

## A LETTER TO A

# Woman Alcoholic

By Margaret Lee Runbeck

*Wherever you are, at whatever stage in the long  
descent, this is for you.  
It says nothing of shame or scorn or ridicule;  
it brings only love and understanding.  
And help*

If I lived across the street from you and saw you gallantly but hopelessly struggling against your ailment and spoke to you sometimes when you couldn't avoid meeting me, I'd not dare to tell you what I want to tell you now. You wouldn't let me, because you'd be afraid of me. You'd think I was in the world-wide conspiracy against you; you'd resent me for suspecting your secret agony, .

If we looked into each other's faces, I couldn't find a way of letting you know I love the sight of you. I couldn't tell you that I find nothing in you to despise or ridicule or preach at, for you wouldn't let me speak about what is your fatal malady. We'd both pretend it doesn't exist.

So I am having to write to you. I am writing you a letter and putting it in this safe place, where you will find it and hide it from your family and then read it.

You and I begin by having one bond in common: We both know you are secretly worried to death about your drinking.

You may be any age - a college girl, a young mother, an admired professional woman, the wife of your town's most prominent citizen,

a staid-looking grandmother. You may be an extrovert and the life of the party or a frightened, inferior-feeling little person who has to pour courage out of a bottle before attempting anything, no matter how simple it seems to other people.

You may have been drinking for months or years. You would be horrified and deny it hotly if anyone called you an alcoholic, but secretly you are wondering whether you are one. I'll answer that immediately by saying that if you can't control your drinking, if you drink more than you would like to admit, the chances are you are an alcoholic. When I say that word, I have named a person afflicted with a disease. It grows progressively worse, constantly narrowing one's world until nothing is desired and nothing is real but alcohol.

Because you are a woman, your drinking life is probably most secretive, for you have done everything possible to hide it from everyone, even from yourself. And you may have succeeded. Perhaps nobody knows - yet - that you ever take a drink. For you dare not drink one cocktail in public, knowing that the first drink is the

stumble at the top of a long flight down which you will inevitably tumble. You may become a "bedroom drinker," and I may have followed you at this moment into your own room, where you intend to reach for a bottle hidden under your lingerie or in an innocent hatbox on the top shelf. Your family may not yet be suspicious of your frequent "headaches."

On the other hand, you may be one of those shadows who live their lives in the twilight of bars and cocktail lounges. You may be the neighbourhood problem or the town scandal. Your family may have stopped trying to cover up for you; not even your children try to make excuses for you any more. Or you may even have lost your family because you were helpless about your drinking.

But at whatever stage you are at this moment, there is hope for you here. And neither blame nor shame should be attached to you. You do not deserve the self-righteous pleadings and the aggrieved accusations that everyone has showered on you. "If you loved us, you'd stop." "You think of nobody but yourself." "You should be ashamed of yourself, with all your education and opportunity!" You are not a selfish, immoral monster. Indeed you are quite the opposite. *You are a desperately ill woman.*

After you realize this, the next fact for you to accept is that you are free from any guilt. When you admit you are an alcoholic, you no longer deserve to be blamed and punished (beyond the inhuman punishment you have been giving yourself). You must only recognize that you are ill. Your illness is dangerous. It can destroy everything it comes near; unless it is arrested it can destroy the mind and the body of its victim. But it is no more your "fault" than having

hay fever or diabetes would be. Alcohol is a poison to you if you are an alcoholic.

You are not alone in the indescribable torture that is alcoholism. There are countless thousands of women like you in early or late stages of falling to pieces. Of the sixty-five million people in our country who use alcohol, more than four million are problem drinkers. An estimated 650,000 of these are women. It is difficult to count them accurately, because women, especially housewives, can hide their condition better than men. They can hide it, at least, for a while. But the woman alcoholic suffers more acutely than does the man; her psychology and constitution are more complex and more sensitive. She can endure her self-loathing less easily, and she feels much more keenly the social stigma an ignorant society still puts on alcoholism. I don't need to tell you that, I'm sure. I wish with all my heart it were mere interesting theory to you, but I know it is not.

