

Chapter 01

Carissa: So I was the firstborn of loving but very young teacher parents, raised very close to a large extended family, also mostly teachers and farmers in Oklahoma who still love and support me to this day. Perfection was demanded in our small town to keep people from talking, and I very often felt misunderstood as if who I was was wrong. “Little girls don't do that,” my mother would say, along with my father's tradition: “I'll give you something to cry about.”

That all taught me at a very early age to lie and repress my feelings in order to avoid consequences or upset someone. As a young child, I fell victim to sexual molestation, as a lot of little girls do. At the hands of my older male caretaker, this secret shame stayed with me living just below the surface. But all through school, I was a perfectionist, a rule follower.

I was given little room for error as a teacher's kid, straight A's and becoming valedictorian seemed expected. I didn't drink, didn't smoke, or have sex throughout high school. Church youth group and young life were my way of life through college as I continued on the straight and narrow, steering clear of drugs and alcohol.

The first time I got drunk, I was in Mexico. I chalked up this horrendous, uncontrollable vomiting and blackout to the fact I'd also smoked a cigar. Even when I turned 21, the few drinks I imbibed on rare occasions did not signal addiction to me. On the day of my college graduation, however, my mom cried the whole time.

She had always been a crier, a characteristic that used to disgust my sister and I. When I inquired about the tears, she told me she was simply crying for joy at how proud she was of all I'd accomplished. But that evening, she called with a very different story. “I've asked your dad to move out.” She stated, “Why?” I asked, starting to hyperventilate.

“Well, your dad has found himself a girlfriend, a teacher that works in the room next to mine.” The conversation continued briefly, but I don't remember what

else was said. I ran into the street screaming at the top of my lungs because my worst fear had been realized, my family was falling apart. Looking back, I can see how the universe was trying to prepare me for this, but I was still devastated and heartbroken.

I'm proud to be my father's daughter, believing that all my good characteristics came from him. How could he do this to my mother, to my sister, to me? I was leaving college without a real plan, and now the person I was counting on helping me through that transition had abandoned me and my family. I noticed then that alcohol was incredibly good at numbing the pain and loss I felt, also helping me quiet thoughts enough to sleep.

The next five years were marked with many constant transitions. My dad was in and out of my life, and despite his lies, I found it easy to forgive him. Constant transitions, early stage alcohol dependency is what was going on.

Others started noticing how affected my body was even after one drink of wine. Rage and aggression were commonplace drunk behaviors of mine, which I acknowledged, but blamed heavy drinking on my situation. "Alcohol wasn't my problem, it was my family," I naively told myself.

A short peace course in a Muslim country where alcohol is forbidden assured myself that I did not need to drink. Nonetheless, I began noticing how often I would think about drinking and always got alcohol when and if I could. When we were abruptly evacuated after only seven months due to political unrest, I landed in Tulsa with no job, money, car, or plan.

My mother was also getting remarried that summer, so a surrogate family took me in. They gave me a job and a room at their house. Evenings with them were spent cooking delicious meals and drinking copious amounts of wine and scotch.

And the amount of drinking seemed normal. I was constantly training for marathons, and I'm convinced that the rigorous exercise kept the physical effects of my drinking minimized. But then after a couple of years, the family I had become very close to went through a similar hurtful divorce caused by infidelity.

I found myself once again caring for an unstable mother figure, drinking to medicate my pain, and drowned thoughts continued. I quit my job and was unemployed for three months before finding another opportunity. While

working my next job, I started a master's program, taught yoga and meditation, and began sneaking wine in my coffee mug after lunch.

I finished school and transitions continued, so I began keeping whiskey bottles in my car. I found myself frequenting liquor stores when I was out and about in the community. I drank before and after my Wednesday night workouts with my good friend. And after that, we would often discuss our abundant wine consumption, both starting to wonder if it was a problem.

In the early 2010s, I was given a job that moved me out of Oklahoma, which I was sure this new start and separating from the drama of family would magically create a change in my drinking habits. They changed all right. I began drinking more during the day, hiding bottles under my bed, and blackouts occurred more often. I even lost my car at one point for three days forgetting where I had parked it, but that's a whole other story.

I raised concerns with some of my dearest friends that ignored every red flag, appearing feeling impervious to the true effects of alcohol and any real consequence. Getting arrested during a work trip was actually a check off my bucket list of things I thought a goody goody like me needed to experience.

An extreme DUI charge, however, was not. Though I laughed while getting into the cop car, I bailed myself out that same night, and the next morning was filled with the most intense shame, guilt, and embarrassment I had ever experienced. I had to cancel my work appointments and lied to my boss that I was merely shaken up from the accident.

