

In These Rooms

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The Twelve Steps of Al-Anon

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol(ism), that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Traditions of Al-Anon

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants—they do not govern.
3. The relatives of alcoholics, when gathered together for mutual aid, may call themselves an Al-Anon Family Group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. The only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend.
4. Each group should be autonomous, except in matters affecting another group or Al-Anon or AA as a whole.
5. Each Al-Anon Family Group has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps of AA *ourselves*, by encouraging and understanding our alcoholic relatives, and by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics.
6. Our Family Groups ought never endorse, finance or lend our name to any outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary spiritual aim. Although a separate entity, we should always co-operate with Alcoholics Anonymous.
7. Every group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Al-Anon Twelfth Step work should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. Our groups, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. The Al-Anon Family Groups have no opinion on outside issues; hence our name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, and TV. We need guard with special care the anonymity of all AA members.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.

Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.
(Reinhold Niebuhr)

Chekhov's Gun

i.

In that picture
from our wedding
you're kissing me
in black and white,
holding a glass of wine
behind your back.

The glass of wine is not
a metaphor.

In all the pictures
from our wedding
my father isn't there.
His ashes are back
home in an urn
about the size
of the gallon jugs
of wine he used
to tuck beside
the fridge.

The jugs of wine are not
a symbol of abundance.

If you introduce
the hidden cup of wine
in Act I, it has to go off
by the end of Act III.

ii.

Granted it's not a metaphor
this wine but it may be
a sign-post an indicator
of where we are headed
the loaded gun

is the metaphor
bound as it is to go off
bound as it is to cause
harm even disaster
as a metaphor it's less
ambiguous

than wine but no less
deadly.

iii.

Robin hits herself when she's talking
she slaps her chest so hard I think
she'll bruise the noise
ricochets around
the room hitting our ears
striking especially to those
who've been struck.

I slap my thigh sometimes
for emphasis.
Sometimes a fist, beating down
just above my knee
to say
I really mean it.

iv.

Maybe you can see where all this is going.
What a surprise. What a cliché.

v.

Before I came into these rooms I had no joy says Layne.
I was consumed with rage says Deanna.
I was a real bitch says Sarah and we all laugh
because she still is. The meanest person we know

and entirely welcome here. I was ready to kill him
says Kris, and many of us nod. I was dying,
ready to die, I say.

I couldn't see a way out says Louise, couldn't see
a way forward says Marge.

I'm so glad I found Al Anon so grateful lucky
blessed we all agree, I'm proud to be here
even if the cost of admission is the admission
of utter defeat.

vi.

I'm so grateful for this program
says Joan. Before I came into these
halls (she always says halls, not rooms,
that Joan) I had no idea what peace was.
I'm not sure I even realized how much
I had suffered, as desperate and unhappy
as I was when I walked into my first
meeting.

I had hit the Al-Anon trifecta, Joan says—
parent, spouse, and child.

I had loved so many, do love so
many alcoholics.

I was miserable trying to look
after them all, manage
their lives, make them okay so
I could be okay. I was shocked
to learn there was
no way I could control
this disease. I was shocked
to learn I had been deeply
hurt and even sickened by

its effects in my family.
And I was so shocked to find

people here smiling laughing
hugging I could see
other people who
were living with the same
effects of the same
family disease
of alcoholism,
but they had serenity.
And I decided I
wanted that, too.

I grew up going to meetings
with my parents says Tonya.
They met in AA and Al-Anon,
they've been sober
all my life but they took me
and my brothers with them
to meetings.
Maybe it helped me not become
a drinker too it definitely
taught me not to judge people
no matter how mean or rude or weird
they act. *You never know what someone's
dealing with* my dad would say,
what they're dealing with at home.

Slogans & Sayings

vi.

The first big lie of the alcoholic
family says Marta (Karr) is *I'm not drunk*
and the second is like it,
Everything's okay.

vii.