The bravado that insulates men alcoholics does not come to women like you until they have almost killed their real selves within their ill bodies. I have heard many women alcoholics say, "I was completely dead inside myself. Nothing could reach me and help me."

It is difficult for most women to admit, even to themselves, that they are alcoholics. Yet this admission is their first step toward sobriety and sanity. If you have not taken that first step already, let me help you make to today. For if you can admit that your inner panic and devastation are symptoms of alcoholism, you are ready for help.

My purpose in writing this letter to you is to tell you that, in spite of your desperate illness,

you can "rejoin the human race" and live a reasonable normal life. In fact you will find that life to be much happier than average living. You will not return to the old life you enjoyed before alcoholism overwhelmed you. That life was not good enough for you; you tried to escape your frustration and despair by losing it in drink. This life I'm going to tell you about lies on the other side of a great experience, and you can find it and be exactly what God had in mind when He made you.

Alcoholics Anonymous is what I'm writing to you about. It has stopped the drinking of nearly a quarter of a million desperate, defeated men and women and redesigned their lives. If you are willing and humble enough to let it work for you, it will not only make today's drink your last one forever but will give you a new way of life, indescribably good and of benefit to all who see it.

The general public has little comprehension of the way A.A. works, and, in fact nobody can explain it intellectually. But there is multiplied evidence that it does work. After admitting yourself to be powerless over alcohol, if you sincerely want help, you ask a power greater than yourself to take over your life. On a superficial level this would mean little. But on the deep emotional plane where this asking occurs (and with all you suffering endorsing the plea), the strongest force a human being can experience is released. The presence of this felt power is stronger than the alcohol, which up to that moment had been the paramount urge, overmastering love of family, self-respect, and self-preservation itself. The A.A.'s cannot easily discuss this tremendous experience. But it does not need to be discussed; its results are beyond any doubting. Nobody knows how it works, but it

does.

Let's talk about you a minute. How did you become an alcoholic in the first place? Not just out of cussedness or meanness, of course. Medical science and psychiatry have established the fact that many people drink to excess from emotional causes. I've know two women who became alcoholics because they lost their children, and many because their husbands failed them. Most alcoholics are perfectionists and idealists. They expect to accomplish wonders with their lives; when they cannot live up to their ideals, they cannot face their disappointment in themselves.

In spite of what others usually believe, alcoholics have terrific consciences. They care so deeply about everything that they cannot endure the stress and strain of worry. When an irresistible conscience meets an immovable inability to endure the agony of worry, there's a wide-open invitation to excess drinking.

Emotional conflicts in you supersensitive people become so unbearable that escape, amounting to total obliteration, is sought. In some alcoholics a feeling of inferiority born in childhood builds up a compensation mechanism that creates an egotism gluttonous for praise and success and never satisfied with what is offered to it. In women, the too fat ego demands flattery, indulgence, and, in some cases, continual romance. Disappointed in her excessive demands for perfection, a frustrated woman sometimes believes the dreamy promises of alcohol, the heartless deceiver.

When these extreme emotional tensions exist in addition to bodily allergy, alcoholic ruin is inevitable. People drink because they are unhappy; they are unhappy because they drink; and the vicious spiral whirls on until one cannot tell which was cause and which

effect.

The way back from this unfathomable torture must include treatment for both the emotional obsession and the physical illness. Psychiatry and medicine have worked together on thousands of cases and in some have been successful. But their record of permanent success is discouragingly low. The alcoholic is called the "heartbreak of the medical profession," because all too often the physician knows that the beaten, suicidal body he is restoring will come back to him in a few months in exactly the same, or a worse condition.

