

A Farewell to Alcohol

by William McIlwain

Of every three men who try to stop drinking at Butner, two fail.

Butner, North Carolina

I was late getting to Butner, and they wouldn't let me in. The psychiatrist in Winston-Salem had told me to be here at ten thirty, but he hadn't made a special point of it; and I couldn't see where time made much difference. I got out of bed at nine o'clock, fixed a vodka and orange juice, and drank it while reading the sports pages. I sat for a while by a window, thinking, and drank another vodka and orange juice. Around eleven, I decided it was time to go, and I fixed a cup of black coffee and a vodka and orange juice to drink while I shaved and showered. I had never been to the Alcoholic Rehabilitation Center at Butner, or any other institution, and I wasn't sure what I would need. Deciding it would be casual, I packed two bags of sports clothes, my bathing suit, an alarm clock, a briefcase of writing supplies, an unfinished magazine article that I was writing, my typewriter, two tennis rackets, a hundred newspapers that I was supposed to study for a publisher for \$1500, and nine books--*Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Crackup* by Scott Fitzgerald, *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, *People in Quandaries* by Wendell Johnson, *Editor and Publisher Yearbook* (I have been a newspaperman), *The New American Webster Handy College Dictionary*, *The Penal Colony* by Kafka, and *Romantic Poets* in the Viking Portable edition. I thought that would be all I would need. I wasn't sure whether drunks played tennis, but I would have an extra racket if I found a drunk who did.

I got to Butner at one thirty and stopped at a pool hall, drinking a tall Schlitz while watching three games of eight ball. I didn't have a particular feeling that this beer would be the last one I'd ever drink, but I mused over it. I got to the Alcoholic Rehabilitation Center around two fifteen and told the lady who I was.

"Bill," she said, "you're late." "I know it," I said. "I'm sorry. I left late." "Bill, you're four hours late." She was beginning to annoy me by calling me "Bill"--she didn't know me, and I wasn't a small-time drunk. "I'm sorry," I said. "You'll have to come back next week," she said. "I can't take you." I almost said, "The hell with it, lady," but something strong made me know I had to get into Butner. If I went away, I wouldn't come back. "Can I get a motel and get in tomorrow?" "Bill, you'll just drink all night, and then we can't let you in." "No, ma'am, I won't do that. I really need to get in here." "Do you have any friends in AA you could spend the night with?" "No, ma'am." Finally, she said that maybe a person scheduled to report the next day might cancel out. I could call her in the morning and see. I went to the liquor store in Creedmoor, bought a fifth of vodka, and got a motel room beside a muddy pond. I had a few vodka and Sprites, and fixed another one to carry to an outside phone booth. I hated to do it, but I was going to call the woman. I told her how much I appreciated her consideration and that I hoped someone would cancel tomorrow. I was taking a nap when the motel manager came down and knocked (the rooms have no phones), and said, "The lady at ARC said she'll take you in the morning." I dressed, put my vodka in the car, and decided to ride around Butner. It would be the last chance I would have to see all of it. Butner was an army camp, near Durham, North Carolina, during World War II, and now it is a vast State of North Carolina complex that includes the John Umstead Hospital, a huge green-topped structure for mental patients and bad drunks; a center for youthful offenders; a farm that the youthful offenders maintain; and the Alcoholic Rehabilitation Center. The center is one of three in North Carolina, operated by the State Department of Mental Health.

Across from the hospital, a softball game was going on, and I saw a black center fielder turn on a fly ball and take it on the run, almost at the fence. A little later, the left fielder, white, did almost the same thing. I thought that these must be the crazy people, because drunks can't catch fly balls. I could still hit when I quit playing softball, but I couldn't judge a fly ball. I was getting a little drunk now, and I saw some significance in this--the crazy people being able to catch the fly balls. I watched until the game ended at almost dark and drove back to the motel. I sat in a chair and drank all of the vodka except three drinks. I wanted to have them in the morning before I went to the alcoholic center.

