advantage of a soft touch. He’d evidently interpreted my expression of empathy as an invitation to stay—in any event, he still hadn’t moved. I again told him to get out of the vestibule, but I sounded a little less like Orson Welles. And I understood something very clearly. I’ve never met an alcoholic, recovering or not, who didn’t ache for escape—escape from the sense that he had to be something other than who he was. We all ache for someone to say, ‘Just be yourself. You don’t have to be anything you aren’t.’ All that drunk wanted was to be left alone. To be himself. In a funny way, that’s what I realize I’ve always wanted too. It’s just that I’ve discovered thirteen or fourteen vodka martinis a night aren’t the way to meet that goal anymore.”

Charles smiled. “I’m full of stories, aren’t I? It’s amazing to suddenly feel like I’ve got so much I want to *tell*. Ninety days of no booze, and look what’s become of me. You can’t shut me up.” Charles looks bemused. “Who’d have thought it? Who’d have thought there was somebody here—somebody ready and willing to appear, after all these years, without the help of alcohol! I don’t know how I acquired the ability to empathize with thirteen-year-old girls and homeless drunks, but thank God that I have. There’s life beyond vodka. You couldn’t have convinced me of that before. Not in a million years.”

The people you’ve just met are basically random selections from an enormous and variegated garden: They constitute only a few of the blooms, some of which you may find exotic, others familiar, of newly planted, newly experienced sobriety. Different as they are from one another—and as they may be in certain respects from you—some of the feelings they have do seem to be similar. Being confused by the sudden onslaught of feelings in the new clarity of sobriety, feeling like a vulnerable child, mourning the escape alcohol or drugs meant even while accepting that the escape had become self-destructive (Pablo’s dream made it clear that Pablo was the one getting beaten up), having a dawning sense of who you might be without alcohol and drugs, and, perhaps most of all, realizing that you don’t have to go it alone—you *can* reach out for, and get, help: These are all themes common, if in different degrees, to everyone we’ve met, and to many, many other people in the first days of sobriety.

Our friends may be a bit *too* much alike in one respect, however. With the obvious exception of Jorge (in the hospital detox unit), they’re all bursting with things to say, stories to tell about themselves. Not everyone working on his or her first ninety days of sobriety is quite this energetically articulate. As one sixty-six-year-old recovering man who’d just celebrated fifteen years of sobriety told me, “I never opened my mouth in the rooms for my first eight years; I kept going to meetings, but I was too frightened to actually speak in a meeting all that time.” During those eight years he had gradually

managed to open up one-on-one with a few recovering friends, and eventually to a sponsor he felt he could trust, but the idea of saying honestly how he felt in the relative public of a Twelve Step meeting was, for a long time, terrifying to him. “I wouldn’t recommend my path of keeping silent to other recovering people,” he said. “But it shows you that not all of us are ready to let it all out so soon.”

Mary, a single mother (with a ten-year-old daughter) whose drinking and pill-taking stepped up dramatically when her husband left her—“one morning he woke up and decided he didn’t love me anymore, and that was the last I saw of him”—has experienced a similar terror at AA meetings in her first month and a half of sobriety. “What do I know? I don’t feel I *have* any ‘experience, strength, and hope’ to share yet. Everyone else sounds so good—like they’ve got all the answers. I just feel shell-shocked.” Many other recovering alcoholics and drug addicts echo Mary, especially about her feelings of inadequacy.

Jim, a construction worker in Vermont, says, “I feel like such an ass now, when I think of what a big shot I tried to act like in the bars. Now I don’t feel like I know anything. The AA meeting I go to is small, everyone gets to know each other real well, and they won’t let me shut up completely. But sometimes all I can do is say my name and that I’m an alcoholic, and rely on that trusty phrase ‘I’ll just listen today.’”

Physical Sobriety

The people you met earlier in the New York detox—Miguel, Sam, Theresa, Joseph, and Jorge—as well as Susan, Pablo, and Charles, haven’t talked about another big reality that looms large for most, if not all, people in early sobriety: the *physical* differences they feel now that they’re not drinking or drugging. The onset of physical sobriety sometimes leads to the biggest revelations, joys, and frustrations of anything people first experience when they put down alcohol and drugs.