They discovered I had been arrested not a week later. I was mortified, but miraculously did not lose my job. You would think that this experience would have been a wake up call. It was not. I continued daily consumption and remained in denial that I had a problem. The voice in the back of my head was saying otherwise. I entered a five month sobriety stage in 2015 due to a family competition, openly admitted to my best friend that I thought I might have a problem.

Shortly thereafter, however, she cut me off. She was dealing with her own issues and that recreated feelings of abandonment within me. I relapsed shortly after and continued drowning my wise mind in alcohol. In January of 2016, I met my now husband, who insisted that our dates did not center around alcohol. This was refreshing and relieving, but I wondered to myself, "How does he know?" It took several months before I disclosed my DUI

information to him. I had to since I was finally going to court. Up to this point, there had been no real consequences from that incident, other than being about \$20,000 in debt.

I returned to the scene of the crime, took a plea bargain, and began the process of compliance, which included a week-long stint in county jail, where I was able to go to work during the day but had to return at night. 60 hours of alcohol education classes, which I did online, and a breathalyzer had to be installed in my car for a year.

All of these consequences, along with my partner's presence, did decrease my drinking. Still, alcohol occupied my thoughts, but I told myself, see, I can take it or leave it, more denial. After being reprimanded at a work function for overdrinking, the lies continued as I justified my behavior, blaming my impaired intoxication on medicines that must have interacted with my two glasses of wine. In fact, I had drunk an entire bottle in secret before the dinner to calm my social anxiety, at least that's what I told myself.

My boss voiced concern that made getting help for my problem a requirement to keep my job. This is when I first met a psychiatrist and a myriad of ineffective medications were prescribed. After two more incidents later that year where colleagues reported to my boss they smelled alcohol on me at functions, I simply denied and began searching for a new job.

Deeply embarrassed and angered by the assholes who ratted me out without confrontation, I wanted to leave the job on my own terms since they somehow had not fired me yet. Throughout this, my partner stayed by my side, but daily fights where alcohol was the focus sent us to couples counseling where we learned about planned drinking.

This worked seemingly, but really only served to help me mask my use to myself and others. Thanksgiving of 2017, I got engaged and accepted a new demanding work from home job. This again proved that running from my alcohol abuse was useless.

Feeling constant stress and anxiety sent my daytime alcohol use to an uncontrollable level. My partner became nervous to come home, never knowing who he would come home to or if I'd even be conscious. I knew in my gut I had a real problem at this point, so I continued to read and educate myself on the disease of alcoholism and sobriety. I began opening up to friends who I considered safe, but I continued lying about my actual use.

Drinking in secret during the day, one to two shooters would turn into a pint by afternoon. Tears, screaming, overwhelming emotions, frustration, broken promises, waking up having no recollection of what I did or said the night before. And lies upon lies characterized the first year of my marriage. I knew that if I could just remove alcohol, all of our issues, my problems, my inability to focus at work would go away.

Yet, I couldn't do it. Saying to myself each night, tomorrow's gonna be different. Affirming myself in the morning, "Today I will not drink," still did not keep me away from liquor stores. Making rules for myself did not work, and I continued to feel awful, sneak and hide alcohol, make poor decisions, and black out.

"This is no way to live, love, and accept love." I told myself, but I could not see a way out. Finally, on a hot day in June, my husband and my mother confronted me. They had no idea how to help me, so they researched treatment facilities and made the arrangements to take me.

To say I was offended and angry at them both for going behind my back is an understatement. I was hysterical as I called my then boss and told her what was going on.

But then after a short intake call with the facility, I started to realize just how sick I was and that I needed this help. Reluctant but willing, I packed my bag, knowing in my heart of hearts that I needed help and was not trustworthy to seek it for myself. I spent 26 days recovering in the mountains of Colorado. I reconnected with God, and I've not had alcohol since.

My sobriety would not be possible without my initial recovery, the support of my friends and family, and the program of Alcoholics Anonymous keeping me sober. I'm a perfect storm for the disease of addiction. Heredity and other genetic predispositions make me vulnerable. And I've seen how alcohol affects loved ones in my family currently.

And now I know how it affected my family in the past. I'm still processing alcohol's effects on me personally. But suffice it to say that my soul and my body ache for those I have hurt, the memories I have missed, and for those still suffering.

I'm grateful today for the awareness that I cannot control alcohol because it controls me. And I will work all my days to stay clean and clear.

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