I woke up sweating and shivering and feeling as if I were choking. In the old days, drinking a fifth of vodka at night wouldn't do this to me, but it does now because I've been drinking a long time. Some of the ice hadn't melted, and I thought if I could drink a vodka and Sprite I would quit sweating and shivering. I drank two and still felt bad when I stopped at a restaurant. It wasn't officially open, but the man and his wife were pleasant. He said I could have a bowl of Brunswick stew for breakfast, if I liked that. I ate the Brunswick stew, drinking the last vodka and Sprite that I had. I did wonder now if this would be the last drink I would ever have. "You going to be around a few days?" the restaurant man asked. "I'm going to ARC," I said. He hesitated and said, "Good luck." I thanked him, finished the drink, and left the motel glass on his table.

"Well, Bill," the lady at ARC said, "you look a lot better this morning. I'm glad." I thanked her and said, "Yes, ma'am, I feel a lot better today." She filled out some forms, asked my income, studied awhile, and said, "Bill, I'm going to have to charge you \$32 a day." It was more than I had expected, and I later learned that many of my fellow patients were paying \$4 a day, some of them \$1 a day, but that's fair enough. Certainly in a program such as this a man should have to pay only what he can afford.

A bearded young doctor, a good sport,

examined me, studying my retinas, pushing at my liver, and seeing whether I could distinguish between sharp and dull objects when they touched my legs.

"Were you a wrestler?" he asked.

I thought he meant a well-built college wrestler, and I felt good; then I thought he meant a professional wrestler with a big belly. My waistline gradually got bigger as I escalated to keeping a half-gallon of vodka at home, a half-gallon in my office, and a half-gallon in the trunk of my car, in case I got caught away from home or the office. I was drinking about seven Sprites a day and also eating, which many alcoholics don't do. I told him, no, but I had been a football player. It was a long examination, and I felt ashamed of being so shaky and wet with perspiration. But I left the room feeling better because he said, "You have great lungs."

It was hot outside, and a long way from my car to C Dorm, one of the three one-story brick buildings where patients live, about twenty to a dorm. Sweating, I struggled with the two bags of clothing, the typewriter, the two tennis rackets, the briefcase, and the hundred newspapers. I had to make three trips. In the lobby of C Dorm, I saw men and women, black and white, sitting together in chairs and on a couch, watching television and playing cards. A beautiful black woman and a young white man--attendants--put my bags on a bed and went through them, taking Listerine, Bufferin, nose drops, and iodine. They would have taken shaving lotion and hair tonic, but I didn't have any.

"We'll give these back when you leave," the woman attendant said. "You should go now and eat with the rest of them."

I am at Butner, then--"with the rest of them"--for twenty-two days. We include all sorts: Tommy Morgan (I will not use patients' real names), who dropped out of college eighteen months ago because "I was drinking so much I couldn't keep up with my studies"; a bulldozer operator who cannot read or write; a grandmother who drinks vanilla extract; a young man who writes detective stories and has

written a good book; Tip Watson, who constructed a whiskey still when he was fourteen, sold its output at a nearby sawmill, and began drinking it, too; a business executive's wife, Julie Wall, who has tried three times to commit suicide; an accountant, highly articulate; Mr. Wellington, a church deacon and "secret drinker," who lost his job in big industry after thirty-six years because "I was drinking beer at night and making mistakes the next morning"; a truck driver who was using amphetamines and whiskey at the same time; and Mr. Leland, who for years would get in his boat and go across the river to buy a half-gallon of moonshine. Mr. Leland's words are difficult to understand; he mumbles, batting his eyes steadily, shaking so much that he can hardly lift a cup of coffee to his mouth.

There is, perhaps, only one similarity in us all: none of us thought he would ever become an alcoholic, but all of us have become alcoholics.

What's it like being an alcoholic and living with no one but alcoholics? Would you suppose that a dorm full of drunks (though sober now) would fight? Quarrel? Sulk? Withdraw? What?

It's the most considerate, congenial group that I have ever been a member of. That includes Sunday school classes, football teams, college fraternities, newspaper city rooms, and cocktail parties. Men and women hold doors open for others to pass through; red-neck countrymen sit down at dinner with black men with Afro haircuts, and they talk; patients see a new member coming toward the dorm and they go out to help with the luggage; they help, too, when a patient leaves; constantly, they inquire about one another's well-being--"Feeling better this morning, Mr. Leland?"

