

It started quite casually. Then, almost before I knew it, my life had become a nightmare.

I Was an Alcoholic Housewife

It still isn't clear to me why I did it, but at two o'clock that September afternoon in 1963, I walked into the kitchen of our suburban home and made myself a martini. It tasted good. I made myself another, and settled back in my chair to let the delightful euphoria wash over me. I felt wonderful. How *different* this was from the usual 5:30 cocktail, when I was constantly jumping up to settle the children's squabbles or to stir something on the stove. And what could be the harm in it? I asked myself. It was just this one time....

In the beginning, I promised myself I would have only two martinis each afternoon, starting at two o'clock. That would give me plenty of time to collect myself before the children got home from school. Within three weeks the promise had gone by the wayside. Two drinks were no longer enough. I decided to start at 1:30 so I could have three martinis and still not be so intoxicated that the children, who were 8 and 11 years old, would notice. Also, the two hours between their arrival at 3:30 and my husband's at 5:30 gave me enough time to sober up.

Or at least to *appear* sober, which was the important thing. To

be on the safe side, I stopped greeting my husband with a kiss each evening - a perfunctory ritual which I felt sure he could take or leave after 14 years of marriage. I missed it, though.

Weekends presented a real problem. I began to count the hours until five o'clock, when I could legitimately have that strong, life-restoring nectar. Soon I convinced my husband that we should let our hair down a little on weekends and have two or three martinis before dinner, instead of just one. He said it was all right with him, and make a joking remark about our becoming regular luses. He didn't know how right he was about *one* of us. Later, I became desperate enough to do my weekend drinking behind the locked door of our bathroom.

My addiction built steadily and, before I realized it, I had become a morning as well as an afternoon drinker. Well, so what? I said to myself; plenty of people have drinks before lunch - just look in any restaurant at noontime. I didn't have any problem.

The truth was, I had several. For one thing, I could no longer stay asleep at night. I had no trouble falling asleep, thanks to the soporific effects of alcohol,

but I frequently woke up around one or two in the morning and lay sleepless till dawn, when I'd finally doze off again. (I didn't know until later that such wakefulness is common among chronic drinkers.) Because of this erratic sleep pattern, I seldom got up to fix the children's breakfast and get them off to school. And my hands trembled. But several fast martinis, I found, would take care of the shakes.

Paying for all the gin, yet keeping my husband from noticing, presented another problem. (By the time I had been secretly drinking for a year and a half, the liquor store was delivering a \$60 case of gin every two weeks. I told the delivery man we entertained a lot.) I wrote cash checks in larger and larger amounts. When my husband asked where all the money was going, I told him the children were growing so fast that they constantly needed new clothes and shoes and...things. I pointed out proudly that I hadn't bought anything for myself in ages. He said rather wistfully, "I wish you would. Frankly darling, you've been looking terrible lately."

I burst into tears, something I was doing more and more frequently now. What really hurt was that I had already come to the same conclusion, but had hoped it was just my imagination. As a former campus queen, I found this pretty hard to take. It didn't occur to me that the enormous amount of alcohol I was consuming kept my facial muscles sagging at least 16 hours a day. I looked ten years older than my actual 38.

One day I asked my oldest daughter why she no longer brought friends home. She said, "Are you kidding? I wouldn't bring my friends into this crummy house." I slapped her across the face, something I had never done before. We had a lovely house, and I kept

it as clean as my flagging energy permitted. No, she had every reason to be proud of her home, I told myself; so it must be something else.

I got the shock of my life, therefore, when I overheard a playmate tell my daughter, "Your mother's an alcoholic." "So?" she had countered defensively. "What's wrong with having an alcoholic mother?"

The children had known all along! Then a terrifying thought struck me: Had they told their father? Was it possible that he, too, knew, yet had never once mentioned it? I had no easy way of finding out, for I couldn't bear the indignity of asking the children. I decided then and there to stop drinking.

