

Joe's Woes

This is the fifth in an intermittent series of personal stories which first appeared at the back of the first and second editions of the Big Book, **Alcoholics Anonymous**, but were later dropped from the third edition.

By presenting a representative sampling of these stories in the months to come, the Grapevine hopes to continue offering to newcomers a chance to meet — in print — some of the Fellowship's early members.



I never drank in high school or college, because I never *went* to high school or college.

I've never been to Knickerbocker Hospital, I've never been to Grasslands, I've never been to Towns, that swanky place on Central Park West. But I've been to Bellevue's alcoholic ward thirty-five times. That should qualify me, because they don't take you in the Bellevue alcoholic ward for sinus trouble.

I made a few jails, maybe sixty-five or seventy-five times in my drinking. I made my first trip to Bellevue at the age of seventeen. I was called an alcoholic when I was eighteen or nineteen,

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but I just couldn't believe it. I didn't know what an alcoholic meant. I had trouble with alcohol, but at that age I wasn't bothering anybody. I was single. I just went on about my business, and I made up my mind, "Well, I'll lick this thing my way. Someday I'll be able to stop."

I made up my mind I was going to stop drinking when I got married. In 1926 I met the right girl, and we got married. I thought it would be as easy as the snap of a finger to stop drinking. Well, I didn't stop because I couldn't stop. I couldn't leave it alone. I just went on, but now it went into tragedy drinking, because I had brought three children into the world and it went from bad to worse. It was a matter of hospitals, and jails

and that merry-go-round we all go through.

My wife stood for this for about eleven years. Then she got a resentment — she was going to leave me! She had tried to leave me before many times, but it was only to try to get me to sober up. But this time I got home one night in the early evening, and everything was crated and ready to go to storage. She was going her way with the three children. I was left to go my way with the bottle.

My sister heard about this, and she came running over to the house and says to my wife, "Now wait a minute, before you do a tragic thing like this and leave my brother! Do you realize he is a sick man?" Boy, I thought that was out of this world — such kind words as "a sick man"! You ought to hear what my family called me before that! My sister says, "Let me stand the expense of taking my brother to the Medical Center to interview one of the best psychiatrists."

I thought I was real ripe for a psychiatrist, because I was beginning to do a lot of things I didn't want to do. I thought I was really going out of my mind. I had gotten to the stage where I'd get up in the morning, and I'd look in the mirror, and then I'd start talking to myself, and I'd say, "For cripe's sake, will you stand still long enough till I shave?"

And then I got to the stage where I'm walking the streets of New York, and my eyes go up to an ad on a great big billboard. The ad read, "Old Dutch Cleanser." Now that's an

everyday ad, but on this can of Old Dutch Cleanser there happened to be an old woman with a club. Next thing you know, she got off the sign and chased me into the 51st Street police station. I ran in for help. She was right behind me. I went up to the lieutenant's desk and said, "Help me, she's out there!" He said, "Who's out there?" I start raving, "There she is with the club! She followed me from 54th Street!" He looked me over and says, "Oh, I see what you mean, Mac." He hollers for Patrolman Murphy, and Murphy comes out, and this lieutenant says, "Take that bum to Bellevue!" So away I go.

So later on when my sister mentioned the Medical Center and a psychiatrist I thought I had no choice. Next day we walk into the Medical Center and I'm perfectly sober, and we see a certain doctor there. I had made my mind up I would do anything in the world that this man says. So we get appointed to Dr. So-and-so, office so-and-so. We walk in, and there's a little psychiatrist sitting down at his desk. He gets up, and he turns out to be a little squirt about that high. Right away my mind changes! I says to myself, "I'm bigger than this guy." I kept staring at him. I didn't think he knew more than I did. I was bigger than he was. I came to the conclusion in the end, "One good drink would kill that guy!"

He started asking me a lot of questions. He says, "Why do you drink?" My sister is paying fifty dollars for that question! "Why do you drink!"

Well, I had interviewed psychiatrists before, and I started asking *him* a lot of questions. He couldn't get to first base with me because I wasn't cooperating. Finally he threw me out of the office and called my wife and sister in and talked to them about an hour. The conclusion was that he suggested that I go to Bellevue! What did Bellevue have for me after being there over twenty-five times?