Alcoholism is a disease that
compels the drinker to try to
erase us says Rebecca. We'll
never be their first love,
can never compete.
Nothing I do, say or become
will ever be as interesting
as the next drink.

But we can no longer
cooperate
Rebecca says, no
longer participate
in our own erasure.

We have the right to speak,
to write about our own
experiences. The alcoholic's,
the family's response
is none of our business.

viii.

Mind Your Own Business
Progress Not Perfection
One Day at A Time
Let Go & Let God
Easy Does It
Just for Today
Live and Let Live
First Things First
Keep It Simple

vix.

And we tell these lies ourselves repeat them
until we have it down our spin we spin the tale
the myth of our intact family our happy marriage
repeat it life is good we're doing great. I was good
at it, too, most of the time I believed it myself.

Life is Good was on a hat I bought, a pale pink
ballcap I picked up on our honeymoon, driving
through California wine country in a rented T-bird
convertible. The wind was murder on my hair and
so the cap and so our line, our slogan: "Life is Good

with Fred and OMC." Delivered with sparkle, a smile,
pop of the chin. Yes, we spent our honeymoon
in wine country, you used to brag, drinking and driving.
You said it like you thought it was cute.

Evidence Against You

i.

When we go for a long weekend to see
our dear friends in the country, you bring
a bottle of wine to share with dinner,
knowing they'll already have one or two in
the house,
knowing that won't be enough to get you
through the weekend,
even though

I'll only have a half glass and Warren won't
have a drop. You packed, I realize later,
several bottles in your luggage and more
in the car tucked under
some old newspapers.

You won't let Warren help with your bag—
he carries mine—because like you, it's mostly
full of wine.

ii.

You thought everyone at outpatient was a loser,
the facilitators were idiots. You tried to tell
one kid he didn't have a problem, were ready
to join in blaming everyone's wives
and mothers—we were the crazy ones.

You never believed you were an alcoholic
and yet you were so angry
when the facilitator wouldn't
accept your First Step inventory.

It was clear to him to everyone
you hadn't really accepted
the idea that you were sick.

Even though denial
is part of the disease.

Maybe some small part of you
understood, but he
got shouted down pretty quickly.

iii.

The parties when you sat glazed in a silent
stupor, vaguely smiling; the parties at our
house when you would suddenly just get up
go to bed without a word, taking off your clothes
as you went, stumbling naked to the bathroom.
Pretend you didn't see that, I say to Andrew.
I didn't see anything, he says, wide-eyed.
Years later Andrew will help me pack your clothes
for rehab. What does one wear to rehab, I ask.
We have no idea. We choose warm layers
for you. Hospitals can be cold. We want
you to be comfortable.

iv.

How many times have you fallen,
my dear? How many scrapes
and bruises does your poor body bear,
unconsciously? Marks where no one
sees, deep purple patches on your
elbows, dark spots on legs, marks you
don't see yourself but sometimes
I'll tell you and sometimes
it's your sweet face that's
scraped or bruised.

Sometimes you look like a battered
husband, bad reflection on me
in your stained ripped clothing,
hollow-eyed malnourished since
you stopped eating
years ago.

How you stumble, a shabby ghost,
knocking into furniture, walls,
falling
over nothing,
down the stairs
sometimes.

And sometimes, my dear,
I want to leave you

there in the bushes, or
wedged—how
did you manage it? —
between the toilet
and the claw-foot tub.
Sometimes, my love,
I want to push
you
down
the
stairs.

v.

What else? The snoring memory loss
the loss of functional control the loss
of functional intimacy shall we say.

But what is worse than
losing your bright presence, hearing you repeat
the same old lines not only to students, friends
but to the dog, yourself, to me.

At certain times of day,
at mealtimes when we check the mail or I play
guitar, when it's getting late, this is what we say.
We say to the dog when she scratches at the door,
“What are you selling?”
We say in the afternoon, “Oh look, the mail's come.”
Every evening you say, “Do you want a soak, love?
I'll run you a bath.”