We could spend a whole book on this topic alone. Recovering addicts and alcoholics rarely come into recovery in terrific shape: The sheer physical abuse to which many of us have subjected ourselves, often for years, can take any number of tolls. We’re often war-torn—perhaps battling the HIV virus, or diabetes, liver damage, or intestinal problems—in addition to trying to adjust psychologically to life without drugs or alcohol. Issues about medication, such as whether or not we should take “mood-altering” drugs even when they’re prescribed, all constitute a vast and complicated area. Simply how we *feel* about the physical changes we experience in sobriety can run the gamut from terrific to appalling.

We’ll be touching on many of these dilemmas throughout the rest of this book. For now, it may help to focus on a few specifics, just to get us into the ballpark of what many recovering alcoholics and addicts first go through physically when they stop picking up. Let’s just concentrate for the moment on two areas that seem to be especially absorbing (and exasperating) to most recovering people, especially in their first ninety days: sleep and food.

Sleeping Sober

A couple of people in their first ninety days illustrate two common experiences of sleep in early sobriety:

- “You know that Twelve Step acronym HALT, which is supposed to remind us not to get too hungry, angry, lonely, or tired?” asks Jonathan, a middle-aged businessman with five weeks of abstinence from drugs and alcohol. “I want to scream every time I hear that damned thing. I can’t go to sleep. I keep trying, but I can’t make it all the way through the night. It’s like my body won’t let me. It’s so damned baffled that it didn’t get its usual dose of cocaine or booze, it’s like it’s in revolt or something. ‘Give me what I want!’ it seems to be saying. And what it wants is to pass out, which is the only way it knew how to go to sleep before. And when I do sleep a little—God, the dreams! Such crazy dreams. Does anyone else grind their teeth like I do when they sleep? Sometimes I think I’ll grind them down to the gums. Then, when I wake up, tossing and turning, I feel like I’ve got to hang on to the edges of my bed, just to keep from jumping out of my skin. There’s some kind of weird physical detox going on, that’s what it feels like, and, man, I’m exhausted.” Jonathan snorts disgustedly. “And what does my sponsor say? ‘Don’t drink or drug, and go to meetings. Lack of sleep never killed anybody.’” He smiles evilly. “I know. I’ll start calling him up in the middle of the night at five-minute intervals to make sure he doesn’t get any sleep either!”
- Andrea has had a very different experience. “I’m a nurse,” she says, “and I was easily able to get tranquilizers to knock myself out at night—mixing them, I thought, very carefully, with just the right amount of wine. What I’d taught myself to do was pass out on cue, not sleep. But now—I can’t tell you the difference. Not that it was easy getting used to sleeping sober at first. It wasn’t. I probably went through a week and a half of purely physical withdrawal, and I was like a crazy woman. But then, I’ll never forget it, I had one pure long night of real sleep. It felt so different. My dreams were different. On the rare occasions I could remember any dreams when I drank and drugged, they were so fantastically strange. I went to places like the moons of Jupiter, saw creatures with three heads, got caught in science fiction fantasies. In fact, I used to be proud of my dreams! ‘Normal’ people seemed to dream about their bosses and husbands and kids and stuff. I was dreaming about shooting around the solar system with a Cyclops on my left and a three-headed dog on my right. Now I realize I was having drugged hallucinations! In the two months I’ve been off drugs and booze, my dreams suddenly seem softer, more normal, more connected to my waking life. They’re even sort of helpful; I can see how the sober mind sort of works things out in sleep. At least sometimes it feels that way.”

Andrea closes her eyes and lets out a long, contented sigh, then continues, smiling. “I love going to sleep now. I even wonder sometimes if I’m not just replacing alcohol and drugs with sleep—if I’m not addicted to going to bed! But, no, it’s different. I feel like I’m healing myself now. I get up feeling actually refreshed by sleep. It’s unbelievable; that never happened before.” Andrea laughs.

“I’m also going to bed every night at about 9:00 p.m. God, I’m only thirty-five. You’d think I was eighty-five. But my sponsor says it takes real work being conscious all day. I can be forgiven if I get tired so early. And, hey, why not enjoy it!”

Jonathan’s and Andrea’s experiences represent two poles of newly sober people’s experience with sleep. But other people have other experiences. Certainly there appear to be differences in adjustment between recovering drug addicts and recovering alcoholics. If you were a heavy cocaine user, you’ll more than likely have a different experience (more like Jonathan’s, on evidence) than if you were mainly battling alcohol or Valium. If you were used to medicating yourself, for example, with downers after spending the day on uppers (what Andrea calls “the Judy Garland grind”), it’s not surprising if you’re not able to fall blissfully off to sleep your first night or two off drugs. As Andrea puts it, “For years, I got used to hitting myself with a sledge hammer. I thought that was normal. It was a big shock to experience something more gentle. It’s taken me time to adjust.”