But what kind of program could be put together to deal with so disparate a group? Here is the printed schedule, with asides of my own, that we live by, Monday through Friday:

7 A.M.--Awakening of patients. (This is no problem because many patients are up and about by six o'clock, some as early as three thirty and four. Alcoholics often don't sleep

well.) Clean bedroom and prepare for breakfast. (We have other chores, too, divided among us, such as sweeping the halls and lobby, polishing the drinking fountains, dusting the furniture, carrying out trash, and taking part in a mass cleanup on Saturday morning, which includes washing the big windows in the front of our dorm.)

7:45 A.M.--Medicine call. (Each of us is required to take vitamin pills for the first two weeks. Patients who are in bad shape--sleeplessness, "nerves," and high blood pressure seem to be the most common afflictions--may get medication several times a day.)

8--Breakfast. (All meals are big and high in calories, except for those patients who are put on special diets. Many alcoholics are undernourished because they quit eating when they start drinking. A taxi driver in our dorm would drop consistently from 200 pounds to about 150, at which point he would become sick and be taken to a hospital.)

8:45--Dorm meeting. (Patients elect a dorm leader, and he presides over this meeting. It is attended by both patients and staff members, offering an opportunity for suggestions, announcements, and complaints--from either side.)

9--Sick call and free time. (Patients who have no need of a doctor can do as they please. The card game "rook" is a chief diversion, but there is the choice of watching television, writing letters, or sitting on benches in front of the dorm and talking.)

9:30 to 10:15--All patients meet in Assembly Room for movie, lecture, or discussion of various aspects of alcohol.

10:15 to 10:30--Free time.

10:30 to 11:30--Group therapy with group leader. (Normally, we have six or seven patients in a group, but the number varies as old patients depart and new patients arrive.)

11:45--Medicine call.

Noon--Lunch.

1 P.M. to 4:15--Avocational classes and/or group therapy as scheduled. (We have a range of choices, including woodwork, metalwork,

polishing stones, painting, doing woodcuts, or making pottery. Tip Watson, who has been here several times, said he hopes to shoot basketball behind the building, if he's permitted. "Last time I was here, I worked in the mud [pottery], and my hands broke all out.")

5--Supper. (The Friday night fish--I don't know what kind it is--stands out as the only unpalatable meal of the week.)

6--Medicine call.

6--Recreation. See bulletin board for notice of activities. Free time. (Musical groups, most of the time guitar pickers and country singers, come on Thursday evenings; fishing trips are made to nearby lakes and rivers on Friday afternoons.)

10--Medicine call.

11--Lights out. Bedtime. (Actually, we stay up through TV's eleven o'clock news, Sunday through Thursday. On Friday and Saturday nights, we watch the "Late Show," which ends about 1:30 A.M.)

We may have visitors from 1 to 4 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays. Attendance is compulsory at meetings arranged each Friday evening by Alcoholics Anonymous.

That's our schedule, a full one. But for all of the formal effort put forth by the staff, there may be equal therapy in our just being together--so many alcoholics studying each other. *That* therapy, which comes at cafeteria tables and on benches in the sunshine, may be as great as the therapy provided by counselors and psychologists. You know that nobody's trying to con you. You're not talking to a doctor who may be trying to scare you about your liver, or a preacher who is moralizing over you. You're talking to a man who's tried it, and if he says it's impossible to drink even half a beer unless you want to start all over again--well, if he tells you that, you can believe it. Because he will tell you that he hadn't had a drink for nine months and was convinced that he could drink moderately "like everybody else." He was drunk for three months, went into DT's, got carried to John Umstead Hospital, and now is with us at ARC. There are other benefits. One

is that it's easier to perceive and understand your own flaws and troubles if you slip up on them indirectly--see them first in men and women around you, wonder if yours are similar, and then conclude that they are. You see alcoholics kidding themselves, and realize that you've been doing the same thing. Another benefit is simply that there are horror cases around you. You look each morning at Mr. Leland, mumbling, eye-batting, shaking, and you think, if I don't stop now, I'll get like Mr. Leland.

That's a negative reason for quitting drinking; a person needs positive ones, too, and I am discovering them each day. Physically, I feel better than I have in at least ten years. I don't wake up shaking, sweating, hot and cold, coughing, snuffling, and disoriented. My life in the morning is much more pleasant than it used to be. Perhaps the biggest reason is that I don't wake up frightened, groping to put together exactly what I had done the night before. This is common, of course, with alcoholics, and some of them here have had a lot worse time than I did. One man said he would get up in the morning and look quickly around the house to see if he had broken anything. Then he would go immediately to the garage and circle his car, studying it, praying not to find that he had hit something or someone the night before.