We have a script we follow, you and I,
that keeps us feeling like we still know
where we are, like the ground
hasn't already
fallen away.

vi.

No one would ever know. Who could tell
the difference whether he died or was
injured either way he'd be gone to the

hospital or the morgue and either way
it would be better for us both. It's just
we're bankrupt and paycheck to paycheck
can't afford the hospital I need a sure
thing need a way out so I do nothing
because I can't see
one yet.

Without This Program

i.

Without this program I'd be dead,
dead or in jail, oh if thoughts were
crimes we'd all be there, I'd be
right there with you, sister, without
this program. Without you all, without
these rooms, my Higher Power, these
books, these slogans, I might not be
walking this earth. I really might not...

ii.

Maybe a bottle of pills for myself because
that would be simpler wouldn't it cleaner
I mean even when I'm perfectly sweet kind
helpful clearly I'm useless I'm no help at all.
He won't stop it only gets worse more bottles
higher proof and on some level he has to
know it's killing him. So just a bottle of pills,
I'll finally let myself off the hook, admit
my failure. Or next time he's really out
just a pillow.

iii.

Before this program, I had no hope says Sherry.
But in these rooms I learned how to live how
to take care of myself and focus on me instead
of living and dying by how much my husband
drank each day. Before this program I believed
in a punishing god says Joy. He was always
watching for me to screw up so He could hurt
me more. But in these rooms, I came to believe,
somehow, in a loving God a Higher Power
who wanted good for me.

iv.

Your Higher Power can be a lightbulb for all I care
says Ellen, who is the closest thing we have to a village
elder. Your Higher Power can be the group. You can lean
on the group the group can provide some guidance at
least for a while. We don't preach religion here but there
has to be something bigger than you that keeps you going,
shows you the way.

When I started praying, I started changing.

v.

Your Higher Power can be
the ocean says Joan, which is
a particularly nice idea she says,
because it's so evidently a power
greater than ourselves. In
comparison to the ocean it's so
clear we are
powerless.

And I don't know about you
says Joan, but I have no problem
believing that the ocean can
restore me to sanity. The ocean
restoreth my soul.

vi.

Without this program, my life would
be so small says Deanna, my life shrank
as my alcoholic got sicker, drank more, his
world shrank, and mine shrank with it.
We wouldn't go out anymore except to
restaurants where he would mostly drink
he didn't want to see family, I had
to work to get him out the door to see
friends there was no chance of going to
the gym a museum a play he would drop
me off somewhere but that just meant he'd
drink until it was time to pick me up not that
he was ever a sober driver.

But this program taught me I can go
out on my own; I can call a friend
order an Uber I can make my own plans
whether he's drinking or not I can have
a good time have my own life.

Without this program, I would not have any
kind of faith says Dee. I used to think AA
and Al Anon were religious I guess because they
mention God and they meet in churches so I
thought it wasn't for me. I only came because
I was so desperate so unhappy and the folks
at the rehab clinic said I needed to. But I found
in these rooms that Twelve Steps is spiritual
not religious. I can pray to the God of my understanding

and that understanding can grow and change.
I can learn to trust in a power greater than myself
without any preaching or pressuring. We're not even
allowed to talk about religion here says Mike
and I love that. I'm private about my religion
says Layne I don't talk about it even with family
or people in my faith.

I've never heard of another program like this one
Layne says, where else can you go and talk about
your darkest problems, lay your soul bare,
and not be judged not be given advice not be interrupted
or talked down to. No one has an agenda here,
no one is even in charge, we're all equals here
just one more banana in the bunch Ellen says.

Do you often ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking?

i.

You have driven drunk every day I've known you,
except for days too stormy or snowy to drive
and those days you just
 stayed home drunk.

You came drunk to pick me up from work, drunk
to the grocery, drunk to my first time playing guitar
in public.

 I picked up guitar after Pete Seeger died,
inspired by his legacy of truth-telling. It took me
several years to realize
all my songs
 were about leaving.

ii.

