

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

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“My name is Geoffrey, and I’m an alcoholic.”

That’s the way my brother has introduced himself at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings virtually every day of his life for almost nineteen years. He is certain that he is still an alcoholic. He believes that one drink will be the end, and the only options will be to be institutionalized, in jail...or dead. If he starts to drink again, he doesn’t know where it will take him. He vows never, ever to go back. After eighteen years of total sobriety it’s still “one day at a time.” That’s why he keeps on going to meetings. That’s why he carries a gold coin embossed with the number 18. It never leaves his pocket. On October 18th he’ll get a new coin with the number 19.

Geoffrey is now almost sixty-seven, living in Santa Ynez, California—just across the valley from Ronald Reagan’s Rancho del Cielo, near the ruins of Michael Jackson’s Neverland. Santa Ynez is a few miles up the road from Santa Barbara. The rolling acres are filled with horse ranches, vineyards and money. The air is fresh, and flowers are everywhere. Lots of his neighbors are Hollywood alumni. Life is good... *now*.

Geoffrey (with a “G”, as in Chaucer) was born on October 23, 1945. My mother was an anglophile to the quick of her soul. She had five miscarriages after her firstborn, who was always robust and delightfully healthy. (He still is.)

Geoffrey was *not* healthy. As a baby he had colic, colds and eventually pneumonia. He didn't sleep as little ones are supposed to do. When he was four he got whooping cough and scarlet fever. At the dinner table he would eat a few bites, then cough and cough, then rush to the bathroom unable to keep down his food. My mother was distraught. What to do? What to do? She had waited so long and been through so much. Now, here was her son dying. Miscarriages were much more frequent in the forties. Still, her suffering was almost unbearable.

Geoffrey's eyes had dark circles around them; not under but *around* them. He didn't look at you—he stared vacantly into space. His complexion was gray; his hair was gray. Geoffrey weighed as little as a kitten. There was no flesh on his bones; he could have been an extra in a zombie film. He looked like a refugee from World War II, emaciated and terrified.

At this point in Geoffrey's life I was barely an adolescent and not able to understand the depth of my parents' fear. I was looking forward to my next Parcheesi game. There is no one more self-centered than a 13-year-old boy who had been an only child for most of his life.

Dad was a steel salesman for Jones and Laughlin, one of Pittsburgh's largest employers. We moved quite a few times as his career progressed. We went to Atlanta in 1952 when Geoffrey was seven. He was still waiflike and didn't look at all like a kid ready for the second grade. But what possessed my mother was

obvious. She began to make sure that Geoffrey would always get more than enough to eat. She didn't exactly force feed him, but she did offer him second and third helpings at dinner.

Geoffrey became heavy. I don't mean pleasantly plump...I mean a mound of flesh. And he remained that way until he went to college. During those years I was away at school and only saw him at Christmas. I knew him as my fat little brother. But today I realize how much he was suffering. Geoffrey recently related to me an incident that happened more than half a century ago. He tried out for the football team at his Memphis high school—something almost every sophomore in the South does. The southern football coach is accorded God-like characteristics; he is often a boy's first leader. He is inspirational. Every utterance is taken as gospel. We all remember Bear Bryant. Geoffrey's coach assigned him a uniform with the number 62½ and announced, "The ½ stands for half ton." His teammates exploded in laughter. Geoffrey smiled as if to enjoy the joke. The cruelty boggles the mind.

Geoffrey had a friend in high school whose parents traveled quite often. The two of them got into the liquor cabinet and drank the father's bourbon. Right from the start, Geoffrey liked what whisky did for him. He said it gave him confidence, when he'd always thought of himself as an introvert. He was afraid of the public, shy around strangers, uncomfortable in groups. He called liquor "giant juice."

He went to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio for one reason only: because he could drink legally at age 18. With this attitude he was clearly doomed to fail and was expelled for “academic insufficiency.” When he came home to Pittsburgh, he worked in a gas station, and then our dad got him a job at the Jones and Laughlin mill. While he was living at home our mother asked Geoffrey to pay her for doing his laundry. He was hurt and offended. So, he left in a huff and went to Washington D.C. where he got a job selling Thermofax machines to government agencies. The CIA was his best customer. Geoffrey told me they’d buy anything and everything.

My parents were determined that he should finish college, and they found a small school in northwestern Illinois called Shimer. It compares with Antioch...or what Antioch used to be. Founded in 1853, Shimer admitted students “on the basis of capability, rather than on the applicant’s previous educational background.” Lucky for Geoffrey.

