

MASTERPIECE

A Love Story

A Memoir About Sexual Abuse

ALAN SEARLE

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www.teddiblack.com

Some names were changed in the telling of this story.

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*This book is dedicated to all who have
yet to enter Christ's Kingdom. May
your arrival precede His return.*

“Without dignity, identity is erased. In its absence, men are defined not by themselves, but by their captors and the circumstances in which they are forced to live.”

~ Laura Hillenbrand

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1

CONQUERED

*“No personal calamity is so crushing that something true and great can’t be made of it.”
~ Bill W., co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous*

It was a day exactly like every other day in recent memory. I woke up and started drinking in secret. Always in secret.¹

Like every other day, I couldn’t predict what kind of day it would be. Some days I would drink all day and feel unaffected, as though it was only water passing through my system, not hard liquor. Other days all bets were off. As soon as the cycle began I would pass into The Blackout Zone, where I was walled off from the awareness of self, thought, the needs of others, and most important, how I felt about it.

It was a vital daily job – the most vital – because there was a lot to feel, all vastly uncomfortable, and it piled up into a larger mass day upon day, all to be avoided. My life became a landfill where nothing ever decomposed, where everything

was saved, and I just couldn't keep myself from compulsively picking through the trash.

Some days I would drink all day and be able to hide it well enough to keep from being caught out. Other days it was painfully obvious to everyone, despite my denials. My life was out of control.

I had been sober off and on for several years since rehab – mostly off, but I had (I thought) become very skilled at hiding my condition. Months could go by (it seemed to me) before anyone really caught on to the fact that I was drunk. Whatever. It was worth the pain and effort, the incredible hard work and focus of will needed to be slightly squeezed all the time – even if I was caught lying once in a while. That's the lifestyle of alcoholic bondage, where drinking to kill pain only creates more pain. It was a vicious circle.

A family member told me that coming home to me was like the story about the Lady or the Tiger, and it was never clear which I would be. Frank Stockton's tale features a courtier who has to choose between two doors for his one chance to win his love's hand. One door opens to the lady herself and a lifetime of bliss. The other reveals a ferocious tiger, ready to devour without mercy.

On this particular day, August 4, 2003, I had neither what passed for normalcy, nor oblivion, only depression. Or so I thought. Later, when people came home, it was clear to them that I had lied one more time, and had overdone it one more time. There was no hiding. I was more drunk than I thought, and this time they had had enough.

'Do you remember what we told you the last time you got drunk?'

'No.'

'We told you that if you got a bottle, you were going to have to get a room.'

And so the old heave-ho was underway. I quietly gathered a rucksack with a change of shirt, my wallet, my phone, what was left of my bottle (the most indispensable item). Shrugging

it on, I headed toward the door, keys in hand. I was reminded not to drive, or a call to the police would follow.

So I took off on foot.

We lived in an exurban area north of Vancouver, Washington – just across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon. Between the subdivisions were main roads with steep ditches and no shoulders. Walking on the road was the only option. Someone called my friend Matt who lived nearby. Matt and I had started attending Alcoholics Anonymous about four years before. Matt had stayed sober and I had not, even though the meetings were still a daily ritual, side-by-side with my secret drinking.

This was the schizophrenic nature of my life, as though I were professionally two-faced.² I wanted all the benefits of AA and all the perceived benefits of being drunk. Sometimes I would leave a meeting and use a bottle hidden under the seat to get drunk before I drove out of the parking lot.

Oh yes, I drove drunk a lot, possibly several thousand times. Only the grace of God kept me from the gift of a DUI and all that entails: arrest, fines, court fees, mandatory treatment, jail time, not to mention humiliation and despair. Only the outright mercy of God kept me from hurting or killing someone, either in my car or with my car, including my family.

Life without booze seemed inconceivable, yet I was so sick of it I couldn't imagine drinking one more drop. It was a daily madness that lied to me about the drink being the only cure for the feeling of hollowness that the drink itself caused. Each morning I would come to consciousness and be hit by the craving.