*If you miss the train I'm
on you will know
that I am
gone
You can hear the
whistle blow
a hundred miles*

*From this valley they say you
are leaving we shall miss your
bright eyes and sweet smile*

iii.

You drove drunk on our first date.

Mind if
I have a glass with dinner? you asked
so sweetly
how thoughtful
 I thought.
It barely registered

that you drank two. Maybe
it was three. And who
knows what you'd drunk
before you picked me up
the liquid courage or
celebration or
whatever excuse.

Do you blame the drinker's behavior on his or her companions?

i.

Goddammit not another bottle as a gift another
student coming over with a bottle and a snack another
party where everyone gives you wine or dinner where
friends buy you drinks. I want to yell at them but even
when I do they don't understand, don't believe me that
there's a problem. If not for your fellow professor drinking
buddies goddammit if not for those students who think
bringing you bottles is a terrific way to build their mentoring
relationship a way to honor the great poet.

Surely this is his natural habitat, surrounded by dark empty
bottles of merlot.

ii.

*This is my least
favorite life the one
where you fly
and I don't...*

iii.

Alcoholism starts out fun Ellen says then
there's fun and problems. Then there's
just problems...

iv.

Fitzgerald said *First you take a drink then
the drink takes a drink then the drink*

takes you. And he would know.

Fitz and Hem and Zelda and all their friends.

v.

I'm not sure why but I blame them, too,
for all his drinking. And they're not even poets.

But they contributed, I think, a great deal
to the romantic image of the alcoholic writer,
the genius that for some reason needs a bottle.

Lots of bottles. But it's not genius, it's genies that
live in bottles, right? The dark, compelling power
that arises, smelling ancient and mysterious, foreign.

vi.

Lately someone's missing from now on...

The mystery that no one knows:

where does love go when it goes...?

Do you search for hidden alcohol?

i.

I don't expect sometimes I stumble upon bottles; they randomly appear in your luggage, under the seat of the car, the office filing cabinet, a desk drawer. Every empty is a small explosion small erosion of trust in you, in our life together. An indication that our "life together" has been drifting into myth probably for a while now.

ii.

I never used to think of it; back when we were first dating, everything was consumed out in the open, mostly together, though I could never keep up with you. But I put out the recycling one day and the crate was full of chardonnay bottles. The neighbor noticed and said, "Oh, did you guys have a big party?"

iii.

I don't expect once in a while I go looking for a special bottle of wine we were supposed to share and it will be gone. There's no wine cellar here, no wine collection, some visitors are surprised to learn. Could Cookie Monster have a Pepperidge Farm collection? You don't curate this stuff, don't age or savor it. You simply consume, at all hours now. It is the most socially acceptable way to oblivion.

iii.

*This is my least favorite you
who floats far above earth and stone...*

iv.

I don't anymore but there was that wedding shower our friends threw, the one with the Wine Theme. All the gifts were special vintages, wine glasses, fancy bottle openers, a wine journal we could use to track our favorites, especially at tastings, especially for our Napa honeymoon. I tried to keep track of who gave what, left cards inside the boxes and bags. But when I went to write our thank-you's all the wine was gone, more than a dozen very nice bottles of very nice wine. I had not tasted them or sniffed their corks. I had not seen them go out in the recycling. Maybe you buried them in the trash. Maybe you hid them somewhere else. What excuse did you have that time? *There weren't that many, sweetheart?* I didn't push it. Instead, a few weeks later, I married you.

Do you think that if the drinker stopped drinking, your other problems would be solved?

vi.

So many problems would be solved
if you stopped drinking. I have been wishing
and praying for it for years now. Every night
when your drunk head hits the pillow
and you snore and struggle to breathe I watch
your back and wish and pray that you'll just
quit. Then surely you would go back to being
vibrant and fun witty generous more alive
again willing to go out and do things swim
walk in the park go to art openings go on road
trips with me read a book you've not read before
watch a new movie instead of the ones you have
half memorized.

vii.

