



A Hero Once More

By Aleyna Iltz

I was a wide-eyed, precocious four year-old, and the man I adoringly called "Papa" would visit with my brother and I often at his humble rancher in a microscopic city in central Washington state. As I grew older, our visits became shorter and less frequent, though I didn't understand why. However, the day my family and I arrived there for a family celebration provided insight as to why my hero was becoming smaller in my life.

That Christmas, I don't remember the exciting new toys I received, the meal my grandma prepared for us, or telling stories with my family while drinking hot cocoa. Instead, I remember Papa asking me time and again to, "Bring me a whisky." I remember hearing shouting from the kitchen and very loud banging as one sarcastic comment turned into a fist fight with my uncle. Yelling, crying, and alcohol-fueled insults hung in the air. Most of all, I remember huddling down under a blanket holding my cousin cringing every time the shouting shook the walls. Very early the next morning we left—cutting our visit three days short.

For the next two years, my sparse visits with Papa were overshadowed by a mental war I had with myself. In my

heart I knew he was my hero, but my parents saw him as a villain; dangerous and unpredictable. He often disappeared before dinner to have a "snap," and wouldn't return until long after dessert was put away.

As I grew older, my view of Papa was less of heroism, and more of embarrassment. Invitations to birthday parties and school plays went unextended, and my grandma visited our house alone. I remember the day my mom picked me up from school and told me she had some very serious news: My hero was going to rehab for alcohol addiction. I was shocked he would admit defeat like this, and even more shaken by the label of "addict." I learned my Papa had struggled with the choice between suicide or rehab, and thankfully, had chosen the latter.

Six weeks of therapy at the Sundown M Ranch in Yakima, Washington saved my Papa, and provided the peace his soul needed to heal. He received therapy that allowed him to begin to recover from the years of abuse he suffered at the hands of his own alcoholic father. In his small group sessions, he learned how to accept responsibility for his choices and was held accountable for the horrible things he said and did while living in

his drunken haze. He learned to ask for, and accept, forgiveness from his family. Most importantly, he began to believe in himself, and was motivated to become my hero again.

When he returned from Sundown, Papa pulled his family and closest friends together and shared his experience. He asked for their help and forgiveness, and was granted both over time. Papa attended weekly group meetings, met daily with his sponsor, and found new ways to spend his days. He reconnected with my grandma again, and learned to love, respect, and partner with her in an intimate and authentic way. Family gatherings changed, and alcohol was no longer a special guest.

Papa's courage and humility changed our entire family, and by extension, my perspective of adversity, addiction, and forgiveness. I know that his love of alcohol and the numbness it provided wasn't bigger than his love for life and family, just more convenient. His experience taught me that everyone deserves a second chance, even though the second chance comes at a price. Even today, after six years sober, my hero is still working to repair the relationships his alcohol abuse destroyed. Addiction nearly took the life of my hero, but he never gave up—even when deciding between suicide or rehab. I am learning how to forgive, listen, and be patient, and he is learning how to help me heal from the hurt.

I do not wish this situation upon anyone. The way the majority of my family responded to my Papa coming back was positive; however, there are still some who are angry and judgmental—that's what I think is wrong. He chose life, a new life where he must face his challenges, fears, memories, and feelings without the security of alcohol to dampen the pain. I gave my Papa a chance to prove to me he'd changed for the better. In doing so, he proved to me he could be my hero once more. 🙏

ALERT SCHOLARSHIP

Aleyna Iltz is a recent high school graduate from Washington. *Alert Magazine* congratulates her for winning the Alert Scholarship and we encourage her in the pursuit of her academic goals. We would also like to encourage future seniors to participate in our scholarship program.