Geoffrey remembers that Dad bought him a navy worsted suit, a cashmere overcoat and bench-made shoes...all from Brooks Brothers. When he got off the train in Mount Carroll (where Shimer was located) he was appalled to see his fellow students dressed in overalls and t-shirts. He said, “I thought I was better than most people—but not that much better.”

Shimer had an exchange program with a college in Oxford, England. So Geoffrey spent his senior year at St. Clare College, along with 20 other Shimer students. This was not the Oxford University of Rhodes Scholarship fame, but a small college in the city of Oxford. However, St. Clare did have an arrangement with The Queen's College that permitted students to take courses there. At Queen's Geoffrey enrolled in a course called "Politics, Philosophy and Economics." He had to present a proposition, and then defend it before his fellow classmates, including some of those Rhodes Scholars. Even today, when he talks about the intellectual challenge that was presented at Oxford, he lights up. That year in England changed his life. He lost weight, and he looked like a normal person. He had a confidence that I had not ever seen before. He knew he could do it.

Dad was working to get him a real job back in Pittsburgh. He knew a vice-president at Mellon Bank and arranged an interview for Geoffrey. The bank didn't have any openings for a history major whose area of specialization was the Weimar Republic. But, the VP had a good friend who was an editor of Pittsburgh's morning paper, The Post-Gazette.

Geoffrey had no experience in journalism, really no experience in writing anything. He knew the pay would be miserable. He couldn't even type—but why not try it? I've always been amazed at how the direction one's life takes is decided mostly by whim and rarely by thoughtful analysis.

He was hired in 1969, but only on probation to see if he could write. His first assignment was to cover the Ice Capades along with a veteran reporter who would write the copy. The Ice Capades started in 1940 and hadn't changed much in the ensuing 29 years, so it's hard to imagine writing anything that would impress anyone. Geoffrey's copy was not to be published, but only to be used for instruction and comparison. Geoffrey tells me that *his* review of that year's show was so different—the editor used words like “striking” and “scintillating”—that it was placed on the bulletin board at the paper with a note saying, “This is what good writing is all about.” Geoffrey now had a permanent job.

Yes, he was drinking. Perhaps more than most, but it didn't seem to have an impact on his performance and his writing. “Not to excess”—whatever *that* means. The effect of drinking is cumulative. As Geoffrey said, “The elevator you get on is always going down. When it starts, it's moving slowly. But as time goes on it moves faster and faster.”

Geoffrey began by writing obituaries and reviewing B movies. The reporter who reviewed the A movies died a few months after Geoffrey started, so, lo and behold, he became the head movie critic for The Post-Gazette at age 24. But, he wanted to be a bigger deal and asked if he could start doing reviews of Pittsburgh restaurants. This was 1970, and restaurant reviewers were few and far between.

Craig Claiborne had had great success writing for The New York Times, but he was the exception.

When he started writing reviews Geoffrey explained the local attitude as follows: “There are those who compare dining in Pittsburgh to following Sherman’s Army through Georgia—the pickings are lean.” But, there *was* a cadre of good restaurants, and his column became an instant hit. I would go to insurance conventions and see my friends from Pittsburgh. They cornered me and (usually the wife) said, “We just don’t go out to dinner on the weekend until we read Geoffrey’s column on Friday morning.” He was quite simply an overnight sensation.

His reviews could be mean. Headlines are usually written by someone other than the reporter, but in Geoffrey’s case he asked for—and received—permission to write the headline for his own column. One of his more infamous reviews concerned an ethnic Greek restaurant. The article was titled “The Glory That Was Grease.” (That’s G-R-E-A-S-E.)

A good review is worth its weight in Beluga to a restaurant owner. There are many offers to take perhaps just a *little* kickback. Geoffrey was indignant at any hint of payola. One year, a few days before Thanksgiving a fully cooked 20-lb. turkey arrived at The Post-Gazette, delivered by a restaurant that had recently

received a boffo review. Geoffrey theatrically picked it up and hurled it into the waste basket, leaving the aroma to waft over the newsroom.

Restaurant guides for the area—all authored by Geoffrey—were published in 1973, 1975 and 1977, each succeeding edition more popular than its predecessor. They were designed to fit in a glove compartment, and they were read by everybody in greater Pittsburgh. He had a devoted following. Geoffrey was respected and loved.

But he kept drinking. “It didn’t matter how much praise I got,” he said. “You still have to be good tomorrow, and a drink will always make it better.” In those years Geoffrey found drinking enabling.

