*Personal Story 4*

## DOC'S STORY

As I sat in the lockdown unit of the treatment center, all I kept thinking was, This was not in the plan. A few hours before, one of the department heads had called me into his office for a meeting. I guessed that this time it probably would be about how I was always late to work, but since I'd just received a scathing evaluation covering everything from my poor medical judgment to my illegible handwriting, I figured I had better be prepared for anything. I walked into the room rehearsing my excuses, but this time something was different. Six other physicians were there—plus a 300-pound security guard carrying a nightstick, just to be sure I got the point. They told me I was going in for drug treatment, voluntarily or otherwise. In CMA meetings, people talk about the moment they surrendered, but I walked into an ambush and was taken prisoner.

The "plan" had been to have as much fun as possible without getting killed in the process. I started getting drunk regularly during college and medical school, but I didn't really like that I had a hard time remaining conscious after a certain point. During my fourth year of medical school, though, I was introduced first to ecstasy and then to crystal meth, and that was another matter entirely. I could party all night long, then, after a bump and a quick costume change, I was off to the hospital to be Super Intern. I had "edge," I thought; and I had it because I had the guts to push the envelope and bend the rules—which really didn't apply to me anyway.

Crystal made everything better, from work to sex to grocery shopping. I finally had found the piece that had been missing my entire life.

Everything was about power and control. Before crystal, I struggled to make life happen, but with the drugs, I had a sense of instant power over all my problems. (Never mind that I never actually fixed anything when I was high; it was the perception that was important.) My biggest problem was supply, and I made sure I had several sources so I could keep that under control. But I especially needed control over the drugs themselves. The key, I thought, was side-effect management. I became a whiz at "recreational pharmacology," memorizing tables of medications I could use to balance out the shakes, insomnia, and post-party depression. As long as I could cover it up, I could get away with it—so it wasn't a problem.

That was the theory, anyway, but shooting crystal and trying to practice medicine at the same time didn't work out so well. A few careless mistakes here and there gradually turned into serious errors in judgment, including leaving an intern alone with a critically ill patient while I was passed out in the call room, all of which required elaborate lies to cover up. No matter how long I stay sober, I never will be able to make amends to all the patients I cared for while I was high.

When I managed to get to work, I was either blitzed out on speed or crashing after a binge, and I looked like someone who had just stepped out of a concentration camp. When the program directors asked me about it, I did what every good addict does in that situation—I lied. I told them I was depressed or in a bad relationship or just out of a bad relationship—anything but admit the truth. I spent huge amounts of energy covering my trail, but by this time it was just damage control and I wasn't even doing a decent job at that.

I would come home at night and sit on the sofa, watching the sun go down and trying to talk myself into using the "contingency kit" I kept in my kitchen so that I could check out for good. Somehow, I couldn't quite get the thought out of my head that there might be a way to get it all back together again, but I had no idea where to begin. Surrender, of course, was unthinkable. The need to use was so overwhelming that I was

convinced the only way out was to die. If something is going to happen, I thought, I hope it happens soon.

Well, something did, and the next thing I knew, the doors were being locked behind me at a psychiatric hospital. As usual, my first reaction was to fight, but somehow that didn't seem to be a very attractive option at the time. I was pretty much out of new ideas, and besides, I was stuck without a car behind a locked door a long way from home. (Willingness can come in many forms, it turns out.) The only alternative was just to go with the flow. I was sure that sobriety would never work for me, but I figured if I let someone else run the show for a while and my life fell apart again, I would have someone else to blame for a change.

As I was considering my plan, a novel thought came to me: You know, the possibility exists that you might be wrong about some things. I honestly had never considered that before. I had always assumed that my conclusions were absolutely correct, so my actions were completely justified. Unfortunately, my convictions about my own infallibility also trapped me on the path of self-destruction, completely unable to grow—or grow up. (Today, one of the cornerstones of my recovery is the willingness to question everything I think I know about myself.)

I finally decided to just follow instructions to the best of my ability and see what happened. After that, things got a lot better very quickly. Those instructions turned out to be pretty simple:

1. Go to meetings.
2. Get a sponsor.
3. Work the Steps.
4. Work with others.
5. Learn to pray.

I was told that if I did these five things I would never have to use again. They worked then and they continue to work years later. In particular, people told me it was important to work with newcomers right from the beginning, even if I still was counting days. I remember seeing people who had been sober for years and thinking, They are either lying or they didn't

use like I did. I could, however, believe that someone might stay sober for a couple of weeks. I was able to take a lot of hope from the people who had come in just before me, while people with more time taught me the solution. Recovery in CMA really is a group effort.

Prayer was more of a problem. I am an atheist and had absolutely no desire to "find God." Fortunately, the instructions said only that I needed to find "a Power greater than myself" and didn't specify what that Power had to be. My first concept was my group, since they had clearly tapped into some resource to stay sober that I didn't yet have. I began to see that Power working in myself as I went through the moral inventory and started amending my past. The need to use disappeared, and, more incredibly, issues I had been struggling with since I was a teenager suddenly started to get better without any real effort on my part to fix them. One day, I became so grateful for how things had turned out in my life that I just said "thank you" out loud to no one in particular. After that, prayer was easy.

There was no CMA group in our area when I got sober, which made it a little challenging to find other tweakers trying to stay clean. Several of us eventually found each other and started our own CMA meeting. A core group started getting together once a week, and the fellowship quickly expanded to the point where there now are many groups meeting every night. Now, anyone who looks can see other addicts staying clean and living life—no one has to feel like they are alone.

To stay sober today, it is important for me to keep things very simple. The universe was around a long time before I got here, will be here a long time after I'm gone, and generally runs pretty well without my interference. I have a part to play but I was not hired to run the show. I am responsible for my recovery and a few other simple things like folding my laundry, but other than that, I'm a lot happier when I can just let things be.

All in all, things in my life have turned out remarkably well. I finished my training and I once again enjoy the respect of my colleagues. I am surrounded by friends and have a new relationship with my family, but the truly amazing part is what has taken place on the inside. I enjoy peace of mind, stability, and security, and I no longer live in fear. That alone is worth everything.

What no one told me—and what I never would have believed at the beginning—is that sobriety is not a daily fight against cravings. The biggest miracle of my life today is not that I haven't used crystal in many years, but that I haven't needed to use for that long. All I had to do was stop fighting.