Eating Sober

What about another basic: food? Few recovering people don’t experience some pretty illuminating if not downright strange realizations in this area.

A couple of examples:

- “My pattern of eating when I drank was simple,” says Mark, a forty-two-year-old accountant in New York. “I’d drink gallons of water, coffee, and juice in the morning because I was so dehydrated. God, there was nothing like that awful thirst. I used to keep a liter-sized soda bottle full of water next to my bed every night. After I passed out, my thirst would usually wake me up several times, and the bottle was almost always empty by the time I finally got out of bed, still dying for water. So breakfast was liquid. Lunch was, too, only a different kind: vodka-and-grapefruit, usually, at this Irish bar I went to on the stroke of twelve noon, escaping from my office as quickly as I could. ‘Lunch’ could last up for one and one-half to two or three hours, depending on whether my boss was also out on a lunch date. As I got to know our clients and their degree of longwindedness, I could predict almost to the minute how long he’d be out. Anyway, I’d slog through the rest of the day, head back to my Irish bar as soon as the second hand passed five o’clock, drink my way to midnight or however long I could last, then fall into a cab and be let off at an all-night Chinese takeout place a block away from my apartment building. I’d suddenly be ravenous for the greasiest, gloppiest stuff they had. I’d get a gallon container of fried God-knows-what, drag it home, and pig out, half-conscious, until I was ready to pass out. Pig out and pass out, that about sums it up.”

Mark lets out a pained laugh. “And now—I don’t know. Now that I’m not drinking, it’s like I’ve discovered food for the first time. I’m eating more than I ever did. Partly it’s anxiety. Partly it’s to fill up the void that booze used to fill. Partly it’s because, for the first time, I can actually *taste* the stuff. I can’t seem to stop eating! My sponsor and friends in the program tell me not to worry. I’m doing just fine, they say, as long as I don’t drink. I can put this problem ‘on the shelf’ for the time being. But I can’t help worrying. I’m turning into a blimp. How

am I gonna attract anybody? I mean, now that I'm not drunk all the time, you know, I wanna, like, eventually anyway, meet some women. Nobody would take a second look at me the way I am now. . . ."

Mark pauses for a moment, then continues, his voice a bit softer. "I am a compulsive person. That's become absolutely clear. I'll latch on to anything I can to get out of myself: food, sex, sleep, you name it. Sometimes I feel like a fake. Sure, I've given up booze, but what's the point if I keep acting out in every other way? It's hard to believe things will get better just by not drinking and by going to a meeting every day. I feel like how I am now is how I'll always be. But maybe I'll be able to 'turn this over' too, like everybody keeps telling me to do. I went to an Overeaters Anonymous meeting once, and freaked out. I mean, I identified with everybody there, but I knew it was too soon for me to get involved. I guess I've accepted that it's all I can do right now to keep from drinking every day. People in AA tell me not to get into a relationship or make any big changes in my first year, and just trust that, in time, all this stuff will get dealt with." Mark pats his considerable belly, and looks up, a half-pleading look in his eyes. "I just wish I had a little less to deal with!"

Isabel's dilemma about food is in some ways the opposite of Mark's. She's hyperconcerned about nutrition, and a stickler about the amount (low) and quality (high) of what she eats. "It's outrageous that recovering alcoholics and drug addicts aren't told more about nutrition," she says. A sixty-five-year-old grandmother who works part time for a health clinic that specializes in nontraditional preventive healing and medical practices, Isabel holds some fierce opinions on this topic. "All right. I know that when I drank, which I did for over forty years, I couldn't have cared less about good nutrition; I didn't have a clue what it was. Then I started working at this clinic about five years ago. I think it was God readying me for the changes he wanted me to make that put me here. Not that my eating habits changed right away. But

I was learning about good diet—high complex carbohydrates, lots of vegetables and fruits, very little animal protein, no added fat, sugar, or salt—and at least I began to see the wisdom of it, even in my drunken or hungover state!" Isabel's anger gathers steam.