My own case was never that extreme, but I've been told that it could have become so. I would try to put together minute pieces of conversations--pieces that often were of no importance, but the inability to recall them was frightening. It meant, I must have sensed, that sooner or later I would not be able to remember the big things either.

I'm enjoying thinking about things while sober. It's like finding a new pleasure. An alcoholic with the slightest degree of introspection wonders all the time--about himself and about others. Would I have done that if I hadn't been drinking? Would I have done it differently? Better? Am I losing my skills? At least some? If I come down hard on a point, will people say, ah, hell, he was drunk? Does anyone know what's happening to me?

Does the owner of the newspaper? What does he mean, "How're you this morning, Bill?"

When I was drinking steadily, I found that agonizing. Now, I feel able to consider an event or comment, good or bad, in a clear light.

I have started writing again--pretty well, I believe. I had been working on a magazine piece before I left home, and spending the day drinking vodka and Sprite while I wrote had finally reduced my daily production to a half-page of copy. If I had been writing sonnets, that might have been sufficient, but on a 7000-word piece, it was slow going.

How did I become an alcoholic? Why did I need to drink? What's being done here to help me? What are my chances of being able to quit drinking? If I do quit, will I be happy with my life? (The suicide rate of "recovered alcoholics" is five times greater than that of the general population, meaning that many who quit drinking still aren't happy.) After drinking for twenty-seven years (very little at first, increasingly more over the years), if I stop, what will I seem like to myself and to others? Stodgy? Cautious? Scared?

It's important that I find answers to those questions, at least partial answers, and I spend much of each day reflecting. In arriving at conclusions, I am helped by a number of persons, one of them Dr. Norman A. Desrosiers, the director of ARC. He is a man with impressive credentials: he has been a theologian, medical doctor, and psychiatrist; he built an airplane and flies it; he built an organ, composes music, and plays it; he designed a house and now is building it. I give weight to what he says. And one of the things he says goes to the core of the ARC philosophy: "We're not drying out drunks here. We're treating persons who are using alcohol as a coping mechanism. We must treat the emotional needs." It's his contention that the majority of Americans who drink are trying themselves to treat emotional needs, using alcohol as a handy drug to deal with anxiety, tension, fear, grief, depression, frustration, and inhibition. "The term 'social drinker' is meaningless," he says. "If it has any validity at

all, it describes a minority of the people who use alcohol strictly at social functions and at social functions alone. And in minimal amounts of one to two drinks." Statistics on drinking vary, but these rounded-off figures will serve: 90 million American adults drink; of these, 10 million are alcoholics or bad-problem drinkers; that leaves 80 million who might be considered social drinkers. That's the figure Dr. Desrosiers won't accept. "It is far more likely that the majority of persons who are not yet what we call alcoholics, but who drink, are in reality not *true* social drinkers but rather persons who use alcohol to treat their underlying emotional disorders. It is this population from which the alcoholic population is drawn, and which constitutes a vast body of persons who adjust to life with the aid of a chemical means."

I'll accept that--whether or not my friends will (about me or about themselves)--and put myself in that group. Not that when I drank my first beer as an eighteen-year-old Marine, standing beside Frank Dassori at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, I thought, Well, Bill, you're joining the chemical-means group. And I wouldn't have put up with that kind of pseudo-psychological junk for a minute if an employer or a fellow next to me in a bar had raised the point during the following twenty-odd years. I was a boy wonder, breaking the newspaper business wide-open, and I liked to drink whiskey. I could drink more than almost anyone else, and my work never suffered. If anything, it got better. Yes, indeed.

Looking back at it, I believe I understand some of what was happening. I was doing my work well, but I seldom felt at ease, inside or outside of the newspaper. Whiskey brought ease, at least some. I drank, and I continued to work well. For a long while.