*Here's the dawn,
coming on
won't be long...
Fare thee well,
fare thee well and adieu,
fare thee well.
With a song
I'll be gone,
fare thee well...*

viii.

Then maybe we'd have money maybe we'd
have sex maybe connect the way we used
to. But maybe not maybe you have nothing
more to give me either way maybe your brain is
too damaged now and anyway, it wouldn't bring
back all the years of
your forgetting me. Like you forget
everything that happens
after five.

ix.

The best situation I can imagine is if you just
died in your sleep. Then I would have help. Then
I would have love and support around me.
People would come by the house I wouldn't
be so alone. They would surround me with
encouragement and flowers and beautiful platters
of food and let me cry, let me sleep. Someone would
probably even clean and organize things and I could
afford to take time off I'd have your life insurance
and Social Security maybe I could stop
working three jobs.

It doesn't make me sad at all to plan your funeral.
I know whom to invite, who should read or speak.
I don't think it would be hard. I could keep pretending
you were perfect and our life was always sweet because
I would know the pretense would be over soon
it would finally end.

x.

*She's got her ticket I think she
gonna use it I think
she goin' to fly
away. No one should try and
stop her
persuade her with their power
she says that
her mind is made
up.*

Do you feel angry, confused, or depressed most of the time?

i.

Some days driving around town I find
myself looking at the overpass where it curves above
the mall and wanting to drive straight
off the edge
but I know that would hurt other people,
the drivers below not just me and I don't even really
want to hurt myself so much I just want all
of this to end. Some days driving around town I find
myself looking at the hospital all the little windows
thinking the people in there are getting
care and attention
 getting a break
 and I envy them.

ii.

*There is a me you would not
recognize dear
call it the shadow
of myself
And if the music starts before
I get there
dance without me...
I really think I'll
be okay.
They've taken their toll
these latter days.*

Do you feel there is no one who understands your problem?

i.

There are a lot of personalities in these
rooms around this table a lot of opinions.
I don't agree with all of them don't like

some but that is not the point. The point
is that for this hour once a week for free
we have a place to come where we are seen

heard we can genuinely connect with
ourselves, each other, God. We don't
interrupt each other when you finish speaking

people say *Thank you*. We learn to listen not
to label or judge each other. There are no last
names no titles or careers just a fellowship

of the same kind of crazy same flavor
of suffering. In these rooms, everyone
understands the particular chaos I've

been living in. What no one else sees
or dares to name.
Because my darling beloved sweetheart

husband is not able or refuses to
acknowledge my pain, my reality.
Because I am so lodged in denial

that for more than twelve years I have not
been able to acknowledge it either. Because
my friends recognize better than I do:
that my life
has become unmanageable.

ii.

*The station rolls away
from the train*

*The blue pulls away from
the sky...*

*This is my least
favorite life.*

*The one where I'm
out of
my mind*

*The one where you're just
out of reach*

The one where I stay

and you fly...

iii.

Eventually some friends will name
what ails
our household. He smells
of alcohol, they tell me. I can't tell.
Have no idea what it smells
like on his body, his breath, or anyone else.
Maybe I have a terrible sense of smell.

Maybe I'm numb to it.
Maybe I have a childhood
part that
numbs it for me
so I don't have to think
bad things
about my father.

Or my love. He came by
drunk today,
they say,
he was
drunk at 10 am. *What?* He
lied to us
didn't remember our
agreement seemed
confused kept

repeating himself.
He repeats himself
a lot tells the same stories
over again
the same jokes.
He embarrassed us
scared us upset our
guests. And the lies.

You're allowed to leave,
the friends say.
You don't have to stay.
You did all the right things,
it's okay.

iv.

*I wish you the best I'm headed west
it's all I know to do...*

v.

...We who live or have lived
with the problem of alcoholism
understand as perhaps few others can...

Al Anon Preamble

Do you feel that if the drinker loved you, he or she would stop drinking to please you?