"Now I go to meetings and I see Oreos and coffee—sugar, fat, and caffeine—and I think, heavens, it's no wonder so many people can't stay off booze and go out again. With the mood swings you go through anyway in sobriety, dosing yourself regularly with sugar and caffeine is like rubbing salt—another no-no, come to think of it!—into a wound. And the smoking! How can a recovering alcoholic call himself recovering when he's consuming nicotine, caffeine, and sugar all day? It makes me so mad to see all these people making it so needlessly difficult for themselves!"

This is a familiar and galling rage for Isabel. "The stupidity and the—the *injustice* of it! Don't these people know what they're doing?" She shakes her head in exasperation, sighs, "But what can you do?" and manages to calm down a little. "My sponsor tries to remind me that imposing my view of the world on everybody isn't going to do anybody much good, least of all myself. 'Let go and let God,' she says. 'Live and let live.' 'Don't take anyone else's inventory.' And

she keeps saying that any anger, even justifiable anger, is dangerous.” Isabel pauses for a moment. “That does get through to me, about the anger. Because when I let myself get into one of these rages, I do automatically think of having a drink. And then I think, how can I set myself up as this nutritional know-it-all when I’m so ready to start ruining my own health with alcohol?”

Isabel confesses to another difficulty. “It’s this rage for perfection. I mean, stopping drinking meant to me that I was supposed to stop everything. For the last couple of years I’d already been eating—when I ate at all—fairly healthily. In fact, I’d put a lot of hope into good nutrition, thinking it would allow me to drink the way I wanted to. But now, here I am, a sixty-five-year-old grandmother, and I think sometimes I might be anorexic. Isn’t that only fourteen-year-old girls? It’s just that—well, any extra ounce makes me depressed. I’m determined to be as thin as I can be. So, sometimes, I don’t eat. . . .” But Isabel keeps talking about it. “My sponsor has been through this too. I realize it’s her love and care, and the love and care of my friends in AA, even if they do drink coffee and eat Oreos, that are saving my life. They all tell me I don’t have to be perfect. And that I can eat when I’m hungry.” Isabel pauses again. “I don’t know. It’s hard. ‘One day at a time’ . . .”

What we experience physically in sobriety poses any number of challenges, and there seem to be few easy answers. Certainly, there’s a great deal more to explore in this area. And while we can’t hope to say anything definitive in the space of this chapter or book, we’ll be investigating numerous additional physical challenges in sobriety as we go on. But in the spirit of the Twelve Step slogan “Keep it simple,” it might be appropriate to pause for a moment and simply take stock of what your physical sobriety *feels* like, without getting too complicated about it. A simple awareness of the physical changes you’re experiencing, or even acknowledging that you *are* a physical being, can, on the most basic level, be healing—perhaps revelatory—even if, as in Isabel’s and Mark’s cases, you may not come up with any easy solutions or answers. Isabel said later that just giving vent to her rage about poor nutrition, just admitting that she feared she might be anorexic, has been healing in itself. Admitting your own awarenesses can have the same effect.

Celebration Anxiety

The first ninety days of sobriety can be an Alice-in-Wonderland explosion: Suddenly, the world may somehow appear simultaneously starkly real and fantastic, a new place with new rules. But even if your first days and weeks of sobriety do not strike you with that kind of dramatic force, there is almost always some sort of awakening: a kind of dipping-your-toe-into-the-water, an acquaintance with some surprising new ways of living and feeling. Anxiety can alternate with feelings of well-being, boredom, rage, sadness, and hilarity (Twelve Step meetings can be very funny, even if you may not always know what everyone’s laughing at).

A good deal of anxiety, however, often relates to completing that magical-sounding “ninety days.” Twelve Step programs sometimes do, wittingly or not, put a good deal of pressure on completing “ninety and ninety” (ninety meetings in ninety days), the period of abstinence traditionally suggested to newcomers to see if sobriety is what they want.

It's the rare recovering addict or alcoholic who doesn't feel some trepidation about facing what comes after this period; you might call it the "Now what?" syndrome. Let's take a closer look at this common anxiety, not least because it will prepare you for the future "Now what's?"—like when you complete your first six months, year, two years, and so on of sobriety. One day at a time.