From Camp Lejeune to Butner, twenty-seven years, my career as a drinker-newspaperman was this: Attending college after World War II, I went for long periods without even thinking about whiskey. But on occasion I drank a great deal, the occasion being a midwinter dance or a mock

trial in which a student was sentenced to be hanged. (A law student loosened the bathrobe cord before the boy was strangled.) I wrote steadily for newspapers, covering sports events during the college year and working full-time during the summer. I was able to do that because I had got off to a good start in the newspaper business as a seventeen-year-old high school senior. I was not concerned about how real my talents were, and certainly not concerned about whiskey ever becoming a problem. That pattern held true for several years after college, but in Richmond, Virginia, I began to feel an uneasiness. I recall a night driving fast through a countryside, close on deadline, going to cover a triple murder fifty miles away, and thinking for an instant, If I hit that bridge abutment I won't have to cover it. That didn't make sense: I was being acclaimed in that city, and I could read my stories and tell that they were good. It had begun, an almost mystical process in which I would always succeed, but at terrible cost--*seeing* the success but wondering how I had brought it about, wondering if I could do it again. But I never went to my apartment and thought, I've got to have a drink. A fifth of bourbon would last for weeks. My work and life at *Newsday* on Long Island were much as they has been in Richmond. At least for many years. I succeeded: chief copy editor, day news editor, city editor, assistant managing editor, managing editor, editor. I felt many days and nights, though, as if I were doing it all with mirrors: not using the *real* skills of a professional but skills less concrete, even less admirable, perhaps little more than the native cunning and charm of a Southerner who could praise, humor, pamper, and reason men and women above and beneath him into doing, finally, what he wanted done. I rarely "ordered" anyone to do anything. And I rarely made it known when anyone--again, *above or beneath* me--hurt me or caused me difficulty with a thoughtless act. I told myself that I acted this way because it was effective and because I was a good-natured person. For at least ten years, I did not drink much each day. I would have a

cocktail, maybe two, before meals. But on occasion, as in college, I would drink for hours, great amounts, the "occasion" being either business or social. It might be a dinner meeting with other editors to work out a tough problem or make some great change at *Newsday*. Or it might be an editors' convention in San Francisco or Washington, where I had Bloody Marys at breakfast, cocktails throughout the day, and whiskey, gin, or vodka far into the night. Always, I behaved well, was articulate (more articulate, actually, than when I was sober), and recalled the next day precisely what had been said and done, by myself and anyone around me. Maybe if I had got sick or done something really stupid during those years, I would have become alarmed. I didn't. I went on drinking, gradually more because it was accepted on my newspaper, remaining the man who could hold whiskey, a good-natured editor who didn't rebuke anyone--but wishing, too, that I *had* rebuked someone, this thought coming as I drove twenty miles at night to my home, wishing I had said to a news editor: Look, you're getting paid to do your job the same way I'm getting paid to do mine. Don't sit there like a kid resisting everything in sight. I told you to quit jumping so many stories, and I goddamn well expect you to do it. But I never said that. The next day there would be five jumps (continued stories) when I had wanted no more than two. I had a refrigerator put into my office, would play tennis at lunchtime, come back and eat a can of cold tuna fish and drink vodka and tonic. I would lay off the vodka for a few hours and start again, shortly before the 7 P.M. new conference in my office. Later, I quit laying off the couple of hours; I would begin after tennis, drink through the news conference, and then sit and drink awhile, thinking, before I began my ride home.

Bill Moyers, then publisher of *Newsday*, spoke to me about drinking so much--gently at first, sometimes in a kidding way, but later in a more concerned fashion. I paid little attention to him, thinking that he simply had been around more conventional people during his years as Press Secretary and Special Assistant to

President Johnson. I felt Bill would have to accept my drinking and my brilliance; I had helped make *Newsday* one of the finest newspapers in the world, and I had done it while drinking. I believe now--but didn't then--that I was becoming paralyzed in my job, a drunk figurehead who no longer was making great contributions to the newspaper. Gradually, though, that fear was creeping into my mind. I would entertain it long enough to feel concern, remorse, depression--then reject it with great resentment. The hell with Bill Moyers and anybody else who thinks I'm still not one of the two or three best newspaper editors in the United States. But I was frightened, also growing tired of the struggle, and I grasped at the opportunity when Bill arranged what amounted to an ultra-white-collar firing: my becoming writer-in-residence at Wake Forest University on full salary. My year there (1970-1971) turned out no better than the latter days at *Newsday*. I drank steadily, beginning most days when I awoke around noon, made false starts on two novels, and succeeded in writing an *Esquire* article only because it was write it or admit total collapse. That--and the great concern of *Esquire's* editor, Harold Hayes, who worked more carefully with me than any editor should ever have to with a professional writer. I was at the end of the string. I would wake up in the morning shivering and sweating, frightened, knowing where my life was headed. I would drink to ease those terrible feelings, never totally, and begin the next day the same way. Except when asleep, I could not go an hour without drinking. My clothes had been outgrown because of fat; I had hit myself in the forehead twice with a steel racket, playing tennis while drunk; I was accomplishing nothing as a writer. At forty-five, my life had become worthless.