The craving was a gnawing, crawling, grabbing, clutching thing that overpowered all inhibition, removed even the thought of inhibition, because of the certain knowledge that the first drink will bring blessed relief from the emptiness – an emptiness that comes from drinking way too much, way too often, for way too long, an emptiness that becomes a self-perpetuating creature with a will of its own.³

Alcoholic bondage is an almost seamless life, where the only demarcation is the unconsciousness of sleep. Life's one desire is that you leave me alone. In the end, it was all I was able to choose: to be away from you and end all relationship, because if you don't know me, you can't hurt me. And I didn't want to be hurt any more.

Why did I hurt so much in the first place? It was a daily question I couldn't answer, and I was reduced to knowing only one response to make it go away, a long, dulling pull on a bottle of Windsor Canadian Blended Whiskey.

I had stopped using a glass years before. Why pay the middleman? The plastic bottle was a welcome development. It was pliable enough to be squeezed so that the liquor would push out faster through my gullet. That first drink of the day was very important. It had to come as fast as possible so the relief followed as fast as possible. No matter that true relief only lasted about 20 minutes and the rest was maintenance. As July became August of 2003 I knew no other path.

Matt and I shared the same AA sponsor until John fired me for lying to him about my drinking. That was about two years before I found myself lurching down NE 10th Avenue late that hot summer afternoon. I had just gone by a spot I knew well, where a small brush-lined creek passed through a culvert under the road, a place I often went when I needed a safe place to drink outside the house. Matt rolled up alongside in his Camry. A mission of mercy, but not for me – for my family, so they might know that I landed somewhere safe.

He powered down the window. 'Hey buddy...'

'Someone called you..?' It was a statement more than a question.

'Yep.' A pause, a once-over. 'What's up?'

'I got kicked out of the house, need to get a room somewhere.' He motioned. I got in.

'Where to?'

Good question. I was one of the fortunate ones. I had yet to drink myself out of everything I owned or professed to love. Somewhere in the back of my mind I denied that I was only enjoying house and home on sufferance. I was at the cliff but hadn't leaned over far enough to fall into the abyss that ends in a life on the street.

Life in The Blackout Zone prevented thinking about that, or making any plan beyond the next drink. Life was reduced to a simple state of need: getting loaded, and being left alone to do it. Eventually, the abyss would come in its own time, of its own accord. But I denied that inevitability as well. Little did I know how close it was.

Surprisingly, I had a credit card in my pocket (these are very useful for procuring alcohol) and could have chosen the University Inn, a new upscale motel nearby, but my heart was set on the Value Motel, a seedy, rundown complex adjacent to Interstate 5 in a less desirable part of town about five miles away. I was, at that moment, beyond pretence.

It was stiflingly hot when Matt pulled into its gravel entryway, just at dusk. We rolled up under the Value Motel sign pylons. Everyone along the Interstate for a mile in both directions could see its neon glory: VALUE MOTEL. BREAKFAST. ENTER HERE. \$21/\$23.

He switched off the car, still saying nothing, pulled away the shoulder belt to create some slack, and turned in his seat to face me. As the sunlight faded, we were bathed in the intermittent flash of the directive arrow urging Interstate drivers to EXIT NOW!

Several families, clearly in residence, not on vacation, ignored us as children ran around the parking lot: loud, unruly, violent. The adults were too busy with their own argument to notice, or perhaps care. A pair of men stood off toward the corner of the two story row engaged in what looked like a drug deal or some other hook-up; three more nearby were throwing back some cheap beer. Everyone and everything

appeared to have experienced better days, so I knew that it was the right place for me. Nevertheless, I was frightened, but if you had asked, I would have denied that as well.

I mumbled a thanks and started to get out and felt Matt's hand on my arm as I turned to leave. I looked back at a caring face with a pair of raised eyebrows under curly brown hair.

'See you at the morning meeting tomorrow?'

'Yes. No. I doubt it. Probably not.' It was an involuntary settlement on honesty. Not my default, but why lie? I had no idea what Monday would bring. Besides, the only thing on my mind, it being Sunday night, is that the liquor stores were closed until 9:30 the next morning, and I had to somehow nurse what I had until then.

Matt let me go with an AA cliché. 'Easy Does It,' he said.

