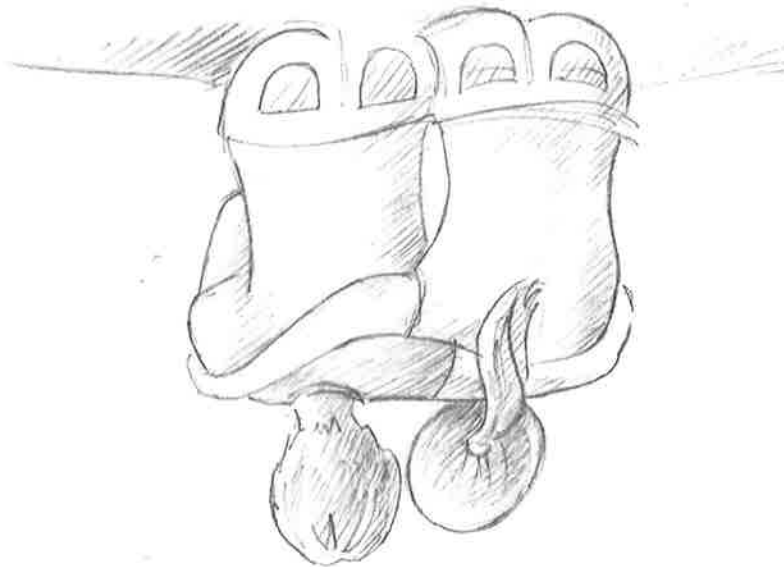


Shirley B. 'n Me

by Sandie B.



find the meaning with the best doughnuts. Now, I'm not sure that's a worthy goal — but it got us out and about, we learned the city, met lots of Program people, and had a good time.

In those days, Shirley was a real smoker. Some days she smoked four packs without batting an eye. And she smoked two different brands: one regular and one menthol. She had an elaborate ritual by which she'd alternate smoking one cigarette from the regular pack and one from the menthol. If someone bummed a smoke, she'd have to reorganize the order in which she smoked the remaining cigarettes. It was much too complicated for me. My own pack-and-a-half-a-day habit paled beside hers.

Neither of us really wanted to quit smoking. We figured we'd given up quite enough already with alcohol and drugs. But one day Shirley heard somewhere that if you took pentothal ("truth serum"), which is often given as a surgical anesthetic, the drug would block the body's craving for nicotine and make it easier to stop smoking. Of course, we knew we couldn't just elect to take the drug, being in recovery. Nonetheless, Shirley continued to be fascinated by the idea, and because she believed it, she persuaded me to believe it. As coincidence would have it (are there any coincidences?), we both eventually had to have surgery, were both administered the drug as our anesthetic, and both stopped smoking in the hospital! Was the effect real, or was it in our minds? I don't know. But neither of us has smoked since, though we sure have thought about it. Talk about a day at a time: this was sometimes one minute at a time! We agree that the best

Recently my first friend in recovery, Shirley B., interviewed for a position out of state, and I had to face the possibility that she might actually move away. It made me reflect on the Road of Happy Destiny she and I have traveled together the past few years.

The *Big Book* says that we are people who would not ordinarily mix. That was certainly true of Shirley and me. If it weren't for the Program, I doubt we would ever have met, and if we had, I doubt we would have become friends. Our lives were very different. She was upscale and worldly; I was smalltime and nerdy.

But meet we did in AA. We were both newly sober, both going to meetings every day, about a year apart in natal birthdays (part of the over-40 crowd), and lived close to each other, so it seemed only natural that we would eventually interact with each other. After we stopped circling each other like two stray cats, we warily agreed to try going to meetings together, and the rest is history. What we've shared in our recovery friendship is unlike any adventure I could ever have imagined.

To help us through those early, jittery weekends in sobriety, Shirley and I used to go to a late meeting on Friday or Saturday night, and then on to an all-night grocery store to do our weekly shopping. Who would have thought that some of my fondest memories would be of grocery shopping with Shirley at 2 A.M.?

