

The Broken Road

Aileen Brown

April 6th, 2021. I was standing in the parking lot of a detox center in South Florida. I had been up all night, playing the agonizing game that comes with managing withdrawal symptoms. Finding just the right amount of alcohol to drink to keep me from getting violently ill, but not too much to send me into a full blackout. Considering that turning back now would almost certainly lead to my untimely death, drinking myself into oblivion before taking my first steps towards healing seemed like the easier choice. I was chugging some Bud Light in a can at this point. I was terrified, but hopeful, that this time would finally be my last visit to a detox center. April 6th, 2021 is the last time I took a drink.

Alcoholism and addiction had its grip on me for about 15 years. It stole everything from me. I had no interest in things I was once passionate about. Goals that I once felt so driven to work towards, seemed like they were unattainable. Towards the end of my drinking, I couldn't even look in the mirror. Not only was I physically unrecognizable, but I was also emotionally and mentally changed. I was a shell of a human being. The slow progression of this disease is often described as slow suicide.

My alcoholism showed up for me at a very young age. A lot of alcoholics talk about that "white light moment," the first time they had a good drunk. I remember vividly the first time I drank to get drunk, and it was a spiritual experience for me. From that point on, I chased that feeling. Little did I know I would be chasing that feeling for years to come and have to suffer incomprehensible amounts of pain in order to finally say "enough".

In early 2020, I started off the year by checking into a detox center. This would be detox visit number 10 for me over the last 4 years. I was what they call a regular at the hospitals and

rehab facilities up in Northern Virginia. Every time I checked in, there would be a “welcome back, Aileen” with sarcastic undertones from the staff. I *thought* each and every time I sought help, that I was truly done. Inevitably though, this disease would creep its way back in, and I’d be drinking again in a month. A few months went by, and I was in just as deep as ever. With the pandemic and shut down in full swing, it was the perfect storm for an alcoholic like me.

At this point I was merely existing. I was living to drink and drinking to live. I was not present. My drinking even prevented me from being present for my own father’s death. April 14th is the last time I ever saw him – he was in a hospital bed in full covid gear. I was told I could go visit him in hospice, but my alcoholism had other plans for me. He died April 17th, alone.

The months after my father’s death are all a blur to me. Alcoholic chaos and complete oblivion. It was a pitiful existence. One night, I had been drinking for 24 hours straight, up all night, and pacing my apartment until 6 am when the 7-11 started selling alcohol again. Some feeling came over me in that very moment that said “enough”. I had felt this many times before, but I had to trust that maybe – hopefully – this time was going to be different. I made a few phone calls, and the next day I was on a plane to Florida.

I was terrified. This disease has a brilliant way of playing games with our minds. I knew that I wanted a different life. I knew that I was meant for more. But here I was, going to detox yet again. I had to question myself as to whether this would just be another oil change and then back to the races. Something in me felt different this time. I had to trust that feeling and follow it. Thank God I did.

As I stood outside that detox center, defeated, exhausted, tired and so empty, I took that last swig of cheap beer, and I walked inside to be admitted. My blood-alcohol content was

dangerously high, but I felt this sense of relief that I had made it to safety and could start my journey into sobriety.

I frequently think about that day. That last drink. Over the years, I probably had over 1000 last drinks. Each time I swore I was done. Something was different that day, that exact moment. I said goodbye to this substance that had such control over me for my entire adult life. A year and some change later, my life is as different as you could ever imagine. I must remember that moment, every single day, to keep living this life that I've built. I cannot romanticize alcohol, or how fun it was, or what I'm missing out on. I must remember the despair and desperation I felt. It's what keeps me motivated, and allows me to say, "no more". April 7th, 2022, I celebrated a year of continual sobriety.

It is often hard to describe the true, ugly nature of alcoholism to those who have not experienced it firsthand. It is not always like how you see it in various forms of media – having one too many drinks at dinner or hiding a flask underneath the desk at work. While those scenarios are the reality for some, it often goes much, much deeper. My alcoholism was taking shots of liquor before work so that I would stop shaking. My alcoholism was losing my sense of self-worth and having my entire life dictated by my next drink. My alcoholism was numbing myself into complacency while my father died alone. In all its cunning ways, alcohol has come close to winning the fight, but I have worked every day since standing in that parking lot, to fight back. I am working towards reconciling the damage that terrible addiction has inflicted upon my life. The journey hasn't been an easy one and there is still plenty of more work to do. Yet despite all the struggles, I feel grateful for all the blessings that a sober way of living has brought me.