But I made up my mind to do anything that man suggested. So the next day we walk into Bellevue, and I shocked the doctor that was sitting at the admittance office. He had seen me come in on crutches; he had seen me come in with a cop under each arm; and when he saw me walk in

with two ladies, he was shocked.

He says, "I don't get this. What is this?" He thought I was really nuts, I guess. "Doctor," I says, "I am having a little trouble with alcohol." I told him about this bird up in the Medical Center that sent me down here to commit myself to a State institution. He says, "You really want to go through with this?" I says, "Yes. I really want to get straight and I think this is going to help me." He says, "Well, all right, I'll draw out a voluntary commitment. You sign it and you're in!"

He didn't tell me *where* I was in! Ten days later I get on the bus and the first thing I know I'm up in the booby-hatch. Well, I resented that because I

thought I was going to one of these drying-out places. I didn't know I was going up there with a lot of nuts.

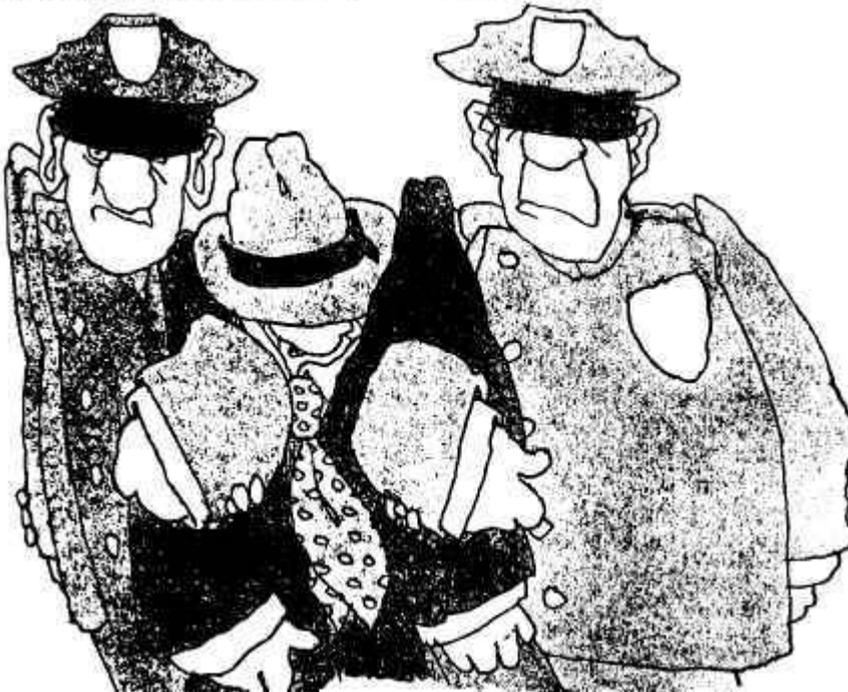
A few days later another bus came up from Bellevue, and on this bus there happened to be two boys that made several trips to Bellevue. One of those boys had been in here and knew the ropes. He says, "Don't worry about this place; this ain't the worst place in the world." Well, he was right, because ten days later the three of us were drunk right up there in the booby-hatch!

I had left three children and a wife on the outside, absolutely penniless. One of the children, a boy ten years old, wrote me a letter to try and encourage me. He thought I was up there getting shots in the arm and different medicines and that when I came out I would never take another drink. Well, he wrote me a letter, and he says, "Don't worry, dad. Do anything the doctors tell you, no matter how long they keep you there. I hope you come out a dad like my friends have." He could bring boys, his friends, up to the house now, and he couldn't do that while I was drinking because I didn't want anybody around me. I was one of those nasty drunks. He went on in this letter, "Don't worry about the house, because I went into business." His business was that he made himself a shoe-shine box and went out and shined shoes — while I'm up in this hospital drinking!