As our friendship grew and our recovery stabilized, we spread our wings and traveled to new meetings all over the city. Quite simply and honestly, our goal was to

Within the Program, we have witnessed marriages, births, and graduations; seen sobriety and relapse where we least expected it; watched one woman die from a failed liver transplant and one man recover miraculously; carried a weekly meeting to a friend with AIDS who died sober; attended funerals for young people who died from suicide and overdoses and long-timers who died with 40 years clean. We have seen people change careers, partners, attitudes, and everything else about their lives. Just like us.

Recovery and the Program have been a tremendous gift. Today we both have new lives. As a matter of fact, our lives are so full now we both wish there were more hours in the day. Before we got sober, Shirley was afraid to go out of her house because she didn't know where she'd end up; when she did go out, she shopped for cremation urns: one for her and one for her shitzu. I was afraid to go out because I had already had two drunk-driving accidents. Our lives, such as they were, were relegated to isolating in our respective houses (months in Shirley's case, years in mine), drinking ourselves into oblivion each night, and waiting for that sense of impending doom we felt in the pits of our stomachs to strike. Instead, as Shirley likes to put it, and puts it so well, we were both "struck sober." Our mutual recovery has been an amazing process, and our friendship, Shirley's and mine, has been an amazing part of that journey.

We still go to meetings together, sponsor people, and work active programs. We still shop together occasionally (we've progressed from grocery stores to pet supply outlets), talk on the phone a lot, and share that level of intimacy that only people in recovery seem to.

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Thank you, Shirley B., for being there at the beginning of my recovery, for helping me when I could not help myself, and for trudging the Road of Happy Destiny with me. We did together what neither of us could do alone.



¹ See the article following this one, the Four T's of Recovery, for a generalized theory of this phenomenon.

thing about quitting smoking is that whenever we get a "craving" now, it's for a cigarette, not a drink.

Lest you think it was all good times, it wasn't. Shirley endured a lot of loss in sobriety — her house, many of her possessions, her savings. I'd like to report that she suffered these losses gracefully, but she didn't. She ranted and raved and yelled — at me and at her other friends. And we, not knowing what exactly to do to help, mostly just listened. Once Shirley was on the phone with me, and suddenly screamed, "I don't believe this — they're stealing my car from my driveway!" (Well, those were not her exact words; the exact words were fairly obscene.) The car was found, sans ignition switch. Shirley drove it to meetings like that for years afterward, starting it with a screwdriver, because she couldn't afford to get it fixed, and that really made her mad. But she didn't drink.

I didn't suffer so gracefully myself, debating for months whether to stay in my marriage or end it, while Shirley listened to the same arguments and reasoning from me over and over, knowing that nothing she said would make any difference, and that eventually I'd make the decision on my own. And I didn't drink.

Come to think of it, neither of us suffered recovery gladly that first year. Shirley swore (and I do mean swore) that she'd never believe in a Higher Power, pray, or do the 4th and 5th Steps. At about six months, I rebelled and started attending a feminist recovery group (I had undermined every male pronoun in the *Big Book* and vowed to rewrite the whole thing). In the end, though, we both came into the fold, immersed ourselves in AA, got sponsors (we still have the same sponsors today), and did all the Steps (including 4 and 5). Why? Not because we believed everything everybody said (as some folks say, "Take what you need and leave the rest.") Not because I was less incensed by the *Big Book* (I still wish they would update and desex it). But because we saw that the Program worked, and we didn't want to drink again. And we didn't drink.¹

Between us, in our time together in recovery, we've ended one marriage and two relationships and started another relationship; moved and changed jobs several times; buried three loving pets and adopted four others; gained enough weight between us when we stopped smoking to form a whole other person ("I wonder what she's like?" Shirley used to muse); then when we couldn't stand it anymore, lost the weight by changing to a low-fat eating style (Shirley also became a vegetarian and an exerciser — too much for me). We have battled (and continue to battle off and on) the scourge of depression. And cried a lot. And laughed a lot, too.