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# Susanna’s story

I think I was born an alcoholic. The first time I ever took a drink I couldn’t control it. I got completely drunk, made a fool of myself, and had to be put to bed. I was six years old at the time and the bridesmaid at a fancy London wedding. There was a lot of champagne at the reception which I ‘mistook’ for fizzy apple juice. Even though I remember it tasted disgusting, I still persisted in going to every reception guest to ask for a sip.

The next time I took a drink at 16 was no different. I remember the day exactly. I was at a party being held by my parents. After years of feeling uneasy, self-conscious, and fearful, I had finally found the answer to my worries. I could talk to people and feel happy and relaxed. I had something to say. Other people were interesting and seemed interested in me. Years of anxiety and shyness dissolved in glass after glass of sweet red wine. I fell in love with it. As at the wedding reception, I got completely drunk, was sick everywhere and had to be put to bed. Apart from getting the vomiting under control, that was to be the pattern of my drinking for the next 20 years.

I was a binge drinker and, although I didn’t drink much more during my school and early university years, each time I did I got uncontrollably drunk. In my third year at university, I joined the Army as a cadet. I joined because I was broke and dossing on people’s sofas—as spending my money in the pub was somehow more important than finding somewhere sensible to live and paying rent. I finished university and went to Sandhurst Military Academy. I passed off the square under Academy arrest because of a drink-related incident and was posted to Germany. It was at that point that drink turned on me. I felt very ashamed of the Sandhurst incident, and as I unpacked my bags in the mess at my new posting, I was determined to turn over a new leaf. That lasted all of three days—and then began the cycle of binge drinking to blackout and bar antics, followed by waking up filled with shame, fear, and remorse whilst determined ‘never to touch a drop again’. It was a pattern that dogged me for the next 7 years.

Despite being an emotional wreck, I continued to work hard as in some way it justified my drinking. Operational tours, professional development, and promotion came in due course. I had had a couple of brushes with the psychiatric team, but nothing lasting or serious. I tried AA for a short time in 1994, but then I got posted and work got busy, so I didn’t sustain it and fell back into my old drinking habits within six months. I felt so isolated and lonely in my drinking. I couldn’t tell anybody about it, but I knew things weren’t right. I could go on the wagon for period of time, but it was always followed by yet more binge drinking. Eventually I gave up even trying to control it. Regimental Dinner Nights were the worst and just became a damage limitation exercise—but I found that if I delayed starting drinking until everybody else was well oiled, then my drunkenness could pass unnoticed. By 1998, I could barely hold things together. I was working hard and putting on a brave face to the world which was so far from the person I truly felt inside. Eventually I just snapped and—having long ago resigned myself to the fact that I was going to die young and tragically—I realised that I didn’t want to die, and the only alternative then was to do something really serious about my drinking.

I made some calls and managed to get a place in a treatment centre in Maidenhead, which was very AA and Twelve-Step-focused. We were bussed to AA meetings every night. By the third meeting, I was able to say my name and admit that I was an alcoholic. Nobody told me I was an alcoholic. I came to that conclusion myself and totally accept it. To me it is as much a part of me as the colour of my eyes. It’s just something that is me.

I was there for six weeks—eating like a horse, smoking thirty fags a day, crying, and going to AA meetings. Afterwards I went back to work part time whilst I worked on my Twelve-Step programme with a mentor (‘sponsor’ in AA parlance). I am so grateful to my Commanding Officer at the time for just leaving me to it and letting me get on with my recovery. Even before I went into the treatment centre, I had a posting order to Northern Ireland, and I was twelve weeks sober when I boarded the ferry at Stranraer. Once in Northern Ireland, I attended the weekly RUC AA meeting in Holywood and got a list of all the other AA meetings in the Province. I got a security map and worked out which meetings were in ‘safe’ areas and then, with the help of the Unit Welfare Officer, I got the green light from the G2 cell to attend meetings in these areas. From that point on, any night I was not on duty, I booked out of the guardroom and went to an AA meeting. I continued my Twelve-Step Programme work. This time, my sobriety was my top priority, because if I couldn’t be there for myself, how could I be there for others?

I have since been posted within the UK and to Germany and Cyprus and have been on operational tours and exercises. I feel that, if anything, my sobriety has made me a more effective human being and a better employee in Defence. My head is clear, and I sleep well. I state on my vetting form that I attend Alcoholics Anonymous and have recently successfully applied for a firearms licence … although I am still a rubbish shot on the ranges! I still go to AA meetings wherever I am. I have been to meetings in Cyprus, Gibraltar, Germany, America, Italy, Spain, Nepal, the Netherlands, and Argentina. I enjoy my work now, but it’s not my top priority. My sobriety is.

My last drink was Remembrance Sunday 1998, and I have been going to AA ever since. I have met very few currently serving members in AA. I wish there were more. AA really is so accessible to serving personnel.