On one of her visits my wife left me a dollar. I thought it was five dollars. I stuck it in my pocket, and when she

left I took it out and saw it was a dollar, and I says, "Why, that cheap so-and-so! What am I going to do with one dollar for the next two weeks?" Two days later one of the head doctors called me into his office and says, "Do you know your wife had to borrow money to get back to New York, that she left you her last dollar in the world?" He pointed out that my children didn't have the price of a glass of milk the next morning. That made me feel pretty cheap. I says to myself, "I'm the cheap so-and-so." I told this doctor, "I'm going to do something about this." He says, "Why don't you sign yourself out — you're able to do that — and go out and get a job, and cut out all this monkey business? Take care of your family. You got a fine little family there. Go out and take care of them." And I swore to God in front of that man that day that I would do that. I swore, "I'll never take another drink as long as I live!"

At the time, I meant it. I did sign myself out, and I did take a job, and for two weeks I did not take a drink. Two weeks is a pretty long period with me. I happened to get paid that first two weeks' pay with a check. I didn't know where to go and cash that check except in a saloon. Nobody knew me, nobody would trust me, only these bartenders. But I knew I couldn't get away with going in there and buying one drink. I says to myself, "So help me God, I won't have any more than three drinks. I'll cash this check and I'll bring



this money home." I had my three drinks, cashed the check, picked up the change, and then the bartender says, "Will you have one on the house?" So I did. Well, after that I don't have to tell you what happened. I never got home with a nickel of that money.

I lost my job, but it was easy at the time and I got another one. Then another. And then it was one job after another, until I couldn't beg, borrow or steal anymore. Then I think I went as low as a man will ever go. When I couldn't get a job anymore, I used to go around to where he was shining shoes and tell that kid that his mother had sent me over to get the money that he'd made. That kid knew all the time that I wasn't going to bring that money home, but he never refused me. He always gave me all the change he had. And I went out and drank it.

The day came when I finally wound up in Bellevue again. I was in the alcoholic ward and I was pretty sick going in there. One of the doctors ordered a big dose of paraldehyde for me to knock me out. An hour and a half later, three men were trying to wake me up. One of them was the night attendant of the hospital, one was a policeman in uniform, and one was a plainclothes man. The law had been looking for me for four or five days, but they finally caught up with me in Bellevue. It was for something I had done in the blackout that I didn't know anything about. They took me out of the alcoholic ward and took me to the Bellevue prison ward,

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where I spent quite a few months.

I was up against a very serious charge. I was supposed to go to Sing Sing for between seven and a half to fifteen years for it. But somehow or other, I don't know how it happened — maybe it was through the prayers of my wife, or maybe help by my family, or somehow or other — when I was brought up on trial I was sentenced to the State Hospital again instead of Sing Sing. This was in late 1938 when I got back up there. This time I wasn't on my own. I was there with the sentence of three judges.

Early in 1939, when the AA book was fresh off the press, I was called into the doctor's office, the chief doctor of the State Hospital. One of the founders of AA was there with five other men from AA, trying to get AA

into the hospital. The way AA was put to me, this doctor says to me, "The medical profession has nothing for you. The clergy has nothing for you. There's nobody in God's world can help you. You're a chronic alcoholic, period!" Then he says, "Maybe these men and this book can help you."

I read the book. In the meantime they had meetings in South Orange, New Jersey. There used to be a group from South Orange that would come up to the hospital and take some of the boys down to a meeting and bring them back. I wanted to know what was going on at these meetings. I got one of the boys that was there and I says, "What are these meetings all about?" He says, "It's a bunch of people that get up there and swap stories. They talk to each other and you talk to them. They're all a bunch of ex-drunks. And they're all happy looking. They all have a lot of fun, they're all dressed up, they have a collar and tie. Some are working and some are not, but they're all happy." He says, "Why don't you ask the doctor to let you come down there sometime? You ought to see the spread these people put out after the meeting — chicken sandwiches and..." Oh, he laid out a beautiful picture for me! "Home-made cakes".. something you weren't getting at the hospital! I says, "Gee, that looks pretty good."

I had never been to a meeting before in all my life where there was a bunch of alcoholics where nobody didn't have a bottle! So I asked the

doctor, and he let me go down to the meeting. I figured, "Well, I'll go down there, I'll get a coupla drinks and I'll beat it, and phooey to AA and everything else!" I went down there this first time, and I was introduced to this happy looking bunch of people. They put me in my class with real two-fisted drinkers. They sat me in a corner talking to these guys. I couldn't get away from them. In the meantime, I'm looking for live wires. Anybody going down towards the water section, I look him over. Well, out of a clear sky there's four rough looking guys over there, and all at once they decide to go down to the water section. Right away I says, "Oops, well, excuse me — I gotta go." And I walked in there figuring as soon as these guys got in there, one of the four is going to pull out a bottle. But I was stunned — I was surprised — no bottle! I says, "What is the matter with these guys?"