Matt was experienced enough to know that I was in no shape to have a conversation, or receive any real kindness from him beyond the lift. Redemption would have to wait for another day. It didn't even occur to me that he would call my family on his way home to let them know where I was, and that I was, presumably, tucked in safely for the night. I didn't care about that (*'Leave me alone!'*). My only need was to negotiate the transaction for a safe and private place to continue my liquid self-immolation.

My burden of guilt and sense of valuelessness only gave me enough strength of will to spend \$21, for the cheapest room (*'I don't need more than this. I don't deserve more than this'*). There was no room for my personal value at the Value Motel, only my person.

(*'I deserve to be sleeping out in the weeds somewhere,'*) I thought, out on the edge, like some of the hard cases who told harrowing stories of ruin and redemption in the thousand-some AA meetings I had attended.

These were guys who rode around the western USA for years in boxcars, or who drank or fought themselves out of one town after another. Guys who lived in dumpsters. Guys who

would get tired of a logging or construction job after a while and pick a fistfight with the foreman. One guy who camped out in an empty corn crib and tried to drink himself to death after being fired as a useless farm hand. Another who got sober while living for an entire winter in an open horse trailer, becoming a successful entrepreneur and business owner. Yet another who struck and killed a child while driving in the kind of drunken blackout that was a regular feature of my life.

All true stories, all told by guys I knew and admired. They had made it out of the darkness I was still living in. They had stepped into the other side of life, the side where the sun shone, and the birds sang and there was a spring in their step and life's equation was factored with joy, fulfillment and peace, rather than depression, restlessness and strife. In their moments of truth, they came to AA and found a relationship with God.

It was the place of my childhood, that relationship. It was what I had had as a boy, but it was now a place I no longer could imagine. My world had long since turned to black and white, all beauty washed out. And God was nowhere to be found.

But these sober guys were all in four-dimensional living color. They showed up in AA after torching their lives. I stood amazed as they grew from the ashes into dependable men, seemingly overnight, while I continued to drag my tired body down the road toward death. I had to acknowledge how they had changed, because seeing was believing. I saw them recover and become men of faith, but didn't believe I could.

They had results, while I could only muster excuses. '*God is fine for you*', I thought, but not for me. If God worked for you, good on you, but faith couldn't work for me. It had failed me long ago. If God was real, He was only real for you, not for me. God answered you, not me. I didn't deserve anything from God anyway. Not after what I had done, and what I had been, and what I was.

In retrospect, it's no wonder that I was taken in by such a pack of lies. My worth had long before drained out of me

like spent dishwater when the plug is pulled, leaving only a scummy residue. My life needed a good scrub, but instead I chose to protect my freedom to drink. And so it was that I drifted into the Value Motel, knowing it would give what I thought I needed for one more night. (*Leave me alone!*)

Tomorrow could wait. That was my powerless and repetitive excuse to avoid facing the guilt and shame that filled my life.

For \$21, I had a room with no frills, a view of the freeway and no TV. Heavily stained carpet. No air conditioning, but a window with no screen (too close to the ground for an effective suicide attempt). A sink but no towel. A *cracked* sink. There was a mirror over the sink, to be ignored. A button lock on the door but no deadbolt; a security chain whose missing receiver was marked by four damaged screw holes on the plastic door frame. A door to a shared toilet. The lingering stale smells of cigarettes and urine. The room had been painted white once long ago and superficially cleaned, possibly within the last week.

The evening's entertainment was liquid, which, as always, produced a bad movie inside my head. It was the same old plot with the same old cast of characters, a seemingly endless string of complaints, resentments, assessments of victimhood, lists of unfair circumstances, people who had turned against me or who simply *didn't understand*, angry diatribes, mournful memories and unresolved problems. I was very engaged in mental conversation with people who weren't there, but who made my life miserable nonetheless.

My victimhood was complete.

At last the bottle was as empty as my heart, and my anger was spent, and I passed out of myself into a restless, dreamless, uneasy sleep. I came to with a start hours later, sweating, vaguely sick but not yet craving more booze, although that would come soon enough. It was maybe sometime shy of five in the morning, the time of day when the body is at its lowest ebb. I had no watch or clock, but as I lay staring at the ceiling the slowly growing light told me the day would begin soon

enough. Another long, hard, empty day with no hope beyond the knowledge that the liquor store opened in less than five hours. I didn't plan to be late.