Do you sometimes feel like a failure when you think of the lengths you have gone to in order to control the drinker?

i.

If he loved me, wouldn't he? If he were stronger if he cared about himself his health if he believed in our marriage, he would change. Other people have managed, how hard can it be? Of course I have no idea how hard it is for him. He has never told me, not the slightest hint. I have heard from others, but it's hard to credit.

I really thought that I could inspire him. I would never yell or threaten or beg like other wives I've met in Al Anon. My strategy was sweetness. I was the very sweetest wife, so under standing. I would never raise my voice. We don't raise our voices in my family; we don't lose our tempers. We love sweet old drunks and we are sweet to them.

ii.

*I know dark clouds will gather
o'er me I know my way
is rough and steep*

iii.

Perhaps if I were even sweeter, more understanding. I study nonviolent communication. I practice yoga, meditation. I pray. If I were more attractive, maybe he could get it up for me. I learn to curl my hair the newest way. Use volumizing mascara, paint my nails, buy pretty clothes.

People on the street and Nobel laureates tell him
he's a lucky man.
He smiles. We both smile.

iv.

*I'm goin' where the sun
keeps shinin' through
the pourin' rain
goin' where the weather
suits my clothes...*

v.

I really thought I could change
him says Deanna. I thought coming
here to Al Anon, you all would
teach me what to do. Oh, I felt
sure there was some remedy says
Rex. Al Anon would have the magic
pill, the right words to say special prayer
to pray. I thought coming to Al Anon
you all would tell me whether or not
to leave says Sonya but no, nobody
gives advice here only your Higher
Power knows what's best for you. There
are no magic words no magic prayers
that can make your loved one quit the
bottle make them go to AA rehab
get clean make amends to you no
matter how much you deserve that. There
is only the serenity that comes when we
relinquish trying to control what is not
ours to control, accept the things we
cannot change. Which is most things.

vi.

I almost left before the wedding, after
that awful wine-theme shower. I had no wish
to marry an alcoholic who does?

But I had no idea really what that
meant no conscious realization at the time
that my father had been an alcoholic
that so many of your qualities that reminded
me of him were related to the disease.

This disease will take its course it will
consume all the bottles, guzzle time,
memory consume your drive it will
suck down all the money we
can't spare it will
drink up my belief that
all is well.

vii.

*The nights that I twist on the rack
is the time when I feel
most at home...*

My First Meeting

i.

When I came in these rooms, I was praying
to die Marta says and we all go *mmbmm* I
could not go on in this pain I had no hope

and I come in these rooms and I hear people
laughing and I think there's no way these people
have lived with what I'm living with but then I

kept listening and some stories were just the same
as mine and some were worse than I had imagined
but so believable so understandable I never thought

I could listen to a stranger tell me the worst things
in their life and feel so connected anyway I kept
coming back and I kept hearing about "experience,

strength, and hope," we're sharing our "experience,
strength, and hope," and I thought maybe if I keep
coming back I'll get a little of that hope and I heard

people talking about serenity and joy and it seemed
real like it seemed even the moms whose kids were
in prison or dead the people who had been in prison

themselves and the rest of everyone really who had
done or thought or said horrible things or seen and felt
horrible things had found a little freedom now somehow

a little of that serenity stuff and maybe somehow if I just
kept trying one day at a time I could have some, too.

ii.

At my first meeting I was so disappointed
Mindy says I thought you people were going
to tell me how to fix my alcoholic, give me
more tricks. I had a lot of good tricks don't
get me wrong I was handling things really just
I wasn't sleeping well and my kids were telling

me they wished I would pick a new daddy for them who treated mommy better and my social worker kept bugging me to go, I figured maybe I'd get some new ideas for how to manage my alcoholic.

At my first meeting Pam says they told me I should go to six meetings before I decided I was done. At that same first meeting one lady shared and said she had been coming to Al Anon for twenty-three years and I thought *wow, what on earth is wrong with her...?*

iii.