I came to Butner to see if I could turn it all around.

Simply not drinking for a few days helped. The remorse and depression eased, and I was able to think more clearly. For the first time in many years, I was engaged in an honest effort

to help myself, and that produced a euphoric effect. I was in a good frame of mind, then, to receive anything that Butner could give.

The most important thing that I have come to accept is that quitting drinking is not enough. The ARC regards abstention as a minimum requirement. A patient also must learn new ways of behavior. That point is made again and again in group therapy sessions; often it deals with a chronic failing of many alcoholics: lack of assertiveness.

"All of us must learn to express anger." Weldon Bayliss, our counselor, said one morning recently. "If we don't, the anger comes out in some other form. Like depression. Some morning you feel extreme depression and you don't know why . . . but if you think back, you may find that a couple days before, you didn't stand up for your rights."

Several of us conceded that we hadn't enjoyed much middle ground--it was almost say nothing or fight. "I broke a cop's jaw with a hammer once," Coley Thompson said. "Another time, I drove my arm through a window." He showed the scars. "I just couldn't say anything when somebody made me mad."

"That's it," Bayliss said. "And you probably wouldn't have anything wrong with your stomach today [Coley has had much of his stomach removed] if you had been able to express anger."

Bayliss turned to Mr. Wellington, the church deacon and "secret drinker." "You seem like a passive man, Mr. Wellington."

"Well, yes, sir," Mr. Wellington said. "I am."

"Have people been pushing you around all your life, Mr. Wellington?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Wellington said. "You could say that, yes, sir."

"That's got to stop," Bayliss said.

Mr. Wellington said that his married daughter often dropped her children off at his house, and they messed up the place. It bothered him.

"Did you speak to her about it?" Bayliss asked.

"No . . . I didn't. She has a terrible temper, and she doesn't like anyone to tell her what to

do. But I spoke to my wife."

I told Mr. Wellington that he must speak to his daughter--realizing that in the past I, too, might have let it slide by.

"Do you feel you're being used?" Bayliss asked Mr. Wellington.

"To a certain extent, yes."

"Do you feel inadequate to handle things?" Bayliss asked. "Here's a social situation that screams for action. Do you feel you can't handle it?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Does anybody listen to you, Mr. Wellington? You've been pushed around, haven't you? You've tried appeasement, and that doesn't work. You wind up with resentment and depression, and you get drunk. You've got to experiment with new methods. So you bungle things--it's not the end of the world. Try something new."

Not all of our group therapy sessions explode with sudden insights and wisdom, the way they do on television. But there is a cumulative effect, a good one, as we discuss our own lives and listen to other alcoholics discuss theirs. Certainly in my own case it has been helpful to be around Mr. Wellington. I see clearly the similarities in our behavior, even if his unassertiveness is far more pronounced than my own. At first, I was reluctant to admit that; it was not to my taste to sit in a room and tell six persons that I was a lot like poor, gentle, broken Mr. Wellington. Or like Coley Thompson. Or Tip Watson, who jokes all the time. But I said it.

I have made progress, and I believe that I will be able to live happily without drinking. The statistics on alcoholism, however, are grim. A counselor, discussing my chances of success, put it this way: of three patients who leave Butner, *two* fail and must return. He said a patient's chances increased sharply if he became actively involved with Alcoholics Anonymous after leaving here.

My own dislike of meetings in general would lead me not to join AA, but I do know that its work is sound. At a meeting last Friday night, a speaker made a point that I won't

forget. He was a tanned, handsome man who is a dispatcher for a trucking company. "Maybe I can save some of you some time," he said. "If you're wondering whether you'll ever be able to drink again, don't bother. You can't. Do you know what one of the greatest dangers is? You leave here, and you get along just fine. I did for three years. You start saying to yourself, 'Maybe I never was an alcoholic after all. I never did drink all that weird stuff that those *real* alcoholics did.' You think you can drink again--and this time control it. You can't. I tried it."

