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IN YOUR OWN WORDS



BEN: THE RESURRECTED

by Tom deMers
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WE ARE IN BEN'S APARTMENT AS HE FINISHES LUNCH. He is eating a sandwich that is a moving target for his mouth, since his hands have a considerable shake. "Essential tremor" he calls it, tells me to look it up on the internet as if I disbelieve him. Now approaching 70, Ben is handsome in a tough, old guy sort of way. White hair, blue eyes, a reddish complexion and a fierceness that qualify him as an understudy for Uncle Sam—except that he is stocky rather than lean, the tremor of head as well as hands lending emphasis to his words. He is a kind of all American alcoholic as well. Son of a minister, Army Ranger, sheet metal worker, father of two, his life could be a Bruce Springsteen song. The lyrics in Ben's own words would run this way:

"I stole a bottle of wine when I was seven and drank for the first time. I felt 10 feet tall, okay, and bullet proof. I turned on my buddies. My dad was a Mennonite minister

trying to convert all the Catholics in Denver. He caught on to me. One day he tied me to a chair and beat me with a razor strap. That didn't stop me. I drank all the way through grade school. I stole it. I had my first stick of marijuana when I was 8, shot heroin at 12. My dad kept beating me but it didn't change nothing. When I was 14, training for the Golden Gloves, I finally had enough. He came at me, and I hit him twice, left him unconscious on the floor."

With lunch over, Ben opens a pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes and pushes his plate away. "My dad was drunk on the Bible," he says. "He drank religion. It's the worst kind of drunk there is. We have them around here too."

At 17 Ben joined the Army because the Denver cops were after him. He met Sonny Barger during Airborne Ranger training. Sonny was a co-founder of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang. Out of the Army in 1957, Ben

couldn't find a job and joined the Angels. Today he calls Sonny Barger his stepbrother.

The serious drinking he started in the army continued with the Angels, fighting all the time as well.

"It was fighting, women and alcohol," he tells me. "That mix was our drug. The biker bitches would put the guys against each other, and we would fight 'til we couldn't stand."

But a more severe beating lay ahead of him. He got involved with organized crime in New York City, and hit skid row on the Bowery. Today he can name the bowery districts in half a dozen cities where he served time as a drunk, winding up back in Denver, where he tells me that once in the drunk tank, he watched another wino cough up part of his liver due to cirrhosis.

"Alcoholics drink for the effect" Ben says. "You go into another world. You feel euphoric, invincible, no fear

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whatsoever, inhibitions are gone. You get obnoxious but you don't know it, okay? You step on other people's toes but you aren't aware. You are living in your own reality. At the same time the need for alcohol increases. You get it anyway you can, okay? Lots of whiskey, cheap wine, canned heat where you drain the alcohol out through a sock. Whatever it takes. I was declared clinically dead three times in Denver (blood alcohol level above .45%).

“Then one day I was sleeping in a doorway at 17th and Larimer. I couldn't do much but lie there, I was so damn sick. Someone stuck a bottle of wine under my arm and a note with the schedule of AA meetings. I just went up there, drank coffee and ate donuts. Then I started going to meetings. I knew I'd hit bottom. I knew another drink would kill me. I got me a sleeping room in a skid row hotel for twenty bucks and started climbing the ladder back up.”

Alcoholics Anonymous was Ben's downfall as a successful alcoholic. He knows the exact date, February 6, when he stopped drinking. He was 28. That was 40 years ago, and he tells you that with pride. He'd been an Army ranger, a Hell's Angel and a prominent drunk in several cities, but once he started attending meetings, his life changed forever.

He went heavily into AA, attending faithfully, then preaching the doctrine of twelve-step salvation around the country. Tucson, Detroit, New York, Chicago, L.A., Portland, Oregon, Ben crisscrossed America pulling drunks off the street and into AA meetings.

“I helped thousands, okay?” he says, scrutinizing me as if I might argue with him. That's Ben's way. He makes bold, opinionated statements, then dares you to take issue. His guard is up.

It's hard not to see Ben's conversion to the Twelve Steps as a parallel to his father's adamant Christianity, Ben preaching salvation through AA wherever he could find an audience, sponsoring men and women at meetings and generally supporting anyone looking for a way out of the nightmare. He also caught back up with his wife and two children and held a steady job.

As he's talked, Ben has been waving a cigarette held between two fingers. Now, as he starts to light up, I feel uneasy. I want to ask him if he can postpone his after lunch smoke until our talk is finished, but I say nothing. This is his home, and he is entitled. Besides, I find myself looking forward to the smell, really strange for someone irritated by even a slight amount of smoke and wary of the secondhand hazards. It's as if inhaling Ben's smoke is inhaling him, part of knowing who he is and how he's lived, sharing something more intimate than words.

“Alcoholics are charmers,” he begins, exhaling a plume of blue smoke. “We know how to charm the rattles off a rattlesnake, okay? That's how we get beautiful women—women other men would die for. It's a characteristic. All alcoholic men have it. They are controllers and manipulators, too. That's how they remain addicts for so long, okay? They

are constitutionally unable to be honest with themselves or other people, their emotions, the whole gamut of human personality goes into keeping the habit alive.”

“Why?” I ask. “Coughing up your liver and sleeping in cold doorways? That sucks. What's the payoff in all this manipulation?”

His answer is immediate. “Euphoria. The high they get becomes something they can't live without. But, the longer you drink, the less often you feel the euphoria, so you have to drink more and more often to get it back. As a group, alcoholics are pretty smart, okay? They are able to do high-level work, but most of them work at jobs that are simple, even way beneath them. Why? Okay, because of the stigma attached to it. They work where they can hide their drinking from their employer, keep the habit intact. Their whole life turns around this, the euphoric boost they live for.”

Ben mentions someone we know who is bi-polar. She drinks because alcohol evens out the highs and lows of her disorder. It can have some good effects, he says, but it made her an alcoholic. He tells me more women than men are alcoholics, that women get drunk more quickly than men, something the literature I have seen supports. Women have less of an enzyme called alcoholic dehydrogenase that neutralizes alcohol.

My nose is burning, but I don't mind. The smoke is part of the story: boxcars and Hell's Angels, boozing 'til the gray light of morning finds their bodies sprawled on the street, AA meetings with those same people sitting in circles, just as we are sitting here with smoke and coffee, the specter of alcohol like a ghost in the corner.

“So, Ben, what's the answer? What gets someone to quit and stay sober?”

“Dishonesty is the key to die from alcohol,” Ben says. “Honesty is the key to recovery. More people die from it than the reports show. The doctors list liver failure or pancreas disease as cause of death but it's alcohol. After we sober up, we are very loving people. We care about others.”

Another time in a conversation in the office, Ben and I were talking about the fourth step in AA where you go back through your life and

identify all your failures and mistakes. I thought that was good because without understanding our failures, we will repeat them. Ben said, the reason we fail is fear. Always. Guilt creates the fear. Where there is fear, there is guilt. As he left the office, he said he was going upstairs to do calculus. “Calculus is about change,” he said. I stared at him expecting more. He said, “It's all connected,” and walked out.

One part of the alcoholic character that Ben still lays claim to is the part about beautiful women. He tells me his second wife was a top model, that he still enjoys the company of beautiful women. Indeed, I have wondered more than once as I saw him getting in or out of a car with a woman behind the wheel. These days, he tells me, he is writing a book on mathematics and dating beautiful women.

“I come and go as I please and don't break any rules. My life is real simple. The most important aspect is peace and quiet.”



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