The call from The Miami Herald came out of the blue in March 1979. He remembers the weather was typical for spring in Pittsburgh. The sky was leaden, and it was sleeting, and it was cold. “We need a food writer with your kind of talent on the staff.” Geoffrey couldn’t believe it: constant sunshine, bikinis, and rum punches. The Miami Herald was a major national paper, with a circulation of over half a million. It employed 350 reporters, while The Post-Gazette had 135.

The editor wanted a *man* to write the food column, but before he got the job Geoffrey first had to pass a test. He had to prepare a meal from scratch for the feature editor, Janet Chusmir. She was like Auntie Mame, kind but firm, tall, imposing, with big, chunky jewelry. Ms. Chusmir knew what she wanted, and that

was to have the features section be the first one a reader turned to when he opened the newspaper. Geoffrey believes that his hollandaise sauce—which our mother had taught him how to prepare—won the day. For all of you non-cooks: The secret is using a double boiler, so the flame doesn't burn the butter. In any event, he got the job.

The Herald had on its staff stars like Edna Buchanan (author of such crime memoirs as The Corpse Had A Familiar Face), Carl Hiaasen and Dave Barry. Geoffrey was particularly intrigued by Hiaasen, who would work all day as a reporter...and then go home and write a best-selling novel at night. By contrast, Geoffrey was going home and drinking.

The politics of a newsroom are fascinating. Although it's never voiced, everyone is competing against each other. A plum assignment was coming up—the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer. The Herald would be sending one of its own. Geoffrey told me that this two-week sojourn should have gone to a veteran, not a relative newcomer who wrote features. But he had a mentor at the paper, namely, Ms. Chusmir. She campaigned for Geoffrey because: a) he had spent a year of his life in England—Oxford, no less—and therefore “knew” the territory; and, b) the wedding was feature material, and who could interpret that better than a feature writer? And, she liked the way he wrote.

He was sent two weeks before the nuptials to do background. He didn't have carte blanche...but almost. He went to Wales to visit Caernarfon Castle, the site of Charles's investiture as Prince of Wales. He wrote an article about the bearskin used to make the hats for the Queen's Guard. Lots of fluff, but every one of his dispatches was carried on the front page of the paper, along with his byline and photo. Heady stuff.

The first week back from England Geoffrey went down to Key West, to his favorite restaurant, Larry Formica's La Te Da Club. Friends and a few reporters from the Herald were there. The club was spacious and raucous. Magnanimously, Geoffrey ordered champagne for everyone...and charged it to the Herald. He now admits that this was not only extravagant but unethical. He knew he was taking advantage of his position at the paper.

Following the royal wedding Geoffrey had invited Mary Jean Connors to join him for a few days in Ireland. Mary Jean worked in the Human Resources Department at Knight Ridder, the publisher of The Miami Herald, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Kansas City Star, The Detroit Free Press, and other papers of national note. She liked to drink, so they were kindred spirits. Also, and most important, she was smart and strong. She had all the qualities that Geoffrey admired. In short order, he was married.

They had two incomes, no children, and no responsibilities other than their respective jobs. Both were introverts. Neither liked to party—just drink at home. They purchased a bungalow close to the beach in Tavernier, one of the Florida Keys. (Tavernier is about 75 miles south of Miami, 90 miles north of Key West.) Many long and lost weekends were spent there.

Mary Jean and Geoffrey particularly looked forward to Friday nights, where they would sit by their pool drinking champagne—lots of champagne—then moving on to margaritas and harder stuff as the weekend wore on. Starting the next week was tough, and Geoffrey began to miss Mondays...and maybe Tuesdays. He spoke of “black-outs.” That’s when you get up in the morning and check to see if your car is still in the garage. You wonder who you insulted the night before, because you have no recollection of what happened in the previous 24 hours, only that it’s doubtful if you’ll see *that* couple again.

Meanwhile, Geoffrey was continuing to receive kudos for his reporting. The Herald nominated him for a Pulitzer Prize for restaurant criticism. He didn’t win, but he was a finalist. He was honored in the publication Best Newspaper Writing 1991, where three of his articles appeared. One was about shade. “You can buy it but, as always, the artificial is never as good as the real thing. It is one of the few things in the world that is better borrowed than bought...The beauty of shade is that it is where you find it, and it is free.” Geoffrey tells me he can write about

anything and make it interesting. “Howard, we can walk down to the corner, find a stranger, and I can write a piece about him that you’ll want to read.” But *shade*?

He had the distinct feeling that he was an anomaly. “I can beat it. Rules don’t apply to me. I’m different. There is no sleeping under the bridge and drinking rotgut in the weeds. I’m okay. I have my house in Miami Beach, a wife, my job, my BMW and my alligator shoes.”