I went to AA meetings for about seven months and I lost the idea of a drink. I didn't think of it anymore. I was amazed when I was called into the doctor's office and told that I was going out on parole. I got a year's parole, and on my parole card was "In the custody of your wife and AA."

My wife used to come to every AA meeting with me, but one particular night we got company, and my wife says, "What are we going to do?" I says, "Look, you tend to the company. I wouldn't miss that meeting for the world. It means too much to me."

I went to the meeting that night,



and it was a swell meeting until the last speaker got up. This fella says, "As long as you are an alcoholic you'll never be able to take a drink as long as you live!" Oooh, that was rough! A little later on in the same talk, he says, "And don't forget — not even a glass of beer!" and he pointed his finger right at me sitting in the back. That was it! I says, "Why that bunch of Bible-backed-bums, where do they get that stuff?"

That's one meeting I didn't stay for the Lord's Prayer. The speaker got through and sat down and everybody applauded, and I said, "Phooney!" and went out of the place. I got over to Lexington Avenue and found a saloon. I went in there and I says, "Gimme a glass of beer." I drank it and I walked right out of the place. I stood under a lamp post on the corner there at 59th and Lexington. I stood there maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. I was waiting for something to happen because I had a glass of beer. I thought maybe twenty minutes after you have this beer you get some chemical change in you. Maybe you explode. I didn't know what would happen.

Well, I didn't explode. I didn't do anything. So I jump on the subway up to the Bronx, and when I get off at the subway station instead of going home I automatically walk into a saloon and I have another beer and another beer and another. When the man came up with that seventh beer, I says, "Wait a minute, make that a double whiskey." Well, he did. And to

make a long story short, what do you think happened to me? I landed back in the State Hospital — that's what!

Don't get me wrong. I didn't wind up in there that night or the next week or the next month. It took me three months, but it was that one glass of beer that started the merry-go-round going.

I asked myself, "Now what am I doing up here again?" In my heart and soul I knew that AA had something. I wanted to see where I had made my mistake, and I asked the doctor to please give me that book again to read. My number one mistake was I wasn't honest with myself or with anybody in the world. And I knew AA didn't fail me. I failed AA.

So how do I get honest? I cleaned up. I saw a priest there at the hospital, and I really came clean for the first time in my life. I really worked with AA up there in the hospital.

Well, I got out and tried to get a job, but I couldn't. They had opened an AA clubhouse on 24th Street, so I used to go out in the morning and look for a job. Then I went down to the Club and helped scrub floors. I helped do everything. I stayed nights for the meeting and I went home when the place closed. That's the way I spent my time.

This went on for about eleven months, and then my wife had got into the family way again for her fourth childbirth. She was told after her third child that she wouldn't be able to have a fourth. But she saw that it meant the world to the chil-

dren. They were happy, I was happy, she was happy, and I was in AA in full swing and getting along fine. So she just ignored the doctor's orders and went through with it. I took my wife to the hospital one night, and the following afternoon I go to visit her. And before I could see her I had to go see the doctor. He says, "Joe, how do you feel?" I says, "I feel pretty good, doctor." He says, "Sit down," and then he says, "How do you feel now!" I says, "I *still* feel pretty good. What are you driving at?" He was trying to tell me my wife was almost ready for delivery, and that they had done everything they could, but that she was still in danger. "I'm sure you're doing all you can. What can I do?" I ask the doctor. He says "Well, your record shows you're a Catholic, so you know how to pray."