The positive results of Alcoholics Anonymous are inexplicably high. It is usually estimated that nearly 75 per cent of alcoholics who try A.A. therapy come through to success. In some cases it is fantastically simple. At the end of their own resources, they ask for A.A. help, and from that day on never take another drink. In other cases they are "on and off" the program for months. I know of one young woman who tried for three years to make it. Even some of the A.A.'s who worked with her lost faith in her chances. But she stubbornly believed she would finally be able to stop drinking. One night last week I went to her third "birthday" party and I saw her blow out the candles on her cake.

She was unrecognizable as the person who struggled so hopelessly through many twilit years. When she first heard of A.A., she had been drinking for eight years, since she was nineteen. Her family had finally given her up, for she had drifted lower and lower until she was beyond their reach. At the age of twenty-seven she looked forty - fat and sloppy and maudlin. It was almost impossible to look at the tall slender girl in a smart white frock, blowing out the three candles, and believe she had any

connection with the blowzy, fat woman who took her last drink three years ago. She has lately married a wonderful, substantial man who understands her perfectly and admires her wisely. They say they have the prize marriage in captivity, and I must say it looks just that.

One of the miracles of A.A. is that it transforms bodies as well as emotions and minds. The very substance of flesh and hair seems made over. Women whose bodies have been degraded by neglect and abuse now value their appearance, because, as one said to me, "God just seemed to paint a new portrait of me."

That wasn't mere wishful thinking when I said you could find more than average happiness in the lives of A.A. members. Of all groups on earth, the people who have rescued themselves from the undersea horrors of alcoholism are the most exuberantly joyous ones I've ever found. They are not indifferent or bored now; all living has quickened to importance for them. Does it seem unbelievable to you that you could ever be so conspicuously happy - without anything to drink? You'll learn new meanings for the word "happy."

When you stand outside a room where a group of Alcoholics Anonymous is meeting, the most frequent sound you hear is laughter. Mellow laughter, which can come only from people who have looked destruction and catastrophe in the face, not once but continuously over long years, and now are free and unafraid. The laughter, in short, of people who hold God's hand and feel safe.

That is the basis of Alcoholics Anonymous, the fact almost incredible to a world that is half-afraid to expect much of God in everyday life. The single

thing that decides whether or not you will find your sobriety, the A.A.'s say is your *willingness*. Willingness to admit that you are powerless over alcohol and that your life has become unmanageable. Then willingness to turn your will and your life over to God, as you understand Him. This is not glib willingness, by any means. It is not achieved until you have passed your last outpost of helplessness. It is at the point where "Man's extremity is God's opportunity."

It is such a deep cry for help that sometimes you yourself do not recognize it as prayer. Until after it has been answered, that is.

For example, let me tell you about how a friend of mine found A.A. I'll call her Nora because that is not her name. A.A. provides absolute anonymity; one need not hesitate about trusting the privacy promised. Nora had been an unhappy child in an unhappy home. Not much had ever gone right for her, and she did not believe it ever would. As she grew up, one tragedy after another happened, and she tried to escape by drinking.

The first good thing that came into her life was the love she and her husband had for each other. Soon after they were married, Nora realized she was an alcoholic. Before marrying she had believed she drank because she was unhappy; now that she was happy she found herself unable to stop drinking. She did everything possible to keep her husband from realizing the truth about her. But her craving for alcohol was so uncontrollable that as soon as he had left in the morning she gulped down several drinks. (Alcoholics drink faster than most people.) She lay in bed most of the day, hating herself. When her head felt as if it would split, she put an ice pack on it; and when her husband came home, she

quickly slid the ice pack to her cheek, saying she had a toothache.

Gradually, of course, he found out the truth. He begged her to promise not to touch alcohol, and she eagerly did. But the next time she was alone, she was powerless to resist. Her husband got medical help for her, but it did no good. She spent many sessions in sanitariums; those too failed.

Nora told me about this period a few nights ago as she was driving me to an A.A. meeting at our county jail. She said, "I've never been in jail myself, but I know about solitary confinement. An alcoholic has prison bars inside his own skull. He exists behind those bars in solitary confinement."