It was a day exactly like every other day in recent memory. A day made for drinking. A day to be spent in secret.

Limp, drained, devoid of feeling or expectancy, I searched the room, as though to find a clue about how I had come to be there. Nothing. Out the window, the world was slowly stirring. I leaned outside in the humid stillness, puffing on a Marlboro like a man does when he's killing time waiting for an overdue train.

I felt an anxiety that had nothing to do with what was external to me: the broken promises, the damaged relationships, the unfulfilled potential, the strife, the lack, the emptiness! That anxiety – what woke me – was all internal, and it boiled up inside me with an unexpected urgency of its own. It was all from things long denied and ignored, and I had no control over it any more. It was my brokenness and my inability to glue any two pieces of my life back together. It had fallen apart 40 years earlier.

The burden of the years suddenly pressed down on me and squeezed out words I didn't expect or intend.

'God, where are you?' I heard myself asking. 'Why are you leaving me like this? Where do I go from here?'

Seemingly against my will I asked God these questions, but didn't truly crave answers. Answers involve facts, and facts can lead to reason and reasoned arguments can change minds. That's a dangerous path for a man in denial. It was better to remain unreasoning. New ideas were too painful, and I was tired of pain.

I would have preferred more drinking, but the bottle contained only stale fumes. I had checked vainly out of long habit. The fuel of my life had at long last run dry.

If something *else* would just come and sweep all of it away, I thought. All of this: the searing emotional pain; the

admissions of guilt; the burning of shame; the heartache of vivid failure and of failing others; the oppression of loneliness; the uselessness, and the lies, all those lies. I wanted something other than God to make the change happen. Facts could wait until the wound was drained.

Suddenly it was too late. There came an unspoken Answer to my questions, and it made me shudder.

‘There is nothing left but to swallow whole truth,’ I heard in my mind. It continued to ring in my head as the moment turned more lucid. I fell into a vision, as I did when I was a child. It was startling. I’d forgotten this would happen to me often.

I was lifted out of my body, and I looked down at myself in disgust; I had driven my life very far in the wrong direction (*‘What would Mom and Dad think if they saw me now?’*). I had a vision of the stereotypically hard-headed man who refuses to stop and ask for directions after becoming hopelessly lost. My stubborn pride had taken me off the edge of the map and I was alone in the wilderness.

Or was I?

I watched myself light another cigarette and smoke it, slowly and deliberately. The sky continued to brighten and the cusp came. I saw myself move through a veil that divided the broken world of the motel room from a pure, clean, supernatural world. I saw myself move into a clear and connected place after years of being lost and away. I moved from death to life and waited there.

When the vision ended and I returned into myself, seeing out of my own eyes again, there was no footing, and I fell. Instead of plunging into the abyss I had long feared, I found myself on hands and knees, still in that clean place.

An ambulance keened its call as it hurried past to help some other injured, dying soul. In its wake, the rasping trill of a red-winged blackbird rose up to greet the day and give me encouragement. There was at least one hopeful song available,

and so I borrowed it. My childhood bird manual described the red-winged blackbird's call as '*konk-uh-REE!, konk-uh-REE!*'

Conqueree. A word for me, defined on the spot: 'One who is overcome by a conqueror'. When I hit the floor in the previous moment, it was a simple act but one of the most difficult in my difficult life. I was unwittingly shoved irrevocably into the world of faith, the way a man is pushed out of the path of an oncoming train.

I had been conquered by alcohol. I was a conqueree, but conquered by the wrong spirit, an evil spirit. (*If I admit defeat, maybe I'll be raised up by a better Conqueror,*) I thought.⁴ Maybe I'll find God, like Matt and the other AA guys had.

(*God hear me! Help me!*) I shouted in my mind.

(*Please remove my obsession to drink! I can't live like this one more minute! Will you help me? If You don't, I think I'm going to die.*)

His silence pounded in my ears as I waited for an answer.