"I was not what you'd call your average, willing, recovering drunk," states Hal, a thirty-three-year-old Minneapolis man. "I remember going to a couple of AA meetings when I still drank; in fact, I went drunk, although not so drunk that anyone could tell right off. In fact, they used to call on me when I raised my hand. No doubt with profound regret afterward. I'd tell them what a bunch of tight-ass schoolmarms they all were, and that what they really needed was to tie one on and get laid. I don't think I was everybody's favorite speaker.

"But . . . well, even I knew when I was through. Or at least the courts did." Hal's drinking had lost him everything: his wife ("She didn't even bother to try to get alimony—hell, for the last five years, I was the one mooching off her; she knew there wasn't a chance in hell of getting any money out of me"), his job as a salesman for a plumbing supply company ("The only plumbing I ever paid attention to was my own"), and his home. He was living on the streets for about a year before getting thrown into and out of jail and into a detox. "I was in jail because I got mad at this jerk bartender in a fleabag bar who wouldn't serve me a drink even after I offered to wash his goddamn window. I threw a rock through it instead. Cops came, and jail and detox dried me out."

Hal doesn't know why this was his "bottom"—"It's not like it was much different from two hundred other scenarios I'd gone through in the last ten years of my drinking life"—but something in detox got through to him. He didn't have much truck with the "damned God talk" he heard during the in-house AA meeting he went to, but one day a guy came in to chair the meeting, a guy who'd been in the same detox himself, had had a job Hal used to have, lost it, and got it back again. "He was like, I don't know, the 'me' I never could be. He was a success. Every time before now when I saw some guy I thought was successful, it was like he came from another planet. Couldn't relate. But this guy, I don't know. I could relate." The speaker ended up becoming Hal's sponsor and taking him to his first AA meeting out of detox.

Hal responded at first like a grumpy kid. "I didn't want to drink. I had to admit, that was amazing. But I sure as hell didn't want to do whatever the hell the 'program' wanted me to do. Not that I exactly knew what that was. I mean, I still can't make head or tail of the Twelve Steps. It's all Greek to me. But, I don't know, it's like I didn't want all those sober people pulling me in. I kept wondering what their angle was. What they wanted out of me. What the deal was."

The deal, Hal's sponsor told him, was simply to give it ninety days. Don't drink for ninety days, and go to a meeting every day for ninety days. The only AA slogan that Hal could make any sense of was "One day at a time." "I could figure that out," Hal says. "That's how I used to drink. Every day, one day at a time." As his ninety days began to go by, one by one, a week, two weeks, a month, two months, two and a half months, Hal experienced something strange and new. "My sponsor said it was self-esteem. I suddenly had some. I guess he was right." But as the ninetieth day drew near, Hal began to feel uncomfortable, really uncomfortable. Scared. Even, he admits, terrified. "How could I

keep this up? It was like somebody hoodwinked me into staying off booze for ninety days, but now, hell, I couldn't continue this. Not drink for the rest of my life? Who was I kidding? I couldn't keep this up, that's what I kept telling myself, I couldn't keep it up. . . .

Hal says that on the morning of the ninetieth day he came very close to picking up a drink—right after he'd picked up his welfare check. “I felt wacko,” he says. “On one hand I felt proud: I'd done it, I'd stayed off booze for nearly three months. Never managed to do that in my whole adult life before. On the other hand, I felt, hey, I must be cured. If I managed to stay off booze for three months, it must be that I'm not an alcoholic! On the other hand—whoops, that makes three hands. Anyway, I also felt like it was time to show everybody what a mess I really was. Yeah, I guess that was the strongest feeling. It was like I'd been pretending to be this good guy, this model nondrinking good guy, for a whole ninety days. But nobody realized what a jerk I still was. I'd show them. I'd let the whole goddamn world see who I really was. I'd get blitzed. . . .”

All these feelings buzzed in Hal as he went to his check-cashing place, got his hundred some-odd bucks, and rounded the corner to a liquor store. Right next to the store was a pay phone. In Hal's pocket was a quarter. He got an idea. “I figured I'd call up my sponsor and let him know what a fuck-up I was. You know, really let him have it. Goddamn chump, I thought. I'd show him I had *him* fooled.” Hal dialed his sponsor at work and delivered the news that he was a “fuck-up” and was about to get blitzed on his ninetieth day. His sponsor calmly told him that he'd never met an alcoholic, drinking or nondrinking, who didn't at one point or another think he was a “fuck-up,” and that Hal could do whatever he wanted to, but he might want to consider going to a noon meeting two blocks away before he made any final decisions.