When I came in here I was powerless over absolutely nothing Ellen says I could fix every thing and everybody if only they would listen. But in this program I started to loosen up I started to see myself. People kept asking me back and I started to listen, started to get humble. I started to learn that I really was powerless I started to learn the slogans. Each week I would pick up on something more; little by little, I started to work the Steps.

vii.

When I first came to Al Anon I didn't know how to accept says Cheyenne every obstacle was a catastrophe. I was like a ball in a pinball machine bouncing around from one disaster to the next but in this program I found a sense of freedom. Al Anon taught me to accept things, especially the things I cannot change. My mom is still stuck on the pity pot, stuck in the drama spiral of despair, frustration, resentment, self-pity. But I don't have to go there with her. I can make another choice.

How I Knew Things Were Wrong

i.

It was that spring when our dog died
and I suddenly realized one evening
I didn't want to go home
after work
I asked myself why, why don't you
want to go home you love your home
and the
answer came back,
there's no more
welcome there.

ii

It was that spring when you were about
to take a sabbatical and I slowly realized
you ~~weren't planning to do~~ ~~wouldn't have~~ anything ~~to do~~ besides
drink the poems were already written
the books on your reading list were ones
you'd already read.

iii.

It was that spring when I started feeling
attracted to some of my male students
they were so vibrant and alive, alert.
They showed up early stayed
after class to chat handsome athletes
smart readers meditators
everything I like.
They paid attention to me, remembered
what I said. On some level, at least,
they wanted me.

Growing Up

i.

Growing up I thought my family was
normal Marta says, I thought all grownups
drank to excess shouted fought disappeared
froze up passed out on the back stoop
I didn't know no better Janice says I thought
all daddies smelled like that yelled like that.

Growing up Sherry says I thought everyone
had a home as unpredictable as mine. I had to
be careful all the time: quiet obedient watchful.
I watched out for my younger siblings Jim says
made sure they were okay bathed fed. Growing
up I never questioned was this normal. It would
never have occurred to me to wonder.

This program is where I grew up Joy says;
this is the place where I learned to heal the hurting
little girl in me and start to take care of myself,
love myself, take responsibility you know, grow up.

ii.

I'm not on the roller coaster anymore
Cheyenne says, not on the hamster-wheel either,
not looking at everyone to see how I can fix them.

I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop any
more not constantly on the lookout for disaster
watching for all the bad signs. I'm learning

to trust my program, myself, my Higher Power. I
started I think by learning to trust you all, in these
rooms, and now I have so much trust Carrie says.

I can try new things start to put myself out there
quit my job leave my drunk husband make new
friends learn to handle finances. I'm growing up

in this program in ways I didn't even know
I needed to do.

Keep Coming Back

i.

I'll never graduate from this
program Carrie says I'll keep
coming back I'll go till my last
day on this earth I'll be dying
and I'll be like, wait—
I have to go to a meeting.

ii.

Try six meetings and see how it
goes for you Joy says if you don't
like it we'll refund you your misery.

iii.

Life is still a challenge I fail all the time
Ellen says I just keep coming back
after thirty-five years here
I come three times a week because
I want to be
better by the time life is done with me
I want to be
a woman of dignity and grace
hold my head high.

vi.

My husband steadfastly refused to see my
suffering you know in this program we keep
the focus on us and not on the alcoholics

in our lives so I've been focusing for months
on recognizing my own denial. But his is
superbly painful to me even today years

later he won't let himself see how he hurt me

betrayed my trust my family's trust diminished
me abandoned me left our marriage long before

I finally walked away. It's not like there were
kids involved and I'm still young I deserved
to start over listen to me still justifying myself still

feeling ashamed or maybe just bitterly disappointed
I don't ever want to be bitter but oh, the disappointment
tastes a little...

x.

The opinions expressed here were strictly these of the person who gave them take what you like and leave the rest.

xi.

Keep coming back.