But, clearly, he wasn’t okay. My older son was getting married. This was a wedding with over three hundred guests invited. There was good cheer everywhere. Geoffrey came into town and was staying at The Cincinnati...by himself. Not good. I had arranged to meet him 9:00 a.m. the day before the big event.

I knew he had a drinking problem; I just didn’t know how much of one. He met me in the lobby of the hotel. He was acting odd. I really wasn’t sure about him. We walked one block south, and, as we were passing the Carew Tower, we ran into a client of mine who was going to work. He was patrician, perhaps born a century too late. Proper introductions were made. My brother suddenly clutched the man’s tie at the neck—not hard, but he was certainly “invading his personal space.” Geoffrey turned and growled, “Why do you have friends like this? He must buy a lot of insurance.” We quickly departed, with abject apologies from me.

We repaired to my office around the corner. The first words out of Geoffrey's mouth were, "Where do you keep the liquor?" "I don't have any," I replied. "Oh, come on. You must have some." "No, truly, I don't."

We met my mother and the groom for lunch at the Highland Towers. Geoffrey was not so much reeling as he was mean with all of us. It made for a devastatingly unpleasant meal.

At the rehearsal dinner that evening he gave a slurred and rambling toast that made little sense, principally because he kept falling down. I drove him back to his hotel before dinner was served. I remember opening the door to his room to discover that his wife had arrived unexpectedly. All Geoffrey could say was, "Uh oh."

On the day of the wedding the bride announced that she never wanted to see Geoffrey again. Welcome to the family.

The A.A. handbook says the alcoholic will put himself in harm's way intentionally. For instance, he will miss an important meeting for which he has prepared for weeks or a closing on a project that has taken a year to get ready...or the rehearsal dinner of his favorite nephew. Whatever it is, he goes on a bender just before the occasion.

There were periods when Geoffrey ceased drinking altogether. He thought he was in control. He felt he could always stop whenever he chose. He'd go two

weeks, perhaps six, and then the cycle would begin again. He was a “dry drunk.” If you have ever known one, you know how abrasive and obnoxious they can be.

The family had gathered in Mt. Dora, Florida to celebrate my mother’s birthday. Geoffrey had purchased an exquisite Fabergé egg pendant. I knew it was expensive and offered to split the cost with him. He turned on me as if I had slapped him and spat, “I don’t want anything from you now or ever. Do you understand that?” There was fury in his voice, and his face was contorted with rage. He was that way all weekend. Which is better? An alcoholic who’s passed out in the corner, or a dry drunk who’s looking for a fist fight?

Geoffrey’s unwillingness to face his alcoholism was also evident to his editors. His annual performance reviews at the paper were remarkably consistent. “He’s a wonderful writer, but hard to get along with, as he’s unreliable. But he’s good...when he shows up.”

Something had to happen. Quoting Geoffrey, “My marriage was in trouble. And, at The Herald, even though they had never talked to me about my drinking, I suspected they were going to put me on suspension. That means giving you a warning, and, if you don’t improve in three months, you lose your job. The editor and my colleagues were certainly aware of my many absences. I knew I needed some kind of treatment. But, as you know, it’s hard to get me to commit to anything.”

An alcoholic must honestly admit that he's powerless over alcohol, and his life is unmanageable. That's Step One of the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and it must be embraced absolutely. Quoting my brother, "We all think we can beat it, when, in fact, you're just like every other drunk you've ever seen. Falling down and peeing in your pants. It happens all the time. Once it starts we're all headed to the same place. The elevator is going down."

"Let me tell you how bad I was. I'd come home and start drinking. (Somewhere along the line MJ had given it up, so she wasn't joining me.) She'd go to bed, and I'd hang out drinking in the little TV room at the back of the house. Even the cats wouldn't come near me. And you know how much I love cats. There's always one in my lap. They'd peer in and see me, and slink away. I'd pass out about two or three in the morning, wake up long after MJ had left for work, meander into the bathroom, throw up and then have a shot of vodka. Then throw up again, and have another shot until I felt better. Meanwhile, my hands were shaking uncontrollably." Then he made the most bizarre understatement: "My behavior was not normal." Not normal? Wow! He went on, "You live by yourself, within yourself. My wife, my mother, my brother, my editor didn't count. I had eliminated all you people. I was so afraid of intervention."