For some reason, Hal did so. And the meeting spoke to him in a different way than a meeting ever had before. For one thing, the secretary asked if anyone was celebrating ninety days or a “birthday” of a year or more. Hal found himself raising his hand and confessing that this was his ninetieth day. Much applause. Hal felt himself going red. And feeling pleased. Later, during the sharing, people talked about how uncomfortable they always were when they faced an upcoming “birthday.” “I feel like an impostor.” “Don't know if I can keep it up.” “Always hated all this positive attention—felt like there were too many expectations on me.” “Can't accept hearing anything good about myself.” In other words, Hal's soul was being bared by a young schoolteacher, a kid in graduate school, a smartly dressed career woman, and a middle-aged mailman.

“I wasn't the only one who felt the way I did—scared of doing something good for myself,” Hal says. “Amazing stuff. I could—more to the point, I *wanted* to—see what day ninety-one might be like, without picking up.”

I've given you Hal's story because so many recovering people have difficulty with “birthdays” or “anniversaries,” whether of ninety days, one year, five years, or twenty years. “I'm so used to thinking bad stuff about me,” Hal says, “that the hardest thing I face in sobriety is accepting that there might be something good in me.” Even people who rejoice in reaching milestones like ninety days—and they constitute a large group too—generally understand the struggle Hal talks about. The struggle is complicated. Even

when you *think* you're celebrating, sometimes old negative feelings can be gnawing away underneath. For example, Lois's experience on reaching ninety days:

"Celebration is called for as you reach a birthday or anniversary," Lois says. "My lover, Rosa, got sober a year before I did, and she was as happy as I was when I reached my ninety days. It seemed like a miracle. We'd spent so much time in bars; that's where we met, after all. And all our women friends still drank. It was so much part of the lesbian scene, at least for the people we knew. So when she took me out to dinner and had a special cake ordered, it was great. But—I don't know—I got so manic. I had this horrendous headache all through dinner. I felt such incredible—*pressure*, I guess. And I realized there had never been another so-called celebration in my life, past birthdays, graduations, getting this or that award, when I hadn't also felt this same kind of pressure. It was like I couldn't accept I was doing it for myself—that I was doing it for me. It all felt like some performance I was doing for someone else's benefit. . . ."

Lois says that Rosa, her friends in AA, and her sponsor all have been "incredibly supportive, telling me it's okay to feel whatever I feel, including terrible," even when circumstances (like reaching her ninety days) seem to make negative feelings inappropriate. "I know I'm struggling with old childhood issues. I had to *behave* all the time; it was like everything I did, I did for my mother, never for me. So it's hard to accept that sobriety is something I'm doing for myself. . . . But then I think, who else could I be doing it for? It only *works* when I realize I'm doing it for me."

Yet another perspective about birthdays and anniversaries in sobriety, especially the special ninety-day one, comes from Jacob, a fifty-year-old professor at a small New England college. "The most reassuring thing I've ever heard in AA," Jacob says, "is that the person who's been sober the longest is the person who got up earliest. It takes the pressure off anniversaries for me to realize that. Sobriety only exists in the moment, right now. That's all I need to remember. Sure, it's nice to realize you've made ninety days. It's a great feeling. But life has a way of continuing. And you find yourself living ninety-one days. And ninety-two. And, if you're lucky, a hundred. And more. . . . Assumptions break down; a whole new way of looking at life and time starts to grow. Nothing is more healing to me than this realization: It's what's going on right *now* that counts."

It won't surprise you to hear that the anxiety, joy, fear, anger, boredom, awakening, and confusion we've just seen—the power of which can be so overwhelming in the first ninety days—don't disappear after three months. As your vision of the world slowly changes, as the prism of your perspective shifts, these feelings may start to change; they may spill into each other, intensify, fade, reemerge differently. But, on the evidence of hundreds of recovering people, they won't go away.

How do you deal with all this now that you've decided not to erase everything with a drug or a drink? If you go to Twelve Step meetings, you'll often hear one of two simple answers: "Work the Steps" or "Work your program." What does this mean exactly? How do you make sense of the "program" in your first days of sobriety?

As with everything else, recovering alcoholics' and addicts' experiences with and reactions to Twelve Step programs vary. But the question about the "program" and doing the "Steps" is an urgent one for nearly everybody who starts going to Twelve Step meetings. Let's tackle it head on.