It works if you work it.

And you work it cause you're worth it.

#METOO #LISTPOEM

I should say at the outset
I've only been hurt by my peers
Men in authority have always kept
their hands to themselves in my case
not sure why.

Also for the record,
I don't have just one inner child
I carry young girls around
inside me by the dozen.

When I think back I tend to start
with the episode in fifth grade but
I guess it started all the way back
in first, didn't it, that first week
if all violence perpetrated
on the female
by the male
is sexual violence.

i. Mason: The older boy, too old
for first grade—what was he doing
in my classroom? how many years
had he been held back?—who stalked
and threatened me on the playground
at recess, held a lighter by my face,
flicked it on. Why? Oh he'd been
expelled for violence so often.
I ran crying straight to the principal
and Mason was expelled again.
I'm not sure I felt empowered.

ii. When we go to the grocery
when we go to the museums
when we go to the zoo or the mall
or the arboretum wherever
we go men notice me and say
things like *what a pretty girl*,

*I wish I was younger, your little girl
is going to be a heartbreaker*
(whatever that means; it doesn't
sound good). *What's your name
smile honey aren't you a little peach
pretty as a picture.* (One time a man
walked up and handed me a rose.
I don't think he wanted money.)
Their attentions do not make me
more confident.

iii. Todd: fifth grade classmate, not
a friend. The boy who during science
class put his ruler between me
and my chair and rubbed it fast
back and forth until it burned me.
Part of me wishes she'd jumped up
to yell at him, call for the teacher's
help. But a stronger part stayed numb
silent angry so confused. The parts
can tell deep inside this is wrong,
it hurts, it's a private place he's touching.
But it's not his body touching mine,
he has a tool. Is it still bad?
What do we even say? It's too
embarrassing. We're not so strong
at ten as we were at six.

iv. And yes, these were isolated incidents;
they were not repeated. Mason did not
come back to school (where did he go?).
But rape culture starts here:
first grade playground
fifth grade classroom
my body as the plaything and me
with no idea
what's happening
or why
what is accomplished

in the sudden
assertion of sexual dominance...

v.

First date:

Bill:

Also the guy who sings duets with me at Westside Baptist
who gets so mad sometime for no reason. During one rehearsal,
I go to the women's restroom to get away but he follows me
inside because he's not done yelling at me, and nobody
walks away from him!

vi.

Bennett:

vii. Taigne:

viii. Taigne's friend

Rape Culture

i.

The guy in the parking lot outside the library who stretches out his hand and when I shake it throws me up against my car and spits on me, yelling that I am a bitch and a whore.

ii.

The Tom Jones roadie who asks me where the showers are and then suggests I join him. Not politely.

iii.

The men on my undergraduate campus who tell me almost every day to *smile, honey*, as I walk to class.

iv.

The two guys in the parking lot who yell at me because I will not shake their hands or stop to talk with them. Again, it seems, I am a bitch and a whore.

v.

The guy who hangs around the Baptist student center, harasses me for weeks, follows me to class, insisting that I owe him at least one date because he's my brother in Christ. How can I say no without giving him a chance?

vi.

The men on the streets of Atlanta who follow me everywhere I walk, the summer of '93. Do they take it in shifts? There was always someone with nothing better to do. *Where you goin, honey? You look like you need a friend...*

vii.

The guy driving around my Louisville neighborhood
on a rainy day, slowing down, rolling down his window,
offering me a ride to wherever I'm going. No, thanks.

Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you. Look,

I have my baby in the backseat.

I wonder where he stashed the mother.

viii.

All this to say, I spoke too soon

last week when you warned me

the public library was full

of homeless folks

and I joked, *They're not going to hurt me.*

Only people I know hurt me.

Because now that I think about it,

I have been harassed and threatened

and catcalled and even physically attacked

by strangers; men my own age, still, so far,

but strangers. Everywhere I have lived,

I have been objectified, and made to feel

unsafe. And almost everywhere I go,

I believe it.