This wretchedness continued for many years without a ray of hope. Then one day she had an accident while driving. The doctors told her husband she was going to die. Amazingly she recovered, and this seemed to her one more evidence of her tragic bad luck, for she was sick of existence.

On the way home from the hospital, her husband told her he was going to put her permanently in an institution, for both their sakes. She said she would be committed willingly, because she loved him too much to keep killing him by inches.

At home she was put immediately to bed, and she tells me that for the first time in her life she cried out within herself to God. "If you can hear me, help me," was all she said. She went to sleep for a while, and when she woke up, she asked her husband to call a doctor. He said, "Which one, dear?" for many doctors had drifted in and out of her muddled existence. She said the first name that came into her mind, a doctor she had not seen for years.

In half an hour he was beside her bed. Since he had worked unsuccessfully on her case, he had

become interested in A.A. Immediately he phoned the local A.A. office, and within an hour a woman member arrived at Nora's house.

Nora has never taken a drink since. She is convinced that the moment her very simple prayer was said, it was answered. She never doubted that her outcome was therefore safe. She is now a gentle and beautiful woman, full of happiness and freedom. The fear and inferiorities and her superstitious belief that she was marked for "bad luck" have completely dropped away. Her life is filled with activity and interest. But she never for a day forgors that she has surrendered herself and her life to God's managing. She remembers she is an incurable alcoholic and that one drink would plunge her back into darkness. She tells me that every night before she sleeps she says, "Thank you, God, for keeping me sober today."

To show you how complete is the allergy in some alcoholics, I'd like to tell you the story of a grandmother, whom we'll call Jane, who took the first drink of her life when she was fifty-nine years old. It was at a bridge party with some new neighbours. The other guests had only a glass or two of punch, but Jane couldn't seem to get enough of it. In fact, before the party broke up, the hostess mixed her several cocktails, for it seemed most amusing to see the proper little middle-aged woman suddenly so crazy about drinking. By the time Jane's husband, Jim, called for her she was hilariously making a nuisance of herself.

Jim got her home and into bed, and she fell immediately to sleep. But just as she was dropping off she said, "Jim, we've missed the best part of life. Tomorrow I'm going to mix you some nice cocktails."

The next morning Jane went boldly into a package store and bought a bottle of rye. Her intention was to have one drink, for medicinal purposes, and to save the rest for cocktails to show Jim what they had been missing. But the one drink led Jane straight through the bottle. She was an alcoholic, completely and fully developed, just waiting for the first drop to set her off.

From that day on she was a problem drinker, completely out of control. At first it seemed screamingly funny that this could happen to such a little homebody. But before a month had passed, both Jim and she knew she was in real trouble. Her sons couldn't believe what had happened; it sounded too fantastic. But there was no doubt about her alcoholism, for nothing else mattered to her but her day's quart. Her minister prayer over her; her daughters-in-law kept the grand children out of her sight; her physician gave her a drug, Antabuse, which creates an aversion to liquor. But that neatly killed her when, in spite of warnings, she drank alcohol immediately afterward.

Six horrifying years followed. When she couldn't get money any other way, she went out on the street and begged for it. She sold her clothes, stole from her husband, and even got a job cleaning up a cocktail lounge, "for drinks." The day she was picked up by the police as drunk and disorderly, she hit bottom. Then, all by herself she went to an A.A. meeting. It was the beginning of the way back.

An Alcoholics Anonymous meeting is a tremendous experience for anyone, even for a nonalcoholic like me. First of all, you are surprised to discover that it is not a solemn occasion. You find a cross section of types present, and except for those who are attending

for the first time, everyone is laughing and talking. Only first names are used, for purposes of anonymity. The only distinguishing mark of the group is that everyone is unusually kind and affectionate toward everyone else. It is as if all shyness and shame and pretence have been stripped away and people are acting spontaneously - from within themselves instead of from the cautious exterior.