I believe that if I hadn't heard that man, I may have come to feel exactly as he did--and tried it. Quite likely, as he said, he saved me some time.

Weldon Bayliss has told me that I can leave tomorrow. Actually, a patient is free to leave when he chooses, unless he has been committed to the ARC under court order (a minority). Some patients get homesick or troubled by business affairs and just pack up and go. But the accepted procedure is for the group counselor to approve a patient's departure. The counselor and patient agree on a date, hold a final conference, and the counselor fills out a report for Dr. Desrosiers, offering an opinion on how he thinks the patient will get along. I went this afternoon to see Bayliss for our final conference.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to say about you in the report," Bayliss said. "You're highly motivated, highly intelligent. I would say your chances of not drinking are quite good. But you've got a tough row to hoe; no job, personal problems, possible depression if your writing doesn't go well."

I thanked him and told him that I had enjoyed the days I had spent in his group.

As I was about to leave, he said, "There's something you hear around AA--that you have to put sobriety ahead of everything. *Everything*. Family, job, everything. If that sounds selfish, what it means is that AA men have learned that if they lose sobriety, they, in time, will lose everything."

Mr. Wellington and Luther Moore, a quiet

sawmill worker, will leave with me tomorrow. Neither has a car here. I will drop them off at their homes and go to Virginia, where I will get a solid first taste of what it's like to be in a room with everyone drinking whiskey except me. That experience will come when I speak to publishers of a newspaper chain and then, a week later, to editors of the same chain. I have been to many newspaper gatherings, and none was dry.

The Virginia meetings will mark the first time in four or five years that I have spoken while totally sober. Not long before I left New York, I interviewed a black activist on television after drinking six martinis. I'm not proud of it; it's just a fact. Now, I'll have to see how well I can do business without gin.

As Luther Moore, Mr. Wellington, and I stood together this afternoon, talking, I wondered how each of us would fare. I recalled the statistics: of three men who leave Butner, two fail and must return. One succeeds. To myself, I wished us all luck, but if numbers dog us, I want to be the one of three.

Atlantic Beach, North Carolina

It has been seventy-three days since I drove west on Interstate 40, taking Luther Moore and Mr. Wellington home. All the days have interested me. The two newspaper gatherings in Virginia went well. I arrived at the first one during the cocktail hour, necessitating an explanation, it seemed to me, of why I did not have on a necktie or suit and why I wanted only a Sprite. I had just got out of Butner, I said, a center for alcoholics. No one seemed to care much, one way or the other, except the owner of the chain of newspapers. He stayed to drink with me, having five ginger ales and explaining

that it had been almost a year since he got out of a private clinic in Tennessee. "You'll find that you drink a hell of a lot of ginger ale," he said.

Soon after the Virginia trip, I went to a party attended largely by young Marine Corps fliers. The room was dark except for flashing lights and psychedelic posters; hard rock filled the room like layers of wool rug. The men, if not all handsome, were well built, the women young and pretty. Cold Duck was pressed towards me, and a pilot, drunk, not truculent but puzzled, shouted above the stereo that he didn't quite understand this business of being an alcoholic. Was I trying to cut back, lay off a while, or what? Wine's OK, isn't it? And why had I settled into this godforsaken place? (I'm living now at Atlantic Beach, North Carolina, writing a book.) There's no future for the whole Southeast, he said. Dead. Backward. *California's the place.*

I felt at ease all evening.

A week later, I went to a "gourmet dinner," as it was described--gin and tonics, cucumber salad, red wine and sauerbraten, followed by cigars and cognac. Spending evenings that way, without drinking, there might be a danger, I suppose, of becoming overconfident. But I keep in mind the AA speaker who cautioned against ever thinking, Well, maybe I wasn't a *real* alcoholic, maybe I can drink again.

The beach is a pleasant place to work and live. I write seven days a week, and I feel that it's going well. I swim, play tennis, fish, crab, and dig clams. Each day I do one of those things, even in rainstorms. I feel good and I don't drink.