But there *was* no intervention. As it turns out, no one even considered it. Mum had given up; MJ was about to. *My* attempts to talk to Geoffrey had been

rebuffed. Meanwhile, the elevator was picking up speed. For an alcoholic one drink is too many and a thousand are not enough. Geoffrey stayed drunk for two straight weeks, not eating, not answering the phone. The editor called Mary Jean, who was working in Detroit with The Free Press, and asked, “Where is Geoffrey?” She wasn’t sure. Mary Jean was checking out.

But she *did* come home, and Geoffrey stopped drinking for two days. “I felt awful. I had been seeing a psychiatrist whom The Herald used. He recommended New Life, a treatment center on the fifth floor of the old Dodge Hotel in downtown Miami. I had called the psychiatrist on Saturday morning and had the whole weekend to think about what I was going to do. I remember taking a cab across town on Monday morning and ducking as we passed The Herald building. I thought to myself, ‘I’ll go to the airport, get a martini, and fly to Belize. When I run out of money, Mum will take me in.’ ” Wrong on all counts.

New Life, the treatment program that Geoffrey entered in Miami was 28-days long. But, although he had voluntarily committed himself, he’d done so for the wrong reasons. He wanted to avoid interaction with his wife, with the paper, with anyone. He was hiding out. “Do you think I wanted to be sober? Hell no.”

That began to change when he met Olaf, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, who counseled at the treatment center. Olaf was a big, blond Norwegian from Venezuela. Yes, Venezuela. His family had wealth and position.

He and his twin brother had graduated from the Wharton School of Finance and had kept a lion cub in their apartment. You might say he was an extrovert. Geoffrey asked him to be his sponsor because he trusted him. Olaf replied, “Geoffrey, I’m going to ask you to do something you don’t want to do.” “Like what?” “Call your mother, tell her where you are, and ask for her forgiveness.” “I was supposed to call someone I love and apologize for my life? It was really scary, but I did it. And what did Mum say? ‘Thank you for calling, and good luck.’ “

New Life held a graduation ceremony for those completing the program. No cap and gown; no strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” The point of it was to encourage the other patients that recovery was possible. Geoffrey’s city editor, Bill Grueskin, who had visited him several times to offer his help, came to the graduation. For the entire length of his rehabilitation Geoffrey continued to get his full salary from The Miami Herald, and when he went back to work he was warmly welcomed by Bill, who told him to take as much time as he needed to attend A.A. meetings. To this day, Geoffrey describes him as a “stand-up guy who was really interested in me.” Bill went on to become editor of the on-line edition of The Wall Street Journal.

Geoffrey *did* go to those meetings...and many more over the next 19 years. When I asked him why he felt he had to attend so often, he told me a story. “Let

me tell you about George Myers. I had been sober for over a year. I looked up to George. He was Mr. A.A. in Monroe County.” (Monroe County is in south Florida and includes the Florida Keys.) “George, who was 58, hadn’t had a drink in 21 years. He worked for the county and monitored those who had been convicted of DUI, but could get out of serving time by attending A.A. meetings. George had to certify that you actually *did* go to the meetings. He preached the gospel to all the wayward souls who passed through his office. He had memorized the A.A. literature. George was counseling a 20-year-old bimbo who had been picked up several times for DUI. And, George fell hopelessly in love. Betty, his wife, threw him out of the house. George fell off the wagon. The girl left him. The last time I saw him, he was sleeping in the weeds. True story. It happens a lot.”

So what has happened in the last 19 years? In 1998 Knight Ridder moved their headquarters to San Jose, California. Geoffrey worked as a reporter for The San Jose Mercury News until Knight Ridder sold out to McClatchy in 2006. All of the Knight Ridder employees received a generous severance. Mary Jean, as head of HR, was particularly well-treated.

Geoffrey and MJ spent over a year building their dream house on five acres in the Santa Ynez Valley. Geoffrey planted bulbs all over their property, concentrating on irises. They were Mum’s favorite flower. Springtime brings the

tour buses. The passengers invariably stop to “ooh” and “aah” and take photos of the more than two thousand plantings.

As I said in the beginning, Geoffrey goes to an A.A. meeting almost every day. He has accepted the sponsorship of five A.A. members. To give you some idea of how widespread the problem of alcoholism is, there are 298 meetings held every week just in the Santa Barbara area. I recently went with Geoffrey to a meeting and was struck by the honesty of the members. One grizzled man said, “This has been a good day. I haven’t had a drink.”

Geoffrey has been lucky. Lucky to have a wife who stuck with him. Lucky to have Olaf show up at the right time. Lucky to have an editor like Bill Grueskin who thought he was worth saving. Lucky to have a family who never stopped loving him. Lucky to be alive.