I lay awake most of that night, and by noon the next day every bone in my body ached. Every fibre of my being cried out for the panacea I was denying it. In a blind panic, I frenziedly poured a wafer glass full of gin, my hands shaking so violently that I spilled half the bottle. As I gulped down the glistening liquid, I could feel the agony gradually subsiding. Then I finally knew the terrible truth: I was hooked. *I couldn't quit.*

One degrading episode followed another. When people stared at me in public, I now knew it wasn't a tribute to my good looks, but curiosity about why a woman like me reeked of gin at 11 a.m. No longer was I under the delusion that frequent mouthwashing and chlorophyll tablets did the trick - especially after my dentist rather pointedly donned a surgical mask halfway through filling one of my teeth. I vividly recall the night I fell down in the middle of the country-club dance floor. Even in my drunken fog I was mortified. I had several close calls on the highways. Once, while driving at

65m.p.h. with one eye shut (a measure I found increasingly necessary to compensate for double vision), I came within an inch of sideswiping another car. It may seem incredible that anyone would attempt to drive in that condition, but that's an example of how little judgment drunks have. Besides, I didn't feel drunk; I just was.

I worried constantly about my health and about my husband's increasing rejection of me. I no longer drank for pleasure; I had to do it to be able to function at all. Unless I had a stiff eye-opener the moment I got out of bed, even a simple task like brushing my teeth was too much for me. But my mind kept returning to the afternoon, several years before, when my husband and I had sat at the bedside of a cherished friend, age 40, as he suffered through the final, hideous throes of an alcoholic death. I knew what was in store if I didn't stop drinking, and soon. But How?

The answer came in a most unexpected way.

I was not fully awake that Wednesday morning when I heard an odd, muffled clatter at the front door. Befuddled by sleep and a thundering hangover, I dragged myself out of bed. Then I heard my husband's voice pleading weakly, "Help me..." Incredulous, I ran to the door and found him sprawled there. "Can't see...hurry," he gasped.

I called an ambulance and ran back to him. His face and neck were swollen beyond belief. When the ambulance arrived, the attendants took one look, told me to call our doctor at once, then sped off with my husband, siren screaming.

On the phone, our doctor told me that my husband had been in to see him earlier that morning about a facial swelling. The doctor diagnosed it as an infection

resulting from the extraction of an impacted wisdom tooth two weeks before. He gotten my husbands assurance that he was not allergic to penicillin, given him a massive injection, and sent him home.

Suddenly the situation came clear to me: *my husband was in penicillin shock!* I knew it could be fatal in a matter of minutes. I was shaking all over, and not just from a lack of alcohol, as I sped to the hospital (with both eyes open for a change). I stopped at the admission desk long enough to find out where my husband was, then flew down the corridor and burst through the emergency-room door. The small room was filled with doctors, nurses and orderlies working over my husband.

One of the doctors gently led me out into a corridor while I peppered him with questions. Yes, he was in penicillin reaction - one of the most brutal he had ever seen. My husband couldn't breath; the inside of his throat had swollen shut, and they were just about to do a tracheotomy.

I stood in the corridor, listening to the terrible racking sounds my husband made as he fought to survive. My knees began to buckle. I sank down in the nearest chair and cried.

Then I began to pray. "Dear Lord, please don't take him away from me. I'll do anything if only you will let him live." I paused for a second to search my soul. "I promise never to touch another drop of liquor as long as I live if you were to spare his life and help him get well again. You alone know how hard that will be but with your help I can do it. Dear God, please let him live."

About ten minutes later, the doctor came toward me from the emergency room. I ran to him. He was smiling. "His blood pressure and respiration are improving

steadily," he said. "It's amazing. Until a few minutes ago, we didn't think he had a chance. Now we have every reason to believe he's going to make it. It's almost like a miracle."

While he was talking, I sent up a fervent prayer of silent thanks, ending with "I'll keep my part of the bargain, Lord." And I did.

Although those first few weeks

three years ago were agony, there was never any question in my mind that I might break my promise. How could I fail a God who had given me back my beloved husband - and subsequently the love and respect of my children, my health and, finally, my own self-respect? To throw away such priceless blessings twice in a lifetime, one would have to be the worst kind of fool. And that, thank God, I no longer am.

Source: Reader's Digest, September 1968.