I went home, and there was my mother and my mother-in-law, two old ladies waiting for news from the hospital. I never let on what they had told me at the hospital, but my mother-in-law started digging, if you know what I mean. Well, I blew my top. I said, "Nuts to it." The next thing I know I'm down in the corner saloon. I got a dollar bill on the bar and I'm ready to order a drink. But AA stepped right into this picture, and I says "Now what am I doing here at a time like this?" I heard in AA when you're in trouble, try a little prayer. Well, I was in a lot of trouble and I tried a prayer. When the bartender got tired of waiting for me to order, he hollered at me. "Hey,

Mac!" he says, "Didja make up your mind? What're you havin'?" I ordered a ginger-ale and plenty of ice. That's how my prayer was answered.

I went down to the clubhouse at 24th Street. Some of the boys there talked me out of the idea of a drink. I stayed for the meeting that night and went home and went to sleep.

About one o'clock in the morning I got a telegram from the hospital. I was afraid to open it. I thought it was the last telegram I would ever get about my wife. I paced the living room floor for about half an hour, like a prisoner in his cell, with that telegram in my hand. I was still afraid to open it. I finally got down on my knees and asked God Almighty, I says, "Gimme the courage to open this thing." Then I opened the telegram. My wife had given birth to a girl and everything was all right. Where would I have been, or where would she have been, if I had blown my top and taken a drink at a point like that? I thank God Almighty that I didn't.

It took me seventeen months before I got a job. I kept sober, using what I learned in AA. Then I got a job I didn't like very much, and it was keeping me away from AA. I made up my mind, "If nothing happens within this week, nuts to AA!" I planned it out — another drunk for myself. I gave myself a week, see? I just didn't take that drink; I allowed myself a week.

Before that week was up, I go home one night and out of a clear sky

there's two old bosses of mine sitting down on the sofa waiting for me. They were two brothers I had worked for a long time before, fellas who swore they'd never have anything to do with me any more. I'm bringing this out because I want you to know that good news travels in AA. They heard I was in AA and doing all right, back with my family and everything, and they came and asked me to go to work for them. Well, I did go to work for them, and I'm on that job till this very day.

Now then, I'm going back about six years. Something happened again. That boy of mine that was shining shoes at the age of ten, in the meantime he had grown up to be a six-foot-one inch fella. And almost to the day of his birthday, the sixteenth birthday, I lost that boy in a trolley car accident only two blocks away from my house. I was in Philadelphia when it happened, and they called me up and drove me in from Philadelphia to see my boy. He regained consciousness once in the thirteen hours I was there. He looked up at me and says, "Dad, what happened to me?" I says, "Well, son, you just keep your chin up. You'll be all right." The doctors told me the boy was going to pull through. He was strong and he was fighting.

Well, the kid didn't make it. He was trying to tell me in that last handshake that he'd lost the battle. He was trying to tell me, "I'm losing this battle, dad, but don't let this throw you." That's what he was trying to

put across to me. I realize that now. But in spite of all that, when they took that kid away from me, I made up my mind I was going on a suicide drunk. I figured I would go home first and take care of the funeral arrangements. Then I would lock myself in some hotel and drink myself to death. If liquor didn't kill me, I was going to jump out the window.

Before I could do this I got a telephone call. It's an AA member in Ohio. How that news travelled to Ohio in thirty-five minutes I don't know to this day. This fella says, "I just heard what happened to you. The reason I'm calling you is I know what's running through your mind. But I hope you don't. I hope you don't take that drink. Nobody in the world or nobody in AA can condemn you for it. But don't forget, there's a couple hundred members here, and we all got our fingers crossed; we're all praying for you."

When he got off the wire, somebody else was calling me, somebody from Connecticut. I was so busy an-

swering calls that I just couldn't get out. While I was still answering calls, one of my AA friends walked in. He stayed with me that night, so I didn't have a chance to get out. This fella and I sat in the kitchen all night, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee.

The next morning the undertaker came up to take me to the hospital morgue to identify my son. This AA fella came with me. The undertaker was an AA too. Well, when that slab was pulled out for me to identify my son's body, if I didn't have AA on my right and AA on my left I wouldn't be alive today. I'd be in the same grave with that kid.

So you can see that my length of sobriety wasn't handed to me on a silver platter. If things are going to happen, they're going to happen. But I'm in AA and sober for over eleven years now. I had my last drink of alcohol eleven years and seven months ago. Thanks to the good people of AA, and last but not least by the grace of God.

And if I can do it, so can you!