A.A.'s have told me that they felt at home for the first time in their whole lives when they attended such a meeting. This is understandable, for here no one criticizes, or blames, or is disgusted or shocked at anything. Here is utter understanding, because each person present has suffered through the same purgatories. Here also are people you cannot fool with the alibis and dodges and deceits the alcoholic always has at hand. Here are people who know 'em all and cheerfully tell you so. It is a relief to be among such people after you have lived for years in a maze of lies and subterfuges. It is as exhilarating as if you discovered a whole new race, with meanness and false pride omitted. It is as comfortable as if you were in a room full of people who all turned out to be yourself in different guises. You know you can trust them to see you as good - and as bad - as you are, without blame or shame.

Meetings follow a simple pattern. IN California, for instance, an A.A. meeting would proceed in much this way: A chapter called "How It Works" is read from the Alcoholics Anonymous "textbook." A member volunteers to act as chairman to conduct the meeting. The chairman may begin by saying, "Good evening, friends. I am an alcoholic." After telling a little of his own history, he introduces speakers he has selected

to tell about themselves. Each speaker, man or woman, tells what he was, what he is now, and how he made the trip between the two states of being. They tell their stories with complete frankness and often with much humour. An alcoholic attending for the first time is often shattered with relief at hearing the horrors, which all his life have been mentioned in self-righteous whispers, now being talked about in plain words and with laughter. Inhibitions and self-condemnation too painful to admit collapse like walls of wax under this quite simple therapy.

When I ask A.A. how they can laugh and joke about their old sufferings, they say, "Well, you see, all that happened to my worst enemy. Not to me, certainly." It is the most wholesome kind of divorcement from the past that any therapy has ever achieved. The past was a series of hang-overs; but when that past departs, it leaves neither hang-over nor scar.

At the end of the meeting there is a moment of silent prayer; then everyone rises and repeats the Lord's Prayer in unison. I defy anyone to take part in this and remain untouched. Then there is coffee and cake and an hour of friendly companionship. Many alcoholics have become bankrupt in their social life, and A.A. offers them comfortable and easy opportunity to make friends again and to "belong."

There are meetings every day; in Los Angeles alone there are thirty-five meetings nightly. They are usually attended by slightly more men than women. There are also stag meetings for men who feel freer when no women are present, and all-woman groups, some of which meet in the morning or the afternoon.

Besides the usual meeting places, in many cities clubrooms

are maintained, where friends may have a meal together, play a little bridge, read magazines, or just talk (one of the alcoholic's favourite enjoyments after years of evasiveness). Actually alcoholics are gregarious people who have deeply hurt themselves by destroying human relationships. Now they return to trusting and being trusted with utter sincerity.

Alcoholism is an incurable disease; one suffering from it can never return to social drinking. The allergy is present for a lifetime, but with A.A. there is no fear about it. One does not have to hide from alcohol or avoid normal drinkers. One need only be on guard against the first drink - always, as long as life lasts. A.A.'s say cheerfully, "Don't take the first drink, and you'll never take any other." This is possible one day at a time, A.A.'s keep close to the presence of God, and through this closeness the multiple problems that once tore down every department of their lives are finally solved, and the rebuilding goes on almost effortlessly.

If you have come this far in my letter to you, my unknown

friend, you must know how uncondemning I am about you. And the love I have for you is multiplied by thousands. All you need do now is reach out and touch that love, for it is waiting to put itself into action for you. Help is as close to you as your telephone at this moment.

Your telephone directory hold the number; look it up under the A's - Alcoholics Anonymous. Ask for a woman to come to see you. No need for you to tell anyone else that you have taken this step. When she comes, you won't have to tell her anything painful about yourself; you won't have to tell her much of anything. She knows all about you - more than you know about yourself. For she has gone every step of the way you've gone, and even farther. And she has come to sobriety and usefulness and a life she never could have imagined possible for herself.

If you find what is there for you, maybe you'll write and tell me. Or better than that, find another woman who needs it and tell her. God bless you now.

The End.