2

SUPERNATURAL

*“We are born, we live, we die among the supernatural.”
~ Napoleon Bonaparte*

I checked into the Value Motel as a blackout drunk, disconnected from life, and with no sense of who I was. I was someone who had become unreal. I checked out as a new man who was real enough, but suddenly didn't know himself.

When God met me on all fours, my only request of Him was to end the drinking. He took me well beyond that, into a land of forgiveness and promise. It was a land I had sailed away from many years before. I reached out to God only to stop my pain. I had no intention of turning into a Christian. Christ was the very thing I hated. He had betrayed me long ago.

Well ha ha. John Lennon is widely credited with Allen Saunders' observation that life is what happens to us when we are making other plans.¹ Actually, it's God that happens, should we choose to include Him. That's my story, anyway. And it all happened against my desire.

The why of my self-destruction is easy to tell: I was sexually violated as a young child and came to believe that I was worthless and filthy. I grew up ashamed and emotionally tortured. School added layer upon layer of bullying. I grew up alone, with no reliable friends until I was in my teens.

The how of my self-destruction involves unwinding the long complication of blocking and escaping all the pain.

I was a child with something marvelous and wonderful that was ripped away from me by circumstance. It was the keen desire to be close to God, and the ability to see Him in all things. It was a connection to the supernatural. Happily, there is life beyond betrayal, rape, anxiety and fear. Somewhere on the other side of forgiveness and surrender there is a quiet place where it is now easy to rest and be at peace. My journey there was long. Because I forgot where I had come from, I could no longer see where I was going.

Before the abuse started and shame rushed in, my life was full of supernatural truths. Everything pointed to a loving God who cared for me. I saw a universe created with great order, full of mysteries and secrets to be discovered and explored. I was born into His crèche, growing up in peace, safety and security. I was Adam in the Garden: naked but unafraid; innocent, and on speaking terms with the Almighty. There was no doubt about who I was, how life worked, or that love was the operating principle of all creation.

I was a precocious and emotionally sensitive child, but there was no one to guide me in developing my spiritual gifts, or to tell me they existed. I also had no warning about lies from the devil. When he pounced, I was defenseless in the face of evil.

No one knew that I had a seer's gift; I certainly didn't. Anything out of the ordinary like that was only shown in 1960s pop culture as magic or science fiction or fantasy, a cartoon joke, or a TV sitcom like 'Bewitched'. Supernatural things weren't from God, or the church would have taught about it, right? And yet, the Christian faith is built on the supernatural.

So, every time I saw something no one else could see, or heard things no one else could hear, or was *certain* of something no one else could understand, I didn't *know* it was supernatural, and from God. I just took it for granted as normal. Likewise, He created me so that I would feel the mood of a room and vibrate to it, like a tuning fork, for good or ill.

Adults dismissed all this as my 'over-active imagination' or declared I was 'making things up'. We read the Bible in our house, but I don't recall an understanding that God still speaks to us today. If the Searle family believed the devil was real, I don't recall being told. I grew up in a religious environment located in the middle of a spiritual desert.

At five or eight or a dozen years old, I would tell adults things I simply shouldn't know, and be shut down for it, or criticized, or be told I was silly, or wrong, or lying. I would know inside myself that I was right, my *spirit* would speak to me about it being right. I would just *know*.

It was the seer's gift, the dreamer's gift, the Joseph gift.² But like that Biblical patriarch, I had no sense about how to use the gift, or when or how to speak of what I had seen. Like Joseph, my mouth wrote troublesome checks that my life couldn't cash.

These things were all real to me. My internal world *was* the real world. It was the God world. What I saw and heard there clashed dramatically with what the adults in my life told me was true, in their *unreal* world. These impressions, of something being true or happening without explanation, or about to happen, were frequent. The word I have for them is *certainties*. I would be immediately and inexplicably *certain* of a thing. Like the night my Uncle Robby was in a crash.

My sister Linda was putting me to bed and it was dark upstairs. I must have been four or five. I insisted to her that Uncle Rob, who slept in the room next to mine, wasn't home and wasn't in bed.

